

“UNDER THE HOLY CROSS”

HOLY CROSS PARISH RETREAT DAY (Part 2)

This morning I spoke of what we, as the faithful of the Church, are facing. The terrible persecutions and the coming trials. I spoke of the darkness which has overwhelmed the world again and left us grasping in the shadows. This afternoon I will speak of the light which has already come into the world, and although the world tries to smother it, it will only set the world on fire and we will see the triumph of the Holy Cross of Our Lord.

On Thursday the Church celebrates the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross and we honour this day as the feast day of our parish which has been granted, by the grace of God, the name of the Holy Cross. This day, September 14, celebrates both the discovery and the recovery of the True Cross of Our Lord. It marks, also, the dedication of the one of the most famous churches in all the world, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The mother of the Roman emperor Constantine, St. Helena, who herself had converted to Christianity, travelled on pilgrimage to the Holy Land to find the places of the life of Christ, and to preserve the relics of the Christian faith that remained there. Her great hope was to find the place of Our Lord's Crucifixion and the very Cross on which He was hung.

Through speaking with those who lived in those places, and with the guidance of the Bishop of Jerusalem, St. Macarius, St. Helena discovered the place of Calvary and found the True Cross which had been buried and hidden.

What was found, though, were three crosses, but it could not be seen which was the true Cross. The ancient historian Rufinus writes that to find which of these three was the Cross of Our Lord, the three Crosses were placed on the body of a dead woman who was being carried through the streets to her burial. To this, St. Macarius recited this prayer: “O Lord, who by the Passion of Thine

only Son on the Cross, didst deign to restore salvation to mankind, and who even now hast inspired thy handmaid Helena to seek for the blessed wood to which the author of our salvation was nailed, show clearly which it was, among the three crosses, that was raised for Thy glory. Distinguish it from those which only served for a common execution. Let this woman who is now expiring return from death's door as soon as she is touched by the wood of salvation." Each of the crosses, one by one, was touched to the dead woman. When the third Cross was placed on her, she was brought to life and so it was held that it was this Cross, the Cross that destroyed death and brought life, was the True Cross of Our Lord.

The date of this discovery and of the miracle, according to tradition, was May 3 in the year A.D. 326. St. Helena had a church built on the original site of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection, known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Her son, the emperor Constantine, had this church dedicated on September 13 and 14 in the year A.D. 335. Even today, the Stations of the Cross in Jerusalem, known as the Via Dolorosa or the "Way of Sorrows," ends at this very spot.

For the next few hundred years the Cross was kept in this Church in Jerusalem, but in the year A.D. 614, the Persian King Chosroas, after his invasion of Syria and Palestine, seized the Cross and took it away. Twenty five years later, in the year A.D. 629, the Cross was found again and brought back to Jerusalem by Emperor Heraclius of Constantinople. The True Cross was then restored to its place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Tradition has it that Emperor Heraclius carried the Cross on his back, a public act of homage, in order to restore it to its rightful place, but he was only able to move it after he had removed his royal garments and put on the humble garments of a penitent sinner instead. And once again, the Cross was brought back to Jerusalem on September 14, the anniversary of the dedication of the Church of the Holy

Sepulchre, the date on which Jerusalem celebrated the feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross.

This then, is why the Church honours that day as the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. But why does the Church honour and exalt the Holy Cross?

When Our Lord was on the Cross, darkness occurred from the sixth hour to the ninth hour. The three hours of darkness happened because Our Lord had to return to the start of creation, to a time before the light when everything was formless and void so that he could undo the chaos released by the fall of man. As St. Paul wrote, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in [the Cross].” (*Col. 2:15*). Only the one who existed from eternity, the Messiah, the Eternal Living Word of God, can overcome chaos and restore order, for His existence precedes it and His power supersedes it.¹

As I spoke of this morning, Satan is attacking the Church, and why, because he knows his end is near. He is doing all that he can to pull people away from the light that came into the world and return them to the darkness of the formless and the void. He deceives us, which is his very name, “The Deceiver,” because his name is Lucifer, which means, “the angel of light.” His darkness he presents as light but it is a lie. But we should not become preoccupied with the works of the devil, the lies of the world, and the corruption of our faith. Instead, we must become preoccupied with Our Lord. Trust in Him, give all that you are to Him, and place it all in the palm of His hand and say I lay my life in your hand and no one can snatch me out of your almighty hand.

