

With the Solemnity of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (September 14), the Maronite Catholic Church entered the final liturgical season of the year. This feast was first instituted in order to commemorate the dedication of the Church of the Resurrection on September 13, 335. The date of September 13 was chosen in order to supplant the pagan feast of the temple of Jupiter in Rome.

The second historical event which is the source of this feast was the return of the Holy Cross to Jerusalem under Emperor Heraclius.

The wood of the Cross had been preserved in the Church of the Resurrection until May 4, 614 when the Persians captured Jerusalem, burned the Church of the Resurrection and carried off the Cross. After the victory of Emperor Heraclius over the Persians, the Cross was returned to Jerusalem on September 14, 628. It is said that the Emperor, dressed in his royal vestments, carried the Cross through the streets of Jerusalem. He was stopped by the Patriarch who demanded that he remove his splendid vestments in order to become more like the scorned Christ. The Emperor agreed and walked through the streets barefooted. A crowd of the faithful accompanied him and prostrated before the Holy Cross. On the feast itself, the Maronite Church celebrates the Rite of the Cross which is a service of adoration of the Cross, the sign of our salvation. This feast also begins the last liturgical season (Season of the Glorious Cross) which is directed toward the second coming of Christ, who carried His Cross of light and triumph. This theme characterizes the prayers and readings of this seven week season.

During this seven week season, we are invited to consider the centrality of the Cross in our lives, mindful of Our Lord's admonition, *He who does not take up his cross is not worthy of me.* (Mt. 10:38). In his

retreat preaching, the late Archbishop Fulton Sheen would say, "There is a new dirty word in our language, only it has five letters instead of four. And that word is *CROSS*." Because of the influence of our materialistic and hedonistic culture, many Christians recoil at the mere mention of the word *Cross*. We see it as eliminating opportunities for self-fulfillment and self-indulgence, the end-all and be-all of life. It especially brings ridicule from the "enlightened" segments of society. These people have reduced the Christian

faith to a smattering of happy-face platitudes—the tepid exhortation, in one form or another, to "be nice." For them, the essence of the Gospel seems to be that we should go along to get along, live and let live, never offending anyone, and show "tolerance" to the point of avoiding moral evaluations of any kind. References to the Cross, heresy, sin, and especially hell are taboo. They do not square with the "lived experience" of so-called "modern man come of age." How many Catholic institutions have taken down their crucifixes for the lure of government money? So what is the meaning of the Cross in our lives?

First of all, it is conformity with the crucified Christ. When Christ shed His Blood

on the Cross for us, He brought us salvation. Because this was an action of the Incarnate Son of God, it wasn't simply a once, done-in-the-past event; its action is continuous. It still continues its saving action because our sanctification comes about to the degree that we accept and embrace our own crosses. Christ Our Lord showed His love for us by dying on the Cross for our sins, and we show our love for Him by accepting the crosses He chooses to send us as the instrument of our sanctification. We see here the great paradox of Christianity: death is the condition of life. God shows His great love for us by sending us

*Because by Thy Holy Cross,
Thou has redeemed the world.*

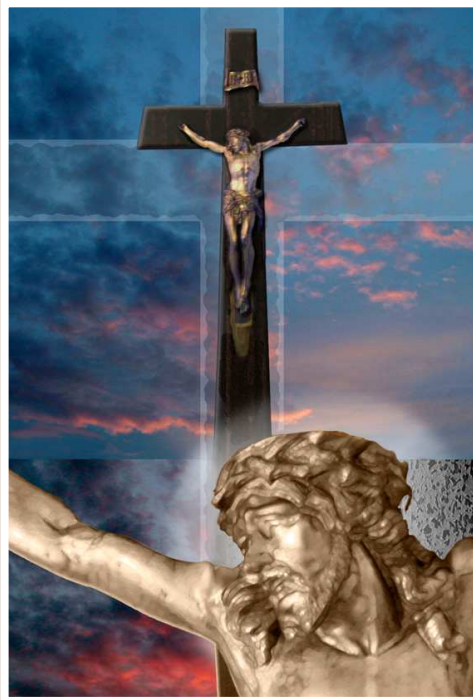


Illustration: Maronite Monks

crosses so that we may be sanctified and conform ourselves to His crucified Son by accepting our crosses. No wonder our culture so despises the Cross. Life is about pleasure and self-fulfillment: sufferings (crosses) are to be avoided. Here the words of Dietrich von Hildebrand, called “The Doctor of the Church for the 20th Century” by Pope Pius XII, offers a reflection:

