

THE SACRED CANONS AND THE HOLY FATHERS ON THE VENERABLE CROSS

—by St. Nektarios Bishop of Pentapolis—

The sacred canons of the God-bearing fathers specify the following concerning the veneration of the Honorable Cross: “If any unbeliever accuses us of worshipping wood, on account of the fact that the Venerable Cross is formed by the union of two pieces of wood, we can reply to the unbeliever that we do not venerate the wood itself but rather the image of the Cross. For when we separate the two pieces from each other and disassemble the image of the Cross, we then consider them mere pieces of wood once more.”

The 73rd Canon of the *Penthekte* Synod (692 AD) dictates the following: “Since the life-giving Cross has brought salvation to us, it is necessary for us to eagerly render due honor to this object through which we were saved from the ancestral fall. Thus, venerating it with our mind, mouth, and heart, we order that the figure of the Cross that some have placed on the floor be entirely removed therefrom, lest the trophy of our victory be desecrated by them who walk over it and trample it underfoot. Thus, we resolve that they who henceforth create the image of the Cross upon the ground be ex-communicated.”

Archbishop Photios of Constantinople proclaims the following: “We venerate the honorable Cross, upon which the Lord’s body was stretched, and upon which His blood that cleansed the world was spilled. When the nature of the wood was watered with Christ’s streams of blood, it sprouted immortal life instead of death. Thus, we venerate the image of the Cross, through which the hordes of demons are expelled and a multitude of passions are healed; for the grace and power that once acted upon the prototype is transmitted to and resides within even the very images themselves.”

Priest Jerome of Jerusalem was asked by a certain non-Christian the following: “Since the Scriptures do not allow us to worship the Cross, how do you therefore justify worshipping it? Reply to us, to the Jews, the Gentiles, and all the

nations who ask you.” To this he responded: “It is precisely for this reason, O fools and impudent of heart, that God allowed every nation who worshipped Him to also revere certain works made with the hands of men on the earth, so that they may no longer be capable of blaming the Christians for venerating the Cross and icons. For just as the Jews venerated the Ark of the Covenant and the two tablets that Moses hewed in stone, even though they were never permitted by God to worship or kiss these objects, similarly we Christians do not venerate and kiss the Cross because we believe it is God, but in order to express our soul’s sincere disposition and love towards Him Who was crucified.”

Finally, the most-eloquent theologian Saint John of Damascus sets forth the following crucial points regarding the Honorable Cross: “**The message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing; but for us who are being saved, it is the power of God’ (1Cor. 1:18).** Every action and miracle of Christ, of course, is grand, divine, and magnificent; His honorable Cross, however, is more wondrous than anything else. Death was abolished, the sin of our forefather was erased, Hades was vanquished, the resurrection granted, the power for us to disregard the things of this present age—and even death itself—was given, the road leading back to the ancestral blessedness was achieved, the gates of Paradise were opened, our human nature was seated at the right of the Father, and sons and heirs of God were created through nothing other than the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. All these things were achieved through the Cross alone. **For all of us who were baptized unto Christ,** as the Apostle states, **have been baptized unto His death.** Those of us who have been baptized unto Christ have also put on Christ. And Christ is the power and wisdom of God. Behold how the death of Christ (that is, the Cross) clothed us with the hypostatic power and wisdom of God (that is, Christ Himself)! The Cross is God’s strength: i) because God’s power, namely His victory over death, was revealed to us through it; and ii) because just as the four points of the Cross are connected and held together by means of the center, similarly through God’s power both the height and depth, the length and the width, namely all of both visible and invisible creation, is preserved.

This sign has been given to us on the forehead in the same way that circumcision had been given to Israel. For through it, we the faithful are distinguished and recognized from amongst the disbelievers. The Cross is a shield, a weapon, and a trophy against the devil. The Cross has been given to us in order to prevent the destroyer from harming us, as it states in the Scriptures. The Cross is the resurrection of them who have fallen, the support of them who are standing, the staff of the sick, the rod of shepherds, the guide for them who are returning [to God], the perfection of the virtuous, the salvation of the soul and body, the repeller of all evils, the cause of all good things, the destroyer of sin, the plant of the resurrection, and the tree of eternal life.

This honorable and truly venerable wood upon which Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice must necessarily be worshipped, since it was sanctified when it came in contact with His holy body and blood. This is also the case with the nails, the spear, the garments, His holy dwellings (such as the manger, the cave, saving Golgotha, the Life-giving tomb, Zion the acropolis of the Churches), and other similar objects, just as the Prophet and Forefather of God states: “**Let us enter into the places where He dwelt; let us venerate where His feet stood**” (Ps. 131:7). It is clear that David is referring to the Cross from what he says in the next verse: “**Arise, O Lord, into Your rest**” (Ps. 131:8)—for the resurrection ensued from the Cross. If the objects such as a house, a bed, and the clothing of a beloved one are desirable, how much more so are the items of our God and Savior, through which we have been saved.

We venerate the image of the Honorable and Life-giving Cross even if it is constructed from materials other than wood; for we do not honor the materials—God forbid!—but the image they form, as a symbol of Christ. For when Christ told His disciples that the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the heavens, He was referring to the Cross. This is also why the angel said to the women who were seeking Jesus, “**You seek Jesus of Nazareth Who was crucified.**” Additionally, the Apostle Paul says, “**For we proclaim Christ crucified.**” There are many “christs” and many people named “Jesus.” But there is only one “Crucified.” He did not say “He Who was pierced,” but He Who was “crucified.” Thus, the image of the cross should be venerated. For wherever the symbol is, that is also where Christ is found. Whereas, when the materials forming the Cross, whether they be

gold or precious stones, are disassembled, they are no longer venerated. Thus, in venerating all the things that belong to God, we actually offer our reverence to Him.

This Honorable Cross was foreshadowed by the tree of life that was planted by God in Paradise. Since death entered through the wood, it was necessary for life and the resurrection to be granted through wood. When Jacob worshipped the edge of his staff and then crossed his hands as he blessed the sons of Joseph, the sign of the Cross was most clearly being depicted. When Moses formed the sign of the cross with his rod upon the sea, the nation of Israel was saved and Pharaoh was submerged. When Moses raised his arms in the form a cross, Amalek was vanquished. Through the use of wood bitter waters were transformed into fresh water and a rock that was struck gushed forth waters. It was a rod that bestowed unto Aaron the honor of the priesthood. When the serpent was hung on wood, and appeared as if he had died on the wood, all who looked at the dead enemy and believed were saved; similarly, Christ Who appeared in the flesh (without sin) nailed the sins of humanity on the Cross. When the great prophet Moses cried out, **“You will see your life hanging upon wood before your eyes,”** he was referring to the venerable Cross of the Lord Jesus. The prophet Isaiah proclaims: **“All day long I have stretched out my hands to a disbelieving and disobedient people.”** May we who venerate the cross attain the portion of Christ the crucified. Amen.