

The Triumph/Exaltation of the Holy Cross

14 September 2008

LESSON: The Christian Never Has to Suffer Alone

One of the most **common arguments** against God and religion is the argument of **suffering**.



- ? People say that if God really existed, and if he really were a good God, he **wouldn't allow** so much suffering in the world.
- ? And when we hear that argument, our initial reaction is to **agree**.
- ? "That's right," we think to ourselves, "after all, if **I were God, I wouldn't** allow so much suffering."
- ? Hundreds, probably thousands, of books have been written explaining how **superficial and illogical** that reasoning is.

But today, Christ himself gives us an **answer** to the problem: He raises our eyes to his **cross**, to his **crucifixion**.

Today's feast – so important that it even supersedes a Sunday - is called the Exaltation or **Triumph** of the Cross.

- ? And it reminds us that Jesus saved the fallen human race **not** by **eliminating** the suffering that our own sin **unleashed** in the world, but by **taking that suffering upon himself**.
- ? He who **never sinned** allowed himself to be **punished** with every conceivable kind of suffering, to the point of crucifixion.
- ? That moment of his **apparent defeat** was actually the moment of his **eternal victory** - the Triumph of the Cross.



Why? Because suffering on earth is **not** the worst thing that can happen to us. We know that for certain, because Jesus himself suffered, and he was God.

- ? The **worst thing** that can happen is to be **separated from friendship with God**.
- ? That's what **sin** does.
- ? What **Jesus** did on the cross was to **win back our friendship**.

By **suffering with us** even though he didn't deserve it, he **showed** us that **he truly loves us** - unconditionally, no matter what, even if we crucify him.

By **suffering with us**, Jesus showed us that we **never have to suffer alone**, that suffering itself, through **faith** in him, can become the path to wisdom, peace, and intimate friendship with God.

ILLUSTRATION: St Helen Finds the True Cross

Christ's desire to **accompany** us in our sufferings and to **use them** to show his love for us was **dramatically** evident in the events surrounding the finding of the true Cross in the **early 300s**.



- ? **Constantine** was the Emperor of Rome, his power extending throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East.
- ? He **legalized** and **encouraged** Christianity, and his mother, **St Helen**, made a pilgrimage to Palestine.
- ? While in **Jerusalem**, with the help of St Macarius, Jerusalem's bishop, she began **excavations** on the hill of Calvary, with hopes of uncovering the Cross upon which Jesus had been crucified.
- ? (Local tradition said that it had been buried nearby.)
- ? To everyone's joy and astonishment, the excavations soon uncovered not **one**, but **three** crosses - two used for the two **thieves** crucified with Jesus, one used for Christ himself.

How to figure out which was which?

- ? St Macarius had an **inspired idea**.
- ? He had **all three crosses** brought to the house of one of his **parishioners**, a woman ill to the point of death.
- ? He prayed that God would reveal which cross was the **holy** one, and then he **touched** the three crosses to the dying woman's skin.
- ? With the first two, nothing happened.
- ? With the third, the woman **opened her eyes** and rose from bed, in the best of health.
- ? The **true Cross** had been found.
- ? St Helen had a **basilica** constructed on Calvary, where the holy relic was kept.
- ? Centuries later, the **Persian Empire** conquered Jerusalem and **confiscated** the sacred wood.
- ? The Roman Emperor **recovered** the Cross on September 14, 614, and ever since then the Church has celebrated this feast of the **exaltation** or **triumph** of the Cross.

Like with the dying women who helped reveal the true cross - it is precisely **in the midst of our sufferings** where Christ can **best** show us his love, grace, and power.

That's why **the Christian never has to suffer alone**.

APPLICATION: Staying United to Christ through Confession

Christ's crucifixion happened a **long time ago**.

Because of that, the devil sometimes **tricks** us into thinking that Jesus **isn't** with us now, today, **accompanying** us in our sufferings.

But Jesus has given us **powerful reminders** that he **is indeed** with us, even amidst our **deepest** sufferings, the ones caused by our own sins.

One of these reminders is the **sacrament of confession**.



