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The Festival of the Holy Cross

St. John 12:20-33

14 September, Anno Domini 2025

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, we ask that you would grant to us the peace of Your cross by which You have made known Your glory in giving Your life for us poor sinners. Help us to receive our own crosses in faith, assured that through them you will work Your good and gracious will for us.

Dear saints of God, while the origins of this festival in the church are not exactly clear and it has been most certainly abused, we certainly can't doubt it's benefit. In a way, it's like having Good Friday in September, another opportunity to be drawn back to the beating heart of it all in an hour where we desperately need to be - the death of God's Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. And by Jesus declaration from the throne of the cross that "It is finished!" We have the promise that this world of sin and death has been overcome and will one day give way to a yet more glorious eternal day when all sorrow and sadness will be put away from Christ's people forever and the evil of this present life will be put away forever. Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly and save us.

But the reality is that beholding Jesus on the cross, as comforting as it is for those who seek the mercy of God, and I pray it is so comforting for you, also has a way of making us uncomfortable, some even going so far as to remove Jesus' body from the cross. St. Paul was right when he called it "a stumbling block". But an even better translation there is really "a scandal".

Why? Well, it's really not that surprising when you consider the full sermon preached by Jesus hanging on the cross, wearing a crown of thorns, stripped of every last shred of dignity and decency. There are basically two reasons seeing this makes us uncomfortable.

The first is that it is MY sin that necessitated such an abominable thing to happen. The crucified Christ demands that we confess that not just the outward crass and obvious sins like murder and adultery and stealing are evil, but also our covetousness, our pride, our snarky comments, our love of earthly things, our sideways glances, our gossip, our disrespect - all of these and all the other evil that reside in our hearts are truly and heinously evil, worthy of the worst of God's wrath for all of eternity. Good Friday doesn't let us simply blow these things off as

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not that big a deal. Put another way, the cross is the definitive proof that, not simply do we do evil, but that, apart from Christ and the Holy Spirit, we ARE evil. If only the brutal crucifixion of the perfectly innocent Son of God, whose heart never for a second doubted the goodness, the promises, and the will of God and whose lips never uttered anything but the purest truth could make satisfaction for you, could be sufficient to blot out our transgressions, then the harsh reality that the cross preaches is that you and I, without the forgiving Blood of Christ, without the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit in the waters of Holy Baptism, are poor, wretched, miserable sinners with no merit or goodness to claim before the throne of God. Nobody wants to confront that truth or think that about themselves. And it is quite amazing the lengths to which will we go to blunt that truth or deny it all together and the devil has plenty of people in the world who will help you do just that.

But it is good that we are made aware of our sin. We should be appalled that any sin lives in our hearts. We should cry out with St. Paul “Wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24) That is a right confession that pleases God because it is true. He didn’t make you a sinner. He just showed you that you’re a sinner by holding up the Law before you and forcing you to look in the mirror. What offends us about the crucified Jesus is that we see the truth of what we are and all of our delusions about being a good person are crushed to powder. The same outrage that we are filled with over the most recent shocking events in our own nation - the man who stabbed and killed the young woman on the train, whoever murdered Charlie Kirk, and the latest individual who sought to slaughter as many children at that Catholic school as possible - should be directed against our own hearts as well. These are not opportunities for us to puff ourselves up with pride. It is an opportunity for collective repentance as we mourn the same hatred and evil that lies within our own hearts. O Lord, have mercy upon us.

Repent. Stare at your Lord on the cross and meditate on the Ten Commandments. Don’t hide from your sin. Don’t varnish over it and try to excuse it or call it something else. Good Friday tells you exactly what your sin is and does - it is an abomination in the sight of God and it makes you inhuman, a worm and not a man. The sinfulness of your heart that then pours out from your lips and your hands separates you from the God of life and condemns you to eternal judgment. God does not lie to you. If your sin were not so terrible, then Jesus wouldn’t have had to suffer something so terrible as crucifixion, and, worse yet, being forsaken by God.

And that is exactly why this wretched sight is at the same time so exquisitely beautiful and why we love it! Jesus suffered exactly all that willingly and joyfully

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for us to save us from having to as we justly deserved! He went uncomplaining forth for the joy of having you in His kingdom for all of eternity, spared from the unquenchable fire of eternal condemnation. This is why we are not ashamed of the Gospel, either to believe it or to proclaim it, though the whole world declares it to be evil and foolish. It is what drives Christians to confession - Jesus loves to forgive sins. Jesus loves to forgive your sins. That is what draws us also to Holy Communion. That sacrifice which Christ offered on the cross - His true Body and true Blood offered to God on the cross in payment for you - is offered to you as life-giving food at the Lord's table. The death of Jesus isn't some emotional experience that is worked up within you. It is a historical event, the blessings of which are fed to you under real bread and real wine. You cannot get any closer to the glorious cross than right there at that rail. Here we feast upon Life and salvation. Here the fruit of the cross is put in our mouths as we relish those precious words "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins."

