

Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, September 14, 2013
Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown
Pilgrimage to The Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
Washington, DC
Homily

Just a few days ago people throughout our country found various ways to observe the 12th anniversary of the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In addition to the news media coverage of this year's observance, there were numerous retrospective articles in newspapers and documentary programs on television.

One story that was reviewed this past week is something that emerged from the World Trade Center in New York City as rescue workers went through the rubble in search of survivors after the collapse of the twin towers. One of the first responders was like so many at the scene; exhausted, and demoralized by the death and destruction.

On September 13, 2011, he came upon two steel beams in the shape of a 20 foot cross amongst the debris of the World Trade Center. It is reported that he immediately stopped and prayed since it was the first sign of hope that he had encountered in three days of searching.

While the removal of debris continued at Ground Zero, the workers with access to the site used the cross as a sort of shrine, leaving messages on it or praying before it. That cross was removed and preserved and was eventually placed inside the National September 11 Memorial & Museum at the World Trade Center site.

This cross continues to be a symbol of controversy. In July of 2012, the American Atheists Association filed a lawsuit in federal courts seeking the removal of this cross from the museum. They contend that there is no place for a religious symbol in a national memorial and museum.

On March 30th of this year, a federal judge in the case dismissed the lawsuit by ruling that regardless of its shape, the steel cross is an historical artifact. David Silverman, President of American Atheists Association immediately announced that they were going to appeal the decision.

Silverman said that they are confident that they will eventually win this case and the cross will be removed, or atheists will be allowed to have their own symbol in the museum at Ground Zero.

From the moment that the Only Begotten Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ began his final steps to Calvary, the Cross has been for Christians

- a symbol of faith
- a symbol of hope
- a symbol of love
- and a symbol of our salvation.

It is the symbol whose power and importance we celebrate and rejoice in on this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

For others who are not Christian, the Cross has been and remains

- a scandal
- and a symbol of controversy.

It seems so strange to hear that the American Atheists Association acknowledges that the cross that was preserved from the wreckage of the World Trade Center is a religious symbol. To be an atheist is to be a person without faith in God.

We have come here as people of faith from the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown on a pilgrimage of faith during this special Year of Faith. And we could not have arrived on a better day than this Feast of the pre-eminent symbol of our faith, the Cross of Jesus Christ.

This Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross dates to the early part of the 7th century when the Emperor Heraclius recovered the true cross from the Persians who had taken it from the Holy Land.

The story is told that Heraclius carried the cross on his own back, yet he was prevented from carrying it into the Basilica in Jerusalem until he removed his royal robes. He was then able to move forward as a barefoot, humble pilgrim.

This story of the true cross of Jesus Christ, reminds us of two important truths that St. Paul draws attention to in the Letter to the Philippians.

- The first is that even though he is God, Jesus humbled himself in becoming like us and especially in becoming obedient to death on a cross.
- The second truth is that because of this humble obedience, God greatly exalted Jesus and as a result of God's exaltation of the crucified Savior we celebrate this feast of exaltation by bending the knee and confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

St. John the Evangelist reminds us that because of Jesus' act of humility and obedience and because of our humble adoration and confession of faith,

- God receives the glory
- and we receive the gift of eternal life.

This central mystery of our Catholic faith, that we are saved through the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, and that we receive the promise of eternal life through belief in his resurrection is a mystery, a truth, that we can never take for granted.

It is indeed something to be celebrated. But how do we celebrate the exaltation of the Cross of Jesus Christ?

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has not hesitated to remind us how and why. In his first homily as Pope that was preached to the Cardinals of the Church on March 13th of this year, Pope Francis stated that as people of faith we are on a journey.

This journey involves three movements, and these three movements go together:

- First, we are to walk, because to be a Christian, a follower of the Lord Jesus means to continue moving on a path that leads to salvation.
- Second, we are to build the Church. But it is not our Church; it is the Church of Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone.
- The third movement is that we are to witness; we are to confess our faith that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, as St. Paul reminds us in the second reading today. We are to witness our faith openly and publicly so that others may come to know our Savior Jesus Christ.

Pope Francis explained in his first homily that there are dangers and potential difficulties in these three movements.

