

# The Feast and the Season of the Holy Cross

“Blessed be Your Cross, Saviour; it is a ladder for Your Church, and by it both the deceased and those who share (in Your Eucharist) ascend with spiritual beings,” from the *mazmuro*, Maronite liturgy for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The liturgy is absolutely fundamental to Christianity: the New Testament shows the Church as a worshipping community, gathering for the adoration of God, the climax of which is the Eucharist. The liturgy is not a man-made add-on to the faith: it is of its essence, and its feasts are major signposts for the Christian and for the Church.

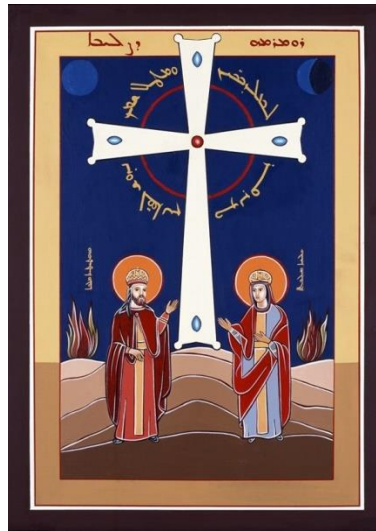
This feast, celebrated on 14 September, was established to commemorate how, in 628, Emperor Heraclius recaptured the Cross which the Persians had stolen in 614. On this day we also commemorate the finding of the Cross by St Helena in 326, and the subsequent dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

It is therefore an occasion to remember in prayer four matters: the Holy Cross itself and all that occurred in relation to it, namely, the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord; the discovery and restoration of the Cross when it had been thought to be forever lost; the establishment of a house of worship in the sacred city of Jerusalem dedicated to its veneration; and the recovery of this sacred item when it had been stolen by enemies of the faith.

There is a pattern: the central mysteries of the faith were enacted in history; but our material artefacts are always in danger. The Cross is not the only one which has now been lost; the Ark of the Covenant, with the Rod of Aaron and other items have also quietly disappeared. The lesson is that the reality of the faith is always here, and always available. Our history is not merely important: it is vital, and must never be forgotten, for it is the history of God’s working for our salvation. But the eternal truth it points to can never be lost. So now let us consider the deeper meaning of this feast.

First, this Feast also marks the commencement of the final Season of the Liturgical Year, the Season of the Holy Cross. This period focusses on the four last things: death, judgment, heaven, hell. The Liturgical Year began with the Feasts of the Consecration and Renewal of the Church, and then the Season of Announcements (Advent).

Closing the liturgical year with the Season of the Holy Cross is something which the Maronite Church shares with the Syriac Orthodox Churches, but not with the Latin Catholic, or with the Greek Orthodox. It was probably established as a Season before the Maronites moved to Mount Lebanon in about 685, because after that point, our tradition starts to diverge from the Syriac Orthodox. The Season is therefore a distinctive aspect of our traditional religious culture. Veneration of the Cross is found in the New Testament Church, and was especially important in ancient Jerusalem and Antioch, from where relics of the Cross were sent throughout the Christian world. Today we have fewer relics, but our reverence of the instrument of our salvation is retained in the liturgy (e.g. in ubiquity of the Cross in and upon our churches and all our religious buildings, and in how the celebrant holds a Hand Cross throughout the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy).



The liturgical year shows, in one twelve month period, three different narratives: the salvation history of Our Lord (from His Nativity through to His death and resurrection), plus the Church’s journey (from its foundation on earth to its culmination in heaven), and, in addition, the entire human story, from birth in this world to our rebirth in eternity. Like the solar year we know so well, the liturgical year also has seasons. Perhaps one can think of the Season of the Holy Cross as being our winter, which is followed by the Time of Announcements, our spring.

Winter can be hard to endure, but it is necessary: some natural processes can only take place in winter, and without it, there can be no spring, no summer. So too with Holy Cross: to enjoy the warmth and light of Easter we must have had the benefits of accepting the Holy Cross, of which I will mention just three: its reminding us of the inevitability of our deaths, and hence the preciousness of our lives; its fostering in us a spirit of repentance after examination of conscience; and its help in conforming us to the life of Christ, both human and divine.

