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PHILOSOPHY AND THE CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN - 41

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762 – 1814)

‘The obvious truth is that the moment any matter has passed through the human mind it is finally and for ever spoilt for all purposes of science. It has become a thing incurably mysterious and infinite; this mortal has put on mortality.’

G. K. Chesterton ‘Heretics’. Chapter 11

Just as the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once proclaimed all of Western philosophy to be a mere footnote to Plato, so also has Professor Roger Scruton described all German philosophy since the Enlightenment to have been footnotes to Kant. Furthermore, this expert also accused Kant’s immediate followers of failing to think outside of their masters established framework of ‘transcendent idealism’. Johann Gottlieb Fichte should almost certainly be counted among the first of this faithful entourage.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte made his entrance into the world on 19 May, 1762, in the village of Rammenau, a name derived from the Sorbian word meaning ‘swampy’ or ‘water-hole’. It was located in upper Lusatia, now identified as Saxony, a state in eastern Germany. He was the eldest and favourite son in a poor peasant family. Christian Fichte, his father, was known to be a pious, upright, and hard working garter-ribbon maker - who found it necessary to augment his cottage industry with farming. Christian chose his wife, Maria Dorothea, from a somewhat higher social class than his own - and the little Fichte appears to have inherited her sensitive excitability.

Although the lad’s earliest education was provided at home by his father, his prodigious intellect soon caught the attention of a wealthy local landowner, Baron Ernst Haubold von Miltitz, who undertook to sponsor the child’s further education (in the vain hope that he would eventually become a village parson). He first studied in the house of a local pastor and then at the elite ‘Pforta’, a school located in the ancient Cistercian Monastery in Naumberg.

Following graduation Fichte studied in Jena, Leipzig, and Wittenberg - but he showed no inclination to assume a pastor-ship. When the Baron died in 1774 his widow, Henriette Luise, suspended support for her headstrong ward’s education - and so, Fichte, like many other talented young scholars of his day, was forced to seek employment as a tutor. This led him into various affluent households in Zurich, Krakow, and other towns in Saxony. On the eve of his twenty-sixth birthday he had become so depressed by his situation that he contemplated suicide.

It was at this otherwise very dark period of his life that Fichte first discovered Immanuel Kant’s critical philosophy which, happily for us, broke his previous attachment to material determinism and fatalism. He also met Marie Johanne Rahn, who readily accepted his proposal of marriage, although (because of his not inconsiderable impecuniosity) he once broke off his engagement to her, asking her to find a more worthy suitor. He then journeyed to Konigsberg to seek Kant’s advice and assistance. This journey bore fruit and resulted in

him securing a publisher for his first book, *'Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation'* (1792). With bolstered spirits Fichte returned to Zurich in 1793 where he married his long suffering but steadfast Marie Johanne.

In 1794 he was specially appointed as a professor of philosophy, at the University of Jena, by the Weimar Court of Duke Karl August of Saxony-Weimar-Eisenach. He at once began to lecture on his own new philosophical interpretation of transcendental idealism, which he called *'Wissenschaftslehre'*, (which is usually, and rather badly, translated into English as - 'the doctrine of science').

The period from 1794 to 1800 must have been one of seriously mixed emotions for Professor Fichte. There was much joy on the domestic front, not least because of the birth of his first and only child, Immanuel Hermann. It was also a time of great academic success, prolific creativity, and enormous popularity among his students. Unfortunately, however, it was rare for him not to be embroiled in sharp and bitter disputes with his critics and political enemies. Rumours of his alleged democratic and antireligious sympathies abounded

Fichte took a firm stand against the violent (and illegal) secret student societies and fraternities at the University of Jena - which culminated in his entire family retreating from Jena to Ossmannstedt. Despite these problems he was able to complete many significant philosophical works, including *'Foundations of the Entire Wissenschaftslehre'* (1795); *'Foundations of Natural Right'* (1797); and *'System of Ethics'* (1798). Throughout this period he continued to lecture charismatically to large enthusiastic audiences of students. It was the publication of his *'On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine World-Governance'*, together with Friedrich Karl Forberg's *'Development of the Concept of Religion'*, that led, in 1798, to the calamitous Atheismstreit (the atheism dispute). Fichte was forced to resign his university teaching position in 1799.

