Reflecting on the Meaning of the Cross

This Sunday we celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross.

Crosses aren't too hard to find these days. You see them in and outside of churches, and also they are a common piece of jewelry. Many people have them in their homes, inside and out as well. However, finding a cross would be a pretty hard thing to do in the year 200.

At that point, Christianity was still underground, facing sporadic persecutions. It was around the year 200 that "Alexamenos worships his god," depicting a figure with a donkey's head on a cross was one of the first forms of graffiti to refer to Christians. It was meant to mock the Christians, as for them, the Cross was an ugly detail that was hard to come to terms with. A cross was a source of shame; one would look at a cross and see someone who had failed, or had said they were something they were not. Ultimately it was a sign of failure, not triumph – even if the Christians knew how the story ended, it would not be something most would display as symbolizing their faith.

Today, the Cross is not really a symbol of embarrassment, but rather I think it's meaning can be forgotten. It symbolizes God's presence in the world, and His love. Beyond that, I think it also symbolizes triumph, the former official name of the feast before it was changed to "exaltation." The feast celebrates the finding of the Cross by St. Helena in Jerusalem in the year 326, being found at Golgotha, which is now the site of the Church of the Holy Sepluchre. But the deeper meaning of today is to ask ourselves how we celebrate the meaning of the Cross in our lives? And the answer for me is found in that word "triumph."

In seminary, we had a course called "Christology," which examined Jesus Christ in great detail. The professor, Fr. Mike Byron, stated that why The Son died the way He did was it was the most appropriate way to show the world how much we were loved. God could have done anything, but had He not manifested and lived and died as He did in Jesus, would we be able to understand the full meaning of love and of how much we are loved? I don't think so. It ties in perfectly with the first reading from this weekend's feast, which is a bit of a foreshadow of Jesus. The people are being inflicted by serpent bites. Moses intercedes for them, raising a cross bearing the serpent. On that cross was the venomous snake that was the cause of suffering and death for many Israelites in the desert. By looking upon the cross by faith, they were healed. The cross is still a symbol of healing today. To be a Christian is to embrace Christ, and with him comes the Cross; for as we heard last week if we are to be a disciple of Jesus, we have to take up our cross. Part of that might entail some suffering in living a life of love and service to others, but also part of the pain might be when we allow the cross to triumph over our sins. Sometimes it can be easy to be afraid of our shadow(s) – meaning there is a shadowy side to all of us, because we sin and make mistakes; sometimes battling the same things throughout life. We need to open ourselves up to the vulnerability of God's love by laying the cards on the table and exposing sin, attachment and negative attitudes that can separate a person from God. Once we have done that, we can try to

do what it is we are to do at the Eucharist: becoming like Jesus, who we receive. There are some who leave their faith at the Church door; but as I've said before we can't do that. We become embrace the Cross by forgiving others and ourselves. We embrace it by making sacrifices for one another. We embrace it by serving as living reminds to people that they matter.

The paradox of Christian love is that it is in emptying of ourselves, as we hear in that Second Reading from Philippians 2:6-11, that we are exalted. Our actions might not get us praise or even a "thank you." Our actions might entail costs of time, money, or popularity. Our actions might even cost us friends. But our actions might just do something else: save someone and help them to learn who God is, all because we were willing to reach out to them in love. Hopefully we start by letting the Cross do that for us by never forgetting what it's significance truly is, and carrying that message to everyone who fills our life, letting it be something that truly triumphs over despair, sin and death by filling the shadows with the light of God's love.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul