

Feast Day of the Holy Cross

September 14, 2021

Today is the Feast Day of the Holy Cross. This feast celebrates the finding of the True Cross by Saint Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine; and the dedication of churches built by Constantine on the site of the Holy Sepulcher and Mount Calvary.

According to tradition, first mentioned by Saint Cyril of Jerusalem in 348, Saint Helena, nearing the end of her life, decided under divine inspiration to travel to Jerusalem in 326 to excavate the Holy Sepulcher and attempt to locate the True Cross.

In celebration of the discovery of the Holy Cross, Constantine ordered that churches to be built at the site of the Holy Sepulcher and on Mount Calvary. Those churches were dedicated on September 13 and 14, 335, and shortly thereafter the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross began to be celebrated on the latter date. The feast slowly spread from Jerusalem to other churches, until, by the year 720, the celebration was universal.

So today we are invited to think in a special way about the place of the Cross within the life of the Christian. To help us with this I am going to call on St. Thomas Aquinas. He wrote back in the 13th century:

It is better to limp along the way than to stride along off the way. For a man who limps along the way even if he only makes slow progress, comes to the end of the way; but the one who is off the way, the more quickly he runs, the further away he is from his goal. If you are looking for a goal, hold fast to Christ, because He Himself is the Truth, where we desire to be, hold fast to Christ if you wish to be safe.¹

Aquinas is pointing out for us two things. Those who are not following Jesus along the way of the Cross might have a much easier time in life. They are striding along free of the constraints of the way of the Cross. As they carry on, they may even be running because they experience a certain kind of freedom. But, says Aquinas, they are running farther away from their true goal, which is to be joined to Christ and to hold fast to him.

Now the person who is on the way of the Cross might be limping along, finding the progress slow and at times even discouraging. But as Aquinas aptly points out, even if this may be, he or she will come to the end of the way, and so come fully to Christ, which is where we desire to be.

I so appreciate Saint Thomas' words because they do remind us that the way of the Cross, the way of discipleship, is a much harder journey than to stride along off the way.

Jesus said that he would be lifted up on The Cross and call people out of themselves towards him. When we participate in the Mass, the Cross is there, too. The "unbloody sacrifice" offered on the altar is the re-presentation of Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. When we receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we do not simply unite ourselves to Christ; we nail ourselves to

¹ Thomas Aquinas Exposition of John Chapter 14 Lecture 2, in the Office of Readings Liturgy of the Hours Volume 3, pages 315-316.

the Cross, dying with Christ so that we might rise with Him. In so doing we are living counter culturally. And while such a counter cultural experience might leave us at times feeling like we are limping along the way, remember the words of Saint Thomas: “For a man who limps along the way even if he only makes slow progress, comes to the end of the way”.

To live such a life that is Cross shaped is the harder way. But in learning to live a cruciform shaped life we are also learning to live authentically because we are learning to “*Have this mind among ourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*”

St Thomas knew the way of the Cross and was able to speak from experience these words that set the way of Jesus before us as the harder but more fulfilling way because it is the way to union with Christ.

Jesus, the one who is the goal and purpose of our lives.