

passion. The first symbols for the saviour appeared towards the end of the second century in the catacombs. Typically these grave decorations showed not a symbol of death but rather one of salvation, in the form of an anchor or a fish.<sup>82</sup> The vision of Emperor Constantine, which revealed to him the monogram of Christ with the words 'In this sign you will conquer', first made possible the transfiguration of the scandal of a crucified God.<sup>83</sup> The widespread *depiction* of a laurel wreath over Christ's monogram or other representations of the cross without the crucified figure were clearly symbols of the victory of Christ and the hope of the faithful. From the same spirit emerged those images in which Christ sits upon a throne decorated with precious gems, an attribute of the Roman emperors and Zeus-Jupiter.<sup>84</sup> The first depiction of a crucifix is, significantly, a pagan caricature from the early third century, which shows the crucified figure with the head of an ass.<sup>85</sup> The first cautious approximations of a portrayal of the crucified Christ are an ivory tablet from c.420 and the wooden door of the Church of St Sabina in Rome from c.431. In both cases Jesus appears to be without pain and has a relaxed expression on his face; on the door, the cross is barely visible. The first depictions of the crucifixion date to the late sixth century<sup>86</sup> - that is, from a time when the Church of the East had long been separated from the Western Churches.

The Church of the East venerates only the original, bare cross of the resurrection; the crucifix is rejected as a sign of the heretical belief in the suffering of God. In this spirit, Catholicos Mar Shimun XVII (in office 1820-1861) declared to a British geologist and Chaldean missionary in 1840, 'Christ suffered once and then entered into glory. He will suffer no more and die no more. Such images are the work of unbelievers, who like depictions of the suffering of Christ, and not of Christians, who rejoice that Christ defeated death through his suffering and death.'<sup>87</sup>

In the Church of the East the cross enjoys the greatest respect, for it is the only Church that numbers the sign of the cross among its holy sacraments. No sacrament can be given and no form of devotion or worship can be carried out without the sign of the cross, since it is 'the emblem of our salvation'.<sup>88</sup> The cross also has a prominent eschatological significance, since at the end of the time it will, as the cross of light of the parousia, announce the return of Christ.<sup>89</sup>

Insofar as the tree of life symbolizes the importance of Christ as the Second Adam, it is not surprising that among the East Syrians the leaved cross and the pearl cross predominate, as examples from Mesopotamia and Iran attest.<sup>90</sup> In both cases the crosses appearing at the ends or the three pearls symbolize both the tree of life and the Trinity. In China there finally emerged a peculiar interreligious synthesis, as the two forms of the cross were enriched with symbolic elements from Buddhism, Taoism and Zoroastrianism.<sup>91</sup>

## The sacraments in the Church of the East

In the Church of the East, 'sacrament' is characterized as *raz&*, whose etymological roots lie closer to the Greek *mysterion* than to the Latin *sacramentum*. Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote, 'Every sacrament consists in [its] representation of unseen and unspeakable things through signs and emblems.'<sup>92</sup> Its premise is the act of faith in divine grace. In the liturgical symbolic action an aspect of the divine mystery of salvation is concretely mediated, in that it re-enacts the salvific work of Christ and simultaneously points towards the coming resurrection. In the sacrament, Christ is the real actor, our eternal High Priest', whose 'sacrifice replaces the eultic rituals of the Old Testament's Aaronic priesthood'.<sup>93</sup> In the sacrament, mediated by a bishop