

Finding of the True Holy Cross of Our Saviour Jesus Christ

The Discovery of the Holy Cross

by Fr. Francis Xavier Weinger, 1877

The true Church celebrates today the discovery of that Cross which our Saviour and Redeemer has made holy, through the painful and ignominious death He suffered upon it for the salvation of all men.

It happened as follows: Helena, the saintly mother of Constantine the Great, endeavored, as she was a Christian, to bring her son to the knowledge of Christ and to receive the Christian faith. But although Constantine listened to her exhortations, he deferred his conversion from time to time. Meanwhile, he had to take up arms against the tyrant Maxentius, who had proclaimed himself Emperor of Rome. When he was marching from France to Italy against him, and perceived that his army was much smaller than that of Maxentius, he turned to the God of the Christians, of whom his pious mother had so often spoken to him, and humbly implored His aid.

Soon after, he and his whole army beheld in broad daylight a brightly shining cross in the heavens, on which was inscribed: "**In this sign thou shalt conquer.**" On the night following, Christ appeared to him with the same sign, and commanded him to have a similar one made, and to use it as a military ensign during the battle. Constantine not only joyfully obeyed the command, but had also a smaller cross made and placed on his helmet. Thus armed, he marched against his enemy into Italy, and having overcome three generals of Maxentius, who were sent to meet him, he finally conquered the tyrant himself, and arrived triumphantly at Rome.

As he had only to thank the God of the Christians, and the power of the holy cross for this brilliant victory, he had the Roman Eagles torn from the banners of the army and replaced them by crosses. He at the same time issued an order that no malefactor should in future be nailed to the cross. He also gave to all his subjects the liberty to embrace the Christian faith, tore down the temples of the idols, erected many spacious churches for the Christians, and at last received holy baptism. His heart now became inflamed with the desire to see and honor the true holy Cross of the Lord.

Helena, the holy Empress, who had the same ardent wish, was admonished by God in a dream, to go to Jerusalem and there search for the Cross of Christ. She undertook the journey and endeavored to ascertain what the wicked Jews had done with it. These, instigated by Satan, had buried the Cross of the Saviour, and the crosses of the two malefactors in a deep pit, not far from the Holy Sepulchre of Christ, and had covered them with stones and rubbish. But when they perceived that many Christians went there to pray, they persuaded the heathens to erect on the holy place a shrine of the unchaste Venus, in order that the Christians, in abhorrence of the idol, should no longer visit it.

This was accordingly done, and the memory of the Holy Cross which was concealed there slowly faded away.

Helena, nevertheless, succeeded in inducing some Jews to show her the places where they had heard from their forefathers that Christ had been crucified and buried. She forthwith ordered the idol which stood there to be demolished, and after having removed the stones and rubbish, she directed them to dig until they had reached the sepulchre of Christ.

Not far from it they found three crosses of the same form and size, with the inscription which Pilate had written and placed above the Saviour's Cross, but they were unable to recognize upon which of the crosses the Redeemer had died. St. Macarius, at that time Bishop of Jerusalem, inspired by God, advised that a sick person should be brought in contact with the three crosses, as he did not doubt that God would make known by a miracle which of them had borne the Saviour. His counsel was followed, and a dangerously sick woman was brought. The touch of the first two crosses had no effect, but no sooner had the invalid come in contact with the third, than she instantly arose in perfect health, in presence of the Empress, the bishop and numberless other persons.

Further, they brought two dead bodies, into which life returned as soon as the Holy Cross was placed upon them. As there could now remain no doubt that the true Cross had been found, no words can describe the joy they all felt, but particularly the Empress, or what honors they bestowed upon the precious treasure.

Helena had a magnificent church erected on the place where it was found, and placed half of the Cross there in a costly case; the other half she sent to her son Constantine who likewise deposited it in a beautiful church, built by him at Rome.

From this time dates the adoration of the Holy Cross through the whole Christian world. Particles of it were sent to different countries. Saint Cyril, who was, twenty years later than Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, testifies most emphatically that particles of the Holy Cross had been sent for from all parts of the world, and although they had cut many from it, the sacred wood had not diminished, but by a visible miracle had retained its original size, which he declares he witnessed himself.

The same is written by Saint Paulinus. Hence the heretics and other scoffers of the holy relics have no reason to say that the particles of the Holy Cross which are honored at so many places must be false, or to accuse the Catholic Church of deception in distributing these particles.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The holy Empress Helena searches with great care and solicitude for the holy Cross of Christ, and rested not until, to her inexpressible comfort, she had found it. Many Saints have sought crosses and sorrows and have earnestly requested God to send them such. I dare not ask so much of you. Do you think, however, that it is too much if I ask you: to carry patiently, the Cross which God lays upon you for your salvation? Himself demands this of you: **He that taketh not up his cross and followeth me is not worthy of me**, says He (Saint Matthew x.). And again, He says; **If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me.** (Saint Luke ix.). The Cross given by Christ must be borne if we wish to follow Him into heaven.

In bearing this Cross we must also imitate him so as to carry it with patience. For what does it benefit, when we carry it impatiently, and only when we must? **"He that is impatient suffereth damage"** (Proverbs xix.), we are assured in holy writ. Because, besides that he, by his impatience, loses the benefit which he would have derived, he makes himself also guilty of punishment. Hence, what must be done?

Follow the advice of the pious Thomas à Kempis: **"Take up your Cross and follow Christ, and you will enter into everlasting life. He went before you and carried his Cross patiently, He died for you upon the Cross, that you also may carry your Cross and desire to die upon it."**

If Christ himself gave you a particle of the Cross on which he had hung and which St. Helena found, you would deem yourself happy: but you are far more happy if you carry the Cross God sends you as though you received the entire Cross of Christ. It is neither sufficient nor necessary for your salvation to possess the Cross of Christ, or a particle of it: but it is necessary that you carry your Cross, and that you imitate the Lord's patience.

2. Jews, heathens and heretics despise the Cross of Christ; true Christians, however, esteem it highly and honor it duly. The Catholics do not worship the holy Cross, but they worship Him who has hung upon it, Christ the Lord, as He was not only man, but also the true God to whom worship is due.

They honor the sacred wood on account of Him who died upon it for the salvation of men. To make the sign of the Cross is a mark of honor which we show not only to the holy Cross of the Saviour, but also to the Saviour Himself. Do not omit this sign of honor, as is done in our days by the enemies and despisers of the Cross of Christ, whose end, according to the Apostle, is destruction (Philip iii.).

Sign yourself, morning and evening, before and after prayer, and also on other occasions, with the holy Cross, but devoutly, and in memory of the crucified God. **"Be not ashamed,"** exhorts Saint Cyril of Jerusalem; **"be not ashamed of the Cross of Christ."** If somebody hides it, sign your forehead openly with it, that Satan, at the sight of it, may flee with fear and trembling. Make use of this sign when you eat and drink, when you stand and sit, when you walk and speak, in one word, make use of it in all your actions.

