**The Procession of the Cross**

The precious and life-giving Cross is the holiest symbol of our Faith. All the Holy mysteries are completed by the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the seal of the Holy Cross. All the Hieratical prayers – of Holy Baptism, Holy Chrism, Holy Eucharist, Holy Matrimony, etc. – begin and end with the sign of the Cross. The Holy Temples, the Holy vessels and the liturgical vestments, and all liturgical actions are sanctified by the sign of the Holy Cross.

Moreover, the Cross is the most faithful companion of every Orthodox Christian. From the moment we enter this world until we exit it in our final resting place – our tomb – we are accompanied by the blessing of the Cross. We bless ourselves with the sign of the Cross daily; we keep crosses at our homes, at our places of work and in our automobiles because we believe in the beautiful hymn of our Church…

The Cross of Christ, is the organ by which He saved the world, the altar on which He offered Himself as the perfect offering, the pure offering of the prophecy of Malachi (1:6). All the kenosis, poverty, humiliation, pain, affliction and death He willingly accepted for us merge on the Cross. He suffered the greatest humiliation and pain upon the Cross; He became a curse to free us from the curse of the Law and the bondage of sin.

All Christ’s work and all His philanthropy gravitate toward the Cross. By being bound on the Cross, Christ loosed the tragedy of human bondage caused by the disobedience of Adam and Eve; and by being obedient unto death, the death of the Cross, He re-orientated our human freedom towards our Maker, the Triune God. Upon the Cross

He conquered our death, by making our death His own death and by His Resurrection He has granted to us life and incorruption. Through the Cross He reconciled us to God the Father and granted us remission of sins. On the Cross He demonstrated to us in the most convincing way that He loves us with infinite, unconditional love – a love that did not diminish an iota even during His most horrific pain and suffering.

Through the Cross He brought together all of us from different and once-scattered nationalities, and further united us as members of one Body, renewing us with the water and blood that spilled out of His side, which water and blood are the two central mysteries of the Church. He broke down the high walls that divided us, re-creating by His blood the new man of grace.

On the Cross He cleansed and sanctified the sky, the air, and the earth. He was crucified under the sky, hanging in midair; and His most precious blood was dripping into the earth. On the Cross He offered an ecumenical sacrifice for the entire earth and a common cleansing for the entire human nature.

That is why He suffered outside the city and away from the Temple of Solomon, according to the theology of St John Chrystotom. On the Cross Christ revealed to us that this transient world is not the final reality but the path towards that reality, provided that we take up the struggle to crucify our egotism. On the Cross He manifested Himself as the only Life-giver, Redeemer and Savior of the entire world. He decisively destroyed the works, power, deceit and authority of the devil over people.

That is why the devil goes into a panic and trembles, being unable to behold or approach the power of the Cross of Christ. There is a poignant story about a very holy man, John Vostrinos, who had the authority to expel unclean spirits; it is said that when they brought to him several young women who were victimized by evil spirits, he questioned the evil spirits inside of them: What do you fear the most from the things that we do in Church? And the evil spirits answered, We are mainly afraid of three things:

#1: That which you hang around your neck... (That is how much they fear the Cross: they could not even say its name…but they described it in a roundabout way.)

#2: that bath that you are given at the church (Holy Baptism), and

#3: that which you eat at your liturgies (Holy Communion).

These are the three greatest weapons against the demons; and that is why they are so viciously fought and totally distorted by sectarian and heretical Christians. The death of the Lord on the Cross is life-giving and redeeming because it was totally voluntary and willing… Christ journeyed to the Cross not as a condemned defendant but as a King.

That is why He said, I have a baptism to be baptized with – a baptism of death – and how am I constrained till it be accomplished. This is why the Eastern Orthodox write on the Cross “The King of Glory” and not simply “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” They depict the Lord on the Cross as Master: with His hands spread horizontally, in total control and not hanging miserably and helplessly conquered by despair and pain, as seen in the crosses of the West. The death of the Lord is salvific and redeeming because it was real death and not docetic (i.e., not for appearance’s sake).

The person of Christ cannot be interpreted by a fallen man, but the fallen man needs to be interpreted by the God-man. When we attempt to theologize about the God-man with our ill rationalism we fall prey to the scandal of the Cross – much like the unbelieving Jews and the Athenian philosophers.

We empty the mystery of the Cross of Christ, according to St. Paul. The theological pen of St. Gregory Palamas adds the following: This is the wisdom and power of God; to conquer through weakness, to elevate through humility, to make wealthy through poverty.

