

SERMON ON THE VENERATION OF THE CROSS - March 11, 2018

By God's mercy we have reached the mid point of Great Lent. The Holy Life-giving Cross of the Lord is brought out for our veneration. Through the Cross we receive encouragement and refreshment, contemplating the symbol of our faith, our Lord's victory over death and the instrument by which salvation and eternal life has been restored to mankind. When we see someone that we love suffering, don't we suffer in our hearts as well? If we were asked to undergo a difficult trial in order to help someone that we love, wouldn't we willingly offer ourselves and suffer almost anything if it would bring relief and healing to the object of our love and affection? Our Lord invites all of us to willingly take up our cross and follow Him. It is possible to suffer and reap no benefit. It depends on what or who it is that we love and for whom we are suffering. The cross we are invited to take up today is the Cross of Christ. Life has many crosses, and it is possible that many things can be the object of our love and affection. The key is that in order to reap spiritual benefit and the gift of salvation, it is necessary that the Lord be the object of our love and affection. Just as we are not forced or coerced into loving the Lord, the Lord gives us an invitation. It is up to us to make the choice to voluntarily accept whatever suffering, deprivation or trials may come our way for the sake of our devotion and love for Christ. Loving the Lord does not come to us automatically, and we should not despair if the objects of our heart's affections are diverse. We should not despair if our love for the Lord perhaps could be stronger, or if sometimes we love other things more than the Lord. First of all, love for God is a gift. Secondly, no one expects us to love something without reason. If someone is kind to us, helps us, suffers for our sake, gives us a wonderful gift—basically, if someone shows love to us, then in a natural way we will begin to respond with love in return. If we think about it, no one shows us greater kindness and love than the Lord. The Lord forgives our sins, always and at all times, no matter how awful the sin, no matter how many times we repeat the sin. Always, unconditionally, the Lord says "I forgive you. Go and sin no more." The Lord loves us so much that He suffered and died for us. When we look at the Cross of the Lord with understanding, we see love personified in the greatest degree possible. What love could be greater, if we really think about it, then for God Himself, the Creator of the universe, to voluntarily lower Himself to become a man in the flesh, and to willingly ascend the Cross and die for our sake? The Lord did not have to do this. He *chose* to do this because He loves *us* and does not want to see us suffer for eternity. Just as medicine can sometimes be bitter, just as the treatment can sometimes be uncomfortable and even painful, so it is when we suffer, or deprive ourselves for the sake of the Lord. The end result will be total and complete healing of soul and body and the inheritance of the gift of eternal life. There is no conceivable gift greater than this known to man. God helps us with our struggles and trials, if they are accepted voluntarily and with faith. God even sends us a Guardian Angel from the day we are baptized to help us, encourage us, protect us. Fasting is a struggle. Prayer is a struggle. Repentance is a struggle. Suffering injustice or abuse is a struggle. Poverty is a struggle. Illness is a struggle. Being a parent is a struggle. Being a husband or a wife is a struggle. The Lord invites us to voluntarily accept our struggles, and to consecrate all of them to God and for the Lord's sake. That's what it means to voluntarily take up our cross and follow Christ. Then *our* cross becomes the Cross of *Christ*, and like St. Simon of Cyrene who helped the Lord to carry His Cross when he faltered and fell under the weight of the Cross on the way to Golgotha, so too will the Lord Himself and the angels help us to carry our cross successfully to the end of life's road. We are passing the mid point of Lent, and already the bright rays of Pascha are beginning to filter through the darkness and the clouds. Already softly we can hear the words of rejoicing that Christ is risen. Our lesson today is to refresh ourselves and rejuvenate our batteries through the power and example of the Holy Life-giving Cross, that we may not falter but reach our goal successfully to completion. May our Lord help and sustain each and every one of us and may we all reach the shore, the harbor, the object of our struggles and hopes, and enter into that bright joy of Pascha which is on the horizon. This

is our hope and our faith, and no matter how weak or seemingly small, God will accept our offerings and efforts, and to each of us He will fulfill all of his promises. Amen.