

GOOD FRIDAY

Just as at yesterday's Mass of the Lord's Supper I spoke about the development of the rite of foot washing, this afternoon I want to reflect on the centuries-long development of an integral part of every Good Friday service, the veneration of the cross. The cross is, of course, the most common of all Christian symbols, and learning something of the different ways in which our forerunners in the faith venerated it may enhance our own understanding and appreciation of what Christ's cross can and should mean in our own lives.

If we Christians ever ask ourselves what was the most significant happening in the first century of our era, we naturally think of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but for the Jewish people the most significant event would have been the conquest of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus in the year 70. About a half-century later, the emperor Hadrian founded a Roman colony on the ruins of the city, intending it to be inhabited by his legionnaires. This meant that the places consecrated by the passion and death of Jesus had been profaned and even deserted. Only after the emperor Constantine became a patron of the Christian faith in the fourth century was it possible for the bishop of Jerusalem to have excavations made to ascertain the location of these holy sites. Calvary was identified and the wood of the cross discovered--and this had everything to do with the origin of the ceremony that evolved in the succeeding centuries and that we will participate in this afternoon.

The earliest evidence we have of veneration of the cross comes from the diary of a woman named Egeria, who traveled from Spain to the Holy Land around the year 380 and left us precious details about the religious services held in Jerusalem during Holy Week. She writes that on Good Friday morning a gold and silver box containing the holy wood of the cross was brought to Golgotha and placed on a table before the bishop, who was seated there. Then, she writes, "all the people, catechumens as well as faithful, come up one by one to the table. They

stoop down over it, kiss the Wood, and move on.."1 This veneration was a rite by itself, distinct from a service with readings from Scripture and preaching by the bishop held later in the day.

Relics of the cross were soon sent to other parts of the Christian world. In Rome, veneration of a relic of the sacred wood developed as part of a longer liturgy instead of remaining simply a way for individuals to express their devotion. A Roman *ordo* from the first half of the eighth century describes a procession from the Lateran Basilica to the Church of the Holy Cross, with the pope and his ministers walking barefoot in front of a reliquary containing the precious relic, while cantors chanted verses from Psalm 118. On arriving at the church, the reliquary was opened and placed on the altar by the pope, who then prostrated himself in prayer before the altar, rose, kissed the relic, and went to stand at his chair as the other ministers proceeded to kiss the cross in their turn. Afterward, the relic was brought from the altar to the edge of the sanctuary where the laity could likewise venerate it with a kiss. All the while, readings from Scripture were being proclaimed.

Several decades later, another Roman *ordo* describes the extension of the veneration to various churches throughout the city and its suburbs. No longer was it a matter of venerating a relic of the true cross, but rather of kissing wooden crosses that had already long since served as symbols of Christ's saving death. Another major change was that the veneration was now accompanied not by readings but by the chanting, in Latin, of the words "Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the savior of the world," with the response, "Come, let us worship," a practice that continues to this very day.

After another century at Rome, the Good Friday service had attained the same general form that we still have: readings, solemn intercessions, veneration of the cross, and Communion. As described in a Roman *ordo* from the latter half of the ninth century, while two priests left the

church itself to get the hosts that had been consecrated the previous day, a cross was brought out from behind the altar in a short procession marked by three stops, with two cantors singing in Greek at each stop the so-called *Trisagion*: "Holy God; Holy Mighty One; Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us," the choir responding with the same words in Latin. All this time the cross was veiled, the veil being removed only when the procession reached the front of the altar and the presiding priest chanted the same phrase used decades earlier: "Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the savior of the world." Individual veneration of the cross and reception of Communion followed.

