



Introduction

The history of Christianity is marked by lights and shadows, by moments of triumph and also of humiliation. One of the oldest testimonies we have of the faith in Christ is not a golden icon, nor a solemn fresco in a basilica, nor a precious reliquary. It is a **graffito**. A rough drawing, scratched on the wall of a Roman building, showing a man worshipping someone crucified... with the head of a donkey.

This is the famous **Alexamenos Graffito**, considered the oldest surviving representation of Jesus Christ. Paradoxically, the first “image” of Christ was not born from devotion, but from mockery. It was an attempt to ridicule a young Christian who, in a hostile environment, confessed his faith in a God made man, crucified and risen.

Today, centuries later, this graffito still speaks to us. It reminds us that the Christian faith will always be a sign of contradiction (cf. Lk 2:34), that the Cross cannot be understood through the logic of the world, and that Christ’s disciples are called to live faithfully, even when mocked.

The Discovery of the Graffito

The **Alexamenos Graffito** was discovered in 1857 on the Palatine Hill in Rome, in a building known as the *Domus Gelotiana*, which had been used as barracks for the young pages of the emperor. On one wall, a drawing was found scratched into the plaster:

- A man with arms raised in an attitude of worship.
- A rough cross, on which is crucified a man with a human body but the head of a donkey.
- And an inscription in Greek: “*Alexamenos worships his god.*”

The graffito was a mockery directed at a certain **Alexamenos**, a Christian who lived or worked in that environment. They mocked him because he adored a crucified God—something that, in the Roman mentality, was absurd, even repulsive.



The Scandal of the Cross

For the Romans, **crucifixion** was the most infamous punishment. It was reserved for slaves and criminals, never for free citizens. It was a sign of absolute defeat and humiliation.

That is why pagans could not understand how Christians proclaimed a “crucified Messiah” (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). St. Paul expresses it forcefully:

“We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles; but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor 1:23-24).

The Alexamenos Graffito reflects this incomprehension perfectly. For the world, Jesus crucified was ridiculous, unworthy of faith. And not only the Lord was ridiculed, but also those who followed Him.

The Donkey’s Head: Contempt for the Christian Faith

Why was Christ represented with the head of a donkey?

In antiquity, there was a slander against the Jews (and by extension, the Christians): it was said that they worshiped a god with the head of a donkey. This absurd accusation circulated in Roman circles as a way to discredit their religion.

Thus, the graffito not only ridiculed the Cross but also associated the Christian faith with what was lowest and most grotesque. In other words: *“Alexamenos, you adore a ridiculous god, unworthy, a donkey-god crucified.”*



The Paradox of History: from Mockery to Glory

The graffito was intended to be an insult. Yet, over the centuries, it has become a providential testimony of the authenticity of the faith. Today we look at it and see in it a confirmation of what Jesus Himself announced:

“If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn 15:20).

The first image of Christ was not that of a Pantocrator in an apse, nor of a glorious Christ in Byzantine art, but of a mocked Christ. And this contains a profound theological truth: **before glory comes the Cross; before the Resurrection, Calvary.**

Theological Relevance

The Alexamenos Graffito helps us better understand three fundamental aspects of the Christian faith:

1. **Faith is incomprehensible to the world.** There will always be those who see the Gospel as foolishness or a scandal. Christianity does not fit into the logic of power, success, or human prestige.
 2. **The Cross is the center of Christian life.** The Romans mocked because they could not accept a crucified God. And yet precisely there, in humiliation, lies the triumph of love.
 3. **The fidelity of the disciples.** Alexamenos was ridiculed, but he continued to worship his Lord. In fact, in the same *domus* another later graffito was found, with the inscription: “*Alexamenos fidelis*” (“Alexamenos is faithful”). The disciple’s faith outlasted the mockery of his companions.
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A Lesson for Today: Modern Mockery of Christ

Although twenty centuries have passed, the spirit of the Alexamenos Graffito is still alive. Today Christ and His disciples are also the object of mockery:



- When the faith is ridiculed in the media.
- When offensive cartoons are made against Jesus, the Virgin, or the Church.
- When Christians are labeled as ignorant, fanatical, or outdated for defending their faith.

Today's world, like that of old, is still scandalized by the Cross. But Christians are called to bear witness with serenity, with joy, and with love, knowing that **“power is made perfect in weakness”** (2 Cor 12:9).

Practical Applications for Spiritual Life

What, concretely, does the Alexamenos Graffito teach us?

1. **To accept mockery without resentment.** If we are criticized for being Christians, let us remember we are in good company: they ridiculed the Master before us.
 2. **To remain faithful.** Like Alexamenos, who continued to worship his Lord, let us be steadfast in prayer, in the Eucharist, and in daily witness.
 3. **To transform humiliation into glory.** The insult became the first “icon” of Christ. Our humiliations too, united to the Cross, can become seeds of holiness.
 4. **Not to be ashamed of the Cross.** Today many Christians hide their faith for fear of ridicule. But Jesus calls us to confess Him with courage (cf. Mt 10:32).
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Conclusion

The Alexamenos Graffito is a small wound on the wall of time, a testimony both simple and powerful. In it we see how the world mocked Christianity, but also how a young believer remained faithful to his Lord.

Today it is our turn to decide: will we live our faith timidly, fearing the world's mockery? Or will we raise our arms, like Alexamenos, to adore Christ, the Crucified-Risen One, knowing that in Him is victory?

In the end, mockery will pass, but the glory of the Cross remains. For as St. Paul says:



“But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal 6:14).

The Alexamenos Graffito, more than mockery, is already a **symbol of fidelity and victory**. And it reminds us that, although the world may laugh, whoever remains united to the Cross walks toward the Resurrection.