

## *The Precious and Life-Giving Holy Cross*

O glorious Cross, your arms upheld the priceless ransom of captive mankind  
Through you the world has been saved by the blood of the Lord.

Hail, O Cross, consecrated by the body of Christ;  
his members have made your wood more noble than precious pearls"  
-from the Roman Divine Office

"For blessed is the wood, by which justice cometh." -Wisdom 14:7

Dear friends,

The feast of the Holy Cross is celebrated this week by all the ancient Churches (Latin and Byzantine: Sept. 14, Armenian: the Sunday nearest the 14th). As many of you know I have a great love for the Eastern expression of our faith. Many times my study of the Eastern Churches has led me to a deeper and more profound understanding of the traditions of the Latin Church. I was surprised to find that many of the traditions the East believes and emphasizes is also present in the Latin Church. The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross is a perfect example this.

Before I began to study the Eastern Churches, this feast -much like that of the Transfiguration- would pass me by virtually unnoticed. But then I discovered that the Byzantine Church held this to be one of the Twelve Great Feasts of their Church. I also learned the Armenians counted it as one their five great feasts also and prepare for it by a week of fasting. This drew my interest so I began to study what this feast meant.

It is obvious that all true Christians have a special honor and devotion for the Holy Cross of Christ. It is the greatest and holiest symbol He left us. We mark ourselves with the sign of it. Most Eastern Christians wear it around our necks as a sign and reminder of our Baptism (cf. Rom 6). Christians in venerating the Cross sometimes represent it with the Body (Corpus) of Christ nailed to it (as Armenians do during Lent). This is to remind us of the great love He had for us.

But I learned from Eastern Christians that when Christ returns their will be a glorious sign of His Holy Cross in the heavens. Thus the Orthodox Study Bible has this to say on praying towards the East and this Sign of the Cross.

"For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and appearerth even into the west: so shall also the coming of the Son of man be." -St. Mt. 24:27

OSB note: "How will Christ come Back? The event will be unmistakably visible to all. In the [Eastern] Church we pray in the direction of the rising sun, because the East symbolizes Christ Himself who is the East of easts, Light of light. The great day of the Lord will be illuminated by the true Light, the 'rising' (Is 60:1,3; Mal 4:2; Lk 1:78; 2 Pet 1:19). The very creation will be transfigured -not destroyed but superseded- by the light of His presence at the end of the age."

"And then shall appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven..." -St. Mt. 24:30

OSB "The sign of the Son of Man in His Second Coming is thought by many to be His glorious Cross, the memorial of His Passion..."

We know that all ancient Churches affirm the maxim "lex orandi, lex credendi" the law of prayer is the law of faith (cf. Roman Catholic "Catechism of the Catholic Church" #1124,1126). In other words, we pray what we believe. Surprisingly, I have found confirmation of this tradition about the great sign of the Cross in the official prayers of the Latin Church. In the Divine Office, which the Catechism calls "an extension of the Eucharistic Liturgy," this is made manifest. In the Responsary for the Vespers vigil for the Exaltation of the Cross (EP 1) they pray referring to the Cross: "This sign will appear in the heavens when the Lord comes... lift up your heads, your salvation is at hand."

I also learned that my own Armenian forefathers had such a special devotion to the Holy Cross that this reputation earned for them the title "Worshippers of the Cross." (This worship, of course, refers to veneration and honor -not the adoration due to God alone). Likewise, in the Roman Divine Office, they pray in the Antiphon for the Canticle of Zechariah, "We worship your cross, O Lord, and we praise and glorify your holy resurrection, for the wood of the cross has brought joy to the world."

As the Church this week celebrates and honors the Holy Cross may we all recall the gift Christ gave us by it. The following beautiful antiphons and prayers from the Roman Church's Liturgies are a good summary of what this feast is all about and what we all hold in common about the Holy Cross of our Lord.

"To destroy the power of hell Christ died upon the cross;  
clothed in strength and glory, he triumphed over death."

"The Lord hung upon the cross to wash away our sins in his own blood.  
How splendid is that blessed cross."

"How radiant is that precious cross which brought us our salvation. In the cross we are victorious, though the cross we shall reign, by the cross all evil is destroyed, alleluia."

"What a great work of charity! Death itself died when life was slain on the tree."

"We worship your cross, O Lord, and we commemorate your glorious passion.  
You suffered for us; have mercy on us."

"We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
for by your holy cross you have redeemed the world."

"O cross, you are the glorious sign of our victory.  
Through your power may we share in the triumph of Christ Jesus."

In Christ's Light,  
Wm. DerGhazarian  
(11-18-00)

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APPENDIX I: Declaration against the Iconoclasts by the Fathers  
of the Council Nicaea II (A.D. 787):

"Following the divinely inspired teaching of our holy Fathers and the tradition of the Catholic Church (for we know that this tradition comes from the Holy Spirit who dwells in her) we rightly define with full certainty and correctness that, like the figure of the precious and life-giving Cross, venerable and holy images of our Lord and God and Savior, Jesus Christ, our inviolate Lady, the holy Mother of God, and the venerated angels, all the saints and the just, whether painted or made of mosaic or another suitable material, are to be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on sacred vessels and vestments, walls and panels, in houses and on streets."

APPENDIX II:

HYMNS OF THE DAYS OF CREATION

by St. Nerses Shnorhali  
from the Armenian Book of Hours

Friday, The Sixth Day:

*The Crucifixion of our Lord*

He who is good by nature,  
not enduring to have alone the ineffable good,  
created man in his own image  
in the morning of the sixth day;  
and in the third hour he gave the one born of the ribs  
as helper to the one born of the earth  
and he put them in paradise to enjoy,  
but he forbade them the fruit of death.

After the transgression Adam of old  
was struck dumb before the Judge  
putting the blame on the woman for the guile  
and the woman on the treacherous serpent,  
because of which this earth was cursed,

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thorns and thistle grew therein,  
sentence of death was given to man  
that he should return to earth from which he was created.

The Father of glory made haste to abolish  
the record of our debt of transgressions,  
therefore the merciful Son in the sixth age  
took upon himself the body of sin;  
according to the good pleasure of the Father  
he came willingly to the death of the Cross on Friday,  
the Lamb was slain on the old Passover,  
instead of the lambs that prefigured him.

By the luminous way of the commandment  
and by the path of righteousness  
thou, lifting thyself up on the Cross,  
didst lift us up to heaven;  
through thine unspeakable humility  
and crucifixion willingly suffered,  
O Lord, be reconciled with us in thy compassion  
and in thy mercy forgive us our sins.

O Lord, who art terrible to the seraphim  
and fearful to the cherubim,  
thou didst humble thyself to endure sufferings  
in the passible human nature;  
thou didst kill sin on the Cross  
and didst make void the sentence of death;  
reconcile with us. Lord, in thy compassion  
and in thy mercy forgive us our sins.

Thou art supreme over the natures of beings  
and art the Maker of all;  
when thou wilt raise up the sign of thy Cross  
in thy second coming,  
them that now worship thee in faith  
enlighten with the light of thy Cross,  
so that in concord with them that have put on the Cross  
we may bless thee for evermore.