

The Coesfeld Crucifix

Have you ever wondered what all the fuss is about the Coesfeld crucifix? Or why it's so significant that the Covington and California provinces would go together to get a replica of it for every sister in the United States during the sesquicentennial in 2000? Read on.

What we call the Coesfeld crucifix is a famous example of the kind of crucifix that "caught on" in Westphalia during the fourteenth century. This style is called a *Gabelkreuz*, or forked cross, and is found in churches and homes throughout the region where our congregation began. "Our" crucifix is the one in St. Lambert's church in Coesfeld, the parish where Hilligonde Wolbring, Elisabeth Kühling, and Theodor Elting met and made the decisions that led to our founding. It is likely that what this crucifix says about God's love entered into their prayer and into those decisions.



According to the booklet prepared to guide visitors through St. Lambert's Church, the years during which the *Gabelkreuz* became a popular way of representing the Passion and Death of Christ were marked by deep suffering and turmoil in church and civil life. The people were going through earthquake, crop failure, hunger, pestilence (the Black Death came to Coesfeld in 1350), and the atrocities of war. The forked cross is formed as a "tree of life," showing God taking on himself the worst human suffering in order to bring salvation.

On the St. Lambert crucifix, seven drops of blood flow from the wound in the side of Christ, thus from his heart. This obvious reference to the sacraments says that the life flowing from this tree is the grace of Christ, given and nourished within the Church sprung from his side. The hands of Christ are turned into the position of priestly blessing. In a sense, the *Gabelkreuz* was for the people a representation of the love of God, of the Heart of Christ, long before there was anything like a statue or picture of the Sacred Heart.

The guidebook further explains that the origin of this form of crucifix in the fourteenth century coincided with new developments in Christian mysticism in the Rhineland (the region bordering Westphalia on the south, associated with the Rhine River). In the deep longing of the people to escape the distress of the times and to find security, freedom, and peace in God, a devotion sprang up which, through abnegation and contemplation, sought union with God within the soul.

The chief exponents of this devotion were Meister Eckhard of Cologne and his students, Henry Suso and John Tauler. In the St. Lambert booklet, the words of a vision of Henry Suso are used to

describe the Coesfeld crucifix. In writing of their prayer and mystical experiences, these "Rhineland mystics" spoke about the Heart of Christ, but with an approach different from that of St. Margaret Mary three hundred years later. In Tauler, for example, one finds biblical imagery, bridal imagery, and the image of entering into the wound and/or the Heart of Christ. The focus is on love and intimate union rather than reparation.

So do this fourteenth century crucifix and the “rediscovery” of the Rhineland mystics early in the nineteenth century (part of the movement of German Romanticism) seem to have had any impact on the prayer of our first sisters? Consider these slices of Coesfeld life, for example:

- As they were getting up in the morning, our first sisters prayed “Within thy Heart, O Jesus, my heart alone can rest . . .”

- A hymn to the Sacred Heart in the hand-copied hymnal of the Coesfeld motherhouse ends with the following stanza (translated):

Heart for hearts the source of life, which comes forth from eternal embers,
Lead me into your cell, where the heart’s thirst quenches itself.
Give me there the love-consecration, that I may find my joy only in You,
That I thirst only for You, that I die to myself.

- On the page where this hymn is found, there is a sample of the kind of Heart image the Coesfeld sisters liked to draw. (Sister Maria Ignatia Kühling used to draw them in the examen booklets of the novices.) On the reproduction here, we see the flames, wound, and crown of thorns typical of the Paray-le-Monial devotion, after the description of St. Margaret Mary. But we also see something we don’t find elsewhere, seven drops of blood coming from the wound.

So what does the Coesfeld crucifix mean? God with us, taking on our pain. God’s love poured out in Christ’s life-giving Body. We could start with that.

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