

Holy Cross, Life-Giving Tree

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With illustrations by Aidan O'Flynn



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This book is dedicated to the unknown artists who created the objects depicted in these pages, and to the members of the Society of the Companions of the Holy Cross: eight hundred amazing women in whom the New Creation has taken root.

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Introduction

This book began as a project that aspired to be a contribution to art history. It might have had a scholarly sounding title such as *Images of Paradise: Depictions of the Cross as the Tree of Life in the First Millennium*. Chapter two especially, with its commentary on a number of works of art, still shows many signs of having started out that way.

However over time my goal has changed existentially. I am not a professional art historian. Those who are, I realized, are already doing excellent work in their field without my input. What I have been for over thirty years is a parish priest. How I can contribute is by trying to help practicing Christians make sense of their faith—the very thing I have been about in my ministry. When I stumbled upon two important clues from Christian art history, I began to see how timely they could be for believers of today. These clues are that the theme of a New Creation is deeply rooted in tradition, and that the symbol of the Cross as a Life-Giving Tree is as well. I began to wonder: What is Christian life like when it is intentionally organized around that theme and that symbol? What did people who did this in the past really mean by it? What could Christian life be for us today, and in the future, if we did the same? Thus my project has turned into a different one. It is now a thought experiment about the Christian life and what it would be, if it were deliberately practiced beneath the Cross understood as the Life-Giving Tree.

Chapters five and six contain the provisional results of that thought experiment, and are the heart of the book. Readers could probably jump

straight to them and get ideas for Christian living that I believe would be helpful. Taking Hildegard of Bingen as the guide, I propose that life in community with attention to the principle she called *viriditas* (greenness) is a valuable way of intentionally organizing Christian life around the theme of a New Creation. I also propose that understanding the Cross as a Life-Giving Tree can bring peace, first among Christians, but also with others who do not share Christian faith.

But how did we get to this point? The theme of a New Creation is present in Scripture, as a perusal of Paul's letters will show. But it was not until I encountered it as a long-standing living reality in art and liturgy that I began to understand what a transcendent vision it truly offers. With the New Creation, the triumph of Easter and the empowerment of Pentecost go not just to the ends of the earth, but to the center of the universe. All things are new in Christ: that is the premise and the promise of a Cross that has itself come to life, and that gives life. These are breathtaking horizons, and to claim them for Christianity requires proof.

This is why I urge readers not to skip to the end, but to go patiently through the first four chapters as well. Only then will the deep roots of the New Creation theme be seen for what they are—truly Christian. Those who work through the historical context (chapter one) and the imagery of ancient times (chapter two) will not only find how deeply present in tradition the Living Tree theme really is, they will begin to understand how it came to be and what it means. Those who meditate on the Scriptures behind the imagery (chapter three) and ponder liturgies that celebrate the Life-Giving Tree (chapter four) will enter directly into experiences of the New Creation that are alive both in the Bible and also in Eastern branches of Christianity still today.

I have left open the question of what the structures of life in a New Creation might ultimately be. A theme as organic as that of a Life-Giving Tree demands no less. My suggestions are only ways to open the conversation, and are just a beginning. No one person can see all the ways that the Life-Giving Tree might bloom. Readers should therefore see this book as an invitation to a conversation, and to emergent development.

That is why the book has six chapters with discussion questions at the end of each. It is designed with study groups in mind—the traditional Lenten variety being the most likely. However, a study in the autumn would make sense too, in the context of Holy Cross Day, and so would an Eastertide reading. Whatever time of year readers spend with these chapters, and whether individually or in groups, my hope is that they will first develop an enthusiasm for the New Creation, and then find one another, to explore its promise in mutual encouragement.

Let me now introduce our protagonist and explain how I first met the Life-Giving Tree. It is indeed surprising to realize how extremely widespread depictions of the Cross identified as the Tree of Life once were. During the first millennium of Christianity, artists all across Eurasia and much of Africa created such depictions. Early examples can be found from Scotland to Tibet, from Ethiopia to the Caucasus, and from Rome to India. In these depictions, attributes of the Tree that God planted “in the midst of the garden” (Gen. 2:9) are given to the Cross of Christ. Flowers, leaves, vines, grapes, birds, and the four rivers of Eden adorn these crosses. The rich metaphor of paradise is applied to our most important Christian symbol.¹

The implication of this imagery, I slowly realized, is that the Cross understood as the Life-Giving Tree was once a valuable support to evangelism and spiritual praxis virtually everywhere Christianity spread. A related discovery is equally intriguing: liturgy and art celebrating the Cross as the Tree of Life are still very much alive in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches. Indeed, the Eastern traditions appear to have preserved ways of honoring the Cross that go back to Late Antiquity.

If the Life-Giving Cross was such a valuable support to evangelism in the first millennium, it is natural to wonder if it could be of equal service in the third. The contemporary situation of Western Christianity

1. The Living Cross is not the only form of the cross from antiquity, but it is certainly among the more important, given its ubiquity. For other cross forms, see Jensen, *The Cross: History, Art, and Controversy*.

has been a cause of anxiety to many. We have seen a puzzling decline in overall vitality, especially in the mainline churches. There is persistent disagreement about the meaning of atonement, and the Cross itself has become a source of division and conflict. We could use some new thinking, especially if it is derived from such a proven source as the great missionary expansion of the first Christian millennium. I believe the Life-Giving Tree could well be a helpful resource as we seek to transcend our difficulties. Rediscovering its vocabulary and charm would give energy. It has an immediate appeal that should be attractive to the unchurched, as well as encouraging to those who already believe.

