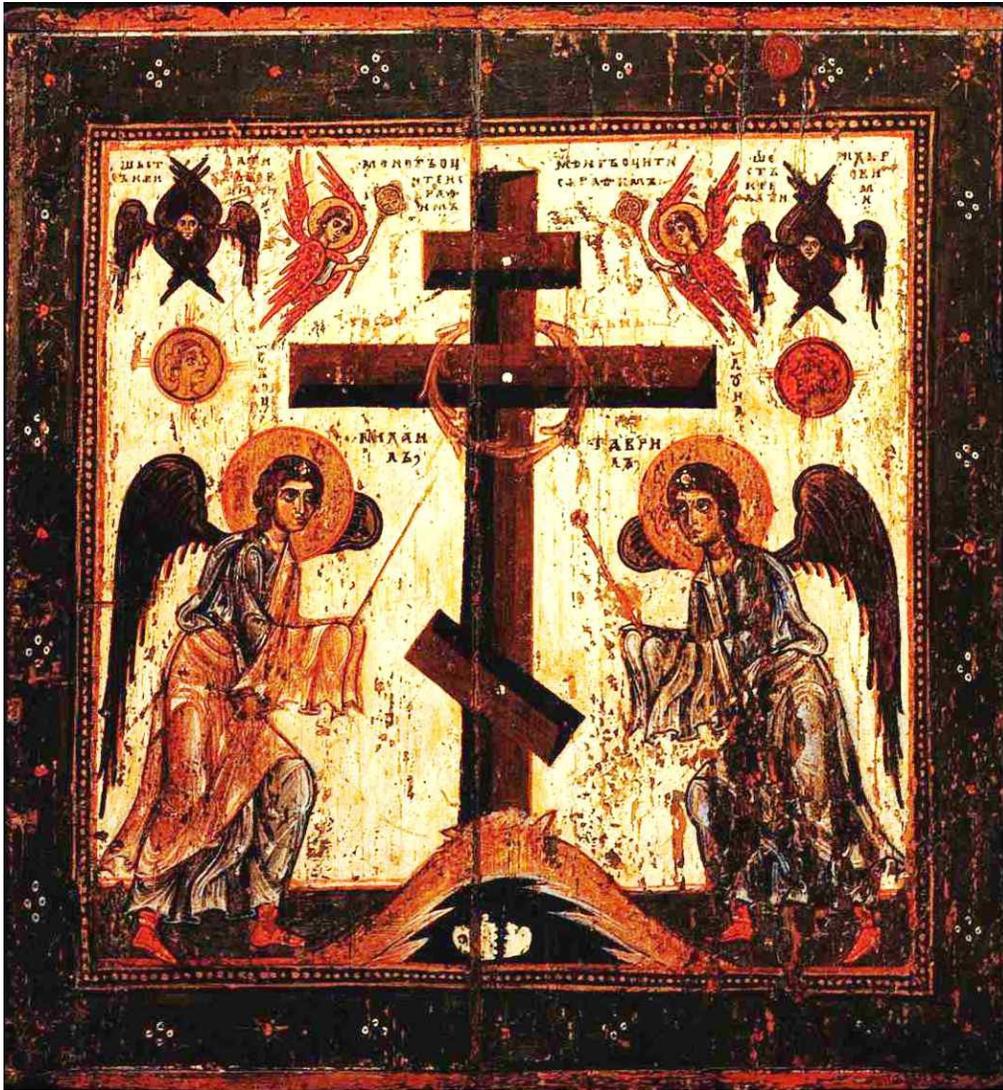


Readings & Hymns

Third Sunday of Lent: Veneration of the Holy Cross



Troparion, Cross - Tone 1

O Lord, save Thy people,
and bless Thine inheritance.
Grant victories to the Orthodox Christians,
over their adversaries;
and by virtue of Thy Cross, //
preserve Thy habitation.

Kontakion of the Cross, Triodion, 3rd Sunday – Tone 7

Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of paradise;
it has been mysteriously quenched by the wood of the Cross!
The sting of death and the victory of hell have been vanquished;
for Thou, O my Savior, didst come and cry to those in hell: //
Enter again into Paradise.

In place of the Trisagion – Tone 6

Before Thy Cross, we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify.

The Prokeimenon

The Prokeimenon in the 6th Tone: O Lord, save Thy people and bless Thine inheritance. *(Cross) (Ps 27 [28]: 9)*

verse: To Thee, O Lord, will I call. O my God, be not silent to me. *(Ps 27 [28]: 1)*

Epistle

§ 311; Hebrews 4: 14 – 5: 6 (3rd Sunday)

The reading from the Epistle of the Holy Apostle Paul to the Hebrews.

BRETHREN, having a great High Priest Who hath passed through the heavens,
Jesus the Son of God,

let us hold fast the confession.

