

THE VENERABLE CROSS

—by Subdeacon Damascene the Studite—

This present Sunday of the Holy Cross is a day of preparation, similar to the one that takes place when a nation prepares to welcome back its king who is returning victorious from war. Just as a king who has vanquished his enemies sends heralds to inform his people and announce to them the joyous news of his victory, prior to returning to his homeland, similarly our Lord Jesus Christ, the Great King, has sent us the Venerable and Holy Cross today as a herald instructing us to prepare to receive Him—because shortly He will come to show us how He conquered the devil through His death and His Holy Resurrection.

Today the Orthodox Church of Christ resembles Paradise. Just as in the middle of the Garden of Eden there was the tree of knowledge, which put Adam to death through his disobedience, similarly our Holy Church sets forth the Cross, the tree of life, which resurrected Adam through the death of Christ. Christ presents the Venerable Cross to us today so that we may cheerfully adore it as the cause of the resurrection for the entire human race. Today, the following prophecy of the Prophet David was fulfilled: **“Let us worship at the place where His feet have stood” (Ps. 131:7).**

We have made an effort to fast thus far through Great Lent; now, the day has come for us to rejoice. People who travel by foot on a far journey oftentimes begin to grow weary, especially in times when the hot sun is beating down on them. If, however, they encounter a tree with dense foliage along the way, they find solace, they rest and recuperate under its shade, and then continue their journey with renewed strength. Similarly, since we have struggled to observe this arduous fast, as we encounter the Venerable Cross today midway through Great Lent, we rejoice in this divine celebration, we find consolation, we are fortified, and thus eagerly proceed on the remainder of our journey through the fast. The Venerable Cross is an invincible weapon for every Christian. It is the victory for kings, the honor of the Church, the persecutor of the demons, and the guard of the faithful.

Blessed are they who venerate the Cross with a pure heart. Fortunate are the people who the Lord speaks of in His Holy Gospel, who are worthy of following Him: **“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mt. 16:24).**

Look at how gently the Lord makes this statement! He did not say, “Whether you want to or not, follow Me.” Rather, **“If anyone desires ...”** In other words, He does not force, He does not oppress, He does not compel anyone. Each person is in charge of his own soul and is free to decide what to do. Each person is able, if he desires, to save his soul or, if he prefers, to condemn his soul. This is why He says, **“If anyone desires to come after Me ... I want to give you what is good, I want to grant you joy, I want to offer you rest. Therefore, come willingly, and if you want to be saved, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Me.”**

When someone denies another person, whether it be his relative, his friend, or anyone else, he no longer thinks of this person, nor helps him, nor pities him, even if he sees or hears that he is suffering. Similarly, God does not want us to pity our body, even if we are ever tortured on account of His name, or if we suffer persecution on account of our faith. In following, He states, **“and take up his cross.”**

Do you see with what kind of powerful weapon the great King and God arms His soldiers with? He does not give them a shield, or an arrow, or a sword, or any other firearm used by earthly soldiers. Rather, He gives them the Venerable Cross! The Cross serves as a sword, as a shield, as an arrow, and it becomes any type of weapon that is necessary for the pious Christian. Just as every king acquires the best weapons for his soldiers, similarly the Lord gave us the Cross as an invincible weapon, and He simultaneously advises us, “Do you see how many things My Cross accomplished? Do you see how it defeated death? Do you see how it trampled on the power of the devil? Hence, hold on to and use this weapon if you also want to accomplish what I accomplished.”

What exactly does it mean for us to take up our cross? It is as if Christ is telling us, “Always keep death in mind. Just as a person who has been sentenced to be crucified for committing crimes carries a cross on his shoulder as he proceeds with it to the place of his execution, certain that his life will come to an end that day, you should also live as if today is your final day and be prepared for death.” Additionally, it means that we must be dead to all the worldly and secular sins, as the Apostle Paul specifies: **“The world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14)**. This is how we must die every day, as the same Apostle stated elsewhere, **“I die daily” (1 Cor. 15:31)**. He is not telling us to die physically with a natural death, but to willingly mortify the passions, disregard the evil desires of the body, and put to death our improper urges. In this instance, our body is mortified, but our soul lives: **“If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13)**.

