

The Sunday of the Veneration of the Holy and Precious Cross

Explanation of the Veneration of the Cross, and “Before Thy Cross”

Third Sunday of Great Lent

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Prostrating before our Old Rugged Cross¹

On the Third Sunday of Great Lent, we commemorate the veneration of the Holy and Precious Cross. There are six Sundays in Great Lent, and then comes Holy Week. This day was chosen because it is in the middle of Great Lent. The cross is also called the “Tree of Life”². Capitalism first capitalism of Life was planted in the middle of the garden of Eden, so it is appropriate to venerate the holy and precious Cross in the middle of the Great Fast.

After the sin of Adam and Eve, the tree of life was guarded by a cherubims with a flaming sword, but the second Tree of Life is not guarded; it actually is presented to us to teach us the only way that leads to life.

We are preparing to celebrate the resurrection (Pascha), but before the resurrection was the Cross, so it is wholly appropriate in the middle of the fast to remind ourselves about the Cross and the capitalism.

The cross is a symbol of life and also of struggle (since our Lord told us that if we will, we should take up the cross – this involves great struggle to the end of our lives), so venerating it should also remind us that *Great Lent is a time of increased struggle*. All of our struggle has an end and a purpose – this is to have all of our passions and sins expelled and to be united with God.

This could not happen without two things. The first is that our *Lord Jesus Christ followed the way of the cross*, that is, obedience to His Father and love. After the Cross, He descended into Hades and vanquished death, and made us able to live forever, giving us a way to be joined to the church through baptism, and sending the Holy Spirit to abide in us and help us to struggle against and eventually completely vanquish sin. The second is that we would obey that which the Lord told us to do if we are willing – “*take up our cross*”, and after our baptism, struggle with all of our might to achieve our purpose – union with God.

There are many things about the cross that the Scripture teaches and that resonate in our soul:

The Cross was formerly an instrument of death, and now of life.

We must take up the Cross and struggle for virtue, even though sometimes this is very hard to do.

We are unworthy because we are great sinners, yet God in His love has made us capable of eternal life.

We must crucify ourselves to the Cross just as our Lord Jesus Christ allowed Himself to be crucified.

All of these things and more resonate in the soul when we venerate the cross at the end of the matins service.

Matins is a morning service, often served before Liturgy, or in Russian practice, and on Mount Athos during long vigils, served following Vespers in the evening.

The Matins service commemorating the Holy Cross has an addition to it that is in no other matins service, the entire year. Near the end of the service, after singing many compunctionate hymns, we conclude the hymns with the "Great Doxology"², just as we do in any festive Matins service. The addition to our worship then occurs at the end of the Doxology, when we sing repetitively and very slowly, just as in a funeral: "**Holy God, Holy Mighty, Holy Immortal have mercy on us**". This should remind us that even though the Cross is a symbol of life for us, death had to occur and must *continue* to occur for us to have life. The first death was that of our Lord Jesus Christ and He shall never die again. The second death must be ours, and it must be a *continuous* death to our sins.

As this hymn is being sung very slowly, the priest is carrying a decorated Cross, usually on a platter with many flowers and/or basil leaves, on of the altar. He stops in front of the Royal Doors, and exclaims in a loud voice: "Wisdom, aright!". Then he makes the sign of the Cross with the Cross he is holding and turns and goes to the middle of the church, to put the Cross on a stand for veneration. As he is walking we sing three times the Troparion of the Cross: "O Lord, save thy people"³

Then the priest and the clergy (only) sing the following hymn, loudly, and without haste: "**Before Thy Cross we bow down and worship O Master, and Thy Holy Resurrection We Glorify**".

As the words "**we bow down**" are sung, everyone prostrates to the ground, as they are making the sign of the Cross upon themselves. As we begin to sing: "**And Thy holy Resurrection**", we rise from the ground. In this way, we are reminded of death and burial, and the resurrection. This clearly shows how the Cross and the resurrection are linked. It is not possible to have one without the other.

After the clergy have sung, all the people sing together another three times, with more prostrations. This is a time when everyone should sing, whether they sing well or not, and they should sing loudly, not with haste, and with great feeling.

After this, everyone comes up to venerate the Cross, making prostrations before it, and being blessed by the priest, while other hymns are being sung.

It is impossible to put into words what the soul is feeling or should be feeling during these moments. The following words, spoken during a Vespers⁴ before the Matins in which the Cross was venerated are an attempt to do the impossible. The only way to really understand them is to worship through the long Matins service, and at the end of it to venerate the cross.

Before Thy Cross we bow down and worship...

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

I want to speak about “Before Thy Cross” and what it means. We cannot speak about the Cross without speaking about the Resurrection, because the Cross was the gateway to the Resurrection. The Lord had to die in order to in order to go down to Hades and “destroy death by death” as we sing in the Paschal Troparion⁵, and then be risen again.

When we sing “Before Thy Cross”, we are recalling the death and the resurrection of Christ, and therefore the death and the resurrection of us. And so, on Sunday we will prostrate. Normally we don’t prostrate at any Sunday of the year, with the exception being when the cross is celebrated on that day. There are only two possibilities - during Great Lent on the Third Sunday, and also the Exaltation of the Cross, which is celebrated in September and sometimes falls on a Sunday.

We sing: **“Before thy Cross we bow down and worship O Master, and Thy Holy Resurrection we glorify”**.

With our bodies, we are showing what we believe. We go down, which is burial, which is death, and we surely get up, which is resurrection.