For we do not have a High Priest

Who cannot have compassion on our infirmities,

but one tempted in all things like as we are, yet without sin.

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace,

that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

For every high priest taken from among men

is ordained for men in things pertaining to God,

that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins:

who can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray,

since he himself is also beset by weakness.

Because of this he is required, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins.

And no man takes this honor unto himself, but he that is called by God,

as was Aaron.

So Christ also did not glorify Himself to become High Priest,

but He that said unto Him:

“Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee.”

As He saith also in another place:

“Thou art a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Epistle text from “The Apostol” St. Tikhon’s Seminary Press, 2012. 2nd Edition.

The Alleluia - Tone 8

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

verse: Remember Thy congregation, which Thou hast gotten of old! *(Cross) (Ps 73 [74]: 2)*
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

verse: God is our King before the ages; He has worked salvation in the midst of the earth! *(Ps 73 [74]: 12)*

Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.

The Gospel

§ 37; Mark 8: 34 - 9: 1 (3rd Sunday)

THE LORD SAID, ^{34b} Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross, and follow me.

³⁵ For whosoever will save his life shall lose it;

but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

³⁶ For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world,
and lose his own soul?

³⁷ Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

³⁸ Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words
in this adulterous and sinful generation;
of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed,
when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

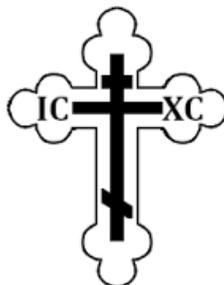
^{9:1} And he said unto them, Amen, I say unto you,
That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death,
till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.

Hymn to the Theotokos

All of creation rejoices in thee, O Full of Grace: the assembly of angels and the race of men. O sanctified temple and spiritual paradise, the glory of virgins, from whom God was incarnate and became a child - our God before the ages. He made thy body into a throne, and thy womb He made more spacious than the heavens. All of creation rejoices in thee, O Full of Grace. Glory to thee.

Communion Verse

The light of Thy countenance is signed on us, O Lord. *(Cross) (Ps 4 [5]: 6)*
Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.



Third Sunday of Lent: Veneration of the Holy Cross

On "Lord I Call ... " stikhera for Holy Cross from the Triodion, Tone 5, Podoben: "Rejoice ..."

Shine, Cross of the Lord, / shine with the light of thy grace / upon the hearts of those that honor thee. / With love inspired by God, / we embrace thee, O desire of all the world. / Through thee our tears of sorrow have been wiped away; / we have been delivered from the snares of death / and have passed over to unending joy. / Show us the glory of thy beauty / and grant to us thy servants the reward of our abstinence, // for we entreat with faith thy rich protection and great mercy.

Rejoice! life-giving Cross, / the fair Paradise of the Church, / Tree of incorruption that brings us the enjoyment of eternal glory: / through thee the hosts of demons have been driven back; / and the hierarchies of angels rejoice with one accord, / as the congregations of the faithful keep the feast. / Thou art an invincible weapon, an unbroken stronghold; / thou art the victory of kings and the glory of priests. // Grant us now to draw near to the Passion of Christ and to His Resurrection.

Rejoice! life-giving Cross, / unconquerable trophy of the true faith, / door to Paradise, / help of the faithful, / rampart set about the Church. / Through thee the curse is utterly destroyed, / the power of death is swallowed up, / and we are raised from earth to heaven: / invincible weapon, adversary of demons, / glory of martyrs, true ornament of holy monks, // haven of salvation bestowing on the world great mercy.

Come, Adam and Eve, / our first father and mother, / who fell from the choir on high through the envy of the murderer of man, / when of old with bitter pleasure ye tasted from the tree in Paradise. / See, the Tree of the Cross, revered by all, draws near. / Run with haste and embrace it joyfully, and cry to it with faith: / O precious Cross, thou art our help; / partaking of thy fruit, we have gained incorruption; // we are restored once more to Eden, and we have received great mercy.

Doxastichon of the Cross, from the Triodion Tone 3

O Christ our God, / of Thine own will Thou hast accepted Crucifixion, / that all mankind might be restored to life. / Taking the quill of the Cross, / out of love for man in the red ink of royalty with bloody fingers / Thou hast signed our absolution. / We are in danger once again of being parted from Thee; / O forsake us not! / Take pity on Thy people in distress, for Thou alone art long-suffering. // Rise up and fight against our enemies in Thine almighty power.

Apostikha Doxastichon of the Cross, from the Triodion - Tone 4

O Lord who hast helped gentle David in the combat / and enabled him to overcome the Philistine, / come to the aid of Thine Orthodox people, / and by the weapon of the Cross cast down our enemies. / In Thy compassion show us Thy mercy as of old, / and make them know in truth that Thou art God, / and that we who put our trust in

Thee shall conquer. / Through the constant intercessions of Thy most pure Mother, // grant us Thy great mercy.