Our 'philosopher of the month', having left for Berlin in 1800, completed *'The Vocation of Man'* within the first year. He revised the *'Wissenschaftslehre'*, and promptly became deeply involved in freemasonry (which he considered to be a potential instrument for moral, social, and political enlightenment. In 1805 he was briefly appointed as a professor in the Bavarian University of Erlangen and Nuremberg, but this post was cut short by the French occupation. He fled first to Königsberg (1806) and then to Copenhagen (1807) which often caused him to be separated from his wife and child. Marie Johanne was frequently financially hard-pressed, and young Immanuel Hermann was sickly.

Fichte, true to his personality, remained active and was able to complete a series of lectures on the *Way to the Blessed Life* (1806). With the Peace of Tilsit (signed by the Emperor of France, Napoleon I) Fichte returned to Berlin in 1807 but he was often unwell. Nevertheless, he was able to serve the new University of Berlin, first as a professor, and then as Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, and finally, briefly, as the Rector. He resigned this appointment in 1812, in order to begin what would prove to be his final version of *'Wissenschaftslehre'*.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte lost both of his parents in the space of two years; Christian in 1812 and Marie Dorothea in 1813. In the same year the Prussian uprising against Napoleon forced Fichte to suspend his lectures. Marie Johanne, who had been engaged in nursing wounded Prussian soldiers, contracted the Typhus fever from which Fichte was to die at 5 a.m. on 29 January 1814. His beloved wife died in 1819 and was buried beside him in the cemetery in Berlin. Immanuel Hermann also became a philosopher and was to edit his father's works.

Just as Immanuel Kant had placed freedom at the center of his practical world, so also did Fichte take the stand that the self, or the ego, is a free and self-determining creative principle. This principle is God: and it was God who created all that is. So God created the entire world of things: you, me, and every other individual - including my little dog Goonie and my big cat Barney! But Johann Gottlieb went a lot further by insisting that all of these things are not material entities at all - for, according to him, there is no lifeless matter such as had been envisaged by the earlier philosophers.

Everything, in the universe of Fichte, is spirit - and the real world is thus a world of mind and spirit (and not a world of dead matter). Everything is the absolute ego, God; but the ego creates a limit to itself in order that it might contend against this limit and grow to perfection. Hence, the world of objects, the so-called material world, is produced by this ego to furnish an arena in which it can exercise its freedom.

Freedom, according to the rules of logic, can mean nothing unless there is something to hinder the exercise of it. Therefore, Fichte reasoned that the eternal ego, God, also created a world of 'non-ego' which provided the

opposition necessary for the real world to become conscious of it-self. This other world operated strictly according to a set of rules.

Our minds and our reason are parts of the universal ego which is the universally active reason. This results in all persons seeing the world alike - a point of view known as 'Idealism'. This particular 'ism' is based upon the belief that there is no matter in the universe - everything being mind or spirit (idea). Descartes, Locke, and even Kant, you will recall had taught that there are two principles in the universe, mind and matter. Fichte, by denying this, and eliminating matter, concluded that the world only appeared to be material: everything in fact in the universe being mind or spirit.

More precisely stated, Fichte reasoned that the universe is the revelation in human consciousness of the absolute principle; moral law implies freedom - and freedom in turn implies deliverance from obstacles - and it is the world of sensible things which serves as the opponent. Finally, the world of experience is deduced from the moral law.

Man, he maintained, is fundamentally a free agent and not merely a link in a predetermined chain of material events. Fichte, in seeking to prove that self-determination is the supreme characteristic of man, argued that even though the primacy of freedom cannot be proven by theoretical reason, we must accept such a principle as ultimate because only by doing so can we satisfy the demands of our moral nature - thereby giving value and meaning to life.

The existence of a moral law, likewise, implies the existence of a moral world order in which man can place his trust. Having this same law within him, a man is perfectly justified in assuming that the world about him is such that the demands of his law can be met. Therefore, man must become intelligent - and so know and do what is right: an ignorant man, on the other hand, cannot be good. Being free and therefore not being forced by some outside authority, a man must know the moral law and its implications and at all times govern himself accordingly. To have mere respect for the moral law is not enough; a man must act in accordance with it.

