

Synopsis of Feast of Exaltation of the Holy Cross John 3:13-17

Introduction: We celebrate this feast of the Exaltation of the Cross for two reasons: (1) to understand the history of the discovery and recovery of the True Cross and (2) to appreciate better the importance of the symbol and reality of Christ's sacrificial love, namely, the cross in the daily life of every Christian.

Historical note: The Feast of Exaltation of the Holy Cross is one of twelve "Master feasts" celebrated in the Church to honor Jesus Christ, our Lord and Master. This feast is celebrated to remember both the first installation of the remnants of the True Cross of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher at Mount Calvary on September 14, 335 AD and its reinstallation on September 14, 630 A.D. The original cross on which Jesus was crucified was excavated in A.D. 326 by a team led by St. Helena the mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine . The Emperor built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher on Calvary , it was consecrated on September 14, 335, and the remains of the cross were installed in it by archbishop Makarios of Jerusalem. After three centuries, the Persians invaded Jerusalem , plundered all valuables and took with them the relic of the Holy Cross. In 630, Heraclius II defeated the Persians, recaptured the casket containing the holy relic and reinstalled it in the rebuilt Church of the Holy Sepulcher. The largest fragment of the Holy Cross is now kept in the Santa Croce church in Rome .

The first reading today describes how God healed the complaining Israelites through the brazen serpent. In the second reading, St. Paul explains how God exalted Jesus for his self-emptying on the cross for our salvation by granting him resurrection. In today's gospel, answering the question raised by Nicodemus, Jesus explains how he is going to save the world by his death on the cross. Jesus cites the example of how the brazen serpent raised by Moses representing the healing power of God, saved the Israelites in the desert from snake bites.

Life messages: **1)** We need to honor and venerate the cross: We should honor and venerate the cross and carry it on our body to remind ourselves of the love of God for us and the price Jesus paid for our salvation. The cross will give us strength in our sufferings and hope in our eternal glory with the risen Lord. **2)** We need to sublimate our crosses by a) by accepting the sacrifice and suffering involved in helping others and sharing our blessings with others b) by welcoming the pain involved in controlling our evil habits and tendencies and in practicing our faith c) by serving others with sacrificial, *agápe* love, self surrender and commitment. **3)** We need to be forgiving others because we are forgiven sinners: The crucifix reminds us that we are forgiven sinners and hence we are expected to forgive those who offend us and ask for forgiveness whenever we offend others or hurt their feelings. (Fr. Tony) **L-14**

O.T 24: SEPT 14, 2008: FEAST OF EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

(Numbers 21: 4-9; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17) **L-14**

Anecdote 1: Trinket or Treasure: Ann Thomas tells this story of herself. She was at a garage sale with her friend Betty. Ann had just sorted through a tray of trinkets. Betty came up and asked, "Any luck?" "No!" said Ann. "It's just a pile of junk." She stepped aside to let Betty see for herself. Betty took one look at the pile, picked up a tarnished old

cross and said, "I can't believe it. I've found a treasure! This cross is made of antique silver." When Ann's friend got home, she cleaned the cross and polished it. It was indeed a treasure. Ann ended the story saying, "Betty and I both looked at the same cross. I only saw junk; Betty saw a treasure." Later Betty's seven-year-old son, Bobby picked up the cross, held it reverently in his hands, and looked at it for a long time. Suddenly he began to cry. "What's wrong?" asked Betty. Bobby said, "I can't help it. I was looking at Jesus on the cross." Three people looked at the same cross. One saw junk, another saw a treasure; a third saw Jesus. Today's feast reminds us to see Jesus and appreciate the price he paid for our salvation each time we look at a cross or crucifix. (Mark Link in *Sunday Homilies*).