Confession is **God's invention**, like the bronze serpent in the desert – remember the story as we heard it in today's 1st reading: the Israelites sinned by not trusting in God – and so, as a punishment, God sent the seraph serpents to bite them – but when they had sufficiently repented and seen the evil of their previous rebellion – God gave Moses the instructions about making the bronze serpent, putting it on a pole – and whoever looked at it would be healed.

God gave us the Sacrament of Confession for three reasons.

First, because he knew we would **need** it.

- ? We are very much like the Israelites in the desert.
- ? We have been baptized, but we still have **selfish tendencies left**, so we sometimes **rebel** against God.
- ? Confession is where we go to **put down those rebellions and start fresh**.

Second, God gave us Confession because he wanted to give us a **clear, objective** way for us to repent.

- ? Human psychology is **complex** and powerful.
- ? We can easily **deceive** ourselves, or fall into **self-doubt** and **paralyzing anxiety**.
- ? When we kneel down before God's representative in the confessional, **there are no doubts** - it's an **objective act of repentance**, not a vague feeling or wavering resolution.

Third, He gave us Confession because he wanted to give us a clear, undeniable **experience of his unconditional forgiveness**.

- ? A lot of people don't go to confession because they say they **go directly to God**.
- ? They are missing the **entire point** of Christianity.
- ? Pagan religions are about **man reaching up** to God.



- ? Christianity is about **God coming down to earth** and reaching out to man, bringing spiritual things **down to earth**, redeeming our suffering by participating in it, by **being with us** amidst it.
- ? Confession is one of the most important ways he **continues to do that**. No other religion has anything **remotely** like it.

Confession is **house-cleaning** for our souls. We clean our houses **at least** once or twice a month. Why would we do **anything less** for our souls, which are so much more important?

Jesus died on the cross in order to win the **victory of his grace**.



APPLICATION: Staying United to Christ through the Eucharist

Confession is one powerful reminder of God’s presence – and how suffering that comes because of our sins can bring healing and life. Jesus gives us yet another **powerful reminder** that he **is indeed still** with us in the **sacrament of the Eucharist**.



- ? Every time a holy Mass is celebrated, the **curtain of time** is opened, and Christ's sacrifice on the cross is made sacramentally present **here and now**.
- ? And after Mass, the remaining **consecrated hosts** that contain the **real presence of Christ**, body, blood, soul, and divinity - much **more** than just a **symbolic** presence - are placed inside the **golden ciborium**, which is reserved in the **tabernacle**.

And so, Jesus himself is present with us not **only** in the Sacrament of

Confession, but through this **amazing sacrament** of the Eucharist, is **within** us through grace and the Holy Spirit - but he also desires to remain **with** us in all the **specific times and places** of history.

- ? When we feel **discouraged, frustrated, exhausted, or sorrowful** and the weight of the cross is **heavy**, we can come and **kneel before him** in the tabernacle, where the red sanctuary lamp burns 24/7, reminding us that Christ's **love** is still **burning** for us.
- ? But Jesus goes even **further**. Every day, in daily Mass, he **offers himself** to us in Holy Communion, as **food, comfort, and strength** for our difficult journey through life.
- ? The Lord of the universe doesn't want us to suffer **alone**.
- ? He wants to **suffer with us**, to give **meaning** to our sufferings, to make them into a source of wisdom, grace, and salvation.
- ? He wants to give us a **share** in the triumph of his cross.

Today, as we celebrate this **triumph of the cross**, let's promise our Lord that we will **give him a chance** to pour that grace into our lives, by going **regularly** to the sacred encounter of confession. Then, relieved of our suffering (our sins) through the victory of Christ's Cross and the reconciliation He gained for us by His Blood, let's renew our faith and prepare to receive Him with all the gratitude and love we can muster.

Do we still suffer? Yes. But Christ – and the victory of His cross – are available to us in the power of His Sacraments to remind us that – we don't suffer alone. Christ suffers with us – and shares His victory with us – if only we accept our suffering in union with His – in order to share in His triumph.