Clearly, from this reasoning, morality and goodness do not constitute a state of life that is attained once and for all, it is not a condition of eternal blessedness, but it is to be had only by the continuous struggling of an intelligent individual who then acts in every situation so as to meet the requirements of the moral law. Thus, Fichte believed knowledge to be a necessary part of morality.

Fichte also taught that the source of the universe was universal reason. This pure ego, which is intelligence alone, he saw as being distinct from the 'self' of every other individual being. This universally active reason he called God. God, who has created - and who cannot be kept from creating - he envisioned as the universal life process which dominates the consciousness of every individual. According to Fichte it is because morality demands such a being that God exists - and that He may be thought of as the universal purpose underlying the entire universe.

If, however, our world is not something given to us from the outside, but rather it is a creation of the pure, active, and free Absolute ego (of which we ourselves are said to be 'free and creative parts'), how precisely did Fichte explain why we are not merely slaves of this ego? His answer was to the effect that we individually retain the ability to decide whether we will be 'blind tools' - or be the 'conscious willing' instruments of its purpose. Our freedom, therefore, lies in our choice as to whether we will willingly or unwillingly serve the Absolute ego.

The principle, that the moral law forms the basis for acting as though there actually is a super-sensible world, beyond science and experience, allowed Fichte, *et al*, to build what has come to be known as 'post-Kantian idealism'. The Absolute ego, or universal reason and will, is the source and creator of the world that we know - but a man can understand only what he has created. Thus, it was necessary to postulate that this Absolute ego has been broken into pieces, which become the egos of individual persons - just as light may be broken into pieces by a prism while not being separated from the source. The individual ego (or soul), because of the moral law which it finds within itself, must go on struggling and therefore must be immortal. Personal reason, that whole array of ideas which any one man has, is prior to the individual and is the creation of a greater reason that existed before the individual man.

In my opinion, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's approach to education was developed essentially from the point of view of the state. It is now of considerable historical interest that it was at one of the darkest moments in the life of the Prussian state that he delivered his 'Addresses to the German Nation'. In these he argued urgently for the group unity and social solidarity that he considered to be essential for the development of a new and strong nation. Thus, he championed a rigorous system of education such as would mould the people appropriately.

Because the mind was everything, he maintained that a 'thing in itself' could not possibly exist outside of it: the material world is then a projection into space of the contents of the mind. The apparent spatial-temporal-causal order which we 'experience' is in fact the revelation in human consciousness of the absolute principle and could not be apart from the universal ego. This was Fichte's solution to the problem of mind and matter which had exercised the ingenuity of philosophers for so long.

Fichte himself observed that the kind of philosophy one adopts depends on the sort of man one is; for a philosophical system is not a lifeless piece of furniture but is animated by the soul of the man who has it. I think this comment alone serves to justify my decision to proceed with a further exploration of the so called school of 'German Romantic' philosophers. So, more of this in the next few sections. God bless you all.

Fr. David Skelton. C.S.W.G. Life Associate.



DIOCESAN NOTES AND NEWS

- Stan and Ruth Horrall have sold their splendid house in Braeside (that's near Arnprior for those who don't know the Ottawa area; and Arnprior is west of Ottawa for those from other parts of the country). As they wait for their new (smaller) house to be built in Arnprior, they have a temporary address:
104-259 Albert Street
Arnprior ON K7S 2M4
Their telephone and email addresses remain the same.
- A reminder that Sunday, October 2 is the Annual Life Chain, a silent, one hour, prayerful witness to the sanctity of all human life from conception to natural death. Please do your best to join not only Christians of other denominations, but also others who believe the same, on that day, in many cities across Canada (There are over 200 locations in Canada this year! Please refer to this web site for the nearest to you: http://www.campaignlifecoalition.com/shared/media/editor/file/LifeChain-locations_Sep18-2011.pdf)
- On Saturday, September 24, Glenn Galenkamp and Michael Trolly were admitted to the Sacred Order of Deacons in the Church of God at the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ottawa. Several clergy of the diocese were in attendance, including The Rev. Dr. Colin O'Rourke (rector of Christ the King in Calgary and the Academic Dean of our St Bede's theological seminary), and The Very Rev. The Dean Shane Janzen, O.S.G (rector of the Cathedral of St John the Evangelist in Victoria), who presented the candidates at the beginning of the ordination service. The following splendid photographs were taken by Tony Broderick of the Annunciation:



