

Veneration of the Holy Cross

We are at the midpoint of our annual Lenten training period. Our mother the Church offers us teaching on how we attain to and experience our salvation. This catechetical toolkit is our evangelization – teaching us how to live as Christians.

Week One – Jesus in one person bore both a fully human nature and a fully divine nature, without mixture or confusion, and without losing any essential attribute of either. By his incarnation he made it possible for we who are human by nature to live the divine life by grace – that is our salvation. We fought and died for icons because if Jesus cannot be depicted in icons, then he did not take on our full humanity, thus the divine life cannot be lived by a fully human person, and we cannot be saved.

Week Two – God offers us participation in the divine life by direct experiential union with him through his divine energies or “grace.” Our salvation consists precisely in living that participation now.

Week Three – The cross is the key, unlocking for us victory over death and sin. It is our means to participation in the divine life, to living the life of God here and now, to salvation.

Week Four – How do we take up our cross daily? St. John Climacus and the Ladder of Divine Ascent.

Week Five – An example – Mary of Egypt – to show us that no one is “so far gone” as to be out of reach of the grace of God and unable to be saved.

When Jesus was raised on the cross, the mouth of Hell opened to receive him. The cross was the key that unlocked the gates of death and hell so he could enter. By his divinity he overcame the power of death and thereby freed his followers from the dominion of death. By living a sinless, fully-human life in which he unfailingly subjected his human nature to his divine nature, he freed us from slavery to sin. By his incarnation he overthrew the tyranny of the demons and ushered in a new kingdom, the Kingdom of God.

This is the Gospel, the evangelion – there is a new king, a new kingdom, new laws, and new blessings for all who choose to be citizens of that kingdom. And there are consequences for those who refuse to honor the king.

How do we take part in this victory? How do we realize this freedom? How do we become part of the Kingdom? This is our salvation.

Today’s Gospel reading ends with Jesus’s assertion that “there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God present with power.” That’s usually read in conjunction with the next pericope, the Transfiguration. But that misses an essential connection.

Jesus had just prophesied his death and resurrection. Peter rebuked him, and Jesus responded, “get behind me, Satan! For you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.”

Then Jesus calls over the people and his disciples – this is important, because it tells us that what he’s about to say about “the things of God” isn’t just for the apostles and their successors the bishops and priests. It’s for everyone.

Jesus tells us all, “whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. ... There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God present with power.” To “see the Kingdom” we must deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus.

We’re not just called to “take up our cross” and “deny ourselves” willy-nilly. We’re to do so “following” Jesus.

When did Jesus “deny himself” and take up *his* cross? He surrendered his human life and took up his cross *physically* on the way to Golgotha, the Place of a Skull. He took up his cross *intentionally* when he submitted his human will to his divine will, the divine will that was always identical to the will of his father. As he contemplated his impending crucifixion and death he prayed, “not my [human] will, but your [divine will] be done.”

Why did he take up his cross? Why was that the will of his father? The cross was an instrument of death. Why did he have to die? Was his father really so angry at sin that his son had to die to appease the divine wrath? Is God really so out-of-control that he can’t deal with his own anger unless somebody dies? Was God so angry at sinners that God had to die to make God happy?

God was not and is not seeking the death of sinners. There's nothing about the divine nature that imposes on God an obligation to exact capital punishment for sins – that would be to posit something extrinsic to and more powerful than God that binds him act in a certain way, which means that God is subject to something outside himself and is thus not God. And there's nothing about the divine nature that makes it desirable to God for sinners to die, as though it's just something he decided to want. That is abhorrent.

So, why did Jesus have to die? The Father and his son Jesus weren't seeking the death of God or the death of sinners. They were seeking the death of death. The Fathers of the Church tell us that Jesus's death on the cross allowed death to swallow him up, so that he could defeat death *from the inside*. Some of the patristic writers even put it in terms of a cosmic deception – Death had to be fooled into swallowing Jesus so that Life could enter into Death and destroy death from within.

