

Many years ago, when I was a senior in high school, we were living in a small town. The bishop's house was not far from where we lived. Once a week, very early in the morning, before school began, a small group of us boys, usually 5-6 of us, would go over to the bishop's house for mass in his tiny chapel. Afterwards, we would have a continental breakfast in his dining room and then meet in his living room to talk about the Gospel reading of the day, or just anything that was on our minds.

On one occasion, a young man there shared how he struggled to believe that God would forgive his sins. One of the other boys, rather bluntly, said, "You are taking Jesus's suffering and His death on the cross for you as if it were nothing. What else does Jesus have to do to show you that He loves you and forgives you? How can you not take Jesus

seriously?" The bishop did not say anything; nobody did. It was pretty awkward for a few moments until someone brought up another subject. Perhaps this boy was too blunt, but, nevertheless, it was the truth.

On this feast of the Veneration of the Cross, should I not ask myself a similar question? Do I really appreciate what our Lord has done for me? Does it ever touch my heart? Isn't it true that we are more often moved or disturbed by trivial things, and seldom, if ever, give our Lord's sacrifice and death for us much thought? Yet, our Divine Savior loved us so much that He would bear the brunt of our sins and lose His life for us, and in the most horrific way. Jesus' life, is a life infinitely more precious than all of the lives of all human persons and that of all angels put together. Oh, my Lord, Jesus, you loved me more than Yourself because You willingly died for me.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, Sol. An. Ad D. C. xiii.

We should often meditate on His cross and the pain and death that He suffered, because in this, we see His profound love for us. The Apostle Paul would write:

While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we are now justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life (Romans 5:6–10).

This liturgical feast of the Veneration of the Cross, anticipates, as it were, what is to come during Holy Week, at the Good and Holy Friday service, where we commemorate our Lord's passion, death and burial. Key to this service is the account of the Suffering Servant described in the reading from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 53. Here are just a few prophetic passages from Isaiah about Jesus. Think of what Jesus has

done for us, and let that stir up in your heart, true devotion and love for Him.

[...] he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted.

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed.

[...] the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. [...]

By oppression and judgment, he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people?

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the Lord to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, [...] by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities.

[...] he poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many... (Is 53:1–12).

In Christ's suffering and death on the cross, then, all of the suffering and horror of sin, for all time, was brought to bear on Him. What anyone could see of our Lord's suffering was but a small part of what He actually endured. It was far more than the horrific, physical pain that He endured on the cross. We get but a glimpse of this by His agony in the garden. Scripture says,

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground (Luke 22:44).

Jesus' soul, not just His body, was crucified. The wonder of all this is that He is the infinite and all-holy God who, in the words of St. Paul:

Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6–8).

The infinitely transcendent, eternal God, the timeless One, took on our human nature, entered time, and died on Calvary for our sins. God eternal and timeless, in His human nature, suffered and died for us. Since He is the eternal and timeless God, His sacrifice is, thus, eternal and timeless. His sacrifice for our sins, once and for all, is forever present encompassing all of human history. All of the sins and evil of humanity of all times and places, he bore in His body and soul and on the cross.

When Jesus rose from the dead, in His Holy Resurrection, He still bore the wound of the cross in His hands, feet and side. And when He ascended into heaven, He took these wounds with Him. He no longer suffers, yet He takes the cross to heaven with Him. In glory, then, Jesus bears His sacred wounds in heaven, the wounds by which we are healed and made whole.

And there, from heaven, the saving power of the Holy Cross touches us here on earth in the mystical sacrifice of the Holy Eucharist. The cross of Christ is in heaven and the cross of Christ descends to earth in the Eucharist and we partake of Him who died for us, who shed his blood for us. We partake of the sacrificial blood of Christ, shed for the life of the world. This should prove to us that His love is far beyond anything that we could ever imagine. St. Paul once wrote,

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no heart has imagined, what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Cor 2:9).

When we look at an icon of the cross or a crucifix, it should stir up awe and wonder in us. His marvelous love is so great, that He would so humble Himself to bear our sins on the cross, to save us. And in the Resurrection, He promises to heal us completely, in body and soul, but not only that, but to give us a share in His own Divine Life. We, body and soul, are to dwell in heaven, with the Holy Trinity, with the Eternal God!

Our Lord has come to save us from sin and death and give us eternal life and happiness with Him. But His salvation requires our participation, not only our consent, but our willingness to follow Christ. Our Father, St. Augustine says, that, while God created us without us, He does not save us without us.

Thus, in the Gospel today, we read:

And he [Jesus] called to him the multitude with his disciples, and said to them, "If any man would come after

me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me (Mark 8:34).

While it is Christ, alone, who ascends calvary to save us, we, nevertheless, must meet Him there. He suffered for our transgressions, but was innocent. We must do the same; that is, to persevere in what is good, knowing that we will suffer the cross with Him. Through His cross, He conquered sin and death, and we must follow in His footsteps. Yes, we suffer our crosses here on earth, due to the trails we must endure, but more importantly, we suffer our cross when we act against our sinful inclinations. All of the evil of hell was put upon our Divine Savior, and yet, He bore it all in obedience for what is true and good. We created the cross by our sins, but He willing bore it for us. We must bear this cross with Him. We suffer the cross when we resist temptation and pursue virtue, that is to say, when we strive to be holy and become a saint. Christ, by His Holy Cross, confronted sin and death, and we

too, by His grace, must do the same. The apostle Peter

explains:

If when you do right and suffer for it, you take it patiently, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Pe 2:20–24).

Christ has trampled down sin and death, by His death on the cross, opening to us the way of salvation. But we must follow Him, follow him in the way that He has laid out for us. These are hard words that our Lord says: "...anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:38). Let us, then, venerate the cross of Christ, but not merely in kissing its image, and bowing before it, but by

denying our very selves, picking up our cross and following in His footsteps of goodness and truth.

Our time on earth passes very quickly, the days fly by; and of all of the pleasures, goods and pursuits of this earth, what remains? The book of Wisdom says:

All those things have vanished like a shadow, and like a rumor that passes by; like a ship that sails through the billowy water, and when it has passed no trace can be found, nor track of its keel in the waves (Wis 5:8–10).

Don't allow yourself to be consumed by this world, which is passing away before your eyes. Rather, deny yourself and pick up your cross with Jesus. Don't waste the little time you have here. God loves you; He truly loves you and has shown you the might and unending depth of His love. Entrust yourself to Him, give your heart to Him always, believe in Him and His promises. In the words of that young high school student, at the bishop's house, that early morning: "What else does Jesus have to do to show you that He loves you and forgives you?"