

Exaltation of the Holy Cross
OF Jn 3, 13-17; EF Jn 12, 31- 36

The liturgical festival of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross can be traced to two historical occurrences in the City of Jerusalem.

The first was the dedication of the Constantinian basilica of the Holy Sepulchre on this date in the fourth century.

The other event was the recovery of the True Cross from the Persians in the seventh century, which event prompted the declaration of this special feast.

This is one of the blessings of being Catholic:
to have a series of liturgies that reflect upon the lives of those devoted to Christ,
of the events that made God manifest,
of the places we've built to worship and praise God,
and even a feast honoring, nay, **exalting** the instrument of our beloved savior's death- the Holy Cross.

Understand and feel the mystery of this oxymoron.

A feast is a gathering of joyful expression...
and we're celebrating it over an instrument of death?
Could you imagine having a feast in the presence of an electric chair or gallows?
Has my life-long familiarity with the Cross, robbed it of its ability to communicate its brutality, the suffering and its finality?

I suspect that was some of the value of Mel Gibson's film portrayal, *The Passion of the Christ*.
The graphic violence intuitively demonstrated what the Son of God chose to endure,
and all for his Father's love for us.

Yet, I just said something a second ago that can help lead us out of this contraction.

I spoke of the brutality and finality of the Cross.
While Jesus did experience cardiac and respiratory arrest,
while his flesh did decay over Friday and Saturday,
there was nothing **final** about his death.

That Sunday morning, in his resurrection,
all creation was made anew.

For love of us, and his creation that had been marred by sin,
God, through the power of the Holy Spirit,
raised Jesus, the first of all to be given new life.

That is why we are called to joy.
That's why we can honor the instrument of death which in the end,
through God's love, became an instrument of new life.

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, **death itself was destroyed.**
This is the new life offered to us who only need to accept his grace
and respond to his grace
by being instruments ourselves of his grace for others.

I remember a picture I once saw of a drawing in the catacombs.
It was an early representation of Jesus.
He was carrying a cross.
It was not the ponderous 10-foot long beam that, bent over, he dragged on the
Via Dolorosa.
It was a small cross, slung over his shoulder,
with Jesus marching strong and erect.
This was not the cross of his suffering.
Jesus was carrying his trophy, the symbol of his victory over death.

Can we appreciate the magnitude of that victory... the honor given to that
trophy?

I had an experience with another trophy, the Stanley Cup.
For those who may not be hockey fans, the Stanley Cup is the trophy given to
the playoff champions of the National Hockey League.
It is one of the most travelled trophies of the world because each of the
victorious players gets to take it to their hometown for a day, regardless of
whether it is Canada, the US, Russia or Sweden.

At the end of the championship game, the players hoist it on high, skating
around the rink as tens of thousands of fans cheer in the stands and millions
watch on their TVs.

Well, I had a brush with that cup.
It was in the 2008 Stanley Cup finals between the Detroit Red Wings and the
Pittsburg Penguins.
My son, Adam, played for Pittsburg.
His whole life he dreamed of winning the Stanley Cup.

In 2008, he came so very close, losing it in Game 6 of a best of 7 series.

After the loss, his mother and I were in the tunnels of the arena waiting to provide some consolation for him outside his locker room.

Well, while waiting, Chris Osgood, the Red Wing's goalie, came through the tight hallway carrying the Stanley Cup to go to a side enclosure where TV does its post-game interviews.

He walked right in front of me.

I was only 6 inches away from the cup.

But, it wasn't my son's team who won it.

It wasn't ours.

It tugged on the heart.

This cup represents the work and aspiration of thousands of players and the hopes of millions of fans.

It is the focus of cheering and jumping, back slapping and high 5s ... of all kinds of excitement.

But you know what folks?

It is just a tin cup.

It is awarded to young men who play a game ... a game for the entertainment of others.

Many people get excited over that cup.

Yet, here today, we come to honor the trophy, the prize, the very instrument on which Jesus Christ, through his loving sacrifice, redeemed the world.

Can we even begin to appreciate that?

We are called to exaltation, the superlative of all joy and honor.

When we come to this altar, we will be nourished and become one with the first who conquered death.

He calls us to carry on,

to carry his cross,

the cross of suffering,

the cross of dying to the old and being raised in the new,

and the trophy of the defeat of death.

Exalt.

i Rev. Peter M. J. Stravinskis, Editor, *The Catholic Dictionary*, by Our Sunday Visitor
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