

Sunday of the Cross – Third Sunday of Lent 2017

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

On this Sunday, which is the third Sunday of Lent, we celebrate the veneration of the Holy and Life Giving Cross. Why would the church fathers have us celebrate the cross today?

It was because we have been fasting for three weeks and perhaps some of us need extra strengthening. Some of us are beginning to tire of fasting. Some of us might be feeling weak and are being tempted to call it quits from the fasting as well as spending extra time in prayer. We have been crying tears of repentance and have become bitter and despondent for the failures in our lives. We have put ourselves in a desert longing to grow closer to God, and at the same time realizing how sinful our lives are.

Why the cross? The cross is a source of great joy. The Jews and the pagans did not understand the idea of a crucified Christ. So, the idea of the cross being a source of joy was ridiculous to them. We know that the Word of God became man and allowed Himself to be crucified so that we might have salvation. When we look at the cross we see the source of our salvation.

If Jesus had not died on the cross and had not risen from the dead, we would not have the opportunity for a life of eternal joy. We celebrate the cross this Sunday to remind us of the goal of our fasting, of our extra prayers and of our extra almsgiving. It is to become one with the Risen Lord and to have life eternal in the Kingdom of Heaven where there are no sorrows, no sighing nor weeping just joy and happiness.

The Cross is called the Tree of Life. It is the tree that was planted in the center of Paradise, and for this reason the holy Fathers have planted it in the middle of Holy Lent. We remember both Adam's bliss and then how he was deprived of it. We also remember that partaking of this Tree we will no longer die but are kept alive.

As St. Paul wrote to the Galatians, we have "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24), and we will have mortified ourselves

during these forty days of the Fast, the precious and life-giving Cross is now placed before us to refresh our souls and encourage us who may be filled with a sense of bitterness, resentment, and depression.

The Cross reminds us of the Passion of our Lord, and by presenting to us His example, it encourages us to follow Him in struggle and sacrifice, being refreshed, assured, and comforted. In other words, we must experience what the Lord experienced during His Passion - being humiliated in a shameful manner. The Cross teaches us that through pain and suffering we shall see the fulfillment of our hopes: the heavenly inheritance and eternal glory.

In today's Gospel, we hear the Lord say: "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Why would any person want to take up a cross and deny himself? Can't we just be a follower of Jesus without denying ourselves. Besides, what does it mean to deny oneself? We deny ourselves all the time when we diet to lose weight, when we are getting in shape for a sporting event, or when we are studying for a test. Is this not enough?

Why can't we seek the things that other people are seeking? We see and hear all the time on television, on the radio, on the internet, in newspapers, in magazines and on billboards that the things that they are promoting will make us happy. Doesn't God want us to be happy? We are told all the time that wealth will make us happy, that spending money on ourselves is the source of happiness. Could they be wrong?

Jesus continues in the Gospel: For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for My sake and the Gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? The way of the world is wrong! As followers of Jesus, we must commit ourselves to rejecting a life of self-indulgence. We must take up our cross but not as a burden, for Christ promises us, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

Before the time of Christ, the cross was an instrument of punishment; it evoked fear and aversion. But after Christ's death on the Cross it became the instrument of our salvation. Through the Cross, Christ destroyed the devil; from the Cross He descended into hades and, having liberated those languishing there, led them into the Kingdom of Heaven. The sign of the Cross is terrifying to demons and as the sign of Christ, it is honored by Christians. The demonic hosts tremble when they see the Cross, for by the Cross the kingdom of hell was destroyed. They do not dare to draw near to anyone who is guarded by the Cross.

The whole human race, by the death of Christ on the Cross, received deliverance from the authority of the devil, and everyone who makes use of this saving weapon is inaccessible to the demons. When legions of demons appeared to St. Anthony the Great and other desert-dwellers, they guarded themselves with the Sign of the Cross, and the demons vanished.

