

Sunday of Holy Cross

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, brothers and sisters, we find ourselves at the midpoint of the Great and Holy Fast. And today we see before us the Holy and Life-creating Cross of our Lord.

The Cross is placed in the middle of the Great Fast and in the center of our churches to remind us of a number of things.

First, we are reminded that the period of Great Lent, the period of preparation for Pascha, is one of struggle, of self-denial, and even personal crucifixion, for we are laboring to put to death the old man within us – the old unregenerated man who is subject to sin and corruption, so that the new man – recreated after the image of Christ – might be able to shine forth from within.

And second, we are reminded this the commandment of the Lord to “deny oneself and take up one’s cross” was first fulfilled by the Lord Himself, for He Himself, though completely sinless, went to His own voluntary Passion to take away the sins of the world, to take away our sins by being mocked, spit upon, slapped in the face, rejected by His own people, deserted by His own disciples, and crucified on the Cross in the most painful and shameful of deaths. All of this the Lord endured unjustly, so that He might free us who were bound by sin, corruption, and death, by defeating the devil and destroying death by death – that is by making death a passageway to eternal life.

And third, we are reminded that not only did the Lord voluntarily ascend Golgotha long ago, but He also accompanies each of us today as we struggle with our own personal crosses, whether they be poverty, sickness, the loss of loved ones, unemployment, the abuse of our neighbors, or even the most difficult of all our crosses, our own personal sinfulness and brokenness. In all of these crosses, the Lord is with us, helping us to not only to endure suffering, but helping us even more to make that suffering redemptive, to make that suffering one through which we profit spiritually.

And how does our Lord do this? How does He help us make suffering redemptive? How does He make suffering, which He Himself not only hates with a perfect hatred but has even come to destroy through the Cross, spiritually profitable to us?

There are three primary ways:

The first is by allowing suffering to serve as a reminder that true, authentic, and lasting happiness cannot be found in this world. This world in which we live is transitory, it is fading away. The pleasures and joys of this life, which are so often inseparably tied up with self-love and over indulgence, may satisfy the flesh for a time, but they will not

satisfy the spirit, which thirsts for the eternal things of God. Man is but a pilgrim in this world, a pilgrim on a journey to the Kingdom of heaven.

We see this very clearly in the parable of the Prodigal Son. We remember that when the prodigal left his father's house, he spent his inheritance on worldly pleasures and joys, and then when a famine arose he entered into a time of suffering and struggle. And it was during this period of suffering that he came to the most important realization in his life – the realization that he did not belong to the world of fleeting pleasures and pain, but rather he belonged to his father's house. Through suffering the prodigal son came to realize two things: the vanity of the world and his true destiny as a son of God.

And it is the same with us, through suffering we cannot help but realize that this world is not our Father's house, we cannot help but realize that this world is just a passing shadow of authentic life with God, and through suffering we cannot help but desire a return to our Heavenly Father with Whom there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life ever lasting.

Now the second way that suffering can be redemptive for us, is because suffering puts us in the way of the Lord, it allows us to make the ascent with Him to Jerusalem – it makes us His co-travelers, not only to Golgotha, but also through Golgotha to His heavenly Kingdom.

Through suffering we are incorporated into the life of Christ, we share in His life in a way in which we could not otherwise.

The Fathers tell us very clearly that no matter how hard we try, none of us can live the sinless life of Christ, nor perform the miracles He performed, nor speak with the same power the life-giving words which He spoke from the Father, nor reveal so perfectly the image and likeness of God, yet we can be like Christ in another way, we can be like Christ through the patient endurance of sufferings.

In this way, we can be incorporated into Christ's voluntary death and glorious resurrection, for as the Apostle Paul says, if we are likened to Christ in a death like His, we shall certainly be likened to Christ in a resurrection like His. And so in this sense, suffering can be seen as an opportunity to unite ourselves to the Lord.

We know that suffering and death come to each and every person born into this world. And while the measure of our suffering may differ depending upon our strength and the glory of the heavenly crown which has been prepared for us, to be sure, suffering will indeed come to us all.

In a sense, each of us will find ourselves suffering on Golgotha with the Lord, either acknowledging our sins, confessing Christ, and entering into Paradise as the good and wise thief, or else reviling the Lord and perishing as the unwise thief.

And so, this is the second way that suffering can be redemptive for it presents itself as an opportunity to be with the Lord on Golgotha, so that we might enter with Him into Paradise.

And in this leads us to the third way suffering can be redemptive for us, for suffering can give us an opportunity to witness to the Lord – to witness to Him as the good and wise thief and as all the martyrs, confessors, and saints throughout the ages.

The Lord says, “He who confesses Me before men, I also will confess before My heavenly Father.” And what greater confession can be made than to deny oneself and the whole world, and to take up one’s cross, and follow Christ? What greater witness can we give to those outside and inside the Church, and indeed to Christ Himself that we are His disciples, than to endure the sufferings of this age not only patiently and with trust in the Lord, but also willingly in imitation of the One who willed to be obedient to His heavenly Father even unto death itself.

To be sure, willingly undergoing suffering makes no sense to the world which lives the life of the prodigal, spending its time, effort, and energy on fleeting pleasures and joys. This is as true today as it was 2,000 years ago when St. Paul wrote that the Cross is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews. But what is also as true today as it was 2,000 years ago is the second half of St. Paul’s statement, for he says that “for those who are being saved, the Cross is the wisdom and power of God.”

The Cross is the wisdom of God which reveals to us the foolishness and vanity of the fleeting world, making us wise enough to realize that our true home is with our Heavenly Father, making us smart enough to put to death the old man and his ways so that we might live to the New Man, Jesus Christ, and making us prudent enough to endure suffering and even death itself like the good thief, with humble confession on our lips and loving and trusting submission to God in our hearts.

And in this way we will experience the power of the Cross personally in our own lives as that same power by which Christ overcame sin, the devil, and death, on Holy Friday so many years ago. And so, brothers and sisters, let us unite ourselves to the Lord in His sufferings that we might by His almighty power be raised again to newness of life in our Father’s House, where there is neither sickness, nor sorrow, nor sighing but life everlasting.

To our Crucified Lord be the glory together with His eternal Father, and His all-holy, good, and life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!