The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
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Mary & I enjoy spending time with our children and grandchildren, whenever we can; whether it be in France, Alaska or Albuquerque. It's amazing to watch our grandchildren develop, both physically and mentally, as they grow older. Seeing grandchildren as young as three or four count to at least 100, in French as well as English, is amazing to us, but we're easily impressed grandparents. However, this year's liturgical calendar would really confuse them. For you see, last week was the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, while next Sunday will be the 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time. So that makes this Sunday, falling in between, the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time; right? Then, why is this Sunday the **Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross** and not the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time? It's so because this feast is always celebrated on September 14 and whenever the 14th falls on a Sunday, like it is this year, then it takes precedence. Note that because of the cyclical nature of the Gregorian calendar, this feast hasn't been on a Sunday since 2014 and won't again until 2031. Therefore, it isn't common to see this combination of lectionary readings on the same Sunday. But they're combined for a specific purpose, for this feast celebrates the salvific power of the Cross, the central symbol of Christ's Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Through the Cross, the Lord's power is revealed, and humanity finds reconciliation and hope for salvation and eternal life.

But first, why is this feast on September 14? Going back to the early days when Christianity was "legalized" throughout the Roman Empire by Constantine in 313 A.D. with the Edict of Milan, he sent his mother, Helena, who would herself eventually be recognized as a saint, on a mission to identify significant sites in Christ's life. In Jerusalem, she successfully identified the site of Calvary and Jesus' nearby tomb. There, tradition holds that Helena found three discarded and buried crosses believed to crucify Jesus and the two thieves. But since she couldn't determine which cross was that of Jesus, she arranged for a test. A sick woman was brought from the town. When that woman touched the first and second crosses, her condition did not change, but when she touched the third and final cross, she suddenly recovered. Therefore, that third cross was determined to be the True Cross. Additionally, a church was erected on the site of Calvary and Jesus' tomb, which today is known as the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Christ's cross was first shown to the faithful on September 14 of the year 335—exactly 1,690 years ago today.

About 300 years later, the cross was lost as a war trophy to the Persians, but was recovered a few years later and returned to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Since that time, this feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross has been celebrated on this date commemorating these three historical events:

- The finding of the Cross
- The first showing, or exaltation, of the Cross, and
- The recovery of the Cross from the Persians.

However, the heart of our celebration today is NOT the physical wood of the Cross; rather, it is on the infinite love shown by Jesus' selfless and perfect sacrifice on that Cross which results in boundless mercy to be poured forth upon the earth. For as we just heard Jesus tell Nicodemus in today's Gospel, in arguably the most widely known passage in the Bible which succinctly summarizes the good news, the entirety of the Gospel, in one sentence: **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life."** (Jn 3:16)

The Cross itself is a cruel instrument of torture and death. But the mystery of the Cross is that such a horrific symbol has become the symbol of God's perfect love. It showcases his ability to turn the worst into the best: Through Jesus' death on that Cross, he transformed the greatest act of cruelty ever known into the greatest act of love and mercy ever bestowed upon the world.

But the Cross of Christ is only effective if we open ourselves to God's mercy flowing from his selfless sacrifice and allow ourselves to be transformed, making us new children of God. Jesus calls us, just as he did in

last week's gospel, to "carry [our] own cross and come after me." (Lk14:27) When we offer our sufferings and endure injustices and hardships for Christ, we share in his redemptive power.

As we commemorate the triumph, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, call to mind the crosses you bear each day. Due to our human nature, when faced with crosses, we tend to seek a way out, succumb to self-pity and often spiral into anger and despair. But what if we allow Jesus to join us in carrying those crosses, so as to transform us and use us for his glory, our good and the good of others? Crosses in life should NOT be avoided; rather, they should be transformitive. Although suffering may remain, it can become redemptive suffering, which will—in turn—bear an abundance of good fruit in ways that only God can accomplish.