Sessional Hymn 3 after the 3rd Ode of the Matins Canon, Tone 6:

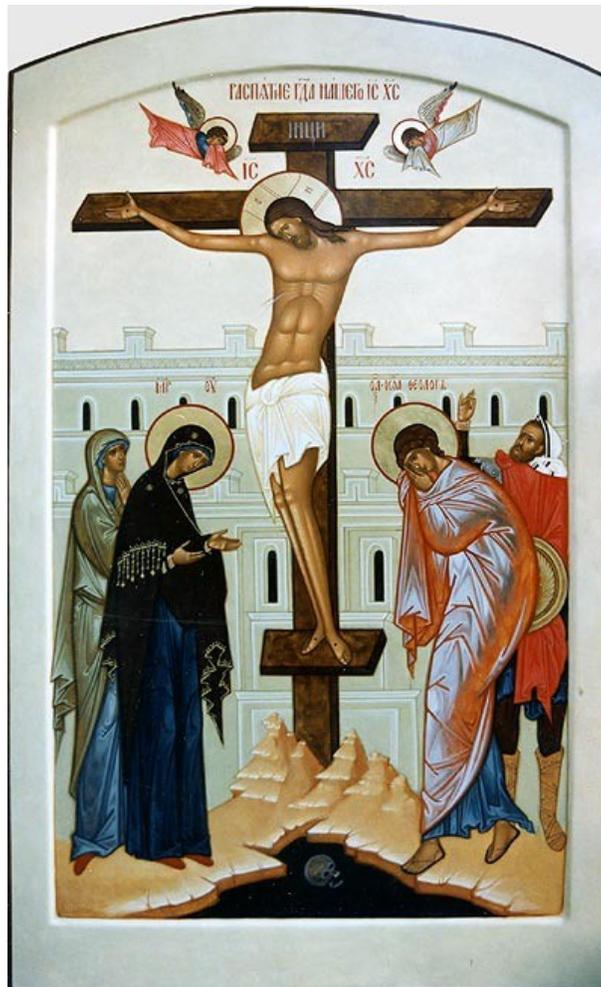
No sooner had the wood of Thy Cross been set up, O Christ our Lord, than the foundations of death were shaken. Hell swallowed Thee eagerly, but let Thee go with trembling. Thou hast shown us Thy salvation, O Holy One, and we glorify Thee O Son of God; have mercy on us.

Troparion, Cross - Tone 1

O Lord, save Thy people, / and bless Thine inheritance. / Grant victories to the Orthodox Christians, / over their adversaries; / and by virtue of Thy Cross, // preserve Thy habitation.

Kontakion of the Cross, Triodion, 3rd Sunday - Tone 7, by Romanus the Melodist

Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of paradise; / it has been mysteriously quenched by the wood of the Cross! / The sting of death and the victory of hell have been vanquished; / for Thou, O my Savior, didst come and cry to those in hell: // Enter again into Paradise.



SUNDAY OF THE CROSS

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh - 18 March 1990

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

As we progress deeper and deeper into the weeks of Lent, we can say with an ever-growing sense of gratitude and of joy, of a serene and exulting joy the words of a Psalm, 'My soul shall live, and with gratitude I will give glory to the Lord'.

In the first week of Lent we have seen all the promises of salvation given in the Old Testament fulfilled: God became man, salvation has come, and all hopes are possible. And then, in the second week of Lent, we had the glorious proclamation of all the Saints of Christendom that not only did God come and dwell in our midst, but He has poured out upon us, into the Church, and into every human soul ready to receive Him the presence, the transforming gift of the Holy Spirit that makes us gradually commune ever deeper to the Living God until one day we become partakers of the Divine nature.

And today, if we ask ourselves, 'But how that? How can we be forgiven, how can evil be undone?' - one step brings us deeper into gratitude, deeper into joy, deeper into certainty when we consider, when we contemplate the Cross.

There is a passage of the Gospel in which we are told that when Christ spoke of salvation and of its conditions, Peter said to Him, 'Who then can be saved?' - and Christ answered, 'What is not possible to men is possible for God!'. And He Himself came; the fullness of God abided in a human person, and He has power to forgive because He is the victim of all the evil, all the cruelty, all the destructiveness of human history. Because indeed, no one but the victim can forgive those who have brought evil, suffering, misery, corruption and death into their lives. And Christ does not only forgive His own murderers, when He says, 'Father, forgive - they don't know what they are doing': He goes beyond this, because He had said, 'Whatever you have done to one of My smaller brethren and sisters, you have done it to Me' - not only in good, but indeed, the worst: because in compassion, in solidarity He identifies with every sufferer: the death, the pain, the agony of each of those who suffer is His. And so, when He prays, 'Father, forgive! They do not know what they are doing, what they have been doing', He prays for each of us not only in His own name, but in the name of all those upon whom evil has visited because of human sin.