### The Inevitability of our Deaths

The great priest and poet G.M. Hopkins wrote about how we see death all around us, and yet: “We dream we are rooted in earth. Dust!” That is, although we somehow live as if deluded that we are immortal, our earthly lives can in fact be blown away on the breeze. We never really know which day will be our last, or how soon it will come, whether for us or for our loved ones.

One cannot deeply ponder, for more than a moment, the fact that we will die: our hearts cannot bear it. To the extent we can stay with this reality, we start to lose our attachment to the passing world, and start to think of eternity. We ask: when I die shall I have done more good than evil? What feelings and reputation will I leave behind me? What shall be my fate when I leave this world? Is there really judgment, is there really heaven and hell; and if so, what do I deserve? Fear of these questions often makes people opt for the easy solution: they tell themselves human beings perish like any animal, that there is nothing after death.

This is not true. The soul will continue into eternity, physical death is not the end for us. This is part of the lesson of the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, of the Ascension, of the Assumption. We are not only animals. We have a physical nature, but we also have a supernatural nature. This is part of the lesson of the Holy Cross.

### Repentance

If we wish for eternal life, we must cooperate with God’s plan for us. As Blessed John Henry Newman remarked, the way the Lord speaks in the Gospels is always exhorting urging and even demanding that we learn God’s commandments and keep them if we are to inherit eternal life.

This has at least two aspects: doing what is good, and avoiding, even preventing what is evil. There is a providential arrangement: we cannot do more and better, we cannot believe more truly and deeply, except to the degree we have overcome our faults. We are all tempted to think only of the good we have done, like the Pharisee in the Temple. And one cannot deny that he doubtless did many good works. But something was missing: he did not see, he never looked for his faults. Hence he was given over to pride. Pride is perhaps the fault which it is hardest to see in ourselves. The tax collector, who had humility enough to accuse himself of his sins

*This was written by a Maronite priest. Of your mercy, please pray for those souls in Purgatory who have no one else to pray for them, and also pray for that priest.*

and be repentant went home justified, but the Pharisee in his arrogance and self-righteousness did not (Luke 18:14).

### Conforming to the Life of Christ

There are two sayings in the Gospel of St Matthew which tell this story more eloquently than I can: “And he that takes not up his cross, and follows me, is not worthy of me.” Matthew 10:38. Also, “Then Jesus said to his disciples: If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” Matthew 16:24.

As Maronites, heirs to the Semitic and Syriac science of typology (both a theology and a spirituality), we should learn to see the reality of the Cross in our own lives. In Matthew, Our Lord was speaking in terms of types (divine patterns repeated on earth). He did not mean that each of us has to literally take up the Cross. He meant that we have to see in our sufferings shadows of *His sufferings*, and to say, “I accept this suffering just as the Lord accepted His suffering.” Only then, can we arise from death with Him; triumphant over the pain because in bearing it we *were united to the Lord Himself*. Death by crucifixion was an almost unbelievably cruel and barbaric torture. I shall not go into the details here. But it comes down to this: whatever we may suffer, we may be assured that Our Lord and Our Lady suffered more.

### Closing Thoughts

To place this teaching in context, consider these recent words of Bishop Tarabay: “... on this feast, we are invited to contemplate the Cross and the death of Jesus, not as a source of suffering like we do on Good Friday, but as a source of life and a source of healing for each one of us.”

This next quote is from Mother Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, long text, chapter 19 “... I wanted to look up from the Cross, but I did not dare, for I well knew that while I contemplated the Cross I was safe and secure; therefore I would not agree to put my soul in danger ...”

We close with these words from our Divine Liturgy: “Now, O Christ Our Saviour, we ask You ... to make the celebration of the Feast of your Holy Cross a sign of security and peace. ... May we find refuge in the shadow of Your Cross on the great day of Your Second Coming ...” the Prayer of Forgiveness, *Exaltation of the Holy Cross*.