

Sunday Of The Veneration Of The Holy Cross: The Third Sunday Of Great Lent

Introduction

On the Third Sunday of Great and Holy Lent, the Orthodox Church commemorates the Precious and Life-Giving Cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Services include a special veneration of the Cross, which prepares the faithful for the commemoration of the Crucifixion during Holy Week.

Historical Background

The commemoration and ceremonies of the Third Sunday of Lent are closely parallel to the feasts of the Veneration of the Cross (September 14) and the Procession of the Cross (August 1). Not only does the Sunday of the Holy Cross prepare us for commemoration of the Crucifixion, but it also reminds us that the whole of Lent is a period when we are crucified with Christ.

As we have “crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (Galatians 5:24), and will have mortified ourselves during these forty days of the Fast, the precious and life-giving Cross is now placed before us to refresh our souls and encourage us who may be filled with a sense of bitterness, resentment, and depression. The Cross reminds us of the Passion of our Lord, and by presenting to us His example, it encourages us to follow Him in struggle and sacrifice, being refreshed, assured, and comforted. In other words, we must experience what the Lord experienced during His Passion - being humiliated in a shameful manner. The Cross teaches us that through pain and suffering we shall see the fulfillment of our hopes: the heavenly inheritance and eternal glory.

As they who walk on a long and hard way and are bowed down by fatigue find great relief and strengthening under the cool shade of a leafy tree, so do we find comfort, refreshment, and rejuvenation under the Life-giving Cross, which our Fathers “planted” on this Sunday. Thus, we are fortified and enabled to continue our Lenten journey with a light step, rested and encouraged.

Or, as before the arrival of the king, his royal standards, trophies, and emblems of victory come in procession and then the king himself appears in a triumphant parade, jubilant and rejoicing in his victory and filling those under him with joy, so does the Feast of the Cross precede the coming of our King, Jesus Christ. It warns us that He is about to proclaim His victory over death and appear to us in the glory of the Resurrection. His Life-Giving Cross is His royal scepter, and by venerating it we are filled with joy, rendering Him glory. Therefore, we become ready to welcome our King, who shall manifestly triumph over the powers of darkness.

The present feast has been placed in the middle of Great Lent for another reason. The Fast can be likened to the spring of Marah whose waters the children of Israel encountered in the wilderness. This water was undrinkable due to its bitterness but became sweet when the Holy Prophet Moses dipped the wood into its depth. Likewise, the wood of the Cross sweetens the days of the Fast, which are bitter and often grievous because of our tears. Yet Christ comforts us during our course through the desert of the Fast, guiding and leading us by His hand to the spiritual Jerusalem on high by the power of His Resurrection.



Moreover, as the Holy Cross is called the Tree of Life, it is placed in the middle of the Fast, as the ancient tree of life was placed in the middle of the garden of Eden. By this, our Holy Fathers wished to remind us of Adam's gluttony as well as the fact that through this Tree has condemnation been abolished. Therefore, if we bind ourselves to the Holy Cross, we shall never encounter death but shall inherit life eternal

Icons Of The Commemoration

The most common icon associated with the Veneration of the Cross is the same icon used on the Feast of the Veneration of the Cross on September 14. In the icon, Patriarch Macarius is standing in the pulpit elevating the Cross for all to see and venerate. On each side of the Patriarch are deacons holding candles. The elevated Cross is surrounded and venerated by many clergy and lay people, including Saint Helen, the mother of Emperor Constantine.

In the background of the icon is a domed structure that represents the Church of the Resurrection in Jerusalem. This church was one of the churches constructed and dedicated by Emperor Constantine on the holy sites of Jerusalem.

Another icon related to this feast depicts the actual service of veneration that is conducted in the churches on the Third Sunday of Lent. In the center of the icon is the Cross (1). It is on a table surrounded by flowers (2). Above the Cross is the image of Christ in a partial mandorla representing His glory (3). He is blessing those who have gathered to venerate the Cross, the rulers, clergy, monastics, and laity.



1. The priest stands amongst the people holding the Cross.



2. At the foot of the cross are flowers.

As in the service of veneration, the icon shows the priest venerating the Cross as the people chant the hymn "We venerate Your Cross, O Christ, and Your holy Resurrection we glorify," which is inscribed on the table holding the Cross.



3. Christ appears about the congregation extending His blessings.