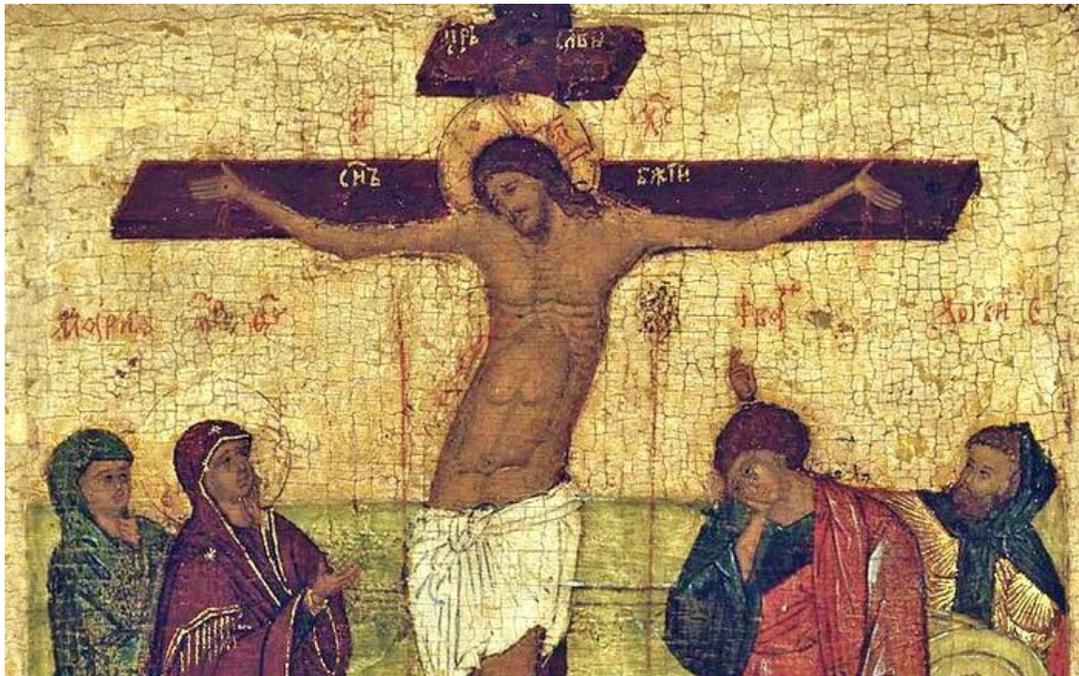
But it is not only Christ who forgives; everyone who has suffered in soul, in body, in spirit, - everyone is called to grant freedom to those who have made him suffer.

And so, we can see why Christ says, 'Forgive so that you may be forgiven' because both the victim and the culprit are tied in one knot of solidarity and reciprocal responsibility. Only the victim can say, 'Lord - forgive him, forgive her', and only then can the Lord say, 'I do!'.

But do you realise what responsibility it puts on each of us with regard to all and everyone? But also the depth, the glorious depth of hope which opens up to us when we look at the Cross and see that in solidarity with all mankind Christ taking upon Himself all the suffering of the world, accepting to die an impossible death has said in the name of all the sufferers, 'Yes, - we forgive!'

This is one more step towards freedom, this is one more step towards the moment when we will be faced with Christ's resurrection that engulfs us also because the risen Christ is risen and is offering all and each of us the fullness of eternal life.

And so again, and again we can say that Lent is a spring of a new life, a new time, a time of renewal, not only in repentance, but in being taken by Christ Himself as the shepherd took the lost sheep, as the Lord took up His Cross, brought it to the place of death, and undid death, undid evil by forgiveness and giving His life. Once more we are confronted with another step of our freedom and of newness. Let us enter ever deeper into this mystery, into this wonder of salvation, and rejoice in the Lord, and rejoicing, step after step, more and more, let us also express our gratitude by newness of life. Amen!



The Sunday of the Cross

Fr Alexander Schmemmann

From time immemorial, on Saturday evening of the third week in Great Lent, a cross is brought into the center of the church, and the entire following week is known as the Week of the Cross. We know that Great Lent is the preparation for Holy Week, when the Church will recall the suffering, crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Bringing out the cross in the middle of Lent is therefore a reminder of the goal

of our deeper and more intense religious life during Lent. So it is appropriate to reflect here on the role of the cross, this most important and most prominent of all Christian symbols.

