

“All Points to the Cross, the Most Blessed Wood Which Is Our Only Hope”
Sermon for the Salutations to the Holy Cross
Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church
March 19, 2018

Introduction

Finding a date for our service this evening that would work for all of the calendars involved was something of a challenging chore. Such things are not unusual. As it turns out, this date that we settled on, March 19th, is one of special significance in the Roman calendar: it is the feast day of St. Joseph, spouse of Blessed Virgin Mary.

To be honest I find it somewhat perplexing that this key figure in God’s plan of salvation has received so little attention in the devotion of God’s people throughout history, in both East and West. There is some evidence that, in antiquity, in the East there was an apocryphal writing entitled “History of Joseph the Carpenter” that seems to have been popular, and which had some allusion to a possible liturgical celebration. In the West the first such appearance of any kind of liturgical observance was around the year 1500. Some scholars opine that this may have made its way to the West from an Eastern source, but there is really no clear evidence of that. In our Western tradition, more solemn liturgical celebration and popular devotion did not really become established until relatively recently, just within the last about 200 years. But once it became established in the West, it did gain prominence.

Christmas and Easter

In our Latin practice the observance of this saint’s day carries with it a certain festive spirit, so much so that the discipline of Lent is somewhat relaxed. I must add here that I have a deep personal connection with this feast day, as it was always a major celebration in my family when I was growing up. The table for the day was set up with special foods with an altar at one end. It was, of course, a rather elaborate banquet, always following the same pattern. But St. Joseph’s Day always occurs during the Lenten season, and so the banquet was always meatless. Of course Sicilians, as Greeks, know how to do much with what they have available! (We do, after all, have the same origin!)

To observe the feast day of a figure such as St. Joseph, whom we associate almost exclusively with the Christmas mysteries, at this time of the year might seem a bit out of place.

In fact, one of few things we know about him for sure from Scripture is that he had already died before the death of his foster Son. We associate him more with the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God which liturgically is commemorated in the Advent and Christmas cycle, than with the Lord's Passion, death and Resurrection which is commemorated in the cycle of Great Lent and Easter. Let us remember, though, that everything points to the Cross, even from the first moment of the realization of the Incarnation.

While the liturgical observance of St. Joseph exists only in the Latin calendar, in a few days a very great and solemn feast day occurs which is shared by both of our calendars: the Annunciation ("Annunciation of Our Most Holy Lady, the Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary"). Scholars tell us that the date of the moment of the Incarnation was established from the date of our Lord's death. A common belief among the first generations of Christians was that our Lord died on the anniversary of his entrance into this world, that date being March 25th. We know, for example, that in the early years of the third century Tertullian stated definitely that our Lord died on the Cross on March 25th, an assertion confirmed by other early writers. All of the other dates of the saving events in the life of our Lord and of those intimately connected with them – the Mother of God and St. John the Baptist – all of these days, from Christmas on, are based on this. Thus, all points to and is derived from our Lord's death on the Cross.

Other considerations tightly connecting the Incarnation with the Paschal Mystery are the circumstances surrounding our Lord's birth. He was born in Bethlehem, in the shadow of Jerusalem where he would die; he was, then, born under the shadow of the Cross, as the great Catholic orator Archbishop Fulton Sheen would put it. He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, harkening forward to the burial cloths with which his body would be wrapped for burial. And he was placed in a manger, made of wood: already a sign of the wood of the Cross upon which he would be placed for the forgiveness of our sins.

Personalizing the Cross

All points to the Cross, because the Cross is the means of our salvation. And so we come together tonight to greet it, to sing to it, and to venerate it. Indeed, we sing, "Rejoice O wood most blessed!" Most blessed because it was wood destined to be an instrument of execution, but instead became the wood of the tree which put to death the death brought into the world through the tree in the Garden by our first parents.

This is one of the many commonalities in our two traditions, for in the West we, too, venerate and sing to the Cross. In fact, the veneration of the Cross constitutes one of the principal elements in our liturgy of Good Friday, the day of the Lord's death. In these final two weeks before Easter, which we observe as Passiontide, we, too, sing a hymn to the Cross. The first line of one of the verses has become a motto of many communities within our Church: "Ave Crux, spes unica". This is the entire verse:

O hail the Cross our only hope
in this Passiontide
increase grace for believers
and remove sins for the guilty.

