

## **Homily of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 2025**

**Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 78:1-2, 34-38; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17**

What is the difference between a crucifix and a cross. A crucifix is a cross with the image of Jesus on it. To crucify means “to fasten on a cross,” and crucifix means “the crucified one.” When the image of Jesus is not on it, it is simply referred to as a cross. For us Catholics, crucifixes are called crosses. Generally, plain crosses represent the Christian faith. Crucifixes go deeper to signify the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross for humanity’s redemption. Plain crosses and crucifixes are a powerful Catholic and Christian identity.

Historically, the cross was one of the ancient ways of execution which continued during the Roman Empire. The cross was a symbol of shame for public execution of political rebels, criminals, and rebellious slaves. Jesus was condemned as a political rebel and was crucified. From the earliest time, Christians gave dignity to the Cross of Jesus, exalted, and venerated it as a powerful religious and spiritual symbol. Honoring Jesus, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, abolished crucifixion about 313 AD after he became a Christian. Before the Battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine testified that he saw a vision of a cross in the sky with the inscription, “In this sign, conquer.” He marked his soldiers’ shields with the sign of the cross. He attributed his victory to the power of the cross and to the Christian God.

Jesus’ crucifixion transformed his own cross to a glorified and Holy Cross. Christians, from the apostolic time, began to use the Sign of the Cross as a prayer for invocation of the Trinity, as a gesture of prayer for protection, as a profession of faith, and for blessing. Part of Good Friday’s liturgy is the Veneration of the Cross. We sing, “Behold the wood of the Cross, on which hung the salvation of the world ... Come, let us adore.” We begin each station of the Stations of the Cross with the prayer of exaltation, “We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you; because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world.” The Cross is exalted in the Preface of today’s Mass: “For you placed the salvation of the human race on the wood of the Cross, so that, where death arose, life might again spring forth and the evil one, who conquered on a tree, might likewise on a tree be conquered, through Christ our Lord.” This exaltation summarizes the story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the salvation story. Later in this Mass, we will acclaim the Mystery of Faith: “Save us, Savior of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free.” The Church calls the Cross “Immortal Tree” and “Tree of Life.”

Jesus himself exalts his Cross by his words in today’s gospel, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up [on the cross], so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14). Jesus also says in John 12:32, “And when I am lifted up [on the cross] from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself.”

The first reading tells us that when the Israelites sinned and were attacked by serpents. Following God’s directives, Moses made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and those who were bitten by serpents and looked at the bronze serpent were healed. This was a prefigure of the Cross and Jesus crucified on it. There is a difference between looking at the bronze serpent and receiving healing and looking at the crucifix and receiving healing. The serpent represents sin and evil. The people looked at it to reject (renounce) sin and evil and were healed. On the other hand, when we look at the crucifix, we look at Jesus the savior, the author of life, and the healer.

The cross is exalted because it tells the salvation story at a glance. The salvation story is a story of hope that does not end with crucifixion but continues with resurrection and ascension. The Cross of Jesus is a symbol of strength and perseverance. Jesus did not refuse his Cross. He persevered through it all. We are encouraged to do the same. May our crosses not be the end of our stories. May we also attain our own 'resurrection' and 'ascension' in whatever shape or form God wills it. Let us graft our crosses to the Holy Cross and draw spiritual nutrients from it for our earthly journey.

Today, the Church reassures us that there is power in the Holy Cross. Satan, his demons, principalities and powers, elemental spirits, and familiar spirits dread the power represented by the crucifix. It wards them off and expels them. We are given, once again, the same sign given to Emperor Constantine, "In this sign, conquer." Like Constantine, let the Sign of the Cross be our banner and our sword for battles. By faith, keep the crucifix around you, carry it with you, place it in your house and environment, wear it, behold it, contemplate it, pray before it, venerate it. Let us boast like St. Paul who says, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Galatians 6:14). St. Paul also calls the cross the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18). May the power represented by the Holy Cross fight for us and grant us victory. Amen.

One of the classical hymns of the Exaltation of the Cross, The Old Rugged Cross, was written in 1913 by Rev. George Bennard (Methodist Episcopal Church). The refrain:

*So I'll cherish the old rugged cross, till my trophies at last I lay down; I will cling to the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.*

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