The Litany



Vesting the new Deacon



The Proclamation of the Gospel



Following the service



The Deacons and their wives



... and the bun fight



Feast of the Holy Cross, Sept 14th 335 AD

During the reign of Constantine, first Roman Emperor to profess the Christian faith, his mother Helena went to Israel and there undertook to find the places especially significant to Christians. (She was helped in this by the fact that in their destructions around 135, the Romans had built pagan shrines over many of these sites.) Having located, close together, what she believed to be the sites of the Crucifixion and of the Burial (at locations that modern archaeologists think may be correct), she then had built over them the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which was dedicated on 14 September 335

It has become a day for recognizing the Cross (in a festal atmosphere that would be inappropriate on Good Friday) as a symbol of triumph, as a sign of Christ's victory over death, and a reminder of His promise, "And when I am lifted up, I will draw all men unto me." (John 12:32)

Tertullian, in his *De Corona* (3:2), written around AD 211, says that Christians seldom do anything significant without making the sign of the cross. Certainly by his time the practice was well established. Justin Martyr, in chapters 55 and 60 of his *First Apology* (Defence of the Christian Faith, addressed to the Emperor Antoninus Pius and therefore written between 148 and 155 AD), refers to the cross as a standard Christian



St. Helena & Heraclius taking the Cross to Jerusalem

symbol, but not explicitly to tracing the sign of the cross as a devotional gesture. In the ruins of Pompeii (destroyed 79 AD), there is a room with an altar-like structure against one wall, and over the altar the appearance of the plaster shows that a cross-shaped object had been nailed to the wall, and forcibly pulled loose, apparently shortly before the volcano buried the city. It is suggested that this house may have belonged to a Christian family, and that they took the cross and other objects of value to them when they fled the city. This is not the only possible explanation, but I do not know of a likelier one.

The Christian custom of tracing the sign of the cross on persons and things as a sign of blessing is very old. Some think that it goes back to the very origins of Christianity and earlier. In Ezekiel 9, we read that Ezekiel had a vision of the throne-room of God, in which an angel was sent to go through Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of the faithful few who mourned for the sins of the city. Afterwards, other angels were sent through the city to destroy all those who had not the mark. We find similar visionary material in Revelation 7:2-4; 9:4; 14:1, where the mark on the forehead again protects the faithful few in the day of wrath, and it is said to be the name of the Lamb and of His Father. Now, the Hebrew word used for "mark" in Ezekiel is TAU, which is also the name of the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet (the ancestor of the Greek letter TAU and our letter T), and it refers to a mark like an X or a +, two short lines crossing at right angles. When the Essenes (the Dead Sea Scrolls people) received converts into their community, they baptized them and then signed them on their foreheads with a TAU, in token that they were part of the faithful remnant who mourned the sins of Israel, and that they would be spared in the day of God's wrath. It seems probable that John the Baptist and his followers were in some measure influenced by the Essenes, and they had certainly read Ezekiel. Accordingly, the tracing of a TAU on the forehead may have been a part of John's method of baptism, and may have been adopted by the earliest Christians. (We remember that some of the Twelve disciples had previously been disciples of John the Baptist -- see John 1:35-37,40.) Very possibly they began by tracing the TAU without asking what it meant -- it was simply a mark, the mark mentioned by Ezekiel. Later, they may have identified it with the Name of God. The Essenes, in some of their documents, used four dots in place of the four letters of the Name of God, and sometimes arranged them in a square. It would be easy to interpret the four ends of the TAU as representing the four letters of the Name of God. Later, Christians, especially Greek-speaking Christians, might interpret the sign as a CHI, an X-shaped letter, the first letter of the word Χριστός or Christos, meaning the Anointed One, the Messiah, the Christ. Again, Christians might understand it to be the sign of the Cross of Christ, and it is this interpretation that has prevailed. Today, in many Christian churches, when someone is baptized, the baptizer afterwards traces the sign of the cross on the forehead of the newly baptized person. Often, some of the water that has been used for baptism is saved and placed in small bowls near the entrance to the church. Worshippers entering the church touch the surface of the water and then cross themselves as a way of reaffirming their baptismal covenant. (A few years ago, a Jewish friend asked me, "May I go to the Easter Midnight service with you?" I said: "Certainly, if you like. However, I must warn you that there will be baptisms, and that afterwards the priest will take a bowl of baptismal water and a sprig of hyssop, and walk up and down the aisle sprinkling the congregation with the water, and if a single drop touches you, you will instantly turn into a goy." He answered, "I will bring an umbrella and open it at the appropriate time.") As we have seen, the practice of using the sign of the cross in connection with Baptism may very well go back to the Apostles themselves, and back before them into their Essene and other Jewish roots, having its origin in the vision of Ezekiel. In fact, the concept may go back further than that. We read in Genesis 4 that, when Cain had killed his brother and was sent into exile, God set a mark (TAU) on Cain, so that no one would slay him. Thus, from the start, the Sign of the Cross has been the protection of the penitent and justified sinner.