Anecdote 2: *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* is an anti-slavery novel written by American author Harriet Beecher Stowe and published in 1852. The sentimental novel depicts the cruel reality of slavery while also asserting that Christian love can overcome something as destructive as the enslavement of one's fellow-human beings. The story follows the fortunes of a slave, the dutiful Uncle Tom. He was a slave on the Shelby plantation in Kentucky. There he was loved by his owners, their son, and every slave on the property. He lived contentedly with his wife and children in their own cabin until Mr. Shelby decided to sell him and another slave to pay off debts to Augustine St Clair in New Orleans. In the idealistic St Clair's household, the young daughter Eva became fond of Tom, and his life with his new master was relatively happy. However, following the deaths of the decent master St Clair and the kindly Eva, Tom was sold again and his new master Simon Legree, the owner of a cotton plantation, was the embodiment of cruelty. He treated the good and loyal Tom so terribly that Tom died just before rescue arrived, in the person of George Shelby, Tom's first owner's son. The novel ends with George Shelby's return to the Shelby plantations. There he freed all his slaves, as a memorial to the sacrificial, loving and dedicated service of Uncle Tom, with the advice: "Remember ... when you look at the wooden cabin of our dear Uncle Tom ... that great man and his sacrificial suffering and heroic death which gave you your freedom." On the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the Church, our mother, gives us, her children, a similar challenging reminder: "Look at this Holy Cross of Christ and learn to appreciate the great price He paid for our freedom from the slavery of sin by his suffering and death on the cross."

Aim of the feast: We celebrate this feast of the Exaltation of the Cross for two reasons: (1) to understand the history of the discovery and recovery of the True Cross and (2) to appreciate better the importance of the symbol and reality of Christ's sacrificial love, namely, the cross in the daily life of every Christian.

Historical notes: According to a reliable legend accepted by early Fathers of the Church, when the Body of Jesus and those of the two thieves were removed from their crosses, the disciples buried the body of Jesus in the tomb donated by Nicodemus. As it was customary, the crosses of Jesus and the two thieves were buried in a pit dug close to the tomb. They remained there unnoticed till the fourth century. In the fourth century, while the pagan commander Constantine the Great was in combat with Maxentius for the throne of the Roman Empire, AD 312, some of his Christian soldiers suggested that he

pray to the God of the Christians to help him in his battle. In answer to his prayer, the sign of a luminous cross appeared in the sky with the words "IN THIS SIGN YOU WILL CONQUER" inscribed on it. Following this, Constantine won the battle over Maxentius. Indebted to the God of Christians for his victory at the Milvian Bridge , October 28, AD 312, Constantine became a Christian catechumen. The Emperor issued the Edict of Milan (in 313), guaranteeing Christians religious tolerance throughout the Roman Empire. He declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and commanded that the sign of the cross be placed on all the Roman standards and on the shields of all the soldiers. At the request of the Patriarch of Jerusalem who participated in the Synod of Nicaea the Emperor Constantine sent a team to find out the true cross. On September 14, AD 327, a team of excavators, led by Constantine 's mother St. Helena, found below the temple of Venus at Calvary the True Cross on which Jesus had been crucified. The cross of Christ was identified by the miraculous healing given to a terminally sick lady when touched by the cross of Jesus. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, Makarios, standing on a raised platform, lifted high the cross, "exalting" it, for all to see. The people fell to their knees, bowing down before the cross and crying out repeatedly: "Lord, have mercy!" To commemorate the finding of the Holy Cross, Constantine built and dedicated two Churches upon Calvary, "Anastasis" and " Golgotha ," both within the precincts of the present *Church of the Holy Sepulchre*. In 355, *the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross* was established in Jerusalem to commemorate St. Helena 's discovery of the true cross of Jesus.

In AD 614, Chosroes II, the King of Persia, invaded Syria and Palestine and carried away many of the great treasures of Jerusalem , including the relic of the True Cross. In AD 628, Emperor Heraclius of Constantinople marched into Persia , recaptured the True Cross. He took the cross to Constantinople at first, then brought it back to Jerusalem on March 21, 630 walking barefoot and wearing sackcloth in penance. On September 14th, the Sacred Cross was restored to its place in the *Church of the Holy Sepulcher* (Anastasis) in Jerusalem . It was to commemorate this great event that the Church of Rome adopted the "Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross" on September 14th.