It is not surprising that the Lord did not wish to maintain the glory of Transfiguration which would certainly make him avoid the Cross…who would dare approach Him…His enemies would vanish like smoke. Christ did not want to convince us and force us to believe by His glory and power, but to draw us to Him by His loving humility.

On His descent from Mount Tabor the conversation was not centered on His glory but he was rather preparing his disciples for the Cross. His work was to convey to us that without the life of the Cross and voluntary discomfort, we will not share in the glory of the Resurrection or Transfiguration. As the Captain of our Faith, having brought many sons to glory (through discomfort, askesis and suffering [like the 7 Maccabees, and their mother Solomnia and teacher Eleazer]),

For it was fitting for the Messiah, for Whom are all things and through Whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of our salvation perfect through suffering…

So everything was made for Christ, and everything visible and invisible was made by Christ… Christ was perfect man and perfect God from the moment of conception… so there was absolutely nothing imperfect in the human nature of Christ that needed  to be perfected through suffering… In His sacrificial spirit and love He chose to be the first martyr: Not to be made perfect through suffering… but to complete his earthly life through suffering.  By stretching out His hands on the Cross He would heal the sinful action of Adam, who stretched out his hands to taste the forbidden fruit.

That is why Christ severely rebuked Peter, who was suggesting to Him to avoid the Cross… He called him Satan, only a few hours after He had praised him for his God inspired confession. Get behind Me, Satan; you are a scandal to Me, because you are not thinking in Godly terms, but you think by the logic of men. After His rebuke of Peter, Christ instructed the rest of His disciples to embrace the gospel of the Cross… Anyone who wants to come after Me, let him deny himself, carry his cross and follow Me.

So the Cross is not just a symbol or a metaphor, but the way of life for those who would like to be called Christians. As it would be inconceivable to consider Christ without the Cross, likewise it is inconceivable to be considered a Christian without sharing in the sufferings and the Cross of Christ. Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot become My disciple.

What does this mean for us? How can we carry our cross in a society that idolizes pleasure and comfort? We can accomplish this in three ways.

 First, by undertaking the daily struggle to crucify our passions according to St. Paul… Those of Christ have crucified their passions and their earthly desires (Gal. 5:24). We must die to the world before Christ can live in us… ]St. Gregory Palamas calls this the first mystery of the Cross: to distance all influences of the world around me which cause me to sin.

The second mystery of the Cross is to guard the mind/nous from all sinful images and remembrance of past sins, and to fight all logismoi. By the daily struggle of watchfulness and prayer a man begins to transform his sinful passions and tendencies; and he discovers the inner treasure, the kingdom of God within him. As he progresses, he begins to feel a spiritual warmth inside his heart, which chases away sinful thoughts and passions and which brings a deep peace and consolation to the soul and body.

The voluntary acceptance of pain as our cross – as the gift of God’s love for our spiritual development and perfection – elevates us to the ranks of the Holy martyrs. The Christian who courageously suffers on the bed of pain and in the process glorifies God for making him a participant in His Son’s suffering will be considered a confessor of the Faith and a contemporary martyr.

We experience the Resurrection when we live the gospel of the Cross. Everything in our Church has the air of the Resurrection because we crucify our fallen nature year round. We don’t give up chocolate for a few weeks. We fast the majority of the time – well over 200 days per year. Our Church is the Church of the Cross and the Resurrection.

This joy, the joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, is hidden in the voluntary sufferings and discomfort that we undertake for the love of Christ. The pain and discomfort of asceticism and repentance is the way to blessedness. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted…

Voluntary discomfort and relative pain for the love of Christ will lead to spiritual freedom and blessedness.Christianity is about joy, they tell us… God does not want us to suffer. God wants us to feel good and be happy…

But joy cannot be bought… with money… True Christian joy comes after the pain and suffering for the sake of the gospel. Today we want to follow Christ empty-handed, without our cross… the idea of the Cross makes us tremble because we are enslaved to a life of comforts.

All the contemporary evils are the illegitimate children of the comfortable and Cross-despising lifestyle of the West. The world today is facing the plagues prophesied in the Book of the Revelation, which are not the work of God but the consequences of a world that chose an antichristian journey…a journey that despises the Cross.

The answer is repentance. Without repentance this world will self-destruct, no doubt. It is only a matter of time. As Christians of these most perilous times, we must increase our vigilance and struggle to avoid being pulled into these strong torrents. Our life preserver is the love of the Cross of Christ.

It is a matter of choice for all of us to follow either the life of the Cross or the wide path that leads to destruction. As wise spiritual investors, let us never forget the undying words of the immortal Saint Paul. *I reckon that the sufferings of this age are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us …Amen*

Glory to Your Precious Cross O Lord!

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