

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at Evensong & Benediction
Holy Cross Day
September 14, 2014

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There is a funny connection between Holy Cross Day and the beginning of my ordained ministry in 1970. It is about that time I began carrying an envelope of tacky little crosses with me on hospital visitations. My protestant congregation used mostly secular hospitals. None of these had crucifixes in the patient rooms. My little crosses were representations of the San Damiano crucifix. So they really were tacky little crosses in a *literal*, not artistic, sense. They could be pressed against a wall and the sticky stuff on the back would adhere. I suppose the hospital maintenance staff did not appreciate this aspect of my pastoral care of the sick!

A person lying in a hospital bed has more opportunity than the rest of us for quietly gazing at a cross. Saint Francis of Assisi called the crucifix *a sermon in wood*, a sermon that speaks to us of the wonderful love of God. And lying in a hospital bed, my parishioners needed to know, day and night, Who loves them.

It is never easy to believe in the love of God. We need less proof of His *power* or His *wisdom*. The evidence is all around us. But much of the time the evidence for God's love is found only in one place: in the Cross of Christ. In that Cross we see that God, in giving us His Son, *gave us His all*. And we need to know that especially at a time when *our physical body* doesn't seem to be worth much.

The Cross is also a sermon about divine forgiveness. In Catholic churches there always used to be a Cross mounted over the pulpit. The sermon is nothing unless it is the proclamation that the Gospel is good news saving us from the guilt and power and penalty of sin. Sin is more than a theory! It is an awful fact whose sinister influence can be attested in each and every one of us. The Cross proclaims that Christ is more than an example. He is a *Saviour* Who came into the world to save sinners and Who has put away the inevitability of sin by the sacrifice of Himself. We need to know that, and especially when *our souls* do not seem to be worth much.

The Cross is also a symbol of the moral power of self-sacrifice. The Cross teaches that self-sacrifice is the most splendid thing in the world, and by far the most

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fruitful thing for others and for us. The Cross reminds us that the very word **sacrifice**, *sacra facio*, means “to make holy.”

What does it mean to *glory* in the Cross? What did St Paul mean by it when he said, “God forbid that I should glory, save in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ?” (Galatians 6:14) St Paul was using symbolical language. A symbol is a representation, in some sort of sign or picture, or brief form of words, of a comprehensive principle of truth. In mathematics, the letters of the alphabet are used to represent definite values. At a wedding, rings are the symbols of the completed circle of life brought about by the union of a man and a woman in marriage. In our worship the ceremonies and props, vestments, candles, and all the rest, are symbols. They are valuable not for what they are in themselves, but for the ideas they represent and suggest to us. They are different from sacraments for they do not actually convey God’s grace to the soul. Symbols nevertheless have sacramental value in that they help produce in us the necessary disposition so we may receive God’s grace. It is in this way St Paul “glories in the Cross.” The Cross sums up the essence of the Christian Gospel. The Holy Cross is what St Francis said it is, *a sermon carved in wood*. Just as the word spoken preaches to the ear and helps put us in the place of maximum exposure to God’s grace, so too the Cross preaches to the eye, if we can say that.

How often in the confessional I ask a penitent in need of God’s love, “Do you have a crucifix at home?” “Yes, Father.” “Do you *look* at it?” The Cross is not just a piece of furniture or wall decoration filling an empty space! Today we honor the fact that the Holy Cross is the most powerful object lesson in the meaning of the Catholic faith.