

Cross or Comfort

On September 14th the Universal Catholic Church celebrates the feast of the “Exaltation of the Holy Cross.” Its remote foundations begin when St Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine undertakes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and finds the True Cross in Jerusalem where Our Lord was crucified. A church, the Church of the Holy Redeemer, was built there. Around 626 the Sassanid New Persian Empire invaded, took Jerusalem, and took the True Cross off to Persia as a type of trophy. The Eastern Roman Emperor Heraclitus led an army into Persia and retook the Cross. On September 14, 628 the True Cross was restored to Jerusalem, hence the feast.

While the Western Church keeps the celebration to a single day, several of the Eastern Churches, including the Maronite Church, carry this feast into an entire liturgical season.

The season of the Holy Cross emphasizes the centrality of the Cross both in the life of the Church and in the lives of each believer along with an eschatological dimension by pointing to the Second Coming of Christ where His coming will be heralded by the sign of the Cross in the sky.

With the start of this liturgical season, the times in which we live (including the upcoming election) and in the current situation and condition of the Church, we need to hear afresh the words of our Divine Savior: “Unless you take up your cross, you cannot be my disciple.” In 1977 the Servant of God Archbishop Fulton Sheen gave a retreat to the priests of the Archdiocese of Washington D.C. and devoted one of his conferences to the Cross. He said the following: “There is a new dirty word in the English language, only it has 5 letters instead of 4: and that word is CROSS.” He detected a wholesale rejection of the Cross taking place in the Church. Fast-forward to our time and in late August Msgr Charles Pope, a priest of the Archdiocese of Washington D.C. and a columnist for the “National



“Jesus Christ our Lord, make us worthy to honor your life-giving cross with joy and gladness. May we carry it, proclaiming with the Church: ‘Your cross is our refuge and our glory.’”

(From the Maronite Liturgy)

Catholic Register” (he has his own blog site on the Internet which is well looking into) wrote a column entitled “Enough ‘comfort Catholicism.’ The Church must prepare for Persecution.” (Much of this newsletter will draw inspiration from this article, so his words will appear in italics). The gist of the article could be summed up by saying that we have become too comfortable with the world, in effect discarded the Cross and have become the lukewarm type that Our Lord condemns in the Book of Revelation: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth.” (Rev. 3:15-16). Imagine the doctor telling you, “If you don’t stop smoking or drinking, you will be dead in 6 months.” Would we accuse the doctor of being “mean-spirited”?

Our doctor of souls not only diagnoses the disease, but prescribes the cure: the Cross.

The following definition from the “Catholic Bible Dictionary” sets the overall foundation of the cross in the Christian life. “An instrument of torture and execution reserved by the Romans for the worst criminals, and the symbol of Christian faith in the redeeming death of Jesus Christ. In the Gospels the Cross is the literal instrument of Jesus’s death, but it also takes on the metaphorical meaning of the sacrifices required by faith in Christ: ‘he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me’ (Matt 10:38). For St Paul, the Cross shows the ‘folly’ of human wisdom against God’s plan of salvation: ‘For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God’” (1 Cor 1:18). The Cross is not only a reminder of how our Lord was put to death, but also a living reality to which we must embrace. In other words, we just don’t look at it: we must be nailed to it in imitation of Jesus Christ.

In the Old Testament the Cross is prefigured in two particular events with Moses. One concerned the battle with the Amalekites, a nomadic desert tribe who were the determined enemies of the Chosen People and attacked them in the desert. This traditional Maronite hymn brings out the connection between this event and the Cross of Christ.

“Moses stood on a hilltop with his hands raised to heaven, showing us the cross in all its glory. For as long as he did this, Joshua conquered and defeated in battle Amalek’s army. Lord, your cross of salvation has defeated in battle all the forces of Satan that have waged war against us. We exalt your cross, O Christ our Savior!”

The other is the incident with the bronze serpent. The Chosen People grew “restless” in the desert and once again complained against Moses so Almighty God sent serpents which bit many of the people causing them to die. Coming to their senses the people repented and implored Moses to intercede with God for them. God told Moses to erect a bronze serpent on a staff and all who would look at it would be cured. When Christ would be lifted up on the Cross all who would look upon him in faith would be saved.

The above definition from the “Catholic Bible Dictionary” gives the fullness of this brought to completion in the New Testament. For us today, we have to be like Moses keeping those hands held high even though it hurts. We must end our “restlessness” with the Church and look upon the Cross the way the Israelites looked upon that bronze serpent. But most of all we must be crucified to it in imitation of our Savior. How present is the Cross in our lives as Christians? Crosses necessarily hurt, they don’t come in Styrofoam. Each one of us has received his or her own cross at baptism which we are to carry as we journey to our true home: the kingdom of heaven. Satan will try with all his might to get us to reject that Cross.

Recall when our Lord started his public ministry, He went into the desert to be tempted by Satan. What was the essence of those temptations? To dissuade Him from the Cross which Satan knew would defeat him. Now to Msgr Pope’s reflections. It doesn’t take a Rhodes scholar to see that persecution of Christianity is right around the corner in the Western World. Many of the faithful have become like the Chosen People in the Desert, impatient with and complaining against the Church mostly because they

want to “rise up and play” (the biblical term for the sexual revolution). We don’t want a Cross, we want fulfillment and to create our own existence apart from God. One of the candidates for major office said recently “the religions which say that abortion and homosexuality are wrong are just going to have to change those teachings” (hear that, God?). Only those who are nailed to that Cross will be able to survive what is to come. But our Lord’s command to “Be watchful! Be awake!” had fallen on deaf ears. Now Msgr Pope’s words.

It seems there is no awareness that we are at war and that Catholics need to be summoned to sobriety, increasing separation from the wider culture, courageous witness and increasing martyrdom. For the past 50 years we seemed to think that if we became like the world as much as possible then everything would be great. That experiment has failed. The world’s not interested in a Cross.

Church architecture and interiors became minimalist and non-descript. Music and language in the liturgy became folksy. Marian processions, Corpus Christi processions, many things of distinctive and colorful Catholicism all but disappeared. Even our crucifixes disappeared, to be replaced by floating “resurrection Jesus” images. The emphasis was on blending in, speaking to things that made people feel comfortable, and affirming rather than challenging. If there was to be any challenge at all it would be on “safe” exhortations such as not abusing the environment or polluting, not judging or being intolerant, and so forth.

More than ever we need to shift toward being distinctive from the culture we have refused to critique and call to reform. More than ever our faith needs to shine brightly and clearly in our churches and communities...Simply put, it is time for clergy to prepare themselves and God’s people for sacrifice. Seeking to compromise with this culture is now unthinkable. Our only recourse is to lance the boils. And the culture will cry foul. And we who do the lancing will be made increasingly to suffer. But we have to be willing to embrace and endure such suffering in increasing ways in the months and years ahead.

That’s the Cross and the Cross of Christ is what we must proclaim. It will hurt and like Moses we will get tired keeping those arms up. Moses would need the assistance of two others to keep his arms up in that battle and likewise we will need to support each. Let us accept this challenge to glory in the Cross of Christ. ✠