This symbol has two closely intertwined meanings. On the one hand, it is Christ's cross, that decisive event through which the earthly life and ministry of Jesus Christ was completed. It is a story of puzzling and terrifying hatred toward the One whose entire teaching focused on the commandment of love, whose entire preaching was the call to self-denial and sacrifice in the name of this love. Pilate, the Roman governor to whom the arrested, beaten, spit-upon Christ was brought, says, "I find no crime in him" (Jn 19:4). But this provokes an even louder outburst: "Crucify him! Crucify him!" shouts the crowd. And so the cross of Christ poses an eternal question aimed at the very depth of our conscience: why does goodness arouse not only opposition, but hatred? Why is goodness always crucified in this world? We usually avoid answering this question by placing the blame on someone else: if we had been there, if I had been there that terrible night, I would not have behaved as everybody else. But, alas, somewhere deep in our conscience we know that is not true. We know that the people who tortured, crucified and hated Christ were not monsters of some sort, possessed by some peculiar and unique evil. No, they were essentially "just like everybody else." Pilate even tried to defend Jesus, to dissuade the crowd; he even offered to release Christ as a goodwill gesture in honor of the holiday; when that failed he stood in front the crowd and washed his hands, showing his disagreement with this murder.

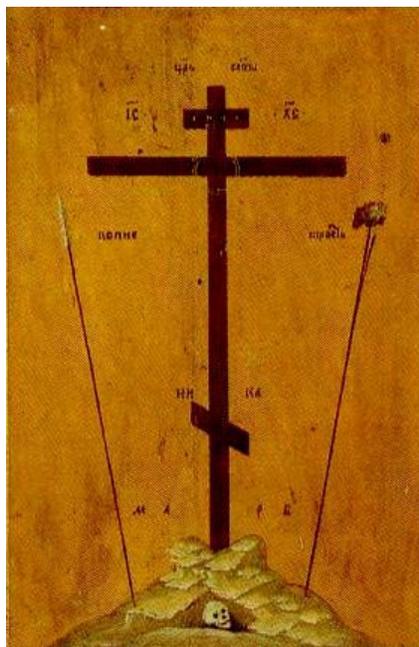
In a few strokes, the gospel draws for us a picture of this pathetic Pilate, his fright, his bureaucratic conscience, his cowardly refusal to follow his own conscience. Isn't this also exactly what happens in our own life and in life around us? Isn't this the most common-place, the most typical of all stories? Isn't Pilate present within us all the time? Isn't it true that when the moment comes for us to say a decisive, irrevocable no to falsehood, injustice, evil and hate, we give in to the temptation to "wash our hands"? Behind Pilate were the Roman soldiers, but they could certainly say in their own defense: we only followed orders, we were told to "neutralize" some trouble-maker who was causing disruption and disorder, so what's there to talk about? Behind Pilate, behind the soldiers, was the crowd, the same people who six days before had cried out "Hosanna" as they triumphantly welcomed Christ as He entered Jerusalem - only now their cry is "Crucify Him!" But they too have an explanation. Didn't the leaders, the teachers, the authorities tell them that this man was a criminal who broke the laws and customs, and therefore by law (always by law, always according to the appropriate statute) must die ... And so each of the participants in this terrible event was right "in their own eyes," since each had justification. Yet together, they all murdered a man in whom there was "found no crime." The first meaning of the cross, therefore, is its judgment of evil, or rather, of

this world's pseudo-goodness, in which evil eternally rejoices, and which promotes evil's terrifying triumph on earth.

This brings us to the second meaning of the cross. After Christ's cross comes my cross, of which Christ said, "If any man would come after me, let him ... take up his cross daily and follow me" (Lk 9:23). This means that the choice everyone faced that night—Pilate, the soldiers, the leaders, the crowd and every person in that crowd—is a choice that is continually, daily set before each of us. Outwardly, the choice may come through something apparently insignificant to us, something secondary. But to conscience there is neither primary nor secondary, only truth and falsehood, good and evil. To take up one's cross daily is not merely to endure life's burdens and cares, but above all to live in harmony with conscience, to live within the light of the judgment of conscience.

Even today, with the whole world looking on, a person "who has no crime in him" can be taken away, tortured, beaten, put in prison or sent into exile. And all of this according to law, all according to obedience and discipline, all in the name of good order, for the good of all. And how many Pilates are washing their hands, how many soldiers are hurrying to carry out the orders of military discipline, how many people obediently, submissively cheer them on, or at best watch silently as evil triumphs?

As we bring out the cross, as we bow down before it, as we kiss it, let's recall its meaning. What does it tell us, to what does it call us? Let's remember the cross as a choice on which everything else in the world hangs, and without which everything the world is a triumph of darkness and evil. "For judgment I came into this world," Christ said (Jn 9:39). At this judgment, before the tribunal of crucified love, truth and goodness, each of us stands trial.



Taking up your Cross

*St Innocent of Moscow, enlightener of the Aleuts
from "Indication of the way to the Kingdom of Heaven"*

The road into the Kingdom of Heaven was made by the Lord Jesus Christ, and He was the first one who travelled it. The Bible teaches that only he who follows Jesus can reach His Kingdom. But how can one follow Him? Hear what our Savior says about this: *Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me* (Mark 8:34).