What is the significance of the sign of the cross? Well, in the first place, we often place our initials or other personal mark on something to show that it belongs to us. The Cross is the personal mark of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and we mark it on ourselves as a sign that we belong to Him, just as in the book of Revelation, as noted above, the servants of God are sealed or marked on their foreheads as a sign that they are His. Again, as one preacher has said, if you were telling someone how to make a cross, you might say (at least to an English speaker), "Draw an I and then cross it out." As we make the sign, we first draw a vertical stroke, as if to say to God, "Lord, here am I." Then we cancel it with a horizontal stroke, as if to say, "Help me, Lord, to abandon my self-centeredness and self-will, and to make you the center of my life instead. Fix all my attention and all my desire on you, Lord, that I may forget myself, cancel



myself, abandon myself completely to your love and service."

The Shape of the Cross

Most of us assume that we know what a cross looks like--that it is two beams of wood fastened together at right angles. However, occasionally we meet someone who claims otherwise. The counter-claim is likely to run like this: "The churches will tell you that Jesus was put to death on a cross, but that is a lie. He was nailed to a single upright beam, with his hands directly over his head. The cross is a pagan symbol, actually a letter T, or Tau, standing for the god Tammuz, who was worshipped by the Canaanites. When you wear a cross, or make any religious use of a cross, you are really worshipping Tammuz, whether you know it or not; and any church that displays a cross, or sings hymns like "The Old Rugged Cross," or "Beneath the Cross of Jesus", actually has its origins in Tammuz-worship, and is an instrument of the Devil, and if you want to avoid the wrath of God, you had better flee from all such churches and sign up with the only organization in town that teaches Bible truth and is devoted to the pure worship of God and not of idols like Tammuz, and here I am, ready to sign you up."

It is therefore of some interest to know what evidence we have about the shape of the device on which Jesus was nailed up to die. Minucius Felix, a Christian who wrote a work called *Octavius*, probably a little before 200 AD, says (chapter 29) that the shape of the cross is to be found everywhere you look.

Indeed, we see the sign of the cross naturally formed by a ship when it carries a full press of sail, or when it glides over the sea with outspread oars.

Note that a ship with a single vertical mast and a triangular sail is a modern device, used for sailing upwind by repeated tacking. The ancients did not do this. They used a ship with a square sail, and a vertical mast with a horizontal spar across it to hold the top of the sail. Hence a cross shape. Note also, that it is not necessary to agree with Minucius Felix that there is anything significant about the many places that the shape of a cross can be seen. What matters is that he knows that his readers will understand the shape of a cross to be two beams at right angles, not just a vertical beam.

The Greek word for the cross of Jesus, used many times in the New Testament and in early Greek Christian writings, is *stauros*, and the corresponding verb is *staurizo* = "crucify". Now, do any early writers use these words in a way that would make it clear what shape they were talking about?

A pagan writer, Lucian of Samosata, probable dates 120-180 AD, wrote a fantasy called *The Trial of the Vowels*, in which the letter Tau is summoned before a panel of judges, the seven vowels, and is accused of being a general mischief-maker. The charges tend to be like this (to invent an example in English): "Consider the word SUN. How good a thing the sun is! It is the source of light and warmth, and is indispensable for life itself. Along comes the letter T, and changes the word to STUN. What does it mean to stun a man? It means "to knock him out cold--to ice him," or to deprive him of warmth. It means "to punch his lights out," or to deprive him of light. It means "to knock him dead," or to deprive him of consciousness, and potentially of life itself. What a villain the letter T is, to turn good into evil in this fashion. (Several other examples follow.) And consider that evil thing, the STAUROS, instrument of torment and shame and death. It takes its name from the letter TAU, because it is shaped like a TAU. What an evil device, and what an evil letter it is named for!"