After Moses led the Jews out of Egypt and passed them through the Red Sea, they came to a wilderness named Shur. They journeyed three days in this wilderness without finding any water to drink. Finally, they came to a place called Marah, where they found water; however, they could not drink this water because it was too bitter, and thus that area was named "Bitterness." Consequently, the people began murmuring against Moses, saying, "Why did you take us out of Egypt? Why didn't you let us die there in our homeland? Now, give water to us, and our wives, and our children." Then Moses cried unto the Lord and asked Him to make the water sweet, and the Lord, in turn, showed him a tree. As soon as Moses cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet (**Ex. 15:22-25**). If this tree, which foreshadowed the Venerable Cross, sweetened the bitter waters of Marah during the time of Moses, how is it possible for the Cross not to perform greater wondrous miracles?

Many other miracles that were accomplished by the rod of Moses also foreshadowed the power and energy of the Cross. Indeed, the rod of Moses was a typology of the Venerable Cross. Moses' rod turned into a serpent and swallowed the rods that belonged to the Pharaoh's magicians (**Ex. 7:10-12**). Similarly, the Venerable Cross crushed, and continues to crush to this day, the power of the demons. Moses' rod parted the Red Sea, and the Jews passed through it, escaping the hands of the Pharaoh unharmed (**Ex. 14:16**). Likewise, the Venerable Cross displaced sin and evil, and allows man to pass unharmed through the ploys and traps of the devil. Even to this day, it is the Cross that helps us to practice and to acquire virtue. Moses' rod split the rock in the desert and twelve springs gushed forth from which the thirsty Jews drank (**Ex. 17:6**). Similarly, the Venerable Cross ruptured the unrepentant world that was hard as a rock, and it brought forth the twelve Apostles who taught and guided the nations who were living in deception. Even the righteous Jacob crossed the Jordan River with his rod, as he himself attests: "**For I have crossed over this Jordan with my staff**" (**Gen. 32:10**).

All these events took place in order for us to realize and believe that the Cross is capable of performing even greater miracles, through the power of Christ Who was crucified upon it. This is why we venerate the Cross and the nails used to crucify Christ, Whom we believe and confess to be the True God. For we do not venerate or worship matter (i.e., wood, or gold, or silver); rather, we honor and venerate the image of the Cross, simultaneously raising our minds to the crucified Lord Jesus Christ.

Thus, it is proper and worthy to venerate the Cross, as the Prophets themselves instruct us to do. The prophet David says, **"Let us worship at the place where His feet have stood" (Ps. 131:7)**. Elsewhere he commands, **"Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship the footstool of His feet" (Ps. 98:5)**. And once more he remarks, **"Thou hast given a sign unto them that fear Thee**, that they may flee from before the face of the bow" **(Ps. 59:6)**. In other words, David, as if speaking to Christ, says: "You gave to the Christians who fear You a sign to flee from the arrow." The sign is the Venerable Cross; for we make the sign of the Cross on our body. The arrow symbolizes the devil, who is our enemy and who desires to assassinate our soul. And then he repeats, **"Work in me a sign unto good, and let them that hate me behold and be put to shame" (Ps. 85:17)**. That is, David pleads and asks Christ, "Give me the sign of the Cross that will be beneficial for me, which will put all my adversaries (i.e., the demons) to shame when they see it. Similarly, the prophet Ezekiel instructs, **"Put a mark on their foreheads" (Ezk. 9:4)**. Whereas, the wise Solomon states, **"For a wood was blessed, through which righteousness comes" (WSol. 14:7)**. That is, the Cross through which salvation was given is honored and venerated. The prophet Isaiah even specifies the type of wood the Cross was made of: **"With the cypress, the pine, and the cedar together, to glorify My holy place" (Isa. 60:13)**.

Rejoice O Cross! You are the boast and glory of the entire world. Rejoice O Cross! You are the strength of the weak and the support of the faithful. Rejoice O Cross! You are the companion of travelers, the victory of those in battle, the salvation of them in danger. Rejoice O Cross! You are the teaching of the Apostles, the prophecy of the Prophets, the aid of the preachers, the boast of the martyrs, the delight of the ascetics, the venerable and honorable adornment of all the Saints. Rejoice O Cross! You are the protector of all pious Christians. You are our guardian and weapon. You are our helper. With Your power and energy we put our enemies to shame, we overcome the demons, and we vanquish the pride of the Devil. Let us worship the Holy Cross my beloved Christians. Let us venerate it and wholeheartedly adore it. Let us gaze at it with fear and joy: with fear on account of our sinfulness and unworthiness; with joy on account of the grace that it bestows to us.