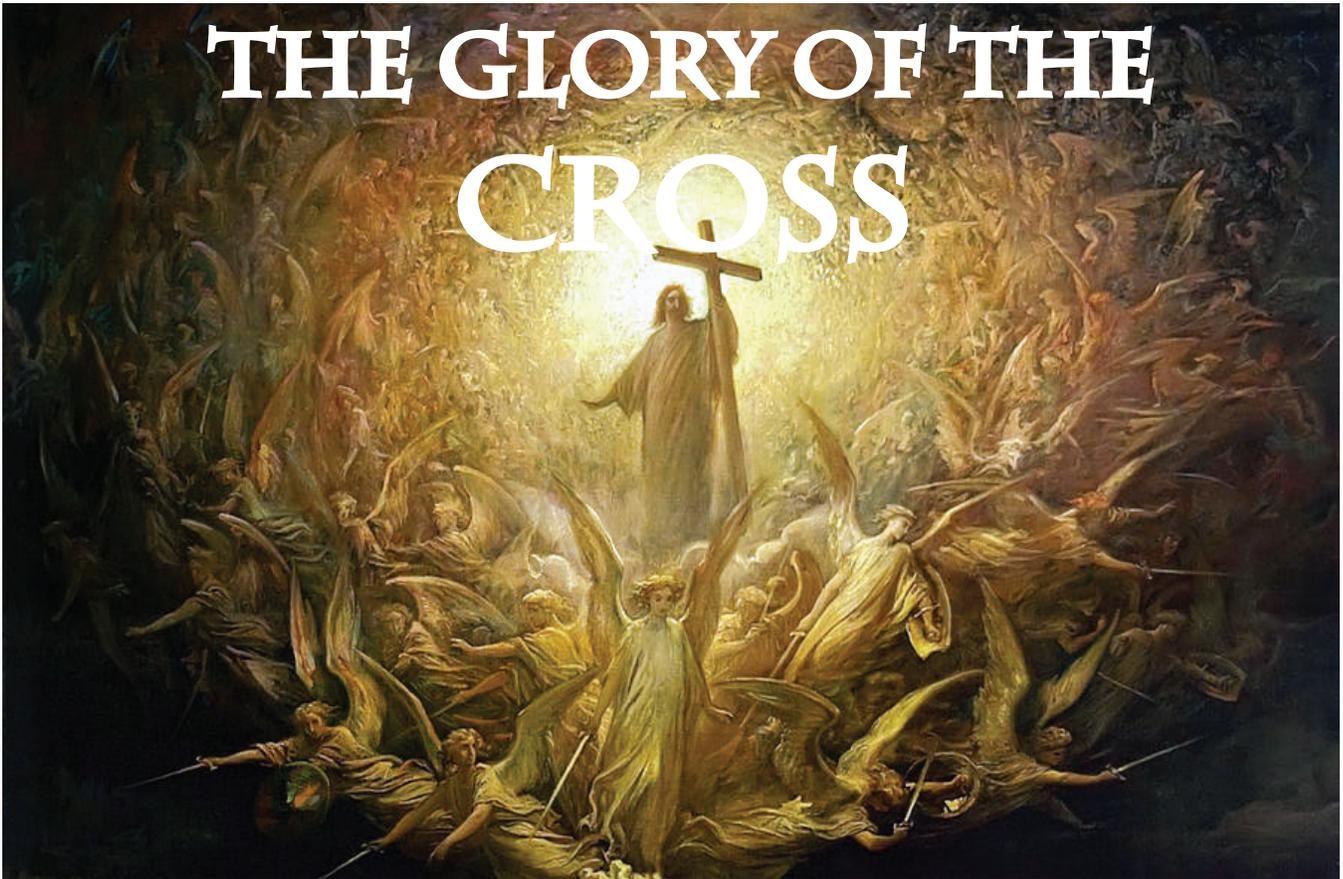


THE GLORY OF THE CROSS



Gustave Doré *The Triumph Of Christianity Over Paganism (Detail)* c. 1868

If the great feast in December is Christmas and that of November is Thanksgiving, then September is especially about the feast of the Exultation of the Cross. One of my fondest memories from my stay in Lebanon, some decades ago, was witnessing the people's great faith and joy during the feast of the Cross (*ayd al Saleeb*). Church bells pealed as hundreds of people walked about in an outdoor fair. It was a great celebration and a time for Christians to show their love for the Cross. In our Maronite liturgy, the feast is marked by a procession with the Glorious Cross followed by a blessing of the four corners of the earth and a chance for everyone to come up and venerate the cross.

