

THE HONORABLE CROSS WAS VENERATED BY THE FIRST CHRISTIANS

—by St. Nektarios of Pentapolis—

Great was the veneration of the Lord's Life-giving Cross by the faithful directly from the beginning. The Apostle Paul commends the sign of the Cross to the faithful as the power of God, declaring: "**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**" (1Cor. 1:18). Faithfully preserving the Apostolic teaching, Christians revered the sign and image of the honorable Cross, believing in its redemptive and life-giving power. The depiction and sign of the Cross was attested to, and was for them an unconquerable weapon against the attacks of visible and invisible enemies. From that time, and from the first centuries of the Church, particular reverence and honor were rendered to it.

The most ancient fathers of the Church maintained the Apostolic tradition of veneration and reverence for the Honorable Cross. Tertullian, who lived during the second and third centuries (†245 AD), attests that the sign of the Cross was in use by Christians during every facet of their life—even when they performed the most insignificant tasks, such as when they arose from bed, when they dressed themselves, when they went to sleep, when they ventured out of their homes, and when they lit their lamps. Furthermore, when they sat at the table, they would bless both themselves and their food with the sign of the honorable Cross. In short, the sign of the honorable Cross was the beginning and the forerunner of every undertaking.

St. Ignatius the God-bearer (†107 AD) writes, "The prince of this world rejoices when anyone denies the Cross, since he knows the confession of the Cross is his demise. The Cross is the trophy that has been raised up against the devil's power. When he sees it, he shudders, and when he hears of it, he fears."

Addressing the pagans who believed that Christians worshipped the Cross, as it was customary for them, St. Ambrose (†397 AD) explains: "When Christians worship the Cross, it is not the wood they are worshipping but Christ Who died upon the Cross."

Christians of the first centuries portrayed the crucifixion of Christ the Savior through symbolic monograms. Archaeologists attribute these monograms to the first century, and to the same period during which the faithful of Antioch called themselves Christians—long before the kingdom of Constantine the Great. Therefore, the theory of certain innovators that the honor rendered to the Lord's Honorable Cross and to its image was first known by Constantine the Great is terribly mistaken. Constantine the Great found the Honorable Cross to be in common use throughout the Church from the most ancient times. As a result, he honored its sign, and raised the Cross as the symbol of his new Christian empire after it was revealed to him.