Before I introduce my next writer, a digression is necessary. The Jews (beginning at what time I do not know) often wrote numbers using the letters of their alphabet, which has 22 letters. (Five of these letters developed distinct forms when used at the ends of words, which gives us 27 letters in all.) If we use the first nine letters for the numbers 1 to 9, the next nine for the numbers 10 to 90, and the last nine for the numbers 100 to 900, we can write anything from 1 to 999 in at most three characters. If we put a tick mark beside a letter to multiply its value by 1000, then with repeated tick marks we can write any positive whole number. (Note that not everyone used the five special forms. Without them, you get as far as Tau=400 and then use Tau Qoph = 400+100=500, Tau Resh = 400+200=600, etc.)

The Greeks used a similar system, which you can find in the writings of Archimedes. Their alphabet as we know it today has only 24 letters, but in an earlier version it had 27 letters. To round it out, add an F (or Digamma) after the Epsilon, and a Q (or Qoppa) after the Pi, and a Sampi (don't ask) at the end, and you have 27 letters. Use the first nine for 1 to 9, the middle nine for 10 to 90, the last nine for 100 to 900, tick marks or

underlinings for multiplying by 100, and you are in business. If you omit the Hebrew letter Tsaddi, the remaining 21 letters correspond exactly and in the correct order with the first 21 letters of the 27-letter Greek alphabet. (The Greeks got their alphabet from the Pheonicians, whose language and alphabet were very similar to those of the Hebrews.)

With this system in hand, some Jewish students of the Scriptures noted the numerical values of various words or sentences, obtained by adding up the values of the letters, and found symbolic significance in the results. This is called *gematria* (from the Greek word for "geometry", here understood to mean mathematics in general). Obviously, the possibilities are endless. Some Christians made similar use of the numerical values of Greek letters. Thus, since Jesus was crucified on Friday, the sixth day of the week, 6 stands for evil and death, as does its intensive form 666. But Jesus rose two days later, on what may be called the eighth day of the week, and so 8 is the number of resurrection, of renewal, of life restored and triumphant. It is thus no accident that the letters in the name of *Iesous* add up to 888.

Iota = 10

Eta = 8

Sigma = 200

Omicron = 70

Upsilon = 400

Sigma = 200

Total = 888

Now for a particular example. In Genesis 14 we read that an invading army captured Abraham's nephew Lot and some others, and that Abraham took a band of 318 warriors, followed the army and in a surprise attack rescued the prisoners. Jewish scholars noted that 318 is written Cheth ("ch" as in "Bach," please) Yod Shin. Now Cheth Yod spells "chai," which means "life." Shin is the first letter of "shalom," which means "peace, deliverance, wholeness, well-being." Thus Abraham's group of warriors had 318 men in it, and was a source of life and peace to the prisoners whom they rescued.

Sometime between 70 AD (when the Temple was destroyed) and 135 (when Jerusalem was sacked again and a pagan shrine built on the site of the Temple), a man called Barnabas, or the pseudo-Barnabas, or Barnabas of Alexandria (not to be confused with the companion of Paul mentioned in the book of Acts), wrote a book called *The Epistle of Barnabas*, in which he points out that 318 written in Greek letters is Tau Iota Eta. Now, Tau clearly represents the cross, and Iota Eta are the first two letters of the Name of Jesus. Hence, the source of the life and peace that Jewish scholars had discovered in Abraham's 318 men is none other than the cross of Jesus.

Now, whether you think that this is a remarkable insight, or think that Barnabas of Alexandria is a complete air-head, is beside the point. The point is that he would not have used this argument if he did not know, and expect his readers to know, that a cross is shaped like a Tau.

