

Exaltation of the Holy Cross

If you walk into any Catholic Church, you will immediately see the cross, the crucifix. Every Sunday we are led into the church by the cross. When we begin mass, we bless ourselves with the sign of the cross. And if you look above the altar, you will see the crucifix prominently displayed. The cross decorates our homes, and for many of us it has even become a lovely piece of jewelry, something we proudly display.

But it wasn't always this way. The cross was once a sign of horror and shame, something that instilled fear and loathing into every heart. Crucifixion was the punishment the Roman Empire reserved for slaves, violent criminals, and those who rebelled against the Roman state. In the Old Testament, the Book of Deuteronomy says, "Cursed by God is anyone who hangs on a tree." So imagine how difficult it was for the first Christians to preach the gospel of the crucified Christ. Crucifixion was the punishment for slaves, violent criminals, and political rebels. Jesus was crucified. *Therefore* Jesus must have been ... Anyone who hangs on a tree (is crucified) is under God's curse. Jesus was crucified. *Therefore*, Jesus must have been under God's curse.

You see, what we take for granted today was a stumbling block in the ancient world, a scandal, a cause for shame. But today we celebrate a feast in honor of the cross; we reverence and proclaim the cross because this instrument of

shame and torture has become the source of our salvation. The wood of the cross has become the tree of salvation because the very Son of God, the one who is equal to God, died on the cross so that we might enjoy the fullness of God's life.

Consider what St. Paul writes about the cross in his Letter to the Philippians. Although Christ was in the form of God—that is to say, divine—he did not insist on his status as God's Son. Rather, setting aside every divine privilege, he became like us in every way but sin, humbling himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

And because Jesus humbled himself, God exalted him by giving Jesus his own name, the name "Lord," so that every tongue in heaven and on earth should confess to God's glory that Jesus Christ is the Lord, the very Son of God, the Savior of the world.

But not everybody confesses that Jesus is Lord, and many who once confessed him as Lord no longer do so, while others live in a way that belies what they confess. But we gather together week after week to celebrate this Eucharist under the protection of the cross, because we know and confess that Jesus is Lord. And because we know and confess that Jesus is Lord, we live a new kind of life. And because we live a new kind of life, we are destined for resurrection glory if we remain faithful to the one who died for us.