Today's Scripture readings: The first reading today describes how God punished the ceaselessly complaining Israelites in the desert for their stubborn and rebellious hearts by sending on them a plague of deadly serpents. When they repented and cried to the Lord for mercy, God instructed Moses: "*Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live*" (Numbers 21:8). The bronze serpent pointed to the cross of Christ on which He defeated sin and death and obtained everlasting life for those who accepted the crucified and risen Lord as their Lord and Savior. In the second reading, St. Paul explains how the exaltation of Jesus on the cross was an act of self-emptying by Christ our Lord for our salvation and how God exalted Jesus as our Lord and Savior because of Jesus' perfect obedience to his Father' will demonstrated by his death on the cross. Today's Gospel describes how Nicodemus, a prominent Jew, went to talk with Jesus under the cover of darkness to ascertain whether he should do anything for his salvation besides observing the Mosaic Law and offering the prescribed sacrifices. Jesus explained to him that He would accomplish human salvation by His death on the cross

and that one needs to be reborn through water and the Holy Spirit to become eligible for his or her eternal salvation. Jesus further explained the necessity of his crucifixion and resurrection using the analogy of Moses and the bronze serpent in the desert.

The transformation of the Roman Cross. Brutal and barbaric, the cross was a tool of political power for the Romans. They maintained their power because of the fear of death on the cross. When one was condemned by the state, the condemned literally had to "take up his cross" and carry it to the public place where he was to be crucified. It was part of the humiliation process, the mechanism of social control for which crucifixion was invented. Even the Jews considered it an instrument of suffering and shame: "cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree" (Deut. 21:23). Jesus went to cross as one who was rejected (by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes), and abandoned (completely -- by his disciples, too). Jesus did not die as a hero or a martyr. Yet Christianity had, and still has, at its center this most awful symbol of death and disgrace. But modern preaching reduces bearing the cross to little more than performing acts of kindness toward other people. On the feast of Exaltation of the Holy Cross, then, we must learn to appreciate the real message of the cross in our Christian life.

The cross as symbol of self-surrendering love: The cross and the crucifix are meaningful symbols as dove symbolizes peace and heart symbolizes love. The crucifix/cross is the symbol of God's loving and sacrificial offering of Himself in a humble, total self-emptying love for all of us, that we might have everlasting life with Him. It represents the cross-bearing Christ leading us in our life's journey of pain and suffering, carrying his heavier cross and still encouraging us, strengthening us and supporting us. In addition, the cross is the symbol of the risen Christ who promises us a crown of glory as a reward for our patient bearing of our daily crosses. Thus, the cross is a symbolic summary of the Passion, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ -- all in one image. Christians "exalt" the Cross of Christ as the instrument of our salvation.

The cross means pain: We generally speak of crosses given by Nature (e.g., diseases, natural disasters, death), crosses involved in doing our duties faithfully, crosses given by the others and crosses we create for ourselves. We are taught to offer these sufferings with Jesus to the Father as gifts of love, in reparation for our sins and the sins of the world. In addition, the cross is the pain we suffer for others. It is the sanctifying pain involved in sharing our blessings sacrificially with others. It is the pain involved in controlling our evil tendencies in an attempt to attain a higher degree of holiness. It is also the pain involved in standing with Jesus and gladly following him even if that means scorn and humiliation from the rest of the world.

How should we carry our crosses? We should not carry our crosses cursing our fate as does the donkey carrying its heavy load, or protesting like oxen or horses pulling heavy carts, or expecting a heavenly reward as a hired worker works for his wages. The true spirit of carrying our crosses is to do so like a loving wife who nurses her paralyzed husband or sick child with sacrificial love and dedicated self-surrender. We find support in carrying our own crosses by comparing our light crosses with the heavy crosses of

terminally ill patients, and by drawing strength and inspiration from Jesus walking ahead of us carrying his heavier cross and supporting us in carrying our crosses.

Life messages: 1) Venerate and wear the cross: When we appreciate, venerate and wear the cross, we remember the price Jesus paid for our salvation and help, support and pray for others in their pains and sufferings.

2) We need to convert our pains and suffering into the cross of Christ by a) by accepting the sacrifice and suffering involved in helping others and sharing our blessings with others b) by welcoming the pain involved in controlling our evil habits and tendencies and in practicing our faith c) by serving others with sacrificial, *agápe* love, self-surrender and commitment like a loving wife who nurses her sick child or husband.