Thus, we see that among pagans and Christians alike in the second century of the Christian era, a time when crucifixions were a common method of execution and everyone knew what they looked like, there was a general understanding that if a man had been crucified, it was probably on a vertical and a horizontal beam.

by James Kiefer

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FROM MAGGIE'S KITCHEN



Tomorrow morning's entertainment in my kitchen will be tomatoes. .and tomatoes. .and still more tomatoes. But the end is in sight, whether a frost materializes or not, since all that rain threw open the door to some fungus or other which killed off the tomato greenery while sparing the fruit that was already set. Maybe then I'll get back to the seventh book in Alexander McCall Smith's *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* series, and over my morning coffee enjoy reading more about the "traditionally built" Botswana woman who runs the agency. (I save the bush tea till evening.)

But maybe for St Francis' Day (October 4) I'll haul out my treasured four small volumes of Laurence Housman's *Little Plays of St Francis*. I love the opening sentence in Butler's *Lives* bio: "It has been said of St Francis that he entered into glory in his lifetime, and that he is the one saint whom all succeeding generations have agreed in canonizing. This over-statement has sufficient truth in it to provoke another, namely, that he is the one saint whom, in our day, all non-Catholics have agreed in canonizing," adding that "he has completely won the hearts of the sentimental."

Fortunately the *Little Plays*, though filled with tender humour, aren't sentimental, because the sentimentality is hard to escape. We have a statue of St Francis of Assisi in our garden, in a little bed under the pines. Do you have any idea how difficult it was for us to find one that didn't include a bird in his hand and a cute little bunny (or fawn, or squirrel) at his feet? We managed that, but gave up trying to locate one that looked like the Italian he was rather than a northern European.

Baptized John, he was nicknamed Francesco ("the Frenchman") because he was born while his merchant father was off doing business in France. Francis himself had no interest in business, nor in academics, though his family could well have afforded to set him up either way. Instead, to his father's bitter disappointment, he turned his back on a lavishly-lived (and business-advertising) youth and took up poverty. Two illnesses, the first one quite serious, had stopped him in his tracks -- or rather, God stopped him in his tracks by means of two illnesses. We do easily forget that God will send suffering when that's the only way He can get our attention. A friend of mine, when she reads this, will recall her grandfather's words when he recovered as much as he was going to from a near-fatal accident: "I was on the road to hell, when I was stopped by my ever-loving Saviour."

Francis' direction thereafter did nothing to appease his father, who concluded that he was not only mad but a blot on the family reputation. He tried beating him (Francis was by this time in his mid twenties), putting him in fetters, and shutting him up in a cell so tiny he couldn't lie down -- a small closet, really, as we have been told by friends who visited the site. His mother, in her husband's absence, let her son out, but there was to be no reconciliation between father and son: the choice was submission or disinheritance, along with repayment of the value of everything he had taken with him -- virtually all of which he had given away, and none of which had previously been begrudged him. On the bishop's advice, Francis made restitution of what he still had -- literally, the clothes off his back (the rest, he said, now belonged to God and the poor). Father left in a rage, and a servant's cloak was quickly donated to cover Francis' nakedness. With chalk, he drew a cross on it, his first habit.

And all of this was before he famously heard the words of the Gospel at the Mass for the Feast of St Matthias: "As you go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. . .Freely have you received, freely give. Take no gold. . .nor two coats nor shoes nor a staff. . .Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves. . ." (*from Mt 10:7-19*). When he heard the words read out that day, he received them literally, and the rest, as they say, is history. I'm reminded of our Lord's words elsewhere: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it." Would God that we were all as literal-minded as this Francesco Bernardone!

PALETTA DI MANDORLA

That is, Almond Slices, a treat for the day from the Umbria region of Italy, no doubt because of St Francis' well-documented love of almonds. Tradition has it that the recipe came from St Clare. Unfortunately, it doesn't call for any tomatoes. Cream 1 cup butter with 1-1/2 cups sugar; beat in 4 eggs. Add 4 cups flour sifted with 1 tsp baking powder, 4 cups ground almonds, and 1 tsp vanilla. Form into two long rolls about an inch in diameter. Bake on parchment paper at 375 degrees till golden brown, 10-12 minutes. Cool, then make 3/4 inch thick slices (24 or so slices per roll -- I cut mine diagonally, like biscotti), lay the slices on their cut sides on the parchment paper, and return to the oven briefly to toast.



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