

**SERMON on the 3rd Sunday of Great Lent - Veneration of the Cross - March 22, 2020  
(Based on the sermon "On Mortality" by St. Cyprian of Carthage)**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ! Every year when we reach the midpoint of Great Lent the Holy Cross is brought out for veneration. However, this year is not a usual year for us. It is both fortuitous and ironic, in a good way, that today of all days the Cross is brought out in the midst of us. This year its meaning has changed, and our reflections and commentary on this great event take on a different meaning for us than the usual commentary which is normally offered today. On August 1 in the Orthodox Church there is a feast called the *Procession of the Life Giving Cross of the Lord*. This feast is not celebrated in every parish, and not every parish brings the Cross out for veneration on this day. In the Russian Church, it was on this feast day on August 1 in the year 988, that the people of Rus received Holy Baptism. When this feast is celebrated in the Russian Orthodox Church it is also accompanied by a service of blessing water. In ancient Byzantium, in Constantinople, during the month of August, illnesses were more common at that time of the year. Trusting in our Savior and in the power of the Holy Life-giving Cross, therefore, every August 1 the large relic of the Cross which was kept in the palace was carried in a solemn procession to Hagia Sophia and placed on the altar. From that day until the feast of the Dormition (August 15), the Holy Cross was carried in procession throughout the city for the faithful to venerate. In obedience to the civil authorities, for the time being, until March 29 when things will be reassessed, today is the last day, I don't know for how long, that we are permitted to assemble together as the body of Christ in His Holy Church and celebrate together the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist. You may still make appointments with me and come to church on an individual basis one at a time on any day for Holy Confession and to receive Holy Communion. Thank God, in His mercy, we still have that, which is much. Let us cherish and offer our gratitude that today God has permitted us to gather together. The Lord, in His infinite mercy and wisdom, today of all days, has arranged that we bring out the Holy Life-giving Cross for veneration. Fear, anxiety and doubt may tempt us at this time. Our Lord predicted and warned us that these things would come to pass. He foretold and prophesied that wars and famine and earthquakes and pestilence would arise in various places, so that when an agency of destruction faces us, no matter what it might be, including a pandemic such as this, we should not be shaken. Why should we be fearful, sad or anxious if we have faith and hope in our Lord and if we truly believe in and have trust in the power of the Cross? Haven't I always preached to you about our mortality and that we should never let a day go by when we are not ready to face the possibility of our passing from this life into the next? Have I not always tried to remind you that in the blink of an eye our life is always susceptible to change dramatically? A firm and resolute faith in our Lord and a devout spirit is not swayed by fear, doubt or anxiety when temptations face us. The man or woman who loves the Lord more than the luxuries and carnal pleasures of this life is always ready to meet our Savior, and in fact longs for the day to be liberated from the struggles with the evils and temptations of this world in order to enter into the eternal bliss and joy of the Lord in the Kingdom on high. For me at this time, my greatest sadness is that we cannot gather for a while together in church after today. Even one day when this is forbidden causes me untold grief and sorrow, as it does our beloved Archbishop and all the clergy of our Church. I don't fear death. I look forward to the day when I can see and embrace my loved ones who have already passed into eternity and celebrate a new life with them which is free from worry, anxiety and suffering. I will surely miss those who I will leave behind, but I am comforted knowing that this is only for a short season, and once I have passed, my hope is that they too will soon join me and the rest of my kin who have gone before them. Don't we ask daily that not our will but God's will be done? If we believe in our Lord and look forward to entering the Kingdom of Heaven, why should we fear even death itself? When we die we pass by death to immortality. How can we inherit eternal life if we do not depart from here? Why would we not hasten to better things? Doesn't our Savior pray in the Gospel, "Father, I will that where I am, they also to whom Thou hast given Me may be with Me and may see My glory which Thou hast given Me

before the world was made. He who is to come to the abode of Christ, to the glory of the heavenly kingdom, ought not to grieve and mourn, but rather, in accordance with faith in the truth, to rejoice in this his departure and translation. Brethren, with sound mind, with firm faith, with rugged virtue, let us be ready for every manifestation of God's will. This is not morbidity, this is not pessimism and this is not scary talk. I would that you would all be comforted and free from fear and anxiety. I would that all of us would survive this illness unscathed. I have always spoken openly with you about life and death, and this pandemic raises these questions, whether we like it or not. Society, I think, likes to shun or hide from things that are disturbing or scary. Christians, however, face reality and truth with courage, firm conviction and faith. We don't pretend or live in a make believe world or hide from reality. I don't know the future, none of us do, and we as Christians should always be sober, truthful, courageous, faithful and ready, come what may. Christians do not panic or overreact. We also don't ignore the need to be proactive and we should take positive steps to be safe. The Christian path is the Royal Path, the middle path, not extreme in either direction, but sober, concerned, courageous, knowledgeable, faithful and hopeful, loving and patient in all things, trusting in the will of God. I've always taught you that time is valuable and not to be wasted, that we should cherish the precious moments of good health and freedom and use the precious time that God gives us in this life wisely. May this current temptation be for all of us an occasion to grow stronger and more faithful in our Lord as our faith is tested. May we all emerge bright and shining like gold which has been tempered in the fire, and be better Christians because of it. Whether we realize it or not, this pandemic is a gift and mercy from God to help us be better Christians and for our salvation. God bless all of you and keep you all safe and under His protecting wing! Amen!