The cross was the key that opened the mouth of Death. Death swallowed a man and met God, and that God-man eviscerated death and hell, trampling down its brazen gates and crushing its iron bars, to lead out of captivity those long held in bonds.

But this was more than just a humanitarian mission to Hell. God was reclaiming the earth.

By his incarnation, Jesus brought the divine life to our human life. By his death, he defeated death. By his resurrection, life triumphed. When we “deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Jesus” we don't just follow him to the Place of the Skull and die, and then stay dead. In baptism we are crucified with him, but in baptism we also rise with him, and now we live with him in newness of life, as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

By giving himself to us once-for-all in our baptism and again and again as often as we receive the Eucharist, he makes it possible for us to live his divine life, and that is our salvation. We live the divine life by taking up our cross and following Jesus up that hill to his crucifixion, then dying with him, but also allowing God to raise us up with him and receiving him into our lives so that we live the divine life.

What does it mean to be “crucified with Christ” in baptism? It means that we live his life – when he died, we died – and when he rose again, we rose again. Now that

he lives in communion with his father and the Holy Spirit, we live in communion with the Holy Trinity.

St. Luke's rendition of Jesus's words in today's Gospel reading adds “daily” – take up our cross *daily*, not just once. (Luke 9:23) Following Jesus requires *daily* decisions to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. It's a continuous thing.

Taking up our cross daily means living the freedom from the dominion of death, sin and the devil by constantly appropriating the energies of God, freely offered, to exercise our free human will to subject our human nature to the divine life we have received by grace so that we can live the life of Christ here and now. This is the mercy of God and the love of God, not the demands of an evil and capricious God. He has given us his very life, not just as a sacrifice for our sins but as an offering to us of his very self, and offers us participation in that life.

This is freedom from the tyranny of sin. Too often we look at Christianity as “the things we have to do to keep Our Father from kicking us out of the house.” But his commands are not onerous, but life-bearing. What we choose to do we choose to do freely; but if we choose to turn away from the new king we remain subject to the demons in the realm of Satan where sin and death reign; the consequence is not eternal life but eternal death.

If we choose to live the divine life, we are no longer slaves to sin but alive to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. St. Paul tells us in Romans 6 that it is part of the human condition to be slaves to something – either slaves to sin, which leads to death, or slaves to God, which leads to eternal life and the “glorious liberty of the sons of God.” (Rom. 8:21)

How do we tell if we have chosen life and freedom? How do we “check our circuits” to be sure we are “working out our salvation” and not just piously deceiving ourselves? Our mother the Church gives us the tools. Great Lent is the greatest of these tools. To find out whether we are free of the disordering of natural desires called the “passions,” we are given blessing to deny ourselves even good desires to see whether we have subjected our passions to our *nous*, that part of us that communes with God, or are actually still enslaved to those disordered desires.

One of the monastic fathers told his disciples to go into the graveyard and insult the dead. They went and berated the dead, using every insult they could come up with, and

threw rocks at the graves. The next day, he told them to praise the dead. They went into the graveyard and lauded the departed. The following day he asked them how the dead responded. Of course, they didn't respond at all. They were dead.

Imagine taking a platter of freshly grilled hot dogs and hamburgers into a graveyard. How would the dead respond? They wouldn't, of course, because they're dead. But you and I might have a different reaction, even though we've freely given ourselves to the disciplines of Lent. We might struggle with the temptation to partake. We might even partake in our mind or our heart, committing what my former pastor called "Whopper of the mind."

The intensity of that struggle shows us how far we might be from the true freedom of the sons of God.

If we are free, we would certainly notice the burgers, and might even find them desirable, but we wouldn't be plagued with a struggle, because we're free.

How free are we? We're about halfway through training. Let's apply ourselves with fresh vigor to the race that lies before us, and run with perseverance toward the mark of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

Next week, our Mother the Church provides us with a guide on actually living the divine life and the glorious freedom of the sons of God, in the inspired writings of St. John of Sinai, the author of "The Ladder of Divine Ascent."