

EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

In Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher encloses the two sites where Jesus was crucified and where he rose from the dead. The building was dedicated on September 13 in the year 335. The next day, a wooden cross was put on display outside the church for people to venerate. According to a legend, Constantine's mother Helena had gone to this site at the request of her son to locate the true cross upon which Jesus died. Helena found three crosses. Each one was brought into contact with a person who was nearly dead, and one of them ascertained a miraculous cure. The Church came to believe that that was the cross of Christ.

Many people claim to have splinters of the original cross, but as you can imagine, these claims are very difficult to verify. This was the case even in the 16th century, when John Calvin sarcastically noted that if you gathered all the relics together, you could build a ship, and three hundred men could not carry the cross that one man carried up Calvary. Nonetheless, the title of today's feast, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, refers both to lifting it up for public veneration and to the triumph over death that Jesus achieved.

Each year on Good Friday we celebrate a special service that includes a time of adoration. Only on that day, the cross of every Catholic church is regarded as a special representation of the cross of Christ. On every other day, we genuflect to the tabernacle because it contains the Blessed Sacrament, the body of Christ. On Good Friday we genuflect to the cross because it was the instrument of our salvation, stained with the blood of Christ.

Crucifixion was intended to induce shame, yet it has become a sign of Jesus' glory. Christians hang a cross publicly on our walls or around our necks in the same way that somebody shows you a scar after surgery, or wounds sustained in battle. The mark on their body is a sign of triumph, as is the cross of Christ, which leads to the glory of resurrection.

A few months ago Muslim fanatics started marking the homes of certain Iraqis with the letter N for "Nazarenes", a pejorative word for Christians. Many Christians here have adopted the symbol to support those who suffer persecution abroad. One group's sign of insult has become another group's badge of honor.

Jesus reminded Nicodemus that Moses lifted up a bronze serpent in the desert to heal those bit by live serpents. So too he would be lifted up on a cross to heal all those who die.

Each of us has experienced suffering. When we gaze upon the cross of Christ, we find in his sufferings the strength to carry on. We also carry hope to those threatened with the loss of property and life, at home or in lands far away. Whether they suffer illness, destruction or death, victory is theirs through the cross of Christ.