

## **SERMON - PROCESSION OF THE CROSS - AUGUST 1 - GIVEN AT HOLY MYRRHBEARERS MONASTERY**

In Constantinople, in Byzantine times, the city was plagued by many illnesses at this time of the year. At that time the Church decided to bring out the true cross, of which they had a large piece, and process with it through the city, invoking God's Divine power and help to heal the many people who were suffering from illness. And so it developed into a standard liturgical practice in the Orthodox Church that on August 1 every year we would celebrate what we call the "Feast of the Procession of the Cross" and bring out the Cross for veneration. One of the earliest events in my life which affected my faith involved the Cross. As a young man, as I once stood on a Sunday on the right side in the back of the church, a very elderly woman was escorted through the front doors of the church which was in the rear and behind me. As she was escorted past me, I was startled and I gazed at her in amazement, and had trouble digesting what it was that I was looking at. Her entire body, head to toe, was covered in bandages, and she was wrapped up like a mummy. She wore some sort of large mechanical device on her chest which, no doubt, probably helped to keep her alive. And she used one or two canes, I don't remember. But I remember that she was escorted up to the life size Golgotha and Cross that we had in our church on the right side in the front near the amvon. And she somehow managed to get down on her knees in front of the Cross and the image of the Lord suspended on the Cross. And over and over again, she kissed the feet of our Lord. To an adult this would be a very powerful scene to witness. You can imagine how this event might affect and influence a young man. Today when I recall this, I can't help but think of Psalm 98 being fulfilled to the utmost, where it says "Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship the footstool of His feet; for He is holy." In my life there was another visual concerning the Cross which greatly influenced me, this time when I was a very young child. It is my first recollection of seeing Jesus crucified on the cross. I was amazed at how high up Jesus was on the Cross, and that He gazed down as if upon the entire world below. I was also impressed by how wide His arms were, suspended from one end to the other on the Cross, as if He could stretch out and cover everyone below. As a very young child, did I understand the significance of what I was looking at? Of course not. But I was taught that Jesus was the Son of God and that He was crucified and that this really took place. I didn't think about what it meant or why Jesus was suspended on this Cross. I was, however, profoundly aware and knew deep in my heart that somehow this was something good and that it happened because the Lord loved me and everyone else.

The Holy Fathers teach us that it was necessary that the Lord die on the wood of a tree, because it was through a tree that sin came into the world. Crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals. If you were Roman citizen and sentenced to death, you were executed by beheading. That is why St. Paul was beheaded. But St. Peter, and St. Andrew and our Lord were crucified. It was a humiliating and very painful way to die. It was the practice to nail a sign on the cross with the charge against the criminal and what crime they were guilty of. In Jesus' case, the sign on His Cross simply stated that He was the King of the Jews. The Jews complained about this. In John chapter 19 it says, "The chief priests of then Jews then said to Pilate, "Do not write 'the King of then Jews,' but 'This man said I am King of the Jews.'" Pilate answered, "What I have written, I have written."

My youngest son served almost four years in the army and spent about 9 months in Kosovo. He worshipped at the ancient Serbian Orthodox monastery Visoki Decani in Kosovo. My son reported to me that he was amazed that he saw a large fresco on the wall of the monastery church of Jesus holding a sword. In Matthew's Gospel we heard Jesus say today, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword." Jesus tells us in the Gospel that we must deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him. God has done and accomplished everything He possibly could for our salvation, culminating with the

incarnation of His only-begotten Son who suffered and died on the Cross for us and then rose from the dead. St. Paul tells us that the central act of our life now, is that *we* must co-suffer with the Lord and *we* must be co-crucified with the Lord. There is no way around it. And only then can we *co-rise* with Him and be *co-glorified* with Him and *co-reign* with Him, it's all *in* and *with* Him. There's no life, happiness, peace or joy without the Cross. How do we take up our Cross? We must love as the Lord loves. We must have complete faith, trust and obedience in Him in everything, and if we do, then we will keep His commandments., and we will have constant mercy, forgiveness, and never condemn any one for anything. Dying on the Cross, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." When Jesus saved the woman from being stoned, he asked her, "Who is left to condemn you?" She answered, "No one." Jesus then said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." In saying this, Jesus does not deny the existence of sin and evil or that the world is rotten. What Jesus does is practice love and mercy. He does not condemn (Jesus says, "I came to save the world, not to judge the world") and in this way, by imitating Jesus and doing the same thing ourselves, through the Cross we will have life, the power to resist temptation and conquer our own sins, and be able to love and practice love. This is what it means to "deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him." Amen