It is easy to see that the entire service was now more unified, and "this attempt to create a more orderly ritual is not without symbolic significance. After kissing the cross, which is highlighted as the instrument of salvation [and which can be seen as a response to the proclamation of the passion from the Fourth Gospel], one approaches to receive the eucharistic Body of the crucified one."² There was now attained a certain balance between a communal dimension, with the entire congregation venerating the cross during the procession, and an individual dimension marked by each person's coming forward to kiss the cross, accompanied by chanting drawn mostly from Psalm 118. As you would expect, some minor changes entered the service during the ensuing centuries, but what I have just described from the ninth or early tenth century is not all that different from what we do today. Even the unveiling of the cross is still permitted, though not required, by the current liturgical books.

It seems to me that several general and somewhat practical conclusions can be drawn from this rapid historical survey. First, we are very much part of a long liturgical tradition. It has gradually evolved, and it may very well evolve further, but if so, the changes will likely continue to be only gradual. What we now have on this very solemn day is surely a quite

satisfying blend of some very crucial elements: readings from the fourth song of the Suffering Servant, a part of the Old Testament that has always struck Christians as a remarkable foreshadowing of Christ's passion; New Testament readings not only of the passion narrative but also of subsequent reflection in the Letter to the Hebrews on what it means to have Christ Jesus as our great high priest; prayers or intercessions for practically every conceivable group of persons on earth; the opportunity to venerate the central symbol of the Christian faith both communally and individually; and the reception of the sacramental Body of the Lamb who was slain for us. That all of this richness should be made available to us in simply one service could well elicit the rhetorical question, "For what more could one ask?"

Secondly, although I didn't dwell on the fact, it is worth noting that while we could rightly call this a kind of Roman liturgy--it is, after all, found in the *Missale Romanum*--liturgical historians point out that elements of the veneration of the cross have come from a number of different cultures and places. We have seen how it all started in Jerusalem, in a service described for us by a woman who had traveled there from northwestern Spain, at the opposite end of the Mediterranean; the introduction of the procession of the cross into the sanctuary is said to have occurred under influence from Gaul, that is, modern-day France; prayers that were at times recited by individuals as they approached to venerate the cross can be traced to Celtic or Germanic sources; the chants that are sung have ancient Jewish roots; and what has been called "Roman sobriety" has ensured that the overall service avoids the exuberant emotional extremes that might appeal to some persons but that would be off-putting to most. What a magnificent example of the universality of the Church and of the way it is possible to draw good things from many different sources.

Finally, whatever problems face our country and our Church both now and in the future, we can surely be thankful for a service that allows us to be mindful of what for us Christians will always stand at the center of human history. Reading in the newspapers about all the momentous events transpiring in the contemporary world might lead us to lose perspective. If so, it would be worth reflecting on something the great diplomat, political scientist, and historian George F. Kennan once wrote. In his diary entry for Good Friday in 1980, Kennan said:

Most human events yield to the erosion of time. The greatest, most amazing exception to this generalization [is that] ... a man, a Jew, some sort of dissident religious prophet, was crucified.... In the teachings of this man were two things: first, the principle of charity, of love [and] ... secondly, the possibility of redemption in the face of self-knowledge and penitence.... The combination of these two things ... shaped and disciplined the minds and values of many generations--placed, in short, its creative stamp on one of the greatest flowerings of the human spirit.³

If each of us were to keep those principles in mind and live accordingly, we could certainly face the uncertainties and challenges of the future with confidence--confidence in God the Father and in his crucified and risen Son, Jesus Christ. When some minutes from now we come forward to venerate Christ's cross and then come forward a second time to receive his sacramental Body in Communion, may we do so with something of the fervor and faith that marked the lives of countless holy men and women who have done the very same thing down the centuries.

1" John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels to the Holy Land*, rev. ed. (Warminster, U.K.: Aris & Phillips, 1981), 137.

2" Donald G. LaSalle Jr., "Devotion Searching for a Place in the Liturgy: The Development of the Good Friday Veneration of the Cross in the West," *Worship* 88 (2014);106. Most of the historical data in this homily come from this article.

3" Quoted by John M. Buchanan, "The Ultimate Mystery," *The Christian Century*, April 2, 2014, p. 3.