

The Feast of the Triumph of the Cross: God Loves Us to Death

For five years I lived in one of the most beautiful places in our country, believe it or not, in New Jersey. I attended Don Bosco Seminary in Sussex County, the Northwest corner of New Jersey. This is an area of green rolling hills and the most colorful autumns you could ever imagine. It is hard to explain the hills of New Jersey to folks who have lived in the flat area of Florida all their lives. The hills just seem to pop up everywhere. Naturally the main roads are in the valleys between the hills.

When the Salesians of St. John Bosco, who ran Don Bosco Seminary, first arrived in Sussex County in the 1920's they were greeted with a most unpleasant sight. On the hill directly across from the seminary, the local Ku Klux Klan erected a burning cross to welcome the Catholics. Anti Catholicism was part of their many prejudices. Time went on. The seminary and the order grew. The KKK faded away, at least from Northwest New Jersey. Forty years later the Salesians remodeled their chapel. In the center of the sanctuary they placed a large burnt cross as a sign that the hatred of men could not destroy the love of Christ. Sadly, this cross was replaced by a traditional crucifix, but the burnt cross made a lasting impression on me and on many others.

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross. The origin of this feast is shrouded in two events: The recovery of the true cross by St. Helena in 326 and the recovery of the cross from the Persians in 628. Which event is true and which is mere legend? We really don't know. I would think the first, but the feast itself dates from the second. Regardless, the Triumph of the Cross is the Triumph of Jesus Christ whose love for us and obedience to his Father climaxed with his death on the cross. Moses lifted up the serpent on the cross in the desert. People looked at this cross as prefiguring Jesus' cross which healed us all. In John's Gospel we hear Jesus telling Nicodemus that he would be lifted up so that all who see him and believe in him would have eternal life. *For God so loved that world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life.*

The cross is the symbol of the Christian. It is our sign of our personal relationship with our Savior. He died not just for people in general but for me and for you. He calls us to join him on his cross not just as a people but as individuals. The ideal that he realized is the goal of our lives, to make real the only true love there is: sacrificial love.

Some people treat the cross as a trinket. For them the cross is merely a piece of jewelry. Other people treat the cross in a superstitious manner. They give a cross powers that belong to God. These people have seen too many cheap horror movies and act as though a cross can defeat evil spirits. It is not the object that conquers evil, it is the power of Christ whose presence the object reminds us that conquers evil.

The deeper meaning of the Cross is presented in today's second reading from the *Letter of Paul to the Philippians*. Jesus emptied himself completely, not just becoming a human being but accepting the worst public death of the society he was in

to demonstrate the extent of the love of God for us. He died making a willing statement of love, filling the world with the love he had for his Father and his Father has for him. We are saved from the horrors of evil, from meaningless lives due to the love of the Lord. Because Jesus died on a cross for us we are able to proclaim to the world: **Jesus is Lord**. His love made this possible. When we wear a cross we are saying: Jesus is Lord of our lives.

This is the ideal set before us: as followers of Jesus, as people with a personal relationship with the Lord who loves each of us, we have to be willing to sacrifice everything we have to fill the world with the Father's love. Our daily turmoil, our problems, our pains all take on an infinite value when we trust them to Jesus, when we unite them to his cross, to our cross.

How much does God love the world? He loves the world so much that he gave his only son to the world so that when he would be lifted high on a cross all might be saved through him.

Praise be Jesus Christ in whose cross we find meaning in this life and eternity in the next.