

Title: The Cross: Life or Death?

Date: September 14, 2025

ID: Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Scripture: John 3:13-17

All biblical citations are from John's Gospel except the two from his epistle marked 1 John. FFS is my book For Us and For Our Salvation. The page number follows.

Text: The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross raises questions on how Christians live in this world. After the faith's long development, what is genuine, what is secondary, what is counterfeit?

First this feast's Gospel: John's third chapter is a conversation between Jesus and a leading Pharisee named Nicodemus. The Gospel's Prologue (1:1-18) sets up a dynamic question. Jesus brings new life, "the light to the human race" (1:4). The light challenges the darkness. Each person must decide whether to be reborn into the light of divine life. Nicodemus arrives in the darkness. Jesus invites him to new birth (3:2). Nicodemus chose life (7:50 and 19:39).

What is new life? To embrace the light is to abide in the God of love (1 John 4:8 and 1 John 4:16; see also our embrace of life through the Eucharist [6:31-65], contemplate especially [6:54-57]).

This feast is about the Cross. John sees the Cross an instrument of divine love. At the Last Supper, Jesus says "No one has greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15: 11-15). The reader might pause to see how living in the God of love fills the Lord's thoughts before His death; read 14:21-24; 15:9-17; 16:27; 17:20-26. The Cross attracts because it is an instrument of God's love (3:14-15; 8:28-30; 12:32).

One who loves cannot judge or condemn. Jesus tells us that the Father does not condemn (5:22) and that He will not condemn (in today's Gospel 3:16-18; also 12:44-50; 14:47).

Over time, the Cross became an instrument of imperial power and a talisman for warriors. The emperor Constantine claimed to see a vision of the cross at the battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312. It included these words: "In this sign, you will conquer." Constantine fought protracted, bloody wars for power in the Roman empire from 306 to 324. After the vision, his soldiers wore the cross. In 326, his mother Helena excavated the cross. Constantine built the Church of the Holy Sepulcher over the spot. The church's dedication was the beginning of this feast. The mix of the cross, power, and warfare did not end. The Persians conquered Jerusalem in 614 and took the cross. The Byzantine emperor Heraclius defeated the Persians and returned it in 628. This feast, then, became universal.

Should the Cross be a sign of power and an instrument of war? Before deciding, believers should contemplate the scene of Jesus before the representative of Roman power, Pontius Pilate (18:16-19:16; FFS, p 63-64). In our country, some Christians want political power; google Christian nationalism in the United States and/or Catholic integralism. They want the judgment; they want power to condemn.

In John, Christianity's power is the power of love because God is love.