

Feast Day: Exultation of the Cross

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Having just had an important and great Feast Day a week ago—the Nativity of the Theotokos—here we are already, with another great Feast, that of the Holy Cross of our Lord! But then, all of the Feast Days in the Church Year are great and important, aren't they, because they speak to us of the facts of our redemption, our salvation, and our hope for eternal life in and with the Holy and Blessed Trinity.

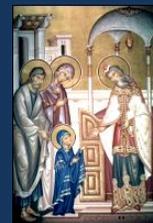
The Feast of the Universal Exaltation of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross is celebrated each year on September 14, the day on which the True Cross of our Lord was found by St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor St. Constantine. In the year 326 the Emperor sent his mother to Jerusalem to locate the site of the Holy Sepulcher and of Calvary. She was already quite elderly, but set out on this sacred pilgrimage with enthusiasm and vigor. Of course the Christians who had lived there since the time of Christ and the Apostles had carefully preserved the knowledge of these precious sites and were able to lead Helena directly to them. Specifically an old man by the name of Jude was her guide, taking her to, where the Romans had deliberately built a temple to the goddess Venus in order to hide Calvary and the Sepulcher of the Lord. The Empress immediately had it destroyed. But unwittingly, the Romans had preserved the Holy Sepulcher and Calvary by building their temple over it, and here, cast down into an old dry well, she found the remnants of three wooden crosses.

However, there was no way to know which had been the actual cross of Christ. But when a dying person was touched with these crosses she recovered instantly when the last one was laid upon her and Patriarch Macarius of Jerusalem identified this one as the True Cross. The Patriarch then mounted a pulpit and lifted the Cross up high with both hands so that all of the people could see it, and they responded with over and over with loud exclamations of "Lord have mercy", repeatedly prostrating themselves before the Cross. This event is shown in the icon for this Feast.

Since that day this Feast has become universal in the Church for it is the way in which we celebrate and honor what had been a symbol of execution and shame but which became the means by which the Son of God overcame death and brought us eternal life. This Feast reminds us that the Cross is the triumph of

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God's wisdom over the fallen wisdom of this world, a source of hope and victory for us, for since that time we Orthodox Christians view ourselves and everyone else and all of life and history and culture *through the prism of this Holy Cross*.

By the way, and as an aside, it is worth noting that the pious Elder Jude, who had guided the Empress to the holy sites, was martyred for Christ during the reign of the Emperor Julian the Apostate, who began his iniquitous reign in the year 361. This St. Jude is commemorated on October 28, the day of his death.

Meanwhile, however, St. Helena had returned to Constantinople, taking with her the Holy Cross and the nails that had pierced the Lord's hands and feet. These relics were enshrined there. She then took with her to Rome, where she lived in quiet retirement, the "titulum"—the wooden sign that had stood above Christ's head on the Cross with the words "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews" in three languages. She lived in an old Roman palace, the Sessorian, and here she constructed a private chapel for herself where the titulum was enshrined. Later, after her death, a great church was built dedicated to the Cross, which enclosed her chapel—still there today—and her gardens have been preserved as well. A monastery now exists in her former palace.

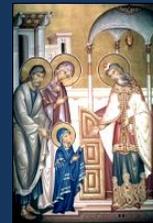
Brothers and sisters, the Cross is the place where every brokenness, injury, and wound encounters the loving compassion of God. We are called not so much to embrace the Cross as to allow ourselves to be embraced by it. When the Holy Spirit begins to work in a soul, that soul is compelled to throw herself into the arms of the Cross because there, and there alone, is the soul secure.

More than any other Christians, I think, we Orthodox Christians love to salute and greet the Cross. We even address prayers to it, as in the beautiful Akathist to the "Spiritual Ladder, the Precious Cross." We call it a "spiritual ladder" because, by means of the Cross, we can actually climb to heaven! Before this holy and sacred Tree we sing: "Angels from Heaven invisibly circle the life-bringing Cross in fear, and seeing it now brilliantly shed light-bestowing grace upon the faithful, amazed they stand and cry to thee such words as these...Rejoice, O Tree most blessed!"

But how can this be? Why do we say such things to an inanimate object? Does the Cross have ears? Why is it that we address it as if it was a living being? Well, of course by speaking such praises to the Holy

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Cross we are actually speaking to our gracious Master, our Lord and God, Jesus Christ, who, by consenting to be nailed to this Cross, saved us from our sins.

But, as with all holy relics, we do believe that the wood of the Cross also is a repository of grace, like sap in a living tree, the grace that could be given only by the One who hung upon this Tree. For this is the second Tree of Life—the first having been planted in the Garden of Eden. By means of *this* tree, which stood on that lonely hill outside Jerusalem so long ago, we have gained eternal life—the same eternal life that would have been Adam and Eve’s if they had not sinned.

And it is here, beneath this Cross, that the Lord waits for each one of us. It is here that He meets us; here, in suffering. Here, in pain, in all loss of worldly success and praise; here, in complete self-sacrifice and in rejection of our own will, as He rejected His own; here, in perfect obedience to Him, as He was obedient unto His Father, yea, even unto death. It is here, at the foot of this Tree that He waits for us when we have been disrespected and rejected by others and when the world and its pomp and princes and powers have failed us, as they failed Him, the spotless Lamb of God. It is here, in sickness and the frailty and fragility of old age, that He awaits us. And finally it is here, beneath the “old rugged Cross,” that He will meet us in death itself and open for us, who have believed in Him, , the door to paradise.

Yes, through the Cross Jesus meets us. But He meets us not as a man, but as the Risen God-Man who holds the keys of eternal life in His precious hands, those same hands that were nailed to this Tree. And here, at His Cross He waits to fasten *us* to the Cross, too. He reaches down from it with one arm to embrace us and draw us up to Him, up to His Cross, and to everlasting glory.

Before we came to the Cross, brothers and sisters, our lives were filled with death. But now we are filled with life, for the Cross, which is hidden in each and every smallest suffering of our lives, brings us closer and closer to that brilliant and eternal life, if only we will embrace it, carry it, and be its champion and defender in this fallen world. And, as we all know, increasingly the Cross is reviled and hated in our world, and in need of defenders.

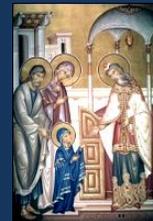
As another has written: “If we are to partake of this [new] life, then we must ascend the Holy Tree [of the Cross]. We must ascend and eat of its fruit. If in the forest we find a tree with beautiful fruit, we do not

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stand idly at the foot of the tree, but we climb the tree to get the fruit, especially if we are suffering from mortal hunger. Even so, we must ascend the Cross of the Lord if we are to be united to Him forever. If we are afraid of the suffering of the Cross, this only means that we do not have the taste for its fruit, for the Grace of Christ sweetens all the sufferings of this life. [In other words, we do not yet have grace.]

“Therefore, let us never fear to bear the Lord’s Cross. Let us ascend with joy, striving for all the virtues, accepting all that comes upon us by God’s allowance, knowing that through patience in sufferings we are united with Him who united Himself inseparably with us on the Tree. Thus shall we partake of the true Fruit of the Tree of Life, whose blessing can never be taken away from us by any power in heaven or on earth or below the earth.”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.