

Homily on the Sunday of the Cross

By St. Philaret of New York

“Rejoice, life-giving Cross of the Lord, thou never-conquered battle-trophy of piety, support and staff of the faithful, the wall surrounding the Church, and the door that leadeth into Paradise. Through thee hath corruption been made to vanish and be no more; death’s mighty power hath been vanquished and swallowed up, and we have been raised from the earth to celestial things. O truceless foe of demons, and our weapon invincible, thou art the glory of Martyrs and true adornment of all the Saints, calm port of salvation, that which granteth the great mercy of God unto the world.” With such words (and many more) does the Church now magnify and glorify the Life-giving Cross, that instrument of our salvation.

We all know, of course, that the Life-giving Cross is our primary sacred object, our main spiritual treasure. And the Church especially glorifies this sacred object. The Cross is glorified over the course of the entire year, on Wednesdays and Fridays, and in the Church’s prayers nearly every Sunday. It is triumphantly brought out for veneration three times a year: in the summer, on the first of August (old style), when its carrying out from the cathedral church in Constantinople, the imperial city, and its procession through the streets of this city is triumphantly celebrated; September 14, (old style) – the main feast of the Cross – when its triumphant Exaltation is remembered; and today’s feast day, in the middle of Great Lent.

Why does the Church specially offer the Cross for our prayer and veneration namely on this day, the third Sunday of Great Lent?

There was a case in the Old Testament, which the Holy Bible relates, when the Jewish people, wandering in the wilderness under the leadership of the Prophet and God-seer Moses, walked through the desert for a long time without having any water and finally the people began to pine away from thirst. Finally, they saw a source of water. Weary and exhausted, they rushed to this source – but, alas, the water was so unbearably bitter that it was impossible to drink. They cried out to Moses. Moses appealed directly to the Lord Himself with prayer, pointing out to Him the plight of the people and this source of water. The Lord directed him to a tree, which he was to immerse with prayer into the water of this source. When Moses did this, the water was miraculously changed, becoming as palatable and refreshing as only the best and purest sources of water can be.

This very miracle, as the Holy Fathers have indicated, was the prototype of how the Life-giving Cross sweetens the raging and bitter waters of the sea of life in which you and I find ourselves. And particularly now, during Great Lent, the Church therefore reminds us of the Cross, putting it forward to encourage and strengthen us in the further passage of the ascetic struggle of the Cross.

Of course, this is incomprehensible to those who do not fast: they will not see any need for this; but those who do keep the fast know that human weakness lets itself be known during the time of fasting labor and that man is weak; and it is to encourage and spiritually strengthen them that the Church reminds them of the Cross, of what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us people, of how He took our sins upon Himself, nailing them to the Cross, and was Himself nailed thereto, and by His suffering on the Cross obtaining our salvation and pardon from Divine Justice.

This is particularly clear to the great strugglers of fasting, true monks in strict monasteries. There they fast strictly, austere, not sparing themselves. Certain fasters spend entire days completely without food and drink. And it is in order to strengthen human weakness, which flags in these struggles of fasting, that these ascetics turn to the wood of the Cross. It tells us of what the Lord suffered for us, thereby lending wings to new labors and ascetic struggles.

But remember, when we venerate the Life-giving Cross – bowing down before it and kissing it as our sacred object, our jewel, our treasure that sanctifies us – we should always have in our thoughts memory of what took place on the Cross.

The mystery of the Savior's struggle on the Cross consists of the fact that He nailed His human nature to the Cross and that this nature accepted all the torments of the Cross. But at the same time, inasmuch as He was not simply a man, but the God-Man, His divine and omniscient nature communicated to Him full responsibility for all the sins of all men of all times – and ours as well. When He suffered there, grievously experiencing all the sins of all of humanity, our sins were also there before Him: He suffered for them and was nailed [to the Cross] for them, for the sins of every one of us.

At the same time, the Holy Fathers tell us the following: just as the power of the struggle of the Cross and its salvific action extends to all times and, consequently, applies to all human sins, so too every time that we commit sin we are, as it were, aggravating the torments that the Lord endured on the Cross for us. The Holy Fathers told us directly that sinners, when sinning unrepentantly, crucify the Son of God a second time, as it were nailing Him to the Cross anew, as it were taking part in those frightful blows under which the nails of the Cross pierced our Lord's all-holy body.

There is an account of the Wonderworking "Unexpected Joy" Icon of the Mother of God that tells of how one sinful man often passed by the Icon of the Mother of God, despite the fact that he was on his way to his sins. However, he would faithfully and reverently glorify her, pronouncing the angelic greeting "O Theotokos and Virgin, rejoice, O Mary, full of grace; the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women." Once, after such a greeting, he suddenly saw with horror that the image, as it were, had come alive: the Mother of God and the Savior were as if alive, and living blood streamed from the Savior's wounds. Trembling, he fell before the image and asked the Mother of God in

horror: “Merciful Mother, intercede for me the sinner before Thy Son, that He might forgive me my iniquities.” But she answered him: “You call me ‘Merciful Mother,’ but you yourself are not merciful to my Son: for every time that you sin unrepentantly, you nail Him to the Cross a second time.” The sinful man implored her and she interceded to Her Son for his forgiveness. But what a warning there is for us here!

Remembering this, Christians, and when bowing down before the Cross and kissing it, pray to the Lord that, by the power of the Cross, He might strengthen you in the battle with sin, that you might not sin unrepentantly, and by these unrepentant sins again nail the Lord to the Cross. Amen.