

The Third Sunday of Great Lent



In the services for this Sunday the Holy Church glorifies the holy cross and the fruits of the death of the Savior on the cross. She will carry out the holy cross into the middle of the temple for veneration, and is why the Sunday is called the Veneration of the Cross. In the hymns for this day the holy Church, inviting us to honor the holy cross, tenderly appeals: "now the angelic hosts gather in reverence and bear aloft the honored Wood, and calling together all the faithful for the veneration. Come therefore and illumined by the fast, let us fall down before it with joy and fear". "Cleansed by abstinence let us draw near, and with fervent praise let us venerate the all-holy Wood on which Christ was crucified, when He saved the world in His compassion". "Come, faithful, and let us venerate the life-giving tree, on which Christ, the King of Glory voluntarily stretched out his hands. He raised us up to the ancient blessedness, whom the enemy despoiled of old through pleasure, making us exiles far from God. Come, faithful, and let us venerate the tree whereby we have been counted worthy to crush the heads of our invisible enemies. Come, all kindred of the nations, let us honor in hymns the Cross of the Lord". Glorifying the most Holy Cross, the Holy Church sings: "Rejoice, life-bearing Cross, the beautiful Paradise of the Church, the Tree of incorruption that brings us the enjoyment of eternal glory", "The indestructible foundation, and the victory of kings and the praise of priests". "Rejoice, life-bearing Cross, piety of invincible victory, door to paradise, foundation of the faithful, protection of the church: through you the curse is utterly destroyed, the power of death is swallowed up, and we are raised from earth to heaven: invincible weapon, adversary of demons, glory of martyrs, true ornament of holy monks, haven of salvation". "Rejoice, O Cross, complete salvation of fallen Adam! Glorifying in you, our faithful kings by your might laid low the people of Ishmael. We Christians kiss you now with awe, and glorifying God who was nailed on you, we cry aloud: O Lord, Who was crucified on the Cross, have mercy on us, for Thou art good and loves mankind".

The purpose of instituting the Holy Cross in the service on the third Sunday will be revealed as a beautiful comparison by the Holy Church to the tree of life in paradise, the tree which sweetened the bitter waters of Marah, the tree with the canopy of leaves under whose shade tired travelers seeking the eternal promised land may find coolness and rest. Thus, the Holy Church offers the Holy Cross for spiritual reinforcement to those going through the ascetic effort of the fast, just as food, drink and rest serve as bodily reinforcement. This spiritual reinforcement is given as the representation of the love of God to man for whom the Son of God turned Himself over to death on the cross. It is especially necessary in the middle of our effort because now our ascetic efforts already have lost much of the freshness of its power and however yet cannot hopefully enliven itself for the near and successful ending of our ascetical effort. Having concentrated all that is the most severe and sorrowful in the worship services of the previous weeks, especially during the first, that may both frighten the sinner and apparently touch

the hardest of human hearts, now in the middle of the large and difficult arena of the Holy Forty Day Fast the Holy Church offers the Holy Cross for great comfort and encouragement as needed for raising the flagging strength of those fasting. Wherefore nothing can both console, encourage, and inspire the fatigued, or perhaps even the Christian weakened in spirit so much as the presentation of the eternal divine love of the Savior who turned Himself over to the struggle on the cross for the sake of our salvation _).

For such a purpose the Holy Church offers the cross on the third Sunday of Great Lent from of old. Many hymns of praise for this Sunday were composed by Joseph and Theodore of the Studite Monastery. Everything in the worship service of this day: the most Holy Cross, solemnly carried from the altar to the middle of the temple, the singing of the stichera for venerating the cross, the Epistle (see below), recounting the suffering of the Savior on the cross as the means of our reconciliation with God, the Gospel (see below), reminding the Christian about everyone's duty to bear their cross in life, following the Crucified One on the cross, - everything that promotes the deep stamp of the cross of Christ on the heart of the believer, as a sign of our salvation, as our mighty, God-given power, saving us on earth and opening to us the entrance to the high place of our fatherland, as the highest and more powerful reinforcement of believers among the ascetics of the Holy Forty Day Fast _). If the Lord suffered on a cross for our sake then we also should practice asceticism unceasingly in fasting, prayer and other efforts of piety for His sake, discharging from ourselves and destroying in ourselves all that interferes with these efforts. With the aim of our greater enthusiasm for patience in efforts of piety, the Holy Church on the present day comfortably reminds us beforehand about coming nearer "to the light of the peaceful joy of Pascha", hymning, in the troparia of the canon, the holy cross and the suffering of the Savior on it, together with His joyful resurrection and inviting the faithful "with pure mouths" to sing "the song of joyfulness" - Irmos of Holy Pascha.

Troparion, see Sept. 14.