This is very meaningful, especially in the context of the long service⁶, when we go out and everyone is before the Cross, and we sing together this Troparion, and then many more stichera⁷ about the cross.

The way of the Cross is not the way of death, it is the way of resurrection. It is the way of knowing which things dead and which things are alive. The temporary things of the world are dead: pride is dead, envy, jealousy – all the passions – they are all dead, they all lead to death. There is nothing meaningful in Them at all. The only thing that is meaningful, that is alive, is Jesus Christ. And if we are members of His body then we also are alive.

The Cross is this beginning of our new life, because the Lord said: “If I be lifted up, I will draw all men to myself”⁸. So, when you prostrate before the Cross tonight, remember that it is your resurrection which you are declaring, and thanking God for. If the Lord had not risen from the dead, it would not have mattered if He died on the Cross. If the Lord was not God and man, it would not matter if He died on the Cross. He had to be God and man, and He had to have His manhood (human nature) die, and then take it up again, so that the power of death would be destroyed.

This is what we are recalling when we prostrate before the Cross.

Normally a prostration is penitential: it is often about our sins, such as when we do the “Prayer of St. Ephrem”⁹, or when we do other prostrations during the Holy Fast, during the various services. These prostrations are about repentance; we have feeling that we have done something wrong. I don’t mean something specific, I mean that there is something wrong with us, something not right.

But when we are prostrating tonight, it’s not this type of prostration. It is a prostration where we are in a way, physically acting out death and then the resurrection. Of course, we don’t do dramatic reenactments in our worship in the Orthodox Church; let’s leave that for the people that are in the big churches that have auditoriums. We are actually living in the

moment; we are in the resurrection now, are we not? The Lord said the Kingdom of Heaven is within you¹⁰, so that must mean we are in the resurrection now.

Now as far as why there are so many things that go wrong with us, that's a difficult question to answer. It's a question we should strive to figure out. Why is it, that, if we are in the resurrection, we continue do such sinful things? So, I suppose, even while you are prostrating before the cross with great joy, there should be sort of wistfulness, a sadness, that although the Lord has granted you resurrection, you are not worth living worthily of it yet. But, if you desire to, you will. Gratitude is a powerful virtue because with gratitude we do everything we can for the One to Whom we are grateful.

When we prostrate before the Lord today, before His Holy and Precious Cross, let us be grateful that He has given us the resurrection. This is not as an event to occur in the *future* but is a *state of being that is occurring now*. It's not completed in us yet; we can prove that the next time we get mad or lazy or have some black thought. But which one of us would deny that it has begun? That would be a blasphemy. The resurrection is occurring in us right now, and that is what we are celebrating when we bow down before the cross.

"We bow down before thy Cross and Thy Holy Resurrection we glorify". The two are one, two parts of the same thought. So, let us live in the resurrection, brothers and sisters!

"The blessing of the Lord be upon you through His grace and love for mankind, always now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen."¹¹

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¹ We bought our land several years before we built on it, and in those long years, we prayed a weekly Moleben (prayer service) before a large Cedar cross we erected. After we built our temple we move the cross to the front. It is our custom to always prostrate before this cross at the end of the liturgy when we are celebrating the holy cross.

² A "doxology" is a hymn of praise to God. The "Great Doxology" is at the end of all matins services and in a festive matins service it is sung.

³ This Troparion is in any good complete prayer book and is sung every Wednesday. It is: "O Lord, save Thy people, and bless Thine inheritance; grant Thou unto Orthodox Christians victory over enemies; and by the power of the Cross Do Thou preserve Thy commonwealth."

⁴ This short homily is in audio and text form here:

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-03_2011-03-26+holy-cross+before-thy-cross-we-bow-down-and-worship.mp3

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-03_2011-03-26+holy-cross+before-thy-cross-we-bow-down-and-worship.doc

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-03_2011-03-26+holy-cross+before-thy-cross-we-bow-down-and-worship.pdf

http://www.orthodox.net/sermons/great-lent-sunday-03_2011-03-26+holy-cross+before-thy-cross-we-bow-down-and-worship.html

⁵ The Paschal Troparion is: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life". It is sung in many different melodies, and usually many different languages during Pascha, and all throughout the Paschal period, which ends liturgically the day before the commemoration of the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ, which was 40 days after Pascha.

⁶ Those who attend long services know how useful they are to the soul. We are so noisy in our souls that it is very difficult to pray without distraction, especially immediately upon entering the church. It often takes a lot of time before our souls are in a soft and receptive state. In my experience, this often occurs at the end of long services. Of course, many people think of long services as difficult and onerous. When a person gets past the difficulty and the fatigue, wonderful things happen.

⁷ A sticheron (singular, Stichera is the plural) is a short hymn, meant to be sung. They appear in almost all of our services, multiple times. This is a Greek word, which, and common practice this is just transliterated and never translated.

⁸ John 12:32: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."

⁹ The prayer of St. Ephrem is said many times, every weekday during Great Lent. For the prayer, and an explanation, see:

<http://www.orthodox.net/greatlent/o-lord-and-master-of-my-life-prayer-of-st-ephrem-01.html>. It is also in [DOC](#) or [PDF format](#).

¹⁰ Luke 17:21: "Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you."

¹¹ This is the final exclamation, said by the priest, which ends Vespers during a vigil service. Immediately following this exclamation, the reader begins to read the "Six Psalms".