

A Homily on the Veneration of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross

*Saint Theodore the Studite**

IT IS A DAY OF REJOICING AND GLADNESS, for the ensign of joy is present; let there be a chorus of praise and thanksgiving, for the all-holy wood is displayed. O most precious gift! O how beautiful to behold! Its appearance is not an admixture of good and evil, as with the tree of old in Eden, but it is all comely and beautiful, both to see and to partake of. For, it is a Tree that brings life, not death, illumining, not darkening, admitting us to Eden, not banishing us thence. It is that Tree which Christ mounted, as a king mounts a four-horse chariot, and then destroyed the Devil, who had dominion over death, thereby freeing the human race from bondage to the tyrant. It is that Tree whereon the Master, like a champion wounded in battle, in the hands, the feet, and the side of His Divine Body, healed our nature, wounded by the wicked serpent, of the weals of sin; and, if I may cite a hymn, it is that Tree from which the blood of the Master flowed, emitting invincible power, whereby the demons are burned and the world is enlightened.

Who, henceforth, will not run to gaze upon this much-desired spectacle? Who will not desire to embrace this Divinely-woven wreath? Come, gather together, all tribes and tongues, every nation and every generation, every rank and every status, whether Priestly or royal, whether ruling or ruled. Since this Feast has been enacted by God, it seems to me that the Angels are attending the celebration with exceeding joy, the Apostles are joining chorus with one accord, as are the assembly of Prophets, the throng of Martyrs, and the company of all the righteous. For, how could they, who are crowned with celestial glory, not make glad with us at the manifestation of that trophy by which, in imitation of Christ, they prevailed over the adverse powers? It seems to me that insentient things are perhaps rejoicing with us, too: I refer to the earth, which brought forth such a fruit, like a mother from her womb; all the trees of the forest, as being honored by having the same name;¹ the ever-shining sun, the most luminescent moon, the gleaming stars, the great and complex Heaven itself; because, through Christ's Passion on the Cross, all change is for the better.

Let David, therefore, strike his spiritual harp and chant those

strains most suitable for the occasion: "Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship the footstool of His feet; for He is holy."² With him let Solomon, who is unsurpassed in wisdom, chant: "Bless ye the Wood whereby salvation cometh."³ For this reason, the Church is seen today as another Paradise, bringing forth the Tree of Life in her midst,⁴ wherein there is no deceitful demon leading Eve astray, but an Angel of the All-Sovereign Lord welcoming one who approaches. Today, the all-holy Cross is venerated and the glad tidings of the Resurrection of Christ are proclaimed. Today, the life-giving Tree is venerated and the whole world is revived to offer it praise. Today, the three-branched Cross is venerated and the four ends of the earth keep joyous festival. "How beautiful," Scripture says, "are the feet of them that preach the Gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things."⁵ But blessed also, I would say, are the eyes of those who see the trophy of universal peace, and blessed are the lips that kiss this most excellent sign. Abundant is the Grace that is set forth for all, ever-flowing is the fountain that pours forth sanctification, in no way repelling anyone from its plenteous goodness, but rather making yet purer him who is already cleansed, freeing him who is polluted from defilement, humbling him who is overly proud, arousing him who is slow of heart, tautening him who is slack, mollifying him who is inflexible, if each one approaches after pledging to amend his life, not drawing near to the things of God with audacity and arrogance, since the Cross is wont to accept the modest, but utterly to turn away those who behave otherwise.

When we behold this life-giving Tree, it heals our sense of sight, which was beguiled in Paradise from looking at the enticing tree. When we touch this life-giving Tree with our lips and mouths, we are delivered from our tasting of the death-dealing tree. O the munificence that is set before us! O the thrice-blessed beatitude! Whereas of old we were slain through a tree, we have now found immortality in a Tree; before, we were deceived by a tree, but now we have repulsed the crafty serpent through a Tree. Wondrous is this exchange! Instead of death, life, instead of corruption, incorruption, instead of reproach, glory! Fittingly, therefore, did the Holy Apostle exclaim: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by Whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world."⁶ For, that supremely wise wisdom that flowered from the Cross rendered foolish the boasting of worldly wisdom; the knowledge of every good thing that was borne as fruit on the Cross has excised the offshoots of evil. From the beginning of the world, prefigurations of this Tree have alone betokened most wondrous things.

See, you who are eager to learn! Did not Noah, together with his sons and their wives, and animals of every kind, escape the destruction of the flood by Divine decree on a mere piece of wood?⁷ Did not

Jacob place the rods which he had peeled in the hollows of the watering-troughs at the time when the sheep became pregnant, and lead them away to the admiration of all?⁸ What about Joseph's staff, to the top of which the Patriarch Jacob did reverence:⁹ is it anything other than a symbol of the life-giving Wood that we now venerate? Again, what about the rod of Moses?¹⁰ Is it not a figure of the Cross? On the one hand, it transformed water into blood,¹¹ and on the other hand, it devoured the serpents falsely so called of Pharaoh's magicians;¹² at one time, it divided the sea by a blow,¹³ at another time joining together the waters so that they returned to their normal state,¹⁴ drowning the foe and preserving the genuine people of God. Such also was the rod of Aaron, a type of the Cross, which budded on the same day and showed who the genuine priest was.¹⁵ I would have to go on at great length in order to bring together all the prefigurations of the Cross. Abraham prefigured the Cross when he bound the feet of Isaac, his son, and placed him upon pieces of wood;¹⁶ Jacob prefigured the Cross when, as he blessed the sons of Joseph, he stretched out his hands in the form of a Cross.¹⁷ Come, now, pray understand Moses himself as a figure of the Cross, for he vanquished Amalek by extending his hands.¹⁸ Think of Elissaios casting a stick down into water and drawing up iron from the depths.¹⁹ Many are the miracles of this figure, not only in the Old Testament, but also in the dispensation of Grace, in victories over barbarians, in putting demons to flight, in delivering from diseases, and in all the other cases too numerous to recall.

Do you see what great power there is in the type of the Cross, my dear friend? If there is such great power in the type, how much must there be in the figure of the Crucified Christ. For, it is evident that the more excellent the prototypes are, the more excellent are the things derived from them. Now someone will say: "I desire to know who was shown to be a type of Christ in the foregoing examples." Those, I respond, who prefigured the Cross. For, just as Moses' outstretched hands were a figure of the Cross, so Moses himself prefigured the Crucified Christ, Who vanquished the invisible Amalek. The same assumption is to be made in the other examples, when the one figure is juxtaposed and shines forth with the other. "But in those cases the figure is animate," he objects; "why are you speaking about an inanimate figure?" I do so because in the case of the figure of the Cross, too, where the object of sight, upon which and around which miracles occur, is inanimate, yet the Icon fashioned after the likeness of Christ, just like the cruciform Icon that is manifested together with it, is wont to work miracles among both animate and inanimate creatures, since it contains in itself both the appearance and the form of its archetype, and is identical to the latter as much in honor and veneration as it is in name; and this is altogether obvious. And although these comments

might appear to be a digression, they nonetheless serve to disprove and refute the Iconoclast heresy, which overthrows the mystery of Christ's œconomy. For, he who removes the image also removes the prototype, since, as any sensible person knows, image and prototype are reciprocal, that is, correlative concepts.

We must now return to the Cross and revel, as it were, in the discourse of holy salutation. Cross, currency more valuable than any money; Cross, surest refuge of Christians; Cross, lightest burden of Christ's Disciples; Cross, sweetest consolation of afflicted souls; Cross, unhindered guide on the path toward Heaven; Cross, length and breadth of the noetic sea monster,²⁰ more comprehensive in its span; strength and might of the Cross, destruction of every adverse power; form and shape of the Cross, more elegant than all others to behold; radiance and effulgence of the Cross, more splendid than the sun; grace and glory of the Cross, gift more beautiful than all other graces; Cross, peace-bestowing conjoiner of Heaven and earth; name of the Cross, supreme sanctification when uttered by the tongue and heard in the ear. By the Cross death is put to death and Adam is restored to life. In the Cross every Apostle glories; by the Cross is every Martyr crowned and every Saint sanctified. By the Cross we put on Christ and put off the old man. By the Cross we sheep are gathered together and placed in the sheepfold on high. By the Cross we gore our enemies and exalt the horn of salvation; by the Cross we put the passions to flight and choose to live a life that transcends this world. He who carries the Cross on his shoulders becomes an imitator of Christ and is manifestly glorified with Christ. When an Angel sees the Cross, he is adorned; when the Devil sees it, he is put to shame; when the thief found the Cross, he entered into Paradise, exchanging brigandage for the Kingdom. When one simply makes the sign of the Cross, he dispels fear and receives peace in return; he who has the Cross as his guardian remains inviolate and is preserved unharmed; whoever loves the Cross hates the world and becomes a lover of Christ. O Cross, much-vaunted boast of Christians; O Cross of Christ, singular proclamation of the Apostles. O Cross of Christ, royal diadem of the Martyrs; O Cross of Christ, most precious ornament of the Prophets. O Cross of Christ, all-shining adornment of the ends of the earth; O Cross of Christ—for I converse with you as with something animate—, may you shelter those who fervently extol you in hymns, save those who embrace you with faith, maintain the obedient in peace and Orthodoxy, convey to all the joyous Resurrection of Christ, guarding both Hierarchs and kings, all monastics and lay people, in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto Whom be the glory and the dominion, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and unto the ages of ages.

Amen.

Notes

1. Cf. St. Theodore the Studite, Canon for the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross, Ode 9, *Troparion* 3 (*The Lenten Triodion*, tr. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware [London: Faber and Faber, 1978], p. 345).

2. Psalm 98:5, *Septuaginta*.

3. Wisdom of Solomon 14:7.

4. Cf. St. Theodore, Canon for the Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross, Ode 5, *Troparion* 4 (*The Lenten Triodion*, p. 341).

5. Romans 10:15.

6. Galatians 6:14.

7. Genesis 7:1-24.

8. Genesis 30:37-43.

9. Genesis 47:31.

10. In this and the next two examples the wonder-working rod belonged to Aaron, not to Moses.

11. Exodus 7:19-20.

12. Exodus 7:12.

13. Exodus 14:21.

14. Exodus 14:27.

15. Numbers 17:8.

16. Genesis 22:9.

17. Genesis 48:14.

18. Exodus 17:11.

19. IV Kings 6:6.

20. This may be an allusion to Hades, which Christ destroyed through His Crucifixion and Resurrection. The Fathers understood the sea monster that swallowed the Prophet Jonah as a prefiguration of Hades. For example, in his Canon for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, St. Cosmas of Maiouma writes: "Jonah stretched forth his hands in the form of a Cross within the belly of the sea monster, plainly prefiguring the redeeming Passion. Cast out thence after three days, he foreshadowed the marvellous Resurrection of Christ our God, Who was crucified in the flesh and enlightened the world by His Rising on the third day" (Ode 6, *Katavasia* [*The Festal Menaion*, tr. Mother Mary and Archimandrite Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 147-148]).

* The Greek text of this homily, translated into English, here, for the first time, is found in *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. XCIX, cols. 692B-700B.

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