

## ***Focus on the Faith***

### **The Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Creating Cross of the Lord**

For a long time the Cross served as the instrument of a shameful punishment, exciting fear and disgust among people, but from the time that Christ sanctified it by His Blood, it became an object of pious respect and veneration for all Christians. However, this did not become universal at once. The very life-bearing Tree on which the Lord was crucified laid in the ground for many years until it was revealed to the world in a miraculous manner.

When the waves of persecutions directed against Christians died down and they emerged, tormented and bloodied, from the catacombs and caves into God's light, signing themselves with the sign of the cross, then it was that Constantine the Great, who more than once had felt the power of the Cross, decided to seek that very Tree on which the Body of Christ had been nailed. His eighty-year old holy mother Helen took upon herself this sacred task. Arriving in Jerusalem she spent much time and expense to discover exactly where the Cross of the Lord was hidden. She managed to establish the fact that soon after the Resurrection of Christ the Jews had filled in the Lord's tomb, since it was a living monument of their rejection of the Lord. There, covered by rocks and all sorts of refuse, was discovered the life-giving Tree of Christ with the crosses of the thieves. In order to weaken the respect of the early Christians towards the holy places, in later times the heathen had placed idols upon Golgotha, had built a temple in honor of the shameless goddess Venus. Later it was found that a certain old Jew, Judas by name, on the basis of written family traditions, knew exactly where the Cross of Christ was hidden. For a long time he did not agree to reveal his secret, but finally lead the Empress Helen and Patriarch Macarius to Golgotha. Pointing to the exact spot, he said : "Here you will find the Cross of your Christ."

With piety and zeal, the people started to work, animated by the sweet-odour emerging from the earth at that spot. Soon, there were found three well-preserved crosses which were exactly alike by their exterior shape. It was therefore impossible to ascertain which of them was the Cross of Christ, since the title-board with the inscription "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews" was laying separately. The perplexity was dispersed by Patriarch Macarius who said: "If Providence did not favor the leaving of the Lord's Cross in the ground, will it allow it to remain unknown now? Will it allow us to give honor to a robber's cross in place of the Lord's Cross? God Himself will show us the Cross of Our Saviour." With these words he commanded that the crosses he taken to the home of a grievously-ill woman. Here, after fervent prayer, he placed the crosses on her, one after another. The first two did not show any effect on the sick woman, but as soon as he placed on her the third cross—the ill woman immediately felt herself healed and arose from her bed. Giving praise to God, everyone unanimously recognized this wonder-working cross as the Lord's. It was pleasing to the Providence of God to reveal new glory for the life-bearing Tree. Just at that time a dead man was being carried to burial past the house of the woman who had been healed. Filled with faith, the Patriarch, in the presence of the Empress and a great multitude of people, stopped the sorrowful procession and began to lay the crosses upon the dead man. And the same one, which gave health to the sick woman, resurrected the dead man to the indescribable joy of the surrounding populace. All those present could not be controlled in their desire to venerate the precious Cross and kiss it. Since this was impossible because of the tremendous gathering of people, Patriarch Macarius stood upon an elevated place, and with help raised the Cross high in the air several times so that it could, at least, be seen by all. Bowing down to the ground with piety, the people cried out : Lord, have mercy!" It is from this festive act of the raising or "exaltation" of the life-giving Cross of the Lord that today's feast received its name. In this glorification of Christ's Cross, His very enemies were forced to give it veneration. Judas, with whose help the

Lord's Cross was found, received Holy Baptism with the name Cyriacus and, little by little, being elevated in the degrees of the Priesthood, later occupied the place of Patriarch of Jerusalem, and later still was made worthy of a martyr's crown.

What is the later history of the Cross of Christ and where is it now found?

In the year 614 the Persian King (Shah) Khosroes captured Jerusalem and along with other treasures abducted the Tree of the Cross. After 15 years when the Persians were defeated, the Cross was returned. At the triumphant meeting of the returned Cross the Emperor Heraclius, himself decided to bear this treasure from the Mount of Olives to the Church of the Resurrection. At the gates of Golgotha, however, some invisible force stopped him and the more he tried the stronger was the power that held him back. Then it was revealed to the Patriarch in a vision that it was not right for the Emperor to go in such majesty and brilliance where the Saviour Himself, carrying His own Cross, went in such poverty and humiliation. The next day, having divested himself of his footwear and extravagant raiment, dressed in simple clothing, the Emperor took the Cross upon his own back and without any hindrance carried it to the Church. This was 14 September of the year 629. Later this Cross was taken apart in particles by the Faithful and today there is not, it would seem, any country where particles of this most precious sacred object is not preserved in churches and even by individuals.

Christians throughout the whole world piously honor this life-bearing Tree. "It is meet and right to venerate Christ's Cross," says Saint Demetrius, the Metropolitan of Rostov "for through this blessed Tree was death slain and life granted." "This sign," teaches St. John Chrysostom, "both in former and present times opened closed doors, removed the power of illness-bearing substances, made poison ineffective, and healed the mortal bites of beasts."

Come, O ye faithful, let us bow to the Cross of the Lord lying before us and, following the example of the ancient Christians, let us say with

compunction : Lord, have mercy! Through the might of the precious and life-creating Cross, save us sinners. Amen.