There is a second way, however, in which Jesus' cross makes us uncomfortable. Jesus' said "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also." (Jhn. 12:25-26) What Jesus is saying is clear. The lives of those who would be His disciples will look like His own. If we follow Jesus we must go to the cross. We must die with Him. This is your Baptism. "Do you not know that all of who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:3-4) Praise be to God that we have already died that death to sin by being baptized into Christ. But the consequence of that death is that we must also die to ourselves - to our sinful desires, our foolish reason, our love of our life in this world, our desire for ease and comfort, wealth and prosperity. "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her." "Wives submit to your husbands in everything." "Children obey your parents in the Lord for this is right." "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart...Masters, do the same to them..." The lives of God's people are lives of sacrifice for the good of our neighbor to the glory of the Name of God. And this, we know we have not done as we ought. Often times, we have used our freedom in Christ as an excuse to do just the opposite, to glorify and enrich ourselves. We have tried to avoid the cross because we love and trust the things of this world.

But we have been rescued precisely from the evil and futility of a life lived for our own benefit. "Whoever loves his life loses it." That is what sin is - a failure to love

God and your neighbor as we are directed to by the commandments. Sin is selfish ambition. But consider, what personal ambition does our Lord and Savior ever show? What neighbor does Christ ever not love either by helping them or by speaking the truth to them, even if they may hate Him for it? Perhaps we dismiss Jesus' words as hyperbole or maybe we just misunderstand Him when He says "whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life." (Jhn. 12:25) Clearly our Lord is not speaking of the blessings that He daily pours out in creation. What He is saying is that our eyes are to be turned toward what is eternal. We are not to set our hearts on the things of this world because they are all passing away and are quite often used by the devil to lure us away from the things of God's kingdom. Our love for the kingdom of God should so surpass our love of things in this world that it might be said that we hate the things of this world. Or, as St. Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesian Christians, "But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead." (Phil. 3:7-9a, 10-11)

I think this is a good opportunity for us to take a moment as we think about the cross of our Savior and the crosses that are appointed to each of us as those who follow Him, to rightly frame the events of this past week and so many of the responses to them that have so shocked our national conscience. We are short-sighted if we dismiss these events as simply political violence. That's an easy scapegoat that serves the interests of those who thrive over having one group of people divided against another group of people. What great campaign fodder for upcoming elections! God grant that we not be duped. Some of the last things that Charlie Kirk said were explicit confessions of faith in Christ who died and rose for his own salvation. Many of the opinions that he expressed were sharpened and clarified by his conversion to the Christian faith in recent years. I don't think it is a stretch to say that Charlie, like the children at that Catholic school who were attending Mass, like so many others who have been hunted down and slaughtered in their churches both here and throughout the world, are Christian martyrs. That was the cross which God, in His love for them, had prepared. The devil hates the truth of God's Word and will stop at nothing to silence it. These saints have been blessed to lay down their lives for the name of Christ. But while their lives in this valley of sorrow have ended, they very much live robed now in white robes around the Lamb on His throne! They have finally received the deliverance from evil they have prayed for. Because Jesus lives, they live as do all who die trusting in the

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crucified Christ for the forgiveness of all their sins. They now join the great throng of martyrs crying out to Christ from under the altar “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.” (Rev. 6:10-11)

The hatred of the Word of God is real and it is growing. I think that is a large part of what has been so shocking about this past week. We have had to confront the reality that we are not simply dealing with political struggles. We are, as Scripture has long told us, in the midst of a battle of much greater significance, not with flesh and blood but against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph. 6:12)

And this nation, which once was able to witness from a distance the outright persecution and killing of Christians “over there”, has to confront the reality that the devil who once operated mostly subversively and in the shadows among us, undermining the Scriptures, drawing our children away from the faith, lulling us all into a sense of complacency, is now emboldened. Those who reject Christ are ready and willing to spill the blood of God’s people here just like “over there” in their insane hatred of God who loves them and died for them. Might some of us here be called to bear the cross of martyrdom? Maybe. That lies alone in God’s merciful wisdom. If that is the cross prepared for you, praise God that you should share in a death like that of your Savior. But do not fear. Do not try to prepare for it other than by daily prayer, daily hearing the Word of Christ, daily confessing and being absolved, committing Scripture, the catechism, and good hymns to memory. Know that the world hated Christ first, and though it thought it destroyed Him by the cross, it only accomplished it’s own destruction. Your crosses likewise, even if they are as direct as persecution or imprisonment, or martyrdom likewise will not harm you. Yes, they may hurt or kill your body. But that is all they can do and you know that is only temporary. The bodies of all the departed saints are being carefully watched over by Christ until the day of the resurrection of all flesh. If martyrdom is granted to you, you will still be with Christ and live forever and such a death, precious before God and His angels, will be the clearest confession of faith to the world and to the devil. What they mean for evil, God means for good and God always brings about His good and gracious will for His saints.