Kontakion, tone 7

**Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of Eden;
It has been mysteriously quenched by the wood of the Cross!
The sting of death and the victory of Hades have been vanquished,
For Thou, O my Savior, didst come and cry to those in Hades:
Enter again into paradise.**

In Matins it is prescribed to sing the Irmoi of Pascha: "This is the day of Resurrection..." and so forth. See page 264 about carrying out the cross in Matins. **Liturgy** of St. Basil the Great. Instead of "Holy God" sing the troparion: "Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy Holy resurrection let us glorify".

_) According to the teaching of St. John Chrysostom: "the cross of the Lord is unpleasant and sorrowful to the ear, but it consists of joy and gladness. It is the originator not so much of suffering as much as of passionlessness. For Jews the cross is temptation, for pagans it is madness, but for us believers it reminds us of our salvation. When in church one reads about the cross and one is reminded of the sufferings on the cross, the faithful are indignant at the cross and let out a plaintive wail and murmur not at the cross but at the crucifiers and unbelievers. For the cross is the salvation of the Church, the cross is the praise of those who hope on it. The cross has released us from the evil that possessed us and is the beginning of the blessings received by us. The cross is the reconciliation of His enemies with God, the promise of sinners to Christ. For by the cross we were freed from enmity and through the cross we have become amiable to God. The cross delivered us from the authority of the devil, the cross saved us from death and destruction. The cross changed human nature to the angelic, having released it from all that is corruptible, and have found lives worthy of immortality".

"How great is the power of the cross! How great is the change made by it in the human race! How from the deep darkness it has led us to the boundless light, from death it has restored us to eternal life, from corruption it has transferred us to incorruption. What good is not accomplished for us by means of the cross? Through the cross we learned piety and learned the properties of the Divine essence. Through the cross we learn the truth about God, through the cross we who were far from Him are united to Christ, and we become worthy of the grace of the Holy Spirit. Through the cross we learn the power of love and we are taught to die for others. Through the cross we are scorned and all what we do is not temporal, we search the blessings of the future and we accept the invisible as if seen. The cross is preached, and the faith in God is confessed, His truth is spread throughout the universe. The cross is preached, and the faith in the resurrection, the life and the kingdom of heaven is made without a doubt. What is more precious than the cross and what is more saving for the soul? The cross is the triumph over demons, the armor against sin and the sword with which the Lord has struck the snake. The cross is the will of the Father, the glory of the Only-begotten, the joy of the Holy Spirit, the ornament of angels, the protection of the Church, the praise of St. Paul, the protection of the Saints, the lamp of all the world".

"See, however desired and deservedly amiable the cross is made today, it was the most terrible and shameful sign of the cruelest execution in antiquity! And the cross makes the best ornament on the imperial crown, the most precious in all the world. The image of the cross is now found on you, both masters and servants, both wives and husbands, both maidens and married, both slaves and free. All place the sign of the cross on the noblest part of their body, daily carrying this sign on their forehead, as on a depicted pillar. It shines on a sacred meal, on the clothes of the priest and together with the Lord's body at the mystical supper. You see it lifted everywhere: on houses, in market-places, in the deserts, on the paths, on

mountains and hills, on the sea, on ships, on islands, on boxes, on clothes, on armor, in the halls, on golden and silver vessels, in pictures, on the bodies of sick animals, on the bodies of the demon-possessed, in war, in the world, in the afternoon, at night, in festal assemblies and in the cells of the ascetics. Already no one is ashamed and does not blush at the thought that the cross is a sign of a shameful death. To the contrary, all of us honor this as an adornment for ourselves, which has surpassed crowns and diadems and precious stones. Let us not run, let us not be frightened, but let us kiss and honor it as an invaluable treasure".

According to the teaching of St. Ephraim the Syrian: "the cross abolished idolatrous adulation, enlightened the whole universe, gathered all the nations into one Church and united them with love. The cross is the resurrection of the dead. The cross is the hope of Christians. The cross is the staff for the lame. The cross is comfort for the poor. The cross is the deposing of the proud. The cross is the hope of those who despair. The cross is food for the sailors. The cross is haven for the bestormed. The cross is the father for orphans. The cross is comfort for those who mourn. The cross is the protector of children. The cross is the glory of men. The cross is the crown of elders. The cross is light for those sitting in darkness. The cross is freedom for slaves, wisdom for the ignorant. The cross is the preaching of prophets, the fellow-traveler of apostles. The cross is the chastity of maidens, the joy of priests. The cross is the foundation of the Church, the establishment of the universe. The cross is the destruction of idolatrous temples, temptation for Jews. The cross is the cleansing of the lepers, the rehabilitation of the enfeebled. The cross is bread for the hungry, a fountain for the thirsty. The cross is the good hope of monks, clothing for the naked.

By this holy armor of the cross Christ the Lord has terminated the omniconsuming bowels of Hades and blocked the many snares in the mouth of the devil. Having seen the cross, death trembled and released everyone whom she possessed with the first creature. Armed with the cross, the God-bearing apostles subdued all the power of the enemy and caught all peoples in their dragnets, and gathered them for the worship of the One Crucified. Clothed in the cross as in armor, the martyrs of Christ trampled all the plans of torturers and preached with plainness the Divine Cross-bearer. Having taken up the cross for the sake of Christ, those who renounced everything in the world settled in deserts and on mountains, in caves and became the fasters of the earth.

