19/09/2022

Homily by His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America at the Κατάδυσις of the Precious Cross on the Sunday after the Exaltation



Your Grace and dear Reverend Clergy,

Esteemed Consul of the Hellenic Republic, Mr. Demetrios Papageorgiou,

Beloved sisters and brothers in Christ,

This hallowed tradition of the Κατάδυσις of the Precious Cross, here in New Jersey, is a most venerable praxis, dating back seventy-five years, which is three quarters of the life of our Sacred Archdiocese. Instituted in Asbury Park in 1947, by the late Archbishop Athenagoras of North and South America, and later Ecumenical Patriarch, the Holy Cross Celebration and Blessing of the Waters is truly a global event. The Immersion of the Holy and Precious Cross in the waters of the oceans is our way to infuse the most precious substance that our planet possesses – water – with the grace of peace and healing. For as it says in the Book of Genesis:

And God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together He called Seas. And God saw that it was good. *

The waters are the matrix in which the earth was born, and we are all connected by these life-giving streams. Thus, our service today is a vessel that transmits peace to the world through these very waters, which receive the blessing and triumph of the Cross of Christ.

This was prefigured many times in the Old Testament, especially in the Book of Exodus, where we read how God sweetened the waters of Marah.† The Israelites were three days in the desert after the miracle of the parting of the Red Sea. But they had no fresh water. So, God showed Moses a tree, which, when he cast into the spring, turned those waters sweet. This tree is nothing less than the Cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

That is why we cast the Cross out today into the waters, and our brave young people retrieve it, to show how the blessing returns to us. They dive into the water on behalf of the fullness of the Church. And although only one will bring up the Cross, all of them share in the blessedness of its baptism in these waters, and all of us share in their act of faith. We sweeten our faith by this act of faith.

Standing on the ocean's shore, I am reminded of a story from the lives of the Desert Fathers – namely, how God takes whatever we find and transforms it for our benefit. It goes something like this:

Doulas, the disciple of Abba Bessarion said: One day, when we were walking beside the sea, I was thirsty, and I said to Abba Bessarion, "Father, I am very thirsty."

Then, the Geronda said a prayer and told me, "Drink some of the sea water." When I drank some, it was sweet. I even poured some into a leather bottle for fear of being thirsty later on. When the Geronda saw this, he asked me why I was taking the water. I said to him, "Forgive me, I'm afraid of being thirsty later on." Then Abba Bessarion said, "God is here; God is everywhere."

My beloved Christians,

Here at the sea's edge, by the power of the Holy, Precious and Life-giving Cross, we have the opportunity to sweeten much more than salt water. We can sweeten the very substance of our lives.

The Cross renews our souls and heals our inner wounds. The Cross lifts up our weary souls and gives us strength. The Cross enables us to forgive ourselves and to forgive others. For as the Lord was being nailed to it, His first words were:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." ‡

Therefore, let us all bow down deeply with reverent devotion, while glorifying Christ and venerating His Invincible Weapon of Peace – the Holy Cross. And remember:

God is here; God is everywhere; God is always.

Through the Power of the Holy, Precious and Life-giving Cross.

Amen!

* Genesis 1:9-10.
† Exodus 15:22-26.
‡ Luke 23:34.

Photos: GOA/D. Panagos

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