In an exorcism, the Priest will hold up before the demon the Crucifix. Why? Because the Crucifix says to the devil, “You have been defeated before. You will be defeated again.” The moment that Our Lord is dying on the cross,

¹ Sobel, Jason. “Why three hours of darkness when Yeshua Jesus was on the cross?”, Rabbi Jason Nobel Official (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxV2hJDc4VU>)

the devil believes that he has won, but then he comes to understand that the moment he thinks of as his victory is really the moment of his defeat.

Fr. William Casey said, “It seems as though the enemies of the Church have got all the worldly power on their side. They’ve got the government, they’ve got the money, they’ve got the movies, they’ve got Hollywood, they’ve got the celebrities, they’ve got the media, they control the means of social communication, they’ve got the courts, they’ve got the universities—and all we have is God. And if God is for us, who can be against us.” As St. Teresa of Avila said: “In every spiritual battle remember, God plus one is an army.”

The morality of the world is always the accepted morality of society at any given moment. Yet it is a peculiar trait of society that it has no place for those who are either too bad or too good. That is why on Calvary Our Lord is hung on a Cross between two thieves. The two thieves were too bad for conventional morality, and Our Lord was too good.

When we look upon the Holy Cross, let us always remember the two thieves that hung on either side of Our Lord. “One mocked Jesus, the other sought Jesus. One took pride in himself, the other humbled himself. One continued to remain condemned, the other moved on to receive salvation. One lost a golden opportunity, the other won Paradise!”² As I began these talks and I spoke of crisis and that crisis means to choose, we have a choice to make: escape from the cross or embrace the cross, exit the cross or exalt the cross.

If you have been through counselling or even if you know something about it, you would know that it is confronting our fears, by looking at them, that we take power away from them. Look at the Cross. What do we see in it? Physical suffering, bodily pain, humiliation, false accusation, cruelty, hatred, injustice, and death itself. Everything that frightens us we see in that Cross. Yet on that Cross, we also see their defeat. Our Lord took on all of these things, took on

² Rev. Fr. Jijo Manjackal MSFS. “September 14, 2020—Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross,” *Reflection Capsules* (reflectioncapsules.com), quoting Most Rev. Fulton Sheen.

every act of evil, and bore them in Himself. The irony of it all is that evil thought it was destroying God, but it was God who nailed evil to the Cross and destroyed it.

We long for justice, and I won't pretend that I am so noble that there are not moments in my life when I don't pray that I will see my enemies humiliated before my very eyes. When injustice overwhelms me, when the petty hatreds of others cause me to be sick and leave me lying awake at night, when the arrogance and the deceit of them tears at me and leaves me in tatters, I admit that I long to see these people destroyed. I know that justice will come to all in the end and that none of us will escape the judgement seat of almighty God. "Vengeance is mine and I shall have it, says the Lord" (see *Dt. 32:35*). And that is where I must leave it, with God. On that Cross Our Lord took all the evil that was thrown at Him and He bore it on Himself. Evil is spread because we pass it on to others. We are mocked so we mock, we are insulted so we insult, we are torn down so we tear down. But on that Cross Our Lord was mocked but He did not mock, He was insulted but He did not insult, He was torn apart but He did not tear apart; and because of this, the evil laid upon Him died with Him.

Archbishop Fulton Sheen said that the crucifixion of Christ is the autobiography of our lives; for my pride placed the crown of thorns on His head, my grasping for worldly things pierced His hands, my running from the responsibilities which are mine nailed His feet, the love that I have wasted wounded His heart, and my depraved desires left His skin hanging from Him like purple rags.

While there is always a rightful punishment for our sins, God also provides us with a remedy as well. When God freed the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and Moses led them through the wilderness towards the Promised Land, the people lost patience and complained about the discomforts they felt, and so a plague of poisonous serpents that brought suffering and death was released upon them (*Num. 21:4-9*). Yet it was the same serpent, a bronze serpent lifted up

on a pole, that brought about healing for all who looked on it. In this we see the foreshadowing of the Cross of Christ. Our sins brought about our death and caused Our Lord to be nailed to the Cross, but it is that same Cross that has brought about our eternal life because Our Lord was lifted up on that Cross. The Holy Cross is the mark of divine love, yearning to bring us back to Him, and provides us the way to be rescued from eternal death.

In our world we often use the heart as the symbol of love. But for the faithful, it is the Holy Cross that is the true symbol of love. For love demands sacrifice. St. Paul wrote: “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (*Phil. 2:6-11*). For this is the true nature of love—sacrificial, self-emptying and committed.

The place of Crucifixion was Calvary, also called Golgotha, or the “Place of the Skull.” There is a legend that says this was the burial place of Adam. So here on this hill, the grave of the first man and the one who brought death into the world, was crucified God made Man, the one who would bring eternal life; the new Adam was dying for the old Adam. The tree of life from which Adam took, is now the tree of the Cross from which God gave.