In this way we personalize the Cross, not just with our affection, but we interiorize it. Maybe it is better to say that we *personify* it. There are, then, two senses of the word "cross" when we speak of it as the instrument of our salvation. There is first of all the Cross as we venerate it tonight: the Cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the instrument of his execution which became the instrument of our salvation: what was designed for bringing death brought us life. We might call this the Cross with a capital "C". But then there is the cross with the lower case "c": this is the cross our Lord refers to when he teaches, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). This is our own personalized cross, and it, too, is the instrument of our salvation. This is a consequence of God's saving action through the principle of the Incarnation: our Lord's Cross must be realized, enfleshed, in our own lives, as we carry the cross he gives us for the sake of our salvation.

And if we think once again of St. Joseph, we recognize that he is a model of this for us in his own life. The cross God gave to Joseph was not just for his own sanctification and salvation, but it was part of God's plan of salvation for the whole world. This plan did not involve what Joseph had anticipated for himself; on the contrary, it was quite far from his original plan for himself! But Joseph, the quintessential just man (as this Gospel describes him), willingly obeyed God and with great alacrity did whatever and went wherever God directed him to, just like his ancestor Abraham.

Eucharist

The cross, then, means a death to oneself, that is, a death to our own will so that God's will might be ours. This death that we go through points to another element in the Christmas mysteries which points to their culmination in the Passion, death and Resurrection of God's Son: the Christ child was laid in a manger, that is, a trough for feeding animals, a container for food. Moreover, the name of the town in which he was born, "Bethlehem", means "house of bread." From the first moment of our Lord's life in this world he is directing us toward the Eucharist, the gift he would leave for us at the Last Supper that he would celebrate with his disciples, and the Mystery by which he would perpetuate and constantly renew his Sacrifice for us until he returns at the end of time.

The Eucharist, too, indicates that cross which we must carry, the death we must undergo. Just as wheat is ground into flour and baked in the heat of the oven, and just as grapes are crushed and their juice turned into wine, so must our lives be for God: by embracing our own personal Cross we become a pleasing offering to Him, as pleasing as fresh baked bread and properly aged wine are to us. St. Ignatius of Antioch applies this image to himself in quite a literal way in his letter to the Christians in Rome, which he wrote while he was being taken there for trial and execution: "Let me be food for the wild beasts, for they are my way to God. I am God's wheat and shall be ground by their teeth so that I may become Christ's pure bread. Pray to Christ for me that the animals will be the means of making me a sacrificial victim for God."

Our trials are not like that, but it is nonetheless an apt image for us, especially for whatever suffering we bear for remaining faithful to God's will. Sadly, and tragically, though, this image does apply just as literally for our brother and sister Christians in the land of ancient Christian origin today as it did for St. Ignatius in his time 1900 years ago. Christians are being driven from their homeland at an alarming rate, with their presence reduced to a small fraction of what they once were, and the massacre being leveled against them has caused the United States government to name it a genocide. And yet, it seems the reaction from the international community is only silence. Or at least, we hear nothing but silence from the main sources of the news media. Now more than ever we must heed the call of solidarity of all Christians, to lend spiritual and moral support to our brothers and sisters in the Middle East: prayer and consciousness raising; material aid and even physical presence, as personal visits and pilgrimages are perhaps the greatest moral support we can give them, so they know they are not

alone; and, of course, taking them in as refugees – our Lord reminds us in the 25th chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel that this is one of the criteria upon which he will judge us.

This calls to mind another important aspect of the Eucharist: it is the sacrament of the unity of the Church, members of the body of Christ united in and under him, our head. Grapes are crushed into juice, all blended together into one; grains of wheat are gathered together and ground to be blended into flour for bread. The crushing and the grounding before Communion is a lesson for us of the need of our own conversion, before we share in the sacrament of that unity. We must constantly attend to our own interior conversion to Christ, without which there is no unity among Christians. Yes, there much more we must do as well: praying together as we do tonight; serving together; theological dialogue is always important and necessary. But none of this will amount to anything without us attending to our own interior conversion. As St. Paul says with regard to charity we can say here: all of our prayer, service and dialogue will be just a clanging cymbal if we do not seek to be ever more perfectly converted to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

That is our hope, our aspiration, and our ardent yearning: to be joined as one, in one Eucharist. Another ancient patristic source, the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles” (better known as the Didache), bears witness to this in its description of the ancient Christian Eucharist. May God see fit to fulfill for us the prayer about the Eucharist contained therein:

As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountain tops and after being harvested was made one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom, for Thine is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.

Amen.