My encounter with the Life-Giving Cross came as an unexpected gift. It was when I learned about the Clergy Refresher Leave program of the Lilly Foundation that my journey began. Applicants to the program are invited to submit a project that “would make your heart sing.” That is a very generous goal for a grant program! I wish to thank the Foundation for its kindness to me and to other clergy in need of refreshment, who have benefitted from some well-funded time off.

A footnote in a book about Celtic spirituality gave me the idea for my project proposal. It quoted an article by Hilary Richardson that suggests commonalities between the High Crosses of Ireland and the khachkars (cross stones) of Armenia.² My project proposal was to go and see for myself. My wife and I were actually able to do so in the summer of 2010, thanks to the Lilly Foundation, and it was a life-changing experience. High Crosses and khachkars are exquisite sermons in stone. However, seeing them in person convinced me of my ignorance. They were so different from what I was used to. What did they mean? Clearly both kinds of carving, even though more than a thousand years old, stemmed from well-developed iconographic systems, but ones I

2. Richardson, “Observations on Christian Art in Early Ireland, Georgia and Armenia.” I later had the privilege of meeting Hilary Richardson in Dublin, and wish to honor both her adventurous spirit and her kindness to me.

did not understand. Asking questions, following leads, making false steps, and finding ever-so-many helpful guides along the way, eventually led me to the conclusion that a key source of the Living Tree iconography explored in this book was the liturgical and spiritual life of early Christian Jerusalem. There in the Holy City, a cult of the Cross grew up round the wood that was widely believed to be from Jesus's own cross. This wood, whose discovery was attributed to Constantine's mother, Helena, was safeguarded in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Encounters with this wood spurred the enthusiasm of pilgrims and the creativity of artists, who developed visual conventions to express Christianity understood as new creation. These conventions and images travelled far and wide.

Many of my guides in this inquiry are scholars of art history, and I want to acknowledge their remarkable profession. Historians of Christian art know a great deal about Christianity and even the atheists among them often understand Christian symbolism better than professional clergy. It is ironic to me that as the monks of the Middle Ages saved secular knowledge in the past, so professors of art history keep traditions of Christian symbolism alive today. I was so impressed by the profession that at first I set out to write an art history book about the Cross, but as explained above I did not ultimately do that. Working outside scholarly norms had advantages. I could roam freely, leaping blithely across academic disciplines and eras in quest of largeness of perspective. Nevertheless, I have always been determined to remain within the bounds of good scholarship. There is no point in speculating about things that just aren't so, when what is known is so deeply life-giving. In any event, I salute art historians, and wish them well. They have been very gracious and willing to share what they know, which has encouraged me to trust in the at-first-surprising vision of a verdant Cross giving life to the world.

I also especially wish to salute the Armenian Apostolic Church. Learning about this ancient Christian community and its fellow Oriental

Orthodox churches has been a delight.³ It is a pity that these ancient churches are so little known to Western Christians, not least because they open a living window into early Christianity. Very early themes are still present in Oriental Orthodox worship, and offer a fresh perspective after all these years. Had I not by purest chance (or providence?) been present for the celebration of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross at St. Vartan Armenian Cathedral in Manhattan in 2009 and found my heart singing during the surprising liturgy for that festival which will be detailed in chapter four, none of the rest of my discoveries would have made sense. The metaphor of the Life-Giving Tree needs a living home, and the worship of the Oriental Orthodox provides exactly that. It is all the more remarkable when one considers that the Armenians were the first to suffer genocide in the twentieth century. They know grief and loss and nevertheless venerate a Cross that is a symbol of life. Happily, the Church in Armenia is reviving after seventy years of atheistic Soviet rule, and I salute its members for an unswerving focus on the gospel of a New Creation. They have been a constant inspiration in my quest to understand the Tree of Life.

Let me now lay out the plan of the book:

- Chapter one describes the context in which depictions of the Cross as Tree of Life were first created—roughly 330–630 CE, when the Holy Land was the spiritual center of an interconnected Christian world. It also discusses the particular factors leading to the invention of such imagery.
- Chapter two shows pictures of Life-Giving Tree imagery from the first millennium and tries to interpret their message.
- Chapter three lays out certain Scripture passages that are evoked by the imagery and reflects on their meaning.

3. The churches known collectively as the Oriental Orthodox are the Armenian, the Coptic, the Ethiopian, the Syrian Orthodox, and certain churches of India. Historically they have been linked because of a common refusal to accept the validity of the Council of Chalcedon, 451 CE.

- Chapter four explores the history of liturgical devotion to the Cross, and suggests ways for celebrating the Life-Giving Tree in worship today.
- Chapter five tries to anchor the metaphor of a Life-Giving Tree in daily experience using Hildegard's concept of *viriditas* as an organizing principle.
- Chapter six suggests ways the Life-Giving Tree could address contemporary conflicts of the Cross and also rejuvenate Christian praxis and evangelism.

This project has taken ten years to develop, during which many people with varied kinds of insight have generously guided me along the way. There are no doubt persons on the list below who will be surprised to see their names there, having long forgotten talking with me. However, I remember them, and in every case benefitted from their knowledge and interest. There are three categories: scholars, clergy, and others who have been encouraging. Among the scholars, I particularly wish to thank Robin Jensen for patient mentoring. Her book about the Cross is the most comprehensive one I know, and my desire to remain within the boundaries of her gold-standard scholarship is heartfelt. Among the clergy, I particularly wish to thank my former bishop, Skip Adams. His invitation to present my findings at a clergy day in Central New York was the first full-scale validation for the project I experienced, and opened the way to many interesting responses. Among others who have encouraged me, first of all is my wife, Janet, who has shared my travels, and persistently insisted that the Tree of Life story needs to be told. Without her nudging this book would never have been written.

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