

HOMILY ON THE SUNDAY OF THE VENERATION OF THE HOLY CROSS
(22/3/2020)

The Sunday of the Veneration of the Cross is today! With a spirit of celebration and surrounded by flowers, the Precious Cross of Christ is placed in the center of the Church. All of the faithful come forward to venerate the life-bearing Cross of Christ, with profound devotion in gratitude for everything that It has already given to us, and what It continues to offer. We are now halfway through Great Lent, along with the spiritual and ascetic struggles that go with it. As today's Synaxarion explains, the Church presents to us the life-giving Cross in order to refresh and comfort us, as we endure the hardships of fasting. The Precious Cross is like a tree with many leaves that a weary traveler sees on a long and harsh journey. Just as the traveler stops to rest in the shade before continuing, so we too rest in the "shade" of the Precious Cross. In this we are given the strength and grace to continue our fight in the Spiritual Arena, for the rest of our lives.

The blessings of the Cross to the faithful are prefigured in the Old Testament. The Israelites were miraculously saved from the Egyptians who were pursuing them. How? By the two strikes that Moses made in the water with his rod in the sign of the cross. With the first strike, the sea was parted, allowing the Israelites to pass through. With the second strike, the water came down again just as the Egyptian Army attempted to follow them. In this way, the Israelites were saved (see Exodus 14:21-30). The same thing happens with those who believe. With the power of the Precious Cross we are saved from our enemies, who wish to keep us as slaves. We all know who these enemies are, as we face them every day. They are the passions of our body and soul. These enemies such as selfishness, hatred, anger, lies, jealousy, slander, greed, and others all aim to overpower us. A person feels helpless before them, knowing they are evil but unable to break away. One need only turn towards the Cross of Christ in faith, remembering the shedding of His blood and that Christ died on the Cross for our own salvation. In this way, a person can draw strength and grace in the spiritual struggle. They can join the countless other Christians who have been victorious over the passions by the power of the Cross. Some not only overcame the passions, but went beyond to become saints of the Church. We see icons of them holding the Cross in their hands, the symbol of martyrdom and victory!

The Cross brings peace to our life and sweetness to bitter experiences. To go back to the Old Testament, we see the Israelites in the desert searching for water. When they finally found it in a place called Marah, it was bitter. By God's command, Moses placed a piece of wood in the water, and the water became sweet. The people drank of it and were refreshed. The piece of wood prefigures the Cross, which inspires love, forgiveness, patience, hope and every other virtue that brings serenity to our souls. It brings Christ's joy in our life "... *For herewith joy has come to all the world through the Cross ...*" as we proclaim at Pascha. Additionally, the Cross is the antidote for the poison of sin that "*the snake of old*" strives to pour into our souls. The Israelites in their long journey faced the danger of poisonous snakes at Edom, which were biting them. Again, at God's command, Moses had a copper snake fixed onto a wooden pole. Those who looked at the copper snake were healed from the poison (see Exodus 15:22-25 and Numbers 21:6-9). The same will happen with every person who believes and turns towards the Cross in faith, which the Lord covered with His Precious Blood, as He Himself said who "*will not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:14-15).

The blessings of the Cross are countless, but for our struggles the Cross of the Lord is an invincible weapon against the devil. When Daniel found himself surrounded by hungry lions, he stood in prayer with his arms outstretched and body formed in the shape of a cross. The lions did not harm him. It is also this way for us, if we believe. With the power of the Cross a person is saved from the devil

who “ *walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour*” (1 Peter 5:8). As the Church chants: “*Lord, You have given us Your Cross as an arm against the devil; for he is terrified and trembles, not bearing seeing its power*” (Praises, Tone 8th).

My brothers and sisters, since the Precious Cross gives so much strength and grace, let us rest upon It with faith, and seek refuge under Its shade for every need of ours so that with the hymnographer we can pray:

“Oh, Most Venerable Cross! With Your power sanctify our souls and bodies; and against any kind of harm coming from those against us, retain us, who are venerating You, invulnerable” (Feast Praises).