But what language is worthy to praise the Cross, this invincible wall of the Orthodox, this victorious armor of the Heavenly King?! By the cross the Almighty One bestowed unspeakable blessings on humanity"!

"Therefore on the forehead, and on the eyes, and on the mouth, and on the breasts let us place the life-giving Cross. Let us arm them with the invincible armor of Christians, with this hope of the faithful, with this gentle light. Let us open paradise with this armor, with this support of the Orthodox faith, with this saving praise of the Church. Neither in one hour, nor in one instant, let us not forget the Cross, nor let us begin to do anything without it. But let us sleep, let us arise, let us work, let us eat, let us drink, let us go on our way, let us sail on the

seas, let us go across the river, let us adorn all our members with the life-giving Cross. And let us not be frightened "by the terror of the night, nor by the arrow that flies by day, nor by anything roaming in darkness, nor by any calamity, nor any noonday demon" (Ps. 90:5, 6). If, O Christian, you will always take up the cross of Christ on yourself as a help, then "evil shall not come towards you, nor any scourge come near your habitation": for the opposition power seeing it trembles and leaves".

_) According to the church hymns: "In the middle of the Fast, the all honorable tree calls in worship" all those who "worthily follow through their passion the passion of Christ", who in the first half of the Holy Forty Day Fast have fervently practiced asceticism in fasting and prayers, in repentance and cleansing from all impurities, in acts of love and good works. For those, the holy cross of Christ really serves with the most comfort and strongest encouragement for the continuation of their Lenten efforts, "easing their lenten time".

But how and for what will they approach the life-giving cross of Christ in the course of the holy days of "the soul-pleasing Forty Day Fast" when they lead the usual sinful, vain, sensual life which, perhaps, even after holy confession and holy communion remain the same as before, with the same passions and with the same insensitivity and hardness of heart? How will they kiss the holy cross when during the holy days of the fast they strayed to the way of vice and yet have not taken the way to true repentance, the real struggle against their passions? How will they touch the pierced side of Christ, who in their heart and during the days the Lenten tenderness did not cease to be the source only of "evil desire, theft, usury, insult, cunning, temptation, shunning, abuse, arrogance, and foolishness"? How will those touch the holy tree, when their impure mouth opened only for idle talk and malicious gossip, for condemnation and slander, for grumbling and indignation? How will they look on the stretched body of Christ hanging on the cross, who with cowardice yielded to any need of the flesh, satisfied all whims, and were afraid to give up for themselves even the excessively fashionable food and clothes? Will they even worship the Crucified One on the cross? But then will their acts of worship be distinct from those genuflections, with which the warriors of Pilate fearlessly greeted the condemned Jesus on the cross? Will they even kiss the wounds of Christ? But would these kisses be better than the kiss of Judas?

So the negligence of people and the very saving suffering of Christ can turn into condemnation, and the word of comfort cross changes to a word of bitter accusations! So from the one cup of the eternal covenant, the Christian, faithful to his name, vigilant about his salvation, or renewed by true repentance, sings of life eternal; but those uncaring about salvation, insensitive to the voice of the grace of God sings eternal condemnation! But the Holy Church offers the life-giving Cross of Christ also to the careless in hope that the beneficial power of the cross will also touch their heart and will urge them away from the deep sleep of the sinner. "They will respect my son" said the owner of the vineyard, sending his only son to the tenants who were grumbling against him (Mt. 21:_7). "They will respect the

wounds of the Son of God", as if thus the Holy Church speaks about her prodigal and disobedient children, offering them the sight of the life-giving cross of Christ. She hopes that the sight of the Divine Sufferer will remind the sinners, that as they were baptized into the death of Christ, they promised to serve the Lord instead of the world and the devil, to please God instead of their flesh, to obey the will of God instead of their lusts and passions.

The Holy Church hopes that souls will be found though guilty, but not fallen into the depths of evil, not going towards the edge of hardness, by which a look at the instrument of the suffering of the Son of God will shake the conscience, will prick the heart, will make the saving change of thoughts and feelings so that they will return from the temple as many returned from Golgotha, - "beating their breasts" (Lk. 23:48), and in their life from now on will go by the way of faith, repentance and Christian piety. (See details in "Full Collection of the Sermons of Demetrius, Archbishop of Chersonese, vol. 4, pages 324-326). They, as Ambrose of Milan teaches, should "grieve and cry, however not pushing to despair, because the One who has enlightened the eyes of the man blind from birth (Jn. 9), can make them both zealous and firm in His service if only they want to return with a pure heart. Therefore, let them recognize they are in their blindness and let them run to the Physician who can enlighten them".

*S. V. Bulgakov, **Handbook for Church Servers**, 2nd ed., 1274 pp. (Kharkov, 1900) pp. 518-521
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