When they appeared to St. Symeon the Stylite, who was standing on his pillar, what seemed to be a chariot to carry him to heaven appeared. The Saint, before climbing into the chariot, crossed himself; and the chariot disappeared and the enemy, who had hoped to cast down the ascetic from the height of his pillar, was put to shame.

One cannot enumerate all the separate examples of the manifestation of the power of the Cross in various incidents. Invisibly and unceasingly there gushes from it the Divine grace that saves the world. The Sign of the Cross is made at all the Mysteries and prayers of the Church. With the making of the Sign of the Cross over the bread and wine, they become the Body and Blood of Christ. With the immersion of the Cross, the waters are sanctified. The Sign of the Cross frees us from the bonds of sins.

The present feast has been placed in the middle of Great Lent for another reason. The Fast can be likened to the spring of Marah whose waters the children of Israel encountered in the wilderness. This water was undrinkable due to its bitterness but became sweet when the Holy Prophet Moses dipped the wood into its depth. Likewise, the wood of the Cross sweetens the days of the Fast, which are bitter and often grievous because of our tears.

Yet Christ comforts us during our course through the desert of the Fast, guiding and leading us by His hand to the spiritual Jerusalem on high by the power of His Resurrection. Moreover, as the Holy Cross is called the Tree of Life, it is placed in the middle of the Fast, as the ancient tree of life was placed in the middle of the garden of Eden. By this, our Holy Fathers wished to remind us of Adam's gluttony as well as the fact that through this Tree has condemnation been abolished.

Therefore, if we bind ourselves to the Holy Cross, we shall never encounter death but shall inherit life eternal. "For what can a man give in return for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels."

Metropolitan Joseph writes: "Many heretics of our time don't believe in the cross, even if they may call themselves Christians. Some pop stars and actors wear the cross, but by the witness of their lives we can assume that they don't put much value in the cross except as an empty symbol. There is nothing new under the sun and there have always been accusation against our Church. In the second century, Christians were accused of practicing incest, of being cannibals, of being ignorant and of being bad citizens. The most dangerous accusation was that the Christian teaching was unreasonable. This idea purported that the incarnation was nonsense; God would not lower Himself to become a tiny baby or to be crucified as a common thief."

St. Paul writes "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). By His divinity Jesus made the cross the sign of the new life.

Our cross is through baptism and repentance. For this reason we become communicants of His cross by our baptism, life, struggle and suffering for the sake of Jesus.

We cross ourselves all the time – before kissing an icon, when we pray, before we eat, to express the daily experience of the cross.

It is the power of God!

The cross to the unbelievers is foolishness, but to us believers it is the power of God. Every action of Christ, including all His working of miracles, was truly great and wonderful. But of all things the most wonderful is His honorable cross.

For by nothing else, except by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, death has been brought low, death has been despoiled and resurrection bestowed. The power given us by the death of Christ, that is to say the cross, has clothed us with the wisdom and power of God. This we have been given as a sign on our forehead, just as Israel was given circumcision. For by it, we faithful are set apart from the skeptics and we are recognized apart from unbelievers. So that honorable and most truly venerable cross, upon which Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for us, is itself to be adored because it has been sanctified by contact with His sacred body and blood.

We have splinters of this most honorable wood as a relic because it touched the humanity and the sacred divinity of our Lord. We also adore the likeness of the honorable and life giving Cross, even though it is made of another material. We do not honor the material, but the likeness as a symbol of Christ. We preach Christ crucified. Therefore, the sign of Christ in the Cross is to be adored, for wherever the sign may be, there Christ will be too.

If the form of the cross should happen to be destroyed however, the material from which the cross was composed is not to be adored, even if it was of gold or precious stones. We honor the material as a sign of Christ, for wherever the sign is, Christ is there. We also trace this sign upon our bodies and thereby bless ourselves. Thus, we adore everything that has reference to God, although it is to Him that we direct the worship.

And so we can enter into these days with hope, because one sigh of the Publican was enough to make him a child of the Kingdom, to restore him to wholeness. Let us bring at least one sigh from the depth of our heart – and salvation is ours.

Through the prayers of the holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us. Amen.