

## Take Up Thy Cross

Today, at the midpoint of the holy journey of Great Lent, the Church, in her wisdom, presents us with the veneration and worship of the holy Cross, offered as a source of strengthening and invigoration of faith. But how can this Roman instrument of torture, used effectively to evoke fear and submission on the part of an occupied populace, be transformed into a source of consolation and strength for the faithful ?

The holy words of St. John of Shanghai and San Francisco can help us understand:

By the Cross, the Son of God having become man, accomplished our salvation. He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross (Phil. 2:8). Having stretched out His hands upon the Cross, the Saviour with them, as it were, embraced the world, and by His blood shed on it, like a king with red ink, He signed the forgiveness of the human race.

The Cross of the Lord was the instrument by which He saved the world after the fall into sin. Through the Cross, He descended with His soul into hell so as to raise up from it the souls who were awaiting Him. By the Cross, Christ opened the doors of paradise which had been closed after our first ancestors had been banished from it. The Cross was sanctified by the Body of Christ which was nailed to it when He gave Himself over to torments and death for the salvation of the world, and it itself was then filled with life-giving power. By the Cross on Golgotha, the prince of this world was cast out (John 12:31) and an end was put to his authority. The weapon by which he was crushed became the sign of Christ's victory.

The demonic hosts tremble when they see the Cross, for by the Cross the kingdom of hell was destroyed. They do not dare to draw near to anyone who is guarded by the Cross.

The whole human race, by the death of Christ on the Cross, received deliverance from the authority of the devil, and everyone who makes use of this saving weapon is inaccessible to the demons.

What a wonderful consolation, comfort and encouragement to receive and be strengthened by as we continue in our Lenten journey of asceticism and purification! But is it enough to simply use the life-giving Cross to repel adverse powers? What does our Saviour mean when He provides us with the essential prescription for our salvation?

Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

Matthew 8:34

We are thus called upon to carry our crosses, those of sorrows, hardships, pain and life's challenges. Such crosses can be greatly burdensome and heavy, at times pulling us into a state of feeling overwhelmed and even entertaining hopelessness. But the Holy Fathers teach that the first step is essential, that of self-denial, in order to be able to carry one's cross. Self-denial actually strengthens us spiritually and renders the cross more manageable. This is seen in the abundant examples of God's holy Saints, who carry their cross with joy!.. demonstrating the radiant and awe-inspiring virtue of "joyous suffering." How is this accomplished, and how is this so? Let us look to the edifying words of Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov for clarity:

...Filled with worry and futility is my cross, no matter how heavy it may be, if it does not become the Cross of Christ through our following in His footsteps.

My cross becomes the Cross of the Christ if I am a disciple of Christ, because a disciple of Christ is firmly convinced that Christ watches over him at all times; that Christ allows his sorrows as the inescapable and inevitable condition of Christianity; and that no sorrow would ever approach him if it were not allowed by Christ; and that through sorrows, the Christian becomes one with Christ, becomes a partaker of His lot on earth, and later in heaven.

My cross will become the Cross of Christ, because a true disciple of Christ considers the fulfillment of Christ's commandments as the only purpose of his life. These all-holy commandments become for him a cross on which he constantly crucifies his old man with his passions and lusts.

Thus, it is clear that before taking up the cross, one must first deny oneself even unto the mortification of one's own soul.

In order to lift the cross to one's shoulder, one must first deny the body its carnal desires and give it only what it needs to survive; one must consider one's own truth to be the worst falsehood before God, one's own reason to be complete madness; and finally having given oneself over to God, with all the power of faith, dedicate oneself to the constant studying of the Gospels, and rejecting one's own will.

He who has accomplished such denial of the self is capable to take up his cross. With obedience to God and trust in God's help to make his weakness strong, he looks at all the imminent sorrows and disturbances without fear. Courageously, he prepares to overcome them, hoping that with their help he will become a participant in the sufferings of Christ, and that he will attain the mystical confession of Christ not only with his mind and heart, but in actual fact, with his very life.

The cross is heavy only as long as it remains "my cross." When it becomes the Cross of Christ, it suddenly becomes very light – "for My yoke is easy, and My burden is light," said the Lord.

The cross is lifted to the shoulders by the disciple of Christ when he acknowledges himself worthy of the sorrows allowed by God's providence.

The disciple of Christ carries his cross correctly when he admits that exactly those sorrows which were sent to him, and not any others, are necessary for his formation in Christ and his salvation.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the cross becomes redemptive, salvific and, even less burdensome, when we truly deny ourselves, at all times and in everything. Such self-denial cultivates humility and meekness, which brings one in synchrony with Christ and His suffering, lightening the cross and solidifying the path to His Kingdom. This of course, is not easy. There are two formidable obstacles to overcome. The first is our own weakness and inherent propensity to sink back into our old ways. The second relates to the incessant efforts of the evil one, who perceptually desires to distance us from Christ. St. John of Kronstadt writes:

Strive in all things to oppose that which the bodiless enemy wishes you to do. He incites you to pride, to self-glory, and to judging your brother: you must humble yourself to the ground, to

dust and ashes, judge yourself as severely as possible, and praise your brother in your heart. Should your brother, through the work of the enemy, behave towards you with pride and malice, you must behave towards him humbly and lovingly. If the enemy incites you to avarice, be generous, with a good will. Act thus in every similar circumstance, and God will give you abundant grace; this you will see for yourself, with your spiritual eyes. If you have not the inward strength to do this, through the great power of the enemy, then pray for it, in every season, in every hour, and the Almighty God will help you.

**“My Life in Christ”**

Wishing “good strength” to all, in the necessary podvig of self-denial and carrying one’s soul-saving cross!

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