This feast celebrates the finding of the true cross by St. Helen as well as the final victory of Christ's Cross seen in the context of the whole of human history. No wonder, then, that the Scripture readings throughout the Season of the Holy Cross concentrate on the End Times and the Second Coming of Christ. Looking at our lives from this point of view,

we may find it easy to say that "all of our blessings come from the Cross." Yet it would also do us much good, and help us better appreciate God's work in our lives to reflect on the blessings of the cross even in the present.

When we speak about the saving power of the cross we usually mean *The Cross*, that is, the one to which Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was nailed. By way of exception, we might reflect on the "other" cross that comes into our lives; the one that Jesus referred to when He told His disciples that "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Matt 16:24). Regarding the former, it doesn't take a great deal of effort to rejoice in it; after all, this was the instrument that God used for our salvation, the sign of His great love for us! While we may shed tears gazing upon the cross of Christ, they are usually not the same tears shed when we're confronted with the "other" cross. Well did a modern translation of the Imitation of Christ use this turn of a phrase, "Many are wowed by His

miracles, few are wooed by His cross.” But is there not some reason to rejoice in this cross as well? Could we not say that God’s blessings come to us through *this* cross also?

There is always a danger of overemphasizing one truth to the detriment of another when discussing our faith. For instance, we often hear of Our Lord meriting the grace necessary for our salvation through His passion, death and resurrection; the grace that justifies us in God’s sight. Yet seldom do we hear of our ability to merit, as children of God, further graces for ourselves and others in union with the work of Christ. Both are important, and the second truth should never detract from the first. Indeed, without Christ meriting God’s initial grace for us, it would be *impossible* for us to merit any other grace.

It’s worth pausing on the word, *merit*. The Catechism states that “[t]he term ‘merit’ refers in general to the recompense owed by a community or a society for the action of one of its members, experienced either as beneficial or harmful, deserving reward or punishment.” (#2006) In other words, our actions receive their due reward. But is it possible to merit anything from *God*? After all, didn’t we receive everything from Him? How could God owe *us* anything??

It’s true that God doesn’t owe us *anything* in strict justice. If He repays us for our good works, it is only out of a free desire to do so, similar to parents giving an allowance to their children or choosing to reward any extra chores done. No child, strictly speaking, deserves an allowance from the parents who brought him into the world and care for all his needs. Yet parents give one on their own initiative. So, as the Catechism goes on to say, “The merit of man before God in the Christian life arises from the fact that *God has freely chosen to associate man with the work of his grace.*” (#2008)

Given that we are able to merit more graces, after receiving the initial grace of friendship with God (that of forgiveness and justification, which is pure gift), what exactly do we receive and how do we receive it? Here we come to the very core of the question, the very incentive of meriting itself. Perhaps we

wonder if the reward is worth the cost as a little boy may wonder if mopping the kitchen floor is really worth a cookie. However, and not surprisingly, as with everything that concerns God’s gifts to us, the rewards are always well beyond our efforts. “Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, *we can then merit* for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life. Even temporal goods like health and friendship can be merited in accordance with God’s wisdom.” (CCC #2010) This means that, first and foremost, we can merit an increase in eternal happiness for ourselves and others and secondly we can *even* merit good things on earth, such as health and friendship, always within God’s plan for us and the world. In other words, merit isn’t a way to *make* God do whatever we want. It’s not a coin we use to buy whatever we want from the Divine Vending Machine. In the end, God brings about His plan and we have the privilege and honor of participating in that great work.

Now, how do we receive this merit and participate in the work of God? Here we finally return to the theme of the cross. Speaking of God’s providence, the Catechism states that, “God thus enables men to be intelligent and free causes in order to complete the work of creation ... they can also enter deliberately into the divine plan by their actions, their prayers, and their sufferings. They then fully become ‘God’s fellow workers’ and co-workers for his kingdom.” (#307) So it is not only by our actions and prayers but also by our sufferings that we can participate in the saving work of God for ourselves and others. And, in the final analysis, isn’t this the greatest reward we could possibly look for: not only to be “co-heirs” of the Kingdom with Christ, but also “co-workers” in His great work of salvation?

So as we enter into the Season of the Holy Cross, may we look upon Christ’s cross *and* the means we have to share in it, as the source of blessings for us and others. One day, by the grace of God, may we see our crosses in the light of God’s plan of salvation and exclaim with our liturgy, “Lord, your cross is a ladder, leading us to heaven’s heights”! And not His Cross only, but ours also. ❖