- He said that if we fail to walk, if we fail to move with Christ on the path toward salvation, something is missing. This image of walking with Christ is what a pilgrimage is all about. Pilgrimage is a journey of faith. Along the way there are all kinds of destinations, including this beautiful Basilica of the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. But our ultimate goal is the kingdom of heaven.
- Pope Francis says that if we fail to work at building up the Church, and building it on the foundation of Christ, then there is a danger in the Church being empty buildings made of stones. But if it is continually built of stones that are alive in Christ, then God's life and mercy and love will be all around us and in us.
- And Pope Francis said that it is most important that we give witness to our faith; not just during this Year of Faith or during this pilgrimage. Pope Francis continues to remind us that we need to announce to everyone who is Christ Jesus for us and for them: the source of life and especially eternal life.

In that same first homily, our Holy Father pointed out that the symbol for these three movements is the Cross of Jesus Christ. He says that

- when we walk without the Cross,
- when we build without the Cross,
- when we profess a Christ without the Cross

we are not disciples of the Lord, because as St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians, the path to glory for Jesus Christ and the path to glory for us is emptying ourselves and accepting the Cross that the Father has asked us to bear.

As recently as this past Sunday, Pope Francis shared this message with the crowds gathered in St. Peter's Square for Sunday's Angelus, encouraging them to follow Christ on the way of the cross.

He said, "Following Jesus does not mean participating in a triumphal procession!" It means sharing his merciful love, entering into his great work of mercy for each person and for all mankind. And this forgiveness passes through the cross."

Probably the most eloquent and powerful expression of the Holy Father's emphasis on the hope of glory that comes from the Cross of Jesus Christ is found in his words during the recent World Youth Day in Brazil when hundreds of thousands gathered to pray the stations of the Cross.

Pope Francis said to the crowd, "In 1984, at the end of the Holy Year of Redemption, Blessed John Paul II chose to entrust the Cross to you, young people, asking you to carry it throughout the world as a symbol of Christ's love for humanity, and announce to everyone that only in the death and resurrection of Christ can we find salvation and redemption.

Since then, the World Youth Day Cross has travelled to every continent and through a variety of human situations where it has touched the life experiences of the countless young people who have seen it and carried it.

No one can approach and touch the Cross of Jesus without leaving something of himself or herself there, and without bringing something of the Cross of Jesus into his or her own life.

Then Pope Francis posed three questions for the crowd in Brazil. I would like to pose them for you to reflect on as part of your experience of this pilgrimage of faith; a pilgrimage that has brought us here on this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

- What does the Cross of Jesus teach us?
- What have you left on the Cross during this pilgrimage?
- What has the Cross of Jesus left for you?

While you start to think about your response, let me share with you the thoughts that Pope Francis had in mind.

- What does the Cross of Jesus teach us? It teaches us to always look upon others with mercy and tenderness, especially those who suffer, who are in need of help, who need a word or a concrete action which requires us to step outside ourselves to meet them and to extend a hand to them.
- What have you left on the Cross during this pilgrimage? Many of you have left behind your sins and the burden of sins as you encountered the Cross of Jesus in the Sacrament of Penance. Pope Francis

recommends that we bring to the Cross of Jesus our joys, our sufferings and our failures, and the joys, sufferings, and failures of others. Who do you wish to pray for during this Mass where we find ourselves at the very foot of the Cross?

- What has the Cross of Jesus left for you on this day of pilgrimage? Pope Francis reminds us that the Holy Cross gives us a treasure that no one else can give: the certainty of the unshakable love which God has for us; an immeasurable love; a faithful love; a love that we can believe in.

That unshakable, immeasurable, faithful love of the Cross of Jesus Christ is made available to us in a most unique way in this celebration of the Holy Eucharist in which we receive the Body and Blood of our Savior.

This is the high point, the summit of our pilgrimage today on this Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross; a symbol of love, a symbol of hope, a symbol of faith.

Just ask the first responder at the World Trade Center who found a 20 foot cross that was immediately cherished for what it is by those who believe. And just as quickly it was mocked, and criticized, and rejected by those without faith.

Thanks be to God for the gift of faith. Thanks be to God for this pilgrimage of faith in this Year of Faith. And thanks be to God for the Cross, a symbol that our world needs now more than ever.

Not just as a decoration or a museum piece, but as the way that God has brought his unshakeable, immeasurable, faithful and reliable love to a world that our world continues to long for today. When you return home after this pilgrimage is finished, please bring that love with you and generously share it with others.