

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross
September 14, 2014
Readings: Numbers 21: 4-9; Phil 2:6-11; John 3:13-17

“By this sign you shall conquer.” With these simple words, Constantine’s vision was complete. The vision included a cross, and Constantine interpreted this as a sign from God himself that he should place the image of a cross on the shields of the soldiers going into battle, a battle in which they were most assuredly outnumbered. In October of 312, all the idols of Rome stood aghast to behold, approaching beyond the Milvian Bridge, the Labarum, a military banner with its sacred monogram the “Chi-Ro,” the first two letters of the word Christ. A day later, 28th of October, Constantine defeated Maxentius his rival, to become sole Emperor.

This morning we celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, also known as The Triumph of the Cross, a liturgical feast begun in the early 7th century. On this day the Church celebrates the veneration of the great relics of Christ’s Cross in Jerusalem after the Emperor had recovered them from the hands of the Persians, who had carried them off fifteen years earlier. Even though this feast has as its history a military battle, it is much more important for our purposes to see the Cross as our sure sign of victory against the forces of sin and evil, both in the world, and in our own lives.

Formerly, the Cross led to the Resurrection; now it is the Resurrection that introduces us to the Cross. The Cross contains in itself the mystery of salvation, because, in the Cross, Love is lifted up. Through his sacrificial death and resurrection, Jesus himself transformed the Cross into a sign of Victory. As Pope John Paul II once remarked: "The Cross is the most profound condescension of God to man . . . The Cross is like a touch of eternal love upon the most painful wounds of man’s existence." ¹

¹ Ioannis Pauli PP. II, encyclical letter *Dives in Misericordia*, 8.

The fundamental question today is not whether we have crosses to bear, but how we respond when they come our way. It is not a question of whether; it is a question of when and how. The crosses we bear may just overwhelm us if we are not purposeful, deliberate, and resolute in grabbing hold of the strength that comes forth from the Cross of Christ.

Last night I attended a dinner in honor of the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and a Cardinal in the Church. At St. Maron's Church in Minneapolis, he used an image of the Cedars of Lebanon, a majestic tree mentioned in the Bible over 70 times. It is 130 ft. tall and has deep roots, perhaps three times the height of the trees. He spoke with passion that the Christians will not leave the Holy Land under any circumstances. They are planted like the Cedars and deep roots of faith will confront all those who would seek to remove them. Though threatened severely, the faithful will not give up.

I am more and more convinced that our society is attempting to remove any symbols of our faith from our common vision. Fulton Sheen once wrote, "The Christ without the Cross cannot save, and the Cross without Christ cannot save. The Cross is evil at its worst and goodness at its best." Do we willingly embrace the crosses in our life? Do we run away from them?

The more willingly we accept them, the lighter seem to be the burdens. Jesus Christ emptied himself of all that rightly belonged to him, in order to raise us up on high. Through humility and obedience, he was able to effect our salvation. When the Cross passes by, we are forced to make a choice. Will we embrace it or will we fold up our tents, and make for the highway? Rather, let us pray for the grace to embrace the Cross, and allow it to transform us, conforming us daily more and more to the likeness of Jesus.