

THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS 2025

On the 14th of September, 335, the bishops of every region of the eastern part of the Roman Empire except Egypt, bishops who had just been assembled for the Synod of Tyre, met in Jerusalem to dedicate a magnificent two part church built by the Roman Emperor Constantine, joining the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher and the Shrine of Calvary under one roof. The Synod of Tyre was one of the most embarrassing duds in the Church's long history, but the grand, new church in Jerusalem was well worth celebrating.

I suppose that there is something instructive about celebrating a church dedication attended by a less than mediocre bunch of bishops. It is a reminder that sometimes less than mediocre leaders can be part of something good and beautiful. It is a reminder that great blessings can flow into the future from events that hardly seemed like blessings at the time.

The principal relic possessed by the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher and the Shrine of Calvary was a large piece of the Cross of Christ. By 335, the Wood of the Cross no longer formed a cross shape, but large pieces of it had been preserved from imperial authorities during long and dreary centuries of intermittent persecution. The imperial government made a point of building a temple of Venus right on the site of Jesus' Sepulcher, the place of the Resurrection. That petty act did not limit the power of the Risen Lord, and by 335 the Empire had bowed its proud head and knee before Him. In one sense, the dedication of a new imperial basilica and shrine over the sites of the Sepulcher and Calvary was a sign of the Church's triumph.

At the same time, the presence of the bishops who had just participated in the ignominious Synod of Tyre was a sign of the Church's troubles. Triumph and troubles. The Church is always triumphant because the Grace of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ is at work in her, and His Grace is never without effect. The Church is always troubled because the human beings who comprise her laity and clergy have all of the usual human weaknesses. An honest unbeliever can never look at the Church without noticing saints and heroes. An honest believer can never look at the Church without noticing knaves and fools.

The Church's Triumph was extremely noticeable as that great church in Jerusalem, with its relic of the True Cross, was dedicated. The Crucifixion had been done by imperial authority, but now the emperor himself solemnly proclaimed the Lordship of the Crucified and Risen One. The Empire which had deliberately defiled the site of the Lord's Crucifixion, Burial, and Resurrection, now deliberately set aside that site to be honored by the entire Empire. People who had been imprisoned and tortured 30 years earlier for being Christian attended the dedication of a church built by an emperor who proclaimed himself a Christian.

The Church's trouble was also noticeable on that day. I am not one whose heart goes pitter patter with joy when I hear the word "synod" in its various forms, simply because the Church's synods, or decision making meetings, have been a very mixed bag down through the centuries, with the holy, the good, the bad, and the ugly, all well represented. The Synod of Tyre in 335 was one of the ugly synods. At it, a herd of mediocre bishops turned against one heroic bishop, St. Athanasius, bishop of the Egyptian metropolis of Alexandria. The arch-heretic Arius [THIS MIGHT BE A BIT DENSE TO TAKE IN BY EAR; HOW ABOUT AVOIDING THE ADJECTIVE UNTIL YOU HAVE DESCRIBED WHAT MADE HIM A HERETIC? of Alexandria, confronted by the tension produced by the biblical teaching that Jesus Christ is true God and

true Man, declared simply that Jesus Christ was not God at all. St Athanasius insisted very forcefully that Jesus Christ is indeed true God, following the Council of Nicea in declaring that He was “Consubstantial” with the Father. The mediocre bishops at Tyre considered it a reasonable compromise to say that Jesus Christ is sort of God. When St. Athanasius refused to accept that and called it blasphemous nonsense, the bishops at Tyre deposed him (a verdict rejected by the Church’s presiding bishop, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope) Out of sheer desire to avoid conflict, the bishops at Tyre endorsed an absurd, unsustainable compromise, and turned ferociously on the one hero among them. Ