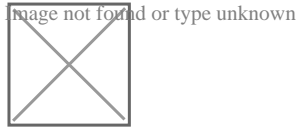


Sunday before the Elevation of the Holy Cross (John 3:13-17) (Metropolitan Panteleimon of Antinoes)

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A week before the feast day of the Universal Elevation of the Holy Cross, the Orthodox Church prepares the faithful through Scriptural readings, prayer and acts of good deeds to celebrate the event of the finding of the precious and life-giving Cross of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Among the many symbols of the Christian Faith the Holy Cross is considered the most important. It is the symbol of Christianity. It is the symbol of Christ's victory over death. It is the weapon against all evil forces. It is the power of the Saints. It is the flag under which the righteous fought against Satan.



Holy Cross, Monastery of Sinai, 12th Century

In the Old Testament we have prefigurations of the Holy Cross. In the Book of Genesis, the Tree of Life prefigures the Holy Cross (Gen. 2:9). As the Tree of Life had the power to grant eternal life to Adam, if he ever touched it (Gen. 3:22); likewise the Holy Cross being the new Tree of Life offers eternal life to those who believe in Christ. Another prototype of the Holy Cross is found in the Book of Numbers (Num. 21:8-9). Moses, in order to save his people from the deadly bites of poisonous snakes received instructions from God to lift up a bronze serpent, and «it shall come to pass that whenever a serpent shall bite a man, every one so bitten

that looks upon it shall live» (Num. 21:8).

Christ himself uses this prefiguration as an example of Him being lifted up on the Cross. As all those Israelites who looked upon the bronze serpent were saved from the deadly bites of the viper snakes; likewise whoever turns to Christ with faith as his own Saviour and beholds His Crucifixion will be saved from the deadly bites of Satan. The bite of sin and death is cured through the wounds of Christ, as this was foretold by the Prophet Isaiah saying, «He was a man in suffering, and acquainted with the bearing of sickness, for His face is turned from us: He was dishonoured, and not esteemed. He bears our sins, and is pained for us: yet we accounted Him to be in trouble, and in suffering, and in affliction. But he was wounded on account of our sins, and was bruised because of our iniquities» (Is. 53:3-5). «And He, because of His affliction, opens not His mouth: He was led as a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is dumb, so He opens not His mouth. In His humiliation His judgment was taken away: who shall declare His generation? For His life is taken away from the earth: because of the iniquities of my people He was led to death ... He was numbered among the transgressors; and He bore the sins of many, and was delivered because of their iniquities» (Is. 53:7-8, 12).

The moment of Christ's greatest humiliation becomes the moment of exaltation for completing His redeeming work. Through our Lord's death, death has been conquered and life has been granted to the world.

Man becomes righteous before God the Father only through His Son and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Justification by faith in God is part of being brought into the New Covenant, through Jesus Christ, and the new relationship with Him who offered Himself for the life of the world is established.



Elevation of the Holy Cross, Monastery of Gracanica, fresco, 14th Century

Salvation is achieved through faith in Jesus Christ who fulfills the Law. With the New Covenant, man becomes a member of God's Kingdom through Holy Baptism, and receives the Gift of the Holy Spirit through Holy Chrismation. From that moment onwards the Holy Spirit guides us, leading us to the knowledge of true Faith in God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Christ becomes the centre of our life, and we are called to become imitators of Christ.

When man is baptized in the Orthodox Church, he becomes a Christ-bearer vessel through whom Christ's life is shown to the world. St. Paul emphasises this teaching in his Epistle to the Galatians saying, «For as many of as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ» (Gal. 3:27). Baptism in Christ means that an Orthodox Christian participates in Christ's death and Resurrection (Rom. 6:3). Freedom from sin is granted only through Holy Baptism. What Christ accomplished on the Cross was the actual and real death to sin; likewise baptism becomes to all those who are baptised canonically. In the Sacrament of Holy Baptism man dies to sin and becomes free from it. In our union with Christ through baptism, in His death and Resurrection, lies the power for victory over sin.

The Holy Cross is the power of God for overcoming sin (1 Corinth. 1:18), and baptism is our Cross! This is the reason why the Bishop or Priest after the baptism

hangs around the neck of the newly baptised the Cross, to remind us the words of Christ saying, «If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me» (Luke 9:23). «For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God» (1 Corinth. 1:18). St. John Chrysostom teaches us saying, that the Holy Cross is a mark of them that perish, because they failed to recognize the things which lead to salvation.

We who bear witness to Christ must not be discouraged when those outside of Orthodoxy mock Christ's Cross. «For we are to God the fragrance of Christ among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing» (2 Corinth. 2:15).

Through the power of the Holy Cross all the powers of darkness are conquered. Therefore God granted to us the power to step upon all the evil forces of sin, as Christ had said to his holy Apostle saying, «Behold, I give you the authority to trample on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall by any means hurt you» (Luke 10:19). By the Holy Cross of our Lord Satan is defeated and dethroned from his demonic lordship over the world. With the death of Christ on the Cross, the work of salvation for the redemption of sinful humanity is completed.

Faith in the Cross of Christ is a living, dynamic and continuous condition which Orthodox Christians must experience in their life by taking up their cross on a daily basis. Orthodoxy is not something which one exercises only at one's critical moments of life. It is not just a decision which one has the choice to follow or not, but it is the Way of Life in Christ Jesus.

Through the Unique Sacrifice offered by Christ on the Holy Cross man is reconciled to God. This means that the broken friendship, peace and communion of man with God is re-established. We as Orthodox Christians have been saved, being baptised into Christ. We are being saved, growing in Christ participating in the sacramental life of the Church, and we will be saved, by the mercy and love of God at the Last Judgement.

Today, our Holy Orthodox Church celebrates the Universal Exaltation of the Holy Cross. As today, St. Helen, the mother of St. Constantine the Great, found the Holy Cross. Let us recall in our hearts what Christ suffered for us on the Cross. Let us stand before the Holy Cross with humbleness and let us offer to Christ as a gift of gratitude our own sins, for saving us. Let us shed some tears for our sins, as Christ shed His Blood for us. Let us cry out with a loud voice, we thank, oh Lord, for all your Love and Friendship, forgive us who fail in our daily life to follow You. Show

mercy unto Your servants and do not turn Your Divine Grace from us, sinners. For all that You went through, we thank You.

My friends, standing before the Holy Cross, let us promise to Christ that we will remain forever true Orthodox Christians and that throughout our life we will always repent for our wrong doings. In this way we will please God through our life.

Amen!