We must always remain aware of the immeasurable distance between our limited vision, which cannot grasp more than a tiny detail of the whole, and the all-comprehensive mind of God. For my thoughts are not your thoughts: nor your ways my ways, says the Lord.’(Isa. 55:8). Above all, too, we must think of the entirely new meaning that all suffering has acquired through Christ’s death on the cross. The suffering of our Lord purified the world; His sorrowful love of atonement redeemed it.

Whether the suffering that has fallen to our lot is meant to provide us with an occasion to atone for our sins here on earth; to try and detach us completely; or again — a costly privilege — to make us atone for the sins of others, or to allow us to participate in Christ’s suffering on the cross, so as to become more like Him; in all suffering we are touched by the merciful hand of God, who is infinite love.

This leads to another meaning of the Cross. It is the sufferings that come our way because of our conscious decision to be faithful to Christ, His Gospel and His Church. You will be hated by all for my name’s sake...By your endurance you will gain your lives. (Lk: 21:16,19). Whenever we suffer rejection, ridicule, calumny and exclusion (it’s OK to exclude believing Christians in our “tolerant” society), we are conforming ourselves to the Cross of Christ, bringing about our sanctification, and that of others. Remember, because the Cross is the instrument of salvation, we can apply the merits which come from our willing acceptance of our crosses to others: for the sufferings of the Cross are redemptive. Today many Christians throughout the world undergo sufferings because of their fidelity to Christ and bringing about the redemption of others. The late archbishop Fulton Sheen loved to tell this story. It concerns a young Russian man named Sergei Kourdakov.

As a young boy he was orphaned and sent to the state orphanages in the former Soviet Union. There he learned that the way to get ahead was through the

Communist Party. So he threw himself wholeheartedly into Communist activities. At every school he attended he became the number 1 Communist Youth and head of the youth organizations. He was named top Communist Youth of his entire district and caught the attention of Communist officials who offered him an appointment to the Soviet naval Academy. There he became head of Communist activities for all the cadets. He was chosen by the secret police (KGB) to form a group of cadets, all of whom were skilled in judo, boxing and the like, in order to do battle with Russia’s greatest enemy according to the KGB—belief, faith. They went out and attacked all Christian gatherings beating and terrifying the believers so that they would never go back to a prayer gathering. He was astounded because every time they attacked, the people would continue praying. One young, beautiful girl named Natasha caught his attention. He said that under different circumstances, he would ask her for a date. But orders were orders and he beat her until the skin literally came off her back. Still she kept coming back. At one of these attacks, he noticed a torn page from the Bible lying on the floor which he put into his pocket and took home. That night he read it, it was from the Gospel according to St. Luke, and he couldn’t understand how anyone who believed what was written on that page could be an enemy of Russia. He refused to go out on anymore raids. While he was posted on a ship, he jumped overboard in a storm, prayed for the first time ever, and made it to the Canadian shore. He became Russian Orthodox and went around speaking on behalf of the plight of Christians in the former Soviet Union. Sadly, he was eventually killed by Communist agents.

Sergei was convinced that the witness of these suffering Christians, literally bearing their crosses, brought him to faith. Ask yourself, would you attend Mass regularly knowing the chances were excellent that you would be beaten up, fired from your job, forced to take the most menial jobs, and suffer unrelenting ridicule for your fidelity to Christ? Many Christians today are experiencing this. It is this redemptive suffering of so many individual crosses, joined to the Cross of Christ, that will bring about Christ’s Triumph when He returns in glory.

With St. Paul may we say that we will glory in nothing but the Cross of Christ.✠