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Homily for the Sunday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross

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His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros
Homily for the Sunday after the Elevation of the Holy Cross
September 15, 2024
Saint George Tropeoforos Greek Orthodox Church
New York, New York
My Beloved Brothers and Sisters in the Risen Christ,

I am so very happy to be here again at the wonderful and beautiful parish of Saint George Tropeoforos. Especially on the Sunday after the Universal Elevation of the Precious and Life-giving Holy Cross. This historical event in the life of the Church – the Finding of the True Cross of the Lord – merits both a “Sunday Before” and a “Sunday After.” This surely demonstrates the great importance that we give to the Feast, much like Christmas and Theophany.

In the Gospel reading for today, the Lord invites us to take up our own crosses and follow Him, saying:

“If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”1

One of the most remarkable things about this verse is that Jesus says it before ascending His Cross, and at the same time, He understands what that sacrifice will mean.

We look at the Lord’s amazing sacrifice for the life of the world on the Holy Cross, and we bow before it in deep reverence and gratitude. But we often ignore the crosses that He asks us to bear. It’s really a very simple question: What is your cross? But what is the answer? Is it the rigor of a religious lifestyle in which you deny yourselves all the pleasures of this world? Clearly, we are not all called to be monks!

The denial that the Lord speaks of may not be the mere negation of the enjoyments of this world. Certainly, we should not exploit them and live for them,

but the negation that the Lord speaks of is not negative – meaning it is not about what we choose not to do, as much as it is what we choose to do. Think about it: it's far too easy to pick the Lenten options on a menu at a restaurant and then think we have denied ourselves.

When the Lord calls us to deny ourselves, He is calling us to exceed our egocentric desires for the sake of someone other than ourselves. Ultimately, He is asking us to choose to love over hate, generosity over selfishness, and compassion over indifference.

When that is our mindset and the intention of our hearts, then and only then, are we ready and able we pick up our crosses and follow Him. For our crosses are the choices that we make; not what has been forced upon us. And even when circumstances do force unpleasant realities upon us, it is for us to decide how we respond, rather than merely react. Then we are truly carrying our crosses; then we are plowing the same path He did on the way to Golgotha.

You may remember that when the Lord was carrying His Cross, the Roman soldiers forced someone else to carry it, one Simon of Cyrene.2 Perhaps it was because our Savior was too weak in that moment to bear the weight of it. He had not slept or eaten for days. He had been beaten and whipped. He had been tortured by the soldiers and made to wear a crown of thorns. Then the Roman soldiers grabbed Simon of Cyrene out of the crowd and forced him carry the Cross of Christ, as they made their way through the Holy City to Golgotha. Can we even imagine what that means?

There is a plain truth in the ancient world about carrying crosses. It was a humiliation to the condemned man – that he had to carry the instrument of his own death on his way to a most painful and miserable end. The Lord's burden was shared by Simon of Cyrene, because by doing so, the Lord Jesus allowed all of us – represented by Simon – to partake in His humiliation. And because of this exchange on that Way of the Cross so many centuries ago, the Lord showed us that we will never be alone with our own crosses. He will always be there to help us carry them, no matter how heavy they may seem.

The Lord became a debtor to us all through Simon of Cyrene, because Simon carried the His Cross for all of us. And now, the Lord will help us with our crosses in generous repayment.

Therefore, as we digest the words of the Gospel today, let us consider what in our lives is a cross that we bear – or even many crosses.

Let us choose to carry them, in the Ὁδός Ἀγάπης – the Way of Love that our Lord walked. If we do so, we will always finds that their weight is shared by the God Who willed to be raised upon the Cross of Golgotha.

And by the power of His Holy Cross, we shall turn the pains and sorrows of this life into glory and joy, with love, forgiveness, and compassion for all.

Amen.

1 Mark 8:34.

2 Cf. Matthew 27:32.

Photo: GOARCH/Dimitrios Panagos.

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