On the Cross an inscription was placed at the order of Pontius Pilate. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews” (*Jn. 19:19*). It was written in three languages: Hebrew, Greek and Latin, the three languages of the three cities of the world: Jerusalem, Athens and Rome. The languages of what the world held to be the Good, the Beautiful and the True.³ It proclaimed His Kingship, but here for His throne was a Cross, for the purple robes of emperors was His blood, for His sceptre were nails, for His crown, the crown of thorns. The world

³ Most Rev. Fulton Sheen. “The Crucifixion by Fulton Sheen,” *Catholic Arena* (catholicarena.com).

ridiculed Him but the voice of Truth spoke out in the silence of that Cross on Calvary 2,000 years ago, and that voice has never, and will never, be silenced.

Kind David prophesied this moment centuries before when he wrote in the psalm: "They have torn holes in my hands and feet; I can count my bones one by one; And they stand there watching me, gazing at me in triumph (*Ps. 21:13*).

These prophecies that foretold the death of the messiah should give us comfort. Why? Because it means that God has everything in His power and nothing comes as a surprise to Him. He is never caught unawares, He knows all that has been, is now, and will ever be. In spite of the power of men, He has the true power, and in spite of the control of men, He is in control of it all. There is nothing we should fear, whatever may come to us, because God will take our shattered life and make it whole again and glorious. He did it on that Cross 2,000 years ago, and He will do it again. The words of Our Lord, "Do not be afraid", are spoken by Him 365 times in the Bible; one for every day of the year. So do not be afraid, He has all of our days in His power.

There are those who masquerade themselves as disciples of Our Lord and who are no more than actors with painted smiles on their faces. These have divorced the Cross from Christ. They place the Cross to one side and Christ to the other. The Cross which confronts us with the darkness of our sins is separated from the Christ they make out to be not God made Man, but a "yes" man whose purpose is to do no more than affirm us in our egos. They have made Our Lord, born without a home, homeless all over again because they have robbed Him of His Cross.

But there can be no Christianity without the Cross, there can be no salvation without the saviour hanging upon it, for the Cross is a bridge between death and life, between exile and Paradise, between slavery in Egypt and freedom in the Promised Land, between this world and the next, between man and God.

Look at the Cross and see that its arms stretch from one end of the world to the other, and reaches down to the earth and up to heaven. Our Lord Himself takes on this shape of the Cross in His Crucifixion and with His arms outstretched He embraces every man and woman, in every place and in every time, and gathering them to His Sacred Heart, lifts them from the dust of the earth to the glories of heaven.

Do not run away from the Cross, do not leave Our Lord abandoned there on the hill of Calvary, do not leave our Blessed Mother, Mary, in the cold of that dark Good Friday, because without this Cross you can never be held in the arms of Our Lord.

St. John of the Cross would say, "The road is narrow. He who wishes to travel it more easily, must cast off all things and use the Cross as his cane."

When you make the sign of the Cross, make it with reverence and with awareness that you are marking upon yourself the Cross to which you nailed Our Lord and the Cross by which Our Lord will save you. When you pray the Holy Rosary, remember that each of these mysteries is a moment of our salvation and that just as the Rosary itself is circular, let it remind us that Our Lord came down to the earth to bring us up to heaven and that where we begin our Rosary is where it ends—at the Cross.

When you attend Mass remember that it is the holy sacrifice of the Mass, the unbloody remembrance of the bloody sacrifice of the Cross. And if you are bored in the Mass, remember the pain of Our Lord to give you the Mass. And if you think the Mass is too long, think of the hours Our Lord hung upon that Cross.

When you are afraid, look to the Cross, because in it is the defeat of all fears. When you are sad, look to the Cross, because in it is the way to the joy of all joys. When you are lonely, look to the Cross, because He who hung upon it alone hangs there so that you will never be alone. When you have sinned, look to the Cross, because the Cross on which Our Lord was nailed because of our

sins is the same Cross by which Our Lord has freed us from our sins and said. "Father, forgive them" (*Lk. 23:34*). When you are made to suffer injustice, look to the Cross, because in that you will find the death of evil and the triumph of good.

Stand, always, under the Holy Cross. Stand there with the Blessed Virgin Mary, given to us as our mother from the Holy Cross. Stand there knowing that our sins nailed Our Lord to the Cross and gave Him death, but that very same Cross held His divine love and gives us life.

We adore you, O Lord, and we praise you, because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.

Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for us.