The words *whoever desires* mean that Christ does not compel anyone to follow Him. He has no need of the unwilling ones, but He desires that each person **freely** follow Him. Consequently, only those who willingly choose the Savior's path reach the Kingdom of Heaven.

Christian! Your salvation or perdition is entirely in your own hands. In His unspeakable wisdom and love, the Lord has given you freedom to chose what you wish, and He does not force you to do anything against your will. Therefore, if you truly wish to follow Jesus Christ, He will show you the way into the Kingdom of Heaven and will help you along each step. ...

Let us now examine more closely the path indicated to us by our Lord Jesus Christ. He said: *Whoever desires to come after Me must:*

Deny himself

Take up his cross

Follow Me

Thus, a follower of Christ must begin by **denying himself**. This means that you must disown all bad habits, free your heart from sinful bonds (like hunger for money, luxury, fame, power over others, etc.), squelch impure thoughts, harbor no lustful desires, distance yourself from situations leading to sin, and, in general, do nothing because of stubbornness or ego but do all for the love of God and with the desire to contribute to the glory of His Holy Name. In other words, to deny yourself is *to be dead indeed to sin but alive to God*, as St. Paul has explained in Rom. 6:11.

Then, it is necessary for a disciple and follower of Christ to **take up his cross**. The *cross* means the various difficulties and sorrows associated with a Christian life. Crosses may be **external** as well as **internal**. To take up your cross means to tolerate everything without complaining, regardless of how unpleasant things might become. For example, if someone has insulted you or laughed at you or provoked you, bear it all without anger or resentment. Similarly, if you helped someone and he, instead of showing gratitude, made up deceitful tales about you or if you wanted to do something good but were unable to accomplish it, bear it without despondency. Did

some misfortune befall you? Did someone in your family become ill, or despite all your efforts and tireless labor did you repeatedly suffer failure? Has some other thing or person oppressed you? Bear all with patience in the name of Jesus Christ. Do not consider yourself punished unjustly, but accept everything as your cross.

To *bear your cross* means not only to accept patiently all difficulties that befall you but also to **strive for spiritual perfection**, as the Scriptures teach us. For example, we must do good to others: work for the prosperity of your parish, visit the sick and imprisoned, help the needy, collect money for the poor, and assist in spreading spiritual enlightenment. In other words, we must seek out tasks which will lead to the salvation and welfare of those around us and then, with perseverance and meekness, strive in that direction by our actions, words, prayer, and advice.

Should the prideful thought arise that you are better or smarter than others, quickly cast it aside because it will undermine all your good efforts. Blessed is he who carries his cross with prudence and humility, because God will never allow such a person to perish but will guide and strengthen him with His Holy Spirit.

In following Jesus Christ, it is not enough to carry only an outward cross. Indeed, external crosses are borne not only by Christians but by everyone; there exists no person free from one or more sorrows. He who wishes to become a true disciple of Christ must also carry his own inner cross.

An **inner cross** comes more readily than an outer one. In a state of repentance, you need only direct your thoughts inward to study your soul, and instantly a multitude of crosses will appear. For instance, reflect on how you were created and what is the purpose of your life. Are you living according to Christ's teaching, are you accomplishing something good, are you growing spiritually? Meditate about this in some depth, and soon you will come to realize that you are failing in many important areas. God created you so that with all your works, life, and being you should contribute to the spreading of good and the strengthening of His Kingdom. You, however, have not only failed in this, but, by your sins, you have rejected and even insulted Christ. Reflect on what awaits you beyond the grave and on what side you will find yourself at the Last Judgment: with the righteous or with the evildoers? And if you seriously reflect on all this, you will naturally become distressed and will regret your many words and deeds — and these painful feelings and the desire for repentance will become your inner cross. If you continue attentively to study yourself, you will find many other inner crosses. For instance, hell, which you have so carelessly avoided considering until now, will suddenly appear to you as a very real threat. Paradise, which the Lord has prepared for you and which has barely crossed your mind, will vividly present itself to you as it really is: a place of eternal and pure joy from which you have deprived yourself by your careless way of life.

If, in spite of the inner turmoil brought about by such reflections, you firmly resolve to repent and amend your ways and, if, instead of consoling yourself with earthly enjoyments, you diligently pray to the Lord to save you and you decide to surrender yourself totally to His will, then the Lord will reveal to you more clearly the state of your soul so that you may be totally healed. Our problem is that the actual condition of our spiritual sickness is hidden from us under a thick mantle of self-love and passions. Only occasionally, thanks to our conscience, do we get a glimpse of our major and most obvious spiritual wounds.

