

Sunday of the Cross 2006: The Ultimate Icon

A sermon by the Rev. Fr. David G. Subu
delivered on March 26, 2006

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Christ is among us!

“Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify.” (Special Trisagion Hymn for Sunday of the Cross)

Today the Church presents before us the image of the Cross, half-way on our journey through Great Lent. Today our study of iconography enters a new dimension, for is not the Cross the ultimate Icon? The Cross lead our procession of icons on Sunday of Orthodoxy, just as it will lead our procession on Holy Friday and on Pascha. The Cross is the icon which all of us as Orthodox Christians bear in one way or another, either wearing one literally, making the sign of the cross over ourselves physically, or by the grace of Holy Chrismation by which we sealed in cruciform manner. The Cross is the universal icon for Christianity. Only the grossest of iconoclasts despise it or are ashamed of presenting it on their churches, and the most hard-hearted of atheists is offended by seeing it displayed. And today we venerate the precious and life-giving Cross with a kiss, bowing down in worship before our God and Master who ascended it for our salvation. Yet perhaps the Cross is the most misunderstood of icons, for encapsulated in the cross are all the mysteries of our salvation: what is sin, what is death, how are we saved from both, as well as who is our God, who are we, what does the incarnation mean, and more. The Orthodox understanding of these things are essential to understand, and reflect themselves in our veneration of the Cross this Sunday.

The Cross began first and foremost as an image of death, a tool of execution, and a weapon of humiliation. Yet somehow, it has been transformed into the tree of life, granting

salvation and everlasting life to the faithful by the grace of God. Indeed, this imagery of the tree of life reminds us of our lost paradise, as is sung in today's kontakion hymn:

Now the flaming sword no longer guards the gates of Eden;
it has mysteriously been quenched by the wood of the Cross!
The sting of death and the victory of hell have been vanquished (1 Cor. 15:55);
for You, O my Savior, have come and cried to those in hell:
"Enter again into paradise." (*Triodion*)

By the Cross, once an icon of death, death and sin have been overcome. It is essential to understand what death is and where it came from. Death did not come from God as a punishment, as some have believed, but as the consequence naturally of sin. In sinning, the first Adam fell away from God, who is the source and giver of life. Thus, he procured for himself mortality, both of soul and body. True and eternal life only comes through participation in the life-giving grace of God—that same light, life, love, and glory about which St. Gregory Palamas spoke. Humanity does not have a meaningful destiny outside of this state of communion with God. So death is not a punishment from God, and though He warned Adam and Eve of the consequence of disobedience, it was not His will that men should die, but that all should come to salvation in the knowledge of the truth.

Thus, sin and death are intimately tied. Sin is called the sting of death (1 Cor. 15:56), because through sin death enters the world, just as through the sting of the scorpion deadly poison enters the body. Death in turn perpetuates sin like a virus, because out of the fear of death, we sin more and more in a futile and misguided attempt to stave off death in its myriad forms: the loss not only of life but also property, prestige, influence, respect, esteem, control, comfort, and so on. Each of these little losses is perceived by the mortal soul as threats to its survival and very being and identity. Thus we struggle and grab for more and more and fall deeper and deeper into sin. Yet the Cross is said to overcome both sin and death. How?

Last Christmas when I first moved into the area I passed by a non-Orthodox church that has a large banner posted outside that read in very stark terms: “Born to die.” Apparently, this was the full theological import of the Nativity of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for that congregation. “Born to die”—these three little words betray a very distinct understanding of salvation, of who God is and who we are, which is very different from Orthodoxy. For some, Christ came on earth for one purpose, to die on the Cross, so that God who was angry with us because of our sins and sentenced us to death might be appeased and made friendly toward us again. Yet if death is not from God and God already desires to save us out of love, how then can we as Orthodox hold to such an idea as “Born to die.” Well, we cannot, at least not in this respect.

There is a beautiful icon of the Virgin with child in which two angels flank the Birth-giver of God. One carries the spear and the sponge, the other, the Cross. The Christ child looks over his shoulder at the one carrying the Cross almost in fear. Indeed, the Crucifixion is part and parcel with the Incarnation. It is foretold by the elder Symeon, as it was by the prophets before him, that the Christ should suffer and die. But is that the whole story? One thing you may notice is that in our hymn today, “Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master, and Thy holy Resurrection, we glorify,” the Cross is not separated from the Resurrection. In our hymnography the Cross is never celebrated by itself or for its own sake. It is always connected to and in the context of the Resurrection. Even in our services of Holy Week, the promise of the Resurrection remains clear, and our lamentation turns to joy. The Troparion hymn of the Resurrection that we sing to day embraces this mystery:

By Thy Cross, Thou didst destroy death! To the thief, Thou didst open Paradise!
For the myrrh-bearers, Thou didst change weeping into joy! And Thou didst
command Thy Disciples, O Christ God, to proclaim that Thou art risen, granting
the world great mercy. (*Resurrection Tropar, Tone 7*)

If we hold the theology of “Born to die,” then the Resurrection becomes only an after-thought, a happy ending, a vindication of Christ’s divinity. In fact, it is not even necessary. God is satisfied with the death of His Son as propitiation, what needs more said or done? But we do not and cannot hold this view as Orthodox. Christ was not born to die so much as he was “born to rise,” and by rising, destroy death by death, bestowing life upon all of us who were dead in sin. This great victory is why without the Resurrection our faith would be empty, as St. Paul says, “¹⁷And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Cor. 15) Only by the Resurrection can *both* sin and death be overcome.

In closing, let us consider the words of St. John Chrysostom, whose great homily on the Resurrection is read on every Pascha night, who also spoke at length about this subject elsewhere, being himself a man who lived and died by His faith in the Resurrection:

“Why do you fear what has been destroyed? It is no longer terrible but is abolished, utterly despised, and worthless... But what is the meaning of ‘who through the fear of death were all their lives subject to bondage?’ What is he saying? Either that he who fears death is a slave and subjects himself to everything in order to avoid dying, or that all men were slaves of death and held under its power because it had not yet been done away with, or that men lived in continual fear... he shows, too, that not only has death been put to an end, but also through this he who is ever waging a relentless war against us, that is the devil, is abolished. For he who does not fear death is outside of the tyranny of the devil... He fears no one, is in terror of no one, is higher than everyone, and is freer than everyone. For he who disregards his won life disregards more so all other things. And when the devil find such a soul, he can accomplish in it none of his works.” (*Commentary on Hebrews, Homily 4:6*, Reprinted from J. Romanides, *The Ancestral Sin*, pg. 168-9)

Thus brothers and sisters, we see the wisdom of the Cross which is foolishness to a perishing world. We see why the Cross is brought out to us in the middle of the fast, to encourage us to fearlessness in our ascetical efforts and in our repentance, for through the Cross, Christ has destroyed the power and the tyranny of the devil once and for all. To Him belong all

honor, glory and worship with His Father who loves mankind and His holy, life-creating spirit,
unto the ages of ages. Amen.