

Sunday of the Cross

By Bishop George Khodr

Tomorrow we would be halfway through Lent and the Church places the Cross in front of us to encourage those who might have become bored or tired of the struggle in fasting. The Cross is placed in the midst of different kinds of fragrant flowers and plants; the cross is also surrounded with three candles pointing to the eternal sacrifice of Christ where-by the Father had seen His Son crucified before the creation of the world ready to offer life to the world through Love.

Each of the Faithful walks over to the center of the church, where the Cross is, kisses it and receives from the priest a flower denoting that the Cross that has been accepted is our way to Paradise and Joy. And to make sure that the faithful do not think that Joy comes to them from much ease and a base sense of exhilaration, the Church reminds us through the Gospel reading of what Jesus says: "He who wants to follow me let him deny himself, carry his cross and follow me". The Lord says "If you *want* to follow me" because nothing can force you to seek Jesus and commit yourself to Him. Freedom is your kingdom and from there you choose to go to either salvation or perdition. And God is happy with your freedom though He does not desire your destruction. You cannot be in His image if you do not act freely like Him, for God did not create human robots to amuse Himself with what they do. The un-coerced free person is the one that goes to God and commits himself to Him or rejects Him.

"Who wants to follow me let him deny himself". That means let him consider that his "I" does not exist. In that he is a slave though Jesus has said: "I do not call you slaves anymore". There is slavery only in the world of sin. God has canceled our slavery after He made us sons in His beloved Son. Even though there is the risk of lazing as sons, yet God is pleased with the relation of Fatherhood after He has lifted His wrath from us in the Beloved Son Jesus with all what it entails of an adventure because there is no other alternative for sonship except slavery.

You throw away your "I" according to what Paul has said: "It is not I who lives but Christ lives in me." You are "He" through love and He is "you" even though your natures are different from each other and the persons are also distinct from each other.

"Let him deny himself, carry his cross and follow me". Here the evangelist speaks of the many "crosses" that come your way in your life. According to the Old Testament, the cross is an abomination since it says: "Cursed is he who is hanged on a tree". Christianity is realistic since it considers you crucified on the existence we live. Christianity is not a rose garden. It can become so if you choose to make your daily sufferings, the physical and the psychological, a path for you to see the Light. We suffer pain not considering it as coming from God in order to purify us or

test us. God is not whimsical and tyrannical as some policemen are. You throw yourself into God's bosom the way you are, and after that you lean on His breast as John did during the Last Supper. Jesus in turn will take away your cross from you and He would nail Himself on it though He does not find it pleasant; but He has become "drunk" with you with what you are about of misery and He wants you to be with Him so you can savor His Splendor. The Lord ends His call by saying "and follow me". That is that you would have enough of His mind so you would follow Him to the end of His earthly course which is Calvary. And so when you sit at His feet, you would receive all of your life and existence from Him.

Jesus confirms this course by saying: "For what benefits Man if he gains the world but he loses himself". If you accept your crucifixion, it is that the Savior would take away from you all what you have or what you think you have or what you consider is yours. Thus there is complete emptying of self such that there is no décor in you, no gold or prestige or power that brings you joy, no beauty tempts you, and you are not ashamed of your poverty and the limitations of your intellect and your culture, and you would be ready for hunger and scorn and mistrust and disrepute coming from those who are jealous of you, and when you are insulted by those who insult God and speak ill of you; if you can bear all that with a loving heart for the sake of Jesus' little brothers, you would be thus losing this world and gaining yourself in the true reality which is the reality of Christ.

With that you would have moved out of this present time to the one coming though your body is still here. It is not important for them to kill you but to overcome you thinking that with that they can efface you; they do not know that you efface them.

Man is at a loss thinking that what he owns can make of him a good human being or can make him more important. All those who think that Man's value is a function of his externals make a great mistake. When Jesus says: "What can a man give for himself", it is as if he is saying that nothing can amount to the inner being, or real Joy, or the divine dignity that is poured on Man. The choice is between real being and additions to that. When God "creates" you, you do not put on any other garment and cannot add anything to what He has wrought in you.

Strange is the saying of the Saints that "poverty is richness". Perhaps this is what Paul meant to say by "all those who are baptized in Christ have put on Christ". And this is told to the newly baptized while they are still naked. One wonders at those Christians who believe that they have a garment of gold on them when in fact they are clothes-less.

Whoever speaks about the cross has to understand the above speech or else he does not belong. We (Christians) are as such and that is all what we have. When we preach Christ crucified, we would have preached him as having risen from the dead. That is a dual action pursuant to Jesus' words "Now is the Son of Man glorified and

God is glorified in Him”, or when He says somewhere else “Glorify me Father with the glory that I had with you before the beginning of the world”. In both sayings His glory is in the love He has revealed to his disciples in voluntarily dying for them. The moment He willed to die, He achieved victory. And the appearances to His disciples afterwards were only a conveyance of this victory. Telling of His death as we are commanded by St. Paul is a proclamation fo His resurrection and a living in it and through it free of death.