

The Eternal Wooden Altar

Gospel: Mark 8:34-38 AV: *And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*

When the priest enters a Church, he immediately kneels in front of the Altar, then rises to kiss the Gospel Book and the Table. After doing this, he begins his service.

The Epistle we heard today talks about Christ, the Archpriest, and emphasizes His uniqueness compared to the Old Testament Priesthood. Christ was not a regular priest who offered sacrifices on behalf of people and himself. He was not a priest who, just as a mediator, offered on the altar the offerings of the people to God for his and their sins. Christ's uniqueness lies in that He was not the mediator, but the actual sacrifice. As the Liturgical texts calls Him, He is the one who offers and the offered sacrifice, the slaughterer and the slaughtered

sacrifice. He offered Himself for our sins, or as the liturgical texts repeats always, "for our salvation."

The Gospel passage calls us to carry the Cross and follow Christ with great desire. This is the mark of the disciple of Jesus. Jesus spoke these words to His disciples and to Peter, when he told them for the first time that His royal mission on earth will end in his crucifixion. Facing this stumbling matter (of the Cross), Jesus bluntly announced to His disciples that they are free to follow or deny Him, but for those who follow Him, there is no choice other than carrying the Cross.

The link of these two (Epistle and Gospel) passages to the feast of the Veneration of the Holy Cross in this Third Sunday of Lent lies in that Christ perfected His priesthood by being both a priest and a sacrifice on the tree of the Cross. So the Cross became the altar of His priesthood. The Lord Jesus truly carried His Cross for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. This is the link between Priesthood and carrying the Cross, following Christ.

Is following Christ today necessitates carrying the Cross as happened with Him two thousand years ago? We, today's Christians, try to reconcile the world with God. We try to live in the former and to please the latter. We often live in a continuous "Bazar" of spiritual life, compromising on certain principles, matching between opposing ideas, and ignoring any differences we have with the world and its mentality... All this we try to accomplish, so that we do not carry the Cross as Jesus did. All this we do so that we may live as sons of this age, and not as apostles and ambassadors of Christ in our world, telling others about His lasting world and city.

Can we, in a world that is overshadowed by immorality, not lift the Cross of faith high up? In a world that made from lying its law, can't we find a place for the Cross of truth? Isn't the Cross ignorance to people? It carries a message of sacrifice in a world that calls this matter silliness, and looks instead after its self-interest. When all run competing to care for their self-interests, we, who are carrying the Cross, begin to feel the taste of the Cross' message, of self-denial and the service of others. When people do anything to gain profit (at the expense of others), we ought to lay our profit on the Cross, and burn it (our profit) as a sacrifice, by the fire of faith. We must not forget our mission and priesthood, which is built on love and self-sacrifice. In a world that has an increase in exploitative profits, we need, more than ever, crosses lifted high up. In a world that people rush to worship money, pleasure and vainglory, we ought to be careful more than ever to venerate the Cross. In a material world that does not believe except in self-interest, the Cross is more than ever a need to be carried as a spiritual message for man. In a world that lives to die, the Cross is a call to resurrection. The world dedicated to science, information and order educates a man on how to be self-sufficient and to fight others and to protect one's needs, thinking that by doing this one gains his soul. For us, the Cross is an altar on which we offer ourselves for the others who are searching to find their self. Sacrifice is a "bait," an attractive morsel that traps its eater. The Cross is a way of the resurrection, even if it begins with death. Sacrifice is a gain to all the ambassadors of Christ in the world, for it proclaims the resurrection even through their death, as happened with their Master. No slave is better than his Master.

This is what Christ meant when he said: "Whoever sacrificed his self for my sake and for the Gospel's sake has found it." If our self is valuable for us, than there is nothing more than the Gospel and its Master that deserves it. If we realize the invaluable worth of our self, then we will not be hesitant to bow down in worship, as priests, to the divine love, to the Cross, our eternal altar, crying courageously in faith:

"To thy Cross we bow down I worship,
and to thy Holy resurrection we praise and glorify."

Amen.