Parents, take heed. And I don’t say this to be alarmist but a realist so that we take seriously the task that is laid upon us and the evil and hatred of the world in which

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we live. The hatred that is spilling out now, God has already told us will continue to deepen and spread. God grant that none of our children should face what the children at the Church of the Annunciation in Minnesota had to face. But like those children, ours may. And with that hard reality in mind, there is simply nothing more important you can do for them than to constantly teach and fill them with the Word of God and the joy of our salvation in Christ. Then, if such a day should come, they will be more than prepared, confident in Christ. Let what we have just witnessed again, stir us up to a fervent devotion to raising our children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. Let us gather them to us around the dinner table to feast and engage in holy conversation. And then let us turn that table into a holy armory by reading the Bible to them and demonstrating a life of piety and devotion to the things of God. The devil hates children just as much as he hates adults. He doesn't spare them just because they are young. Behold how he convinced so many that children are burdens and nuisances so that we are even willing to murder them in the wombs of their mothers. Marriage is despised. Divorce is encouraged and celebrated. And children suffer for it most of all. Parents are relentlessly portrayed as fools and impediments. The devil has so numbed us to these precious little ones that it has been called good to chemically mutilate them.

We need also to think seriously about who we are giving access to our children. How much of the devil's filth and lies comes from teachers and administrators in the state run schools of this nation? That is certainly not to say all of them. But many are very vocal about their hatred of God's Word and the Christian faith and your authority as parents. Don't just blow that off. Pray for the faithful teachers and mark and avoid those who would use their classroom to teach evil. There are too many faithful Christian parents who are suffering the greatest torment because their children were filled with lies in the schools and universities and now openly reject and mock Christ, believing that they have finally been freed and enlightened. May God hear the cries of these dear parents and turn the hearts of their children that they are not lost forever. Let us be vigilant guardians of their hearts and minds, mindful that the devil's poison is as close as the phone in their pocket and his servants are always hunting. May we be filled with the strength and wisdom to so treasure the things of Christ and eternal life that we hate the things and the ways of this sinful world, that we not simply accept what the unbelieving world and our sinful flesh tell us is important. They only know how to lie. Indeed, run away from anything that the world tells you is good and necessary. You can be certain that it isn't.

Let us heed the Word of God knowing full well that doing so will invite the bitter

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hatred of the world. We are not above our Lord. The world hated and crucified Him. It would do the same to us the moment it gets the chance. There is no escaping that. Just look at how many people actually celebrated Charlie Kirk's murder and mock those who would pray for his family and the families of the children gunned down at the Catholic school.

But we are already more than conquerors. Christ has overcome the world and we with Him through Baptism. It doesn't look like it now. But on the Last Day it will be made abundantly clear and our hope and faith will be vindicated and all who spurned Christ, who mocked and beat and martyred His children, will receive for all of eternity the fruits of their unbelief.

If we would know the true glory of Christ, if we would rightly see and know Jesus, we must listen to the clear words of our Lord. The glory of Christ is the cross, when God dies for sinners, the righteous for the unrighteous. There is no greater or other glory - for Jesus or for us. The sinful hearts of men can only see the crucified Christ and call it foolishness, defeat, loss, and shame. But that is because the sinful hearts of men hate sacrifice. They hate the idea of giving up what they want, of doing without, of discomfort, and certainly of dying. Our sinful hearts want flash, success, praise, wealth, comfort, entertainment. We want what feels and looks good. We despise the kingdom of God so that we can chase after careers. We silence the Word of God in our homes because we want to be entertained. We become slaves to lenders because we can't bear the thought of not having the things that we want right now. We try to blend in with the world - filling our eyes and ears with its filth, mimicking its immodesty, speaking its language - because we don't want to be mocked or cast out or thought of as weird Christian prudes. We pray people don't notice that we are Christians so that maybe we can avoid what happened to those children and Charlie. God forgive us.

Beloved, the world cannot offer you glory. It can only offer you those things that will harm and kill you. They might taste good, but they are poison. Glory is not found in your elevation. It is found in your cross - that which humbles you before God, which strips away all of the idols of your heart, and leaves nothing in front of you but Jesus. You cannot have Easter without Good Friday. You cannot have life without death. Through your crosses, which your loving heavenly Father has fashioned specifically for you, He is making you a new creation. Through your cross He is training and disciplining you as a son so that you might not fall prey to the devil's snares and be lost to sin and unbelief. Your crosses, as painful as they are, are good because through them, God is shaping and molding you, He is conforming you to the image of His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who with

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joy endured your cross appointed to Him by His Father, despising its shame and who now sits at the right hand of God, ruling over all things in heaven and earth for the salvation of His people...for you.

May God our heavenly Father so strengthen us by His Holy Spirit that our hearts may find the greatest joy and peace in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. May we so love the things of Christ that we are not led astray by the vain glory that the world holds before us and by which the devil would draw us away from Christ. And, rejoicing in the cross of Jesus, may we rejoice in and take up the crosses prepared for us, willingly and joyfully sacrificing all that we have and are to serve our neighbor and confess the Name of Christ in the midst of this dying world.

In the Name of +Jesus.

(We stand.) The peace which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord.