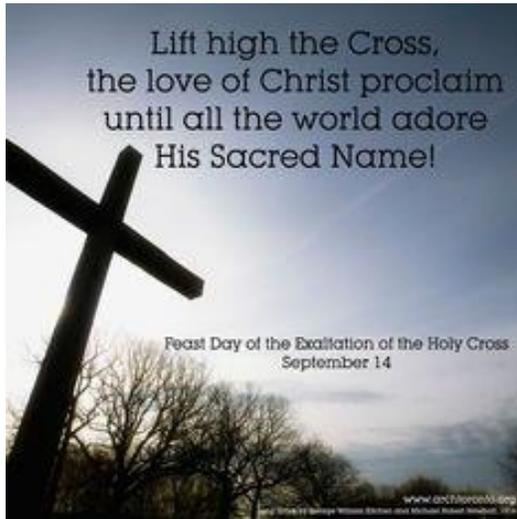


Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

Reflection by Fr. Richard Vega, KHS



The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross marks the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 335. The celebration was a two-day festival: the consecration of the church was on September 13, but the Cross itself was brought outside the church on September 14 so that all, clergy and faithful, could pray and venerate the True Cross.

Today, the cross is a universal image of Christian belief. Countless artists have turned the cross into a thing of beauty to be carried in procession or worn as jewelry. To the eyes of the first Christians, the cross had no beauty. It stood outside too many city walls, decorated only with decaying corpses, as a threat to anyone who defied Rome's authority—including Christians who refused sacrifice to Roman gods. Although believers spoke of the Cross as the instrument of salvation, it seldom appeared in Christian art unless disguised as an anchor or the Chi-Rho.

In contemporary society, the Cross is seen as a symbol of piety or comfort rather than the ultimate source of shame and pain. Embracing a cross and carrying it voluntarily was the most absurd thing the ancient mind could imagine. The moment someone picked up a cross, they were considered dead. Carrying a cross marked what had been forfeited, not what had been received. Today, we view the Cross as a lifestyle to be adopted by the disciple.

In the Gospel, Jesus invites his disciples to give up their lives, "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt: 16:25) We give up our lives and allow Jesus to remake them in his own image.

In the Order of Christian Initiation, when the Inquirer formally requests to continue progressing in the journey of faith, the Inquirer participates in the Rite of Acceptance to enter the Order of the Catechumen. Part of the rite involves the signing of the senses with Sign of the Cross. The praying community asks that the Cross be the sign of their "new way of life." The Cross moving from an object of shame to one of life, hope and transformation.

On the day of Baptism, at the celebration of Confirmation, on entering the worship space, on being reconciled to our God and neighbor, in celebrating our commitment to marriage or sacred orders, in our illness and the day we return to our loving Father's embrace through death; all the key moments of our life involve the presence of the Cross. The Cross identifies us, it tells others that we belong to Christ, we are his.

For the disciple, the wearing of the Cross identifies us as followers of Christ. Through the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist) we are transformed into the presence of Christ for our world. A life under the Cross of Christ allows the disciple to bring Christ's healing balm of love, mercy, forgiveness, and service to all we encounter.

In celebrating the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we remember the instrument that brings death but invites us to life. Daily the Cross invites us to transformation. As Jesus gave his life so that we might have life, the Cross invites us to be transformed and reveal Christ's life within us by what we say and do.

Fr. Richard Vega, KHS, is the pastor of St. Francis of Rome Catholic Church in Azusa, California.