Should a Roman Catholic Church Have a Processional Cross or Crucifix?

The General Instruction of the Roman Missal (GIRM) requires that an image of Christ crucified wherever the holy Mass is celebrated. This is what rubric #306 states: “Either on the altar or near it, there is to be a cross, with the figure of Christ crucified upon it, a cross clearly visible to the assembled people. It is desirable that such a cross should remain near the altar even outside of liturgical celebrations, so as to call to mind for the faithful the saving Passion of the Lord.” So laying a cross or crucifix on the Altar, which almost no one can see, and which duplicates what’s already there, would violate this rubric.

Our crucifix, hand carved in Italy and one-of-a-kind, beautifully fulfills this rubric. Any other images of Christ crucified are superfluous; additional crosses or crucifixes would also violate the spirit of the rubrics that call for the Altar to be adorned with moderation and noble simplicity. The GIRM also cautions against anything that obstructs the people’s view of the sacred actions that take place on the Altar. And common sense dictates that we keep the Altar clutter-free, lest the Eucharistic species be accidently knocked over or spilt. The GIRM even says that whatever is needed to amplify the Priest’s voice must be arranged “discreetly!”

The rubrics pertaining to the required Processional Cross is also interesting. First, the Roman documents use the term ‘cross’ for both a cross and a crucifix. Technically, a crucifix is a cross with an image of our Lord’s Body attached to it; a cross has no image of Christ. Since the rubric does not specify that the Processional Cross have an image of Christ crucified on it, as it does for the Altar’s ‘main’ cross, it is permissible to have either a cross or a crucifix for use in processions.

Here is what rubric #122 says: “The cross adorned with a figure of Christ crucified, and carried in procession, may be placed next to the altar to serve as the altar cross, in which case it must be the only cross used; otherwise it is put away in a dignified place. As for the candlesticks, these are placed on the altar or near it. It is a praiseworthy practice for the Book of the Gospels to be placed on the altar.” This rubric calls for only one image of Christ crucified; it may be the one carried in procession, or the one suspended over or near the Altar, or the one placed on the Altar – but only one! Our sole image of Christ crucified near the Altar is the one that hangs over the back wall of the sanctuary.
Rubric #122 further envisions that churches like ours that have a Processional Cross with an image of Christ crucified should put it ‘away in a dignified place’ when not in use, even during the Mass. This is what our Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark does. However, in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C., where I concelebrated the Vigil Mass for Life last month, and which does not have a crucifix suspended over or near its Altar, they place their Processional Crucifix to the side of the Altar, and they incense it during the holy Mass, since there’s no other image of Christ crucified nearby. What does our parish do?

Since there is no ‘dignified place’ close to the sanctuary for us to place the Processional Cross during the holy Mass, we use a Processional Cross without an image of Christ crucified – thus our new ‘Processional Cross.’ However, in Christmastime, when the stained glass window of the Nativity blocks our main ‘Cross’ or in Eastertide, when we remove Our Lord’s body or corpus from the cross, we will use our Processional Crucifix.’

Here are some final thoughts about the cross in churches that come from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ document ‘Built of Living Stones,’ published in 2000 as guidelines for those who work with liturgical art and environment:

“The cross with the image of Christ crucified is a reminder of Christ’s paschal mystery. It draws us into the mystery of suffering and makes tangible our belief that our suffering when united with the passion and death of Christ leads to redemption. There should be a crucifix ‘positioned either on the altar or near it, and . . . clearly visible to the people gathered there.’ Since a crucifix placed on the altar and large enough to be seen by the congregation might well obstruct the view of the action taking place on the altar, other alternatives may be more appropriate. The crucifix may be suspended over the altar or affixed to the sanctuary wall. A processional cross of sufficient size, placed in a stand visible to the people following the entrance procession is another option. If the processional cross is to be used for this purpose, the size and weight of the cross should not preclude its being carried in procession. If there is already a cross in the sanctuary, the processional cross is placed out of view of the congregation following the procession.” [#91]

So, contrary to what some have said, [tongue-in-cheek, I hope]: we do not have a ‘Protestant’ Processional Cross! Our Cross - and everything in our new church - is very orthodox, very dignified, and very, VERY Catholic!

And contrary to the rumormongers we still have the main crucifix that once adorned the wall behind our former sanctuary; it is in our new Parish Hall beneath the narthex/plaza. To memorialize either the Processional Cross or Crucifix, contact the office.

With God’s love and my prayers,

Reverend Michael J. Kreder