### ***From the Fathers***

Question: "What does this mean: 'Thy rod and Thy staff, they have comforted me' (Psalm 23:4)? Answer: The rod is the Cross, afflictions and the staff is the Jesus Prayer. The rod is the active part of virtue, and the staff is the noetic part" (St. Ambrose of Optina (+1891))

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). And just exactly as all who were bitten by the serpents looked upon the bronze serpent which was suspended and were healed, thus also every Christian who believes in our Christ and has recourse to His life-bearing wounds, who eats His Flesh and drinks His all-holy Blood, is cured of the bite of the spiritual serpent of sin and by this most holy nourishment is made to live unto the renewal of a new creation, that is, new life in harmony with His life-giving commandments. (Elder Ephraim of Philotheou Mount Athos, "Counsels from the Holy Mountain")

"The Cross, is wood which lifts us up and makes us great ... The Cross uprooted us from the depths of evil and elevated us to the summit of virtue." (St John Chrysostom)

"The holy Fathers relate that when the thief of the Gospel, too, came to the gates of the Kingdom, the Archangel with the flaming sword wanted to chase him away, but he showed him the Cross. Immediately the fire-bearing Archangel himself withdrew and permitted the thief to enter." (A Collection of Letters to Nuns by St. Anatoly of Optina)

## **Orthopraxis**

### **Homily on the Shelter of the Cross**

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.  
Glory to Jesus Christ!

I'd like to begin this morning, by reading a few verses from Psalm 90 (91 in the Hebrew.) In the first verses, David speaks. In the last verses, God Himself speaks. Listen:

1. He that dwelleth in the help of the Most High shall abide in the shelter of the God of heaven.....4. With His shoulders will He overshadow thee, and under His wings shalt thou have hope....14. For he hath set his hope on Me, and I will deliver him; I will shelter him because he hath known My name. 15. He shall cry unto Me, and I will hearken unto him. I am with him in affliction, and I will rescue him and glorify him. 16. With length of days will I satisfy him, and I will show him My salvation.

Whenever I have read Psalm 90, about being under the “shelter under God's wings,” I have always had in my mind the image of the hen and her chicks; an image which I suppose I got from the Gospel:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! (Luke 13:34)

And I suppose I have always had the same mental image when chanting the concluding Great Prayer of Intercession at the Litiya:

“...make our prayer acceptable, grant us forgiveness of our trespasses, shelter us under the shelter of thy wings, drive away from us every enemy and adversary, give peace to our life, O, Lord. Have mercy on us

and on thy world and save our souls, for thou art good and lovest mankind.”

This mental image is certainly a correct one. Shelter beneath the wings of God implies our protection, our safety, from the harmful elements and dangers of this world. This would imply rescue and protection from many things: sin, despair, hopelessness. All these things are named specifically in the Psalm. As long as we are resting beneath the wings of God, we will find help, hope, deliverance, and ultimately, salvation. Another thing specifically mentioned in Psalm 90, is our protection from demons (foes and adversaries). But perhaps the most important implication from the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm is that resting beneath the shadow of the wings of God, is deliverance from death. “With length of days I will satisfy him.”!

Maybe that's why when I was preparing this homily, a section from Matins, from the Menaion to be precise, jumped out from the page, and tweaked my mental image in a whole, new direction. Here's the sticheron, from the Afterfeast of the Exaltation of the Cross, a composition of Andrew of Jerusalem:

“Today the holy words of David have received their fulfillment; for lo! We manifestly worship the footstool of Thine all-pure feet, O most compassionate one, and cry out to Thee, placing our trust in the shelter of Thy wings: Let the light of Thy countenance be shined upon us! Exalt Thou the horn of Thine Orthodox people through the elevation of Thy Cross, O greatly merciful Christ!” (“Now and ever” from the Aposticha at Matins for September 16.)

Never, ever, had I thought of the “wings” of God as being the arms of the Cross! And, once the shock and surprise of the moment passed, I smiled to myself, relishing the grace, and the light. Maybe everyone else already knows this. Maybe this is old news. But for me, I felt like a child at Christmas, filled with wonder and delight.

An anonymous North American monk wrote a meditation on the Holy Cross which fits in quite beautifully with this “shelter” beneath the

Cross idea. It speaks of Christ's life and our own lives, meeting beneath the shelter of the Cross. In part, the meditation says this:

“The Lord of all, when He willed to lead all men back to Paradise and give them the Fruit of Eternal Life, set up the Cross in the midst of the earth and said "Here I will meet you." To all mankind he showed the precise location of our salvation, saying, "Here, on the Cross, I will meet you."

Here, in suffering, I will meet you.

Here, in pain, I will meet you.

Here, in separation from the earth, I will meet you.

Here, in the loss of all worldly glory, I will meet you.

Here, in complete self-sacrifice, I will meet you.

Here, in the rejection of your own will, I will meet you.

Here, in perfect obedience, I will meet you.

Here, in the restraint of your members, I will meet you.

Here, when you are mocked and derided by all, I will meet you.

Here, when you are slandered by all, I will meet you.

Here, when in the eyes of the world you have utterly failed, I will meet you.

Here, in the affliction of your mortal body, I will meet you.

Here, in the abandonment which has come to you because of sin, I will meet you, and even in the depths of Hades, I will meet you.

In death itself, I will meet you, and have met you, and will never for all eternity be parted from you who believe in Me Crucified and Risen from the dead."

Amen.