Usually the devil, knowing how good it is for us to recognize our moral illness, uses all his wiles to prevent us from doing so and tells us that all is well and there is no need to worry. But when he sees that we are really serious about becoming true Christians and with God's help are on the way to restoring our spiritual health, then the devil uses craftier means: he presents to us our internal illnesses in such a hopeless condition that we become bewildered and despair of our salvation. If the Lord permitted the devil to use this trick on all of us, few of us would find the strength to continue the struggle. However, the Lord, as a knowledgeable physician, protects us from despair. He heals our spiritual ulcers and encourages us as we heal.

Therefore, as the Lord restores your spiritual sight, you will begin to comprehend more clearly that your heart is corrupt and that your passions obstruct your path to God. You will begin to understand also that the little good you have to your credit so far is damaged by your selfishness and conceit. Then you will certainly grieve, and you will become frightened and saddened: frightened because you are in danger of perishing forever, saddened because you have declined for so long to listen to the gentle voice of God who was calling you to salvation, and saddened because you have accomplished so little good.

Although these inner crosses present themselves as burdensome, do not despair and do not think that the Lord has abandoned you. No! He is always with you and invisibly sustains you, even when you forget Him. He will not burden you with trials beyond your capacity. Fear nothing, but with total humbleness and devotion bear your cross and pray. He is the gentlest of fathers that could be wished for. If on occasion He allows His faithful servants to be tempted, it is only to remind them of their feebleness and to completely cleanse their hearts from pride. In our hearts is where He intends to reside with His Son and His Holy Spirit.

In time of sorrow do not seek comfort from people. Most people are not experienced in affairs of salvation and are poor advisors. **Make the Lord your only helpmate**, comforter, and tutor, and from Him alone ask help. The man to whom the Lord sends afflictions is blessed a hundredfold, because it is afflictions that cure our souls. In enduring sorrows, a Christian is likened to Jesus Christ, who suffered for us.

We should consider sorrows a gift from the Lord and a sign of His care for our salvation.

If you bear your cross with perseverance and seek comfort only from Him, then He, through His mercy, will not abandon you but will touch your heart and will impart to you the **gifts of the Holy Spirit**. It is then that you will feel an indescribable delight, a wonderful inner peace and joy such as you have never experienced before, and at the same time you will feel an influx of spiritual strength; prayer will become easier and your faith stronger. Then your heart will be kindled with love of God and all people. All these are gifts of the Holy Spirit.

When the Lord decides to honor you with such gifts, do not consider them as rewards for your labors, and do not think that you have attained perfection. Such thoughts come from pride. The comforts and grace of the Holy Spirit are not rewards but **gifts** of divine mercy. Occasionally the Lord allows us to get a foretaste of future blessings so that we will put forth a greater effort in seeking His eternal Kingdom.

Finally, a disciple of Christ must *follow Him*. This means that in all deeds and actions we must try to be like our Lord Jesus Christ in His virtues. We must strive to live and act as He lived and acted. For example, Jesus Christ always thanked His Heavenly Father and constantly prayed to Him. Thus we also should constantly thank God and pray to Him in all circumstances, whether successful or difficult.

Jesus Christ revered His Mother and submitted to lawful authority. Thus we also should revere our parents and educators; we too should respect those in positions of responsibility – provided their requests are not in conflict with God's commandments.

Jesus Christ fervently and with love performed the task for which His Father sent Him. We should also conscientiously and zealously perform the duties which are laid upon us by God and civil authorities.

Jesus Christ loved everyone and did good to all. So should we love our neighbor and do good to as many people as possible. Jesus Christ did everything possible for the salvation of mankind. So must we do good to others, not sparing our own well-being and time.

Jesus Christ voluntarily suffered and died for us. Therefore we too must not grumble when some unpleasantness befalls us but be ready to make sacrifices with humility and devotion to God. Jesus Christ not only forgave His enemies their ingratitude and animosity but wished them well. So we also must forgive our enemies, repaying them with good for their evil while blessing those who revile us.

Jesus Christ, the king of heaven and earth, lived in poverty and obtained His daily necessities through His own labor. So we also must be industrious and content with what God has given us and not be consumed with desire for riches for their own sake.

In the words of the Savior: *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God* (Matt. 19:24).

Jesus Christ, being meek and humble of heart, never strove for adulation but directed all toward the glory of His Father. We also must not parade ourselves or seek recognition. For instance, do you help your neighbors, do you give alms, do you live more piously than those around you, are you wiser than your friends, or are you in some way above others? Do not brag about it. Remember that all your praiseworthy attributes are not yours but **gifts of God**. Yours are the weaknesses, mistakes and sins.

Following Jesus Christ means accepting with faith and submitting to all that Christ taught without question and with simplicity of heart. He who accepts Jesus Christ's words becomes His disciple, but he who fulfills His commandments with complete devotion becomes His true and devoted follower.

This is the meaning of denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus Christ. This is the only straight path into the Kingdom of Heaven. Christ walked this path and calls us to follow Him. There never was and never will be any other path to salvation but this one, shown to us by Jesus! To the beginner this path may seem too narrow and steep. But it seems this way only because our understanding of divine blessings and happiness has become distorted. Many of us regard the bitter as sweet and the sweet as bitter. However, as we come closer to God, much of what seemed difficult or bitter before will become easy or sweet, and what seemed to please before will come to seem boring and harmful.

Of course, there will be trying periods in our life when the path of ascension toward God will seem exceptionally difficult. Then we should think that for every step taken there are a thousand rewards being prepared. Sufferings along this path are momentary, but the rewards are eternal. Therefore, do not fear the path of Christ, for a smooth and wide path ends in hell, but a thorny and narrow one leads to Heaven.

Why did God not make the path to the Kingdom of Heaven light and pleasant? Only God knows. Who would question His divine wisdom? He saw that the narrow path is what we need! We who are below see only bits and pieces, but He, Who is above all creation, sees our lives from the standpoint of eternity. However, though not completely understanding the plans of our Creator, let us consider the following:

1. The Kingdom of Heaven is the highest beatitude and inexhaustible wealth. If great efforts are necessary to obtain meager and temporary earthly advantages, then how can it be possible to obtain such a great and eternal treasure without any effort?
2. The Kingdom of Heaven is the most coveted reward. Where else are rewards given freely and for nothing? If we struggle to get temporary benefits, so much more should we struggle to obtain the eternal reward.

3. We must bear our cross because we want to be with Christ and to participate in His glory. If Jesus Christ, our Master and Teacher, gained heavenly glory through suffering, would it not be shameful for us to share His glory when we faintheartedly shun any trials or sorrows?

4. Besides, lifelong crosses are not the lot of Christians alone. Everyone carries their own cross, both Christians and non-Christians, believers and pagans. The difference is that for some, their crosses serve as a means of attaining the Kingdom of Heaven, while for the others they bring no such value. For the Christian, the cross gradually becomes lighter and more joyful, while for the nonbeliever it becomes heavier and more burdensome. Why is this so? Because where the one carries their cross with faith and devotion to God, the other carries it with grumbling and anger.

Therefore, Christian, do not shun your lifelong cross, but, on the contrary, thank Jesus Christ that He honored you to follow and imitate Him. If Christ had not suffered and died, then none of us, no matter how much we suffered and struggled, would enter the Kingdom of Heaven, for then we would have had to suffer as slaves, and slaves deserve no rewards. Now, however, we suffer as sons for our own salvation. O merciful Lord! How great is Thy love for us. How great are Thy benefits to us. Thou bendest evil itself for our benefit and salvation!

Christian! Gratitude alone to Jesus Christ, your benefactor, obliges you to follow Him. Christ came down to earth for you. Can it be possible that you would prefer some worldly thing to Him? For you Jesus drank the cup full of suffering; can it be that you would refuse to suffer a little for Him?

5. Jesus Christ redeemed us by His death, and, therefore, by the right of redemption we belong to Him and must do all that He wills. Christ wills only one thing: that we should attain eternal bliss.

6. Finally, we cannot avoid the narrow path into the Kingdom of Heaven, since every man has sins and sin in itself is an ulcer that cannot be cured without strong medicine. Suffering is the **medicine** with which God cures our souls. When somebody is ill, then, regardless of his surroundings – even though he is in the most magnificent of palaces – he will still suffer. Such is the fate of every sinner; no matter where he settles, even in Paradise itself, he will suffer because the elements of hell reside within him. Similarly, a righteous person can be as happy in a shack as in a palace. When our heart is filled with the Holy Spirit, wherever we may find ourselves, there we will always feel joy, since Paradise is within us.

And so, brethren, if you wish to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, you cannot bypass the path taken by Jesus Christ. Indeed, all the prophets, the Apostles, the martyrs, the saints and countless other righteous ones walked along this path. There is no other.

Some might object, saying, how can we who are sinful and weak be like Jesus Christ or the saints! We live in the secular world and have families and many responsibilities. Oh, brethren! This is a cunning excuse and an insult to our Creator. To justify our carelessness by such reasoning means to accuse our Maker of being unable to create us properly. After all, the saints, like us, were not sinless at first but participated in worldly affairs, labored and had various obligations and families to care about. Surely they were not perfect in everything. They had their share of temptations and low moments. Notwithstanding this, living in circumstances similar to ours and having their ups and downs, they steered toward the main objective of their life: the Kingdom of Heaven. Undoubtedly, we also, if we truly desire to, can be good citizens, faithful spouses, loving parents, and simultaneously good Christians. Our faith will not be an obstacle but, on the contrary, will aid all our good undertakings. The essence of Christianity is pure and selfless love, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, brethren, if you wish to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, follow the path which Jesus Christ took, and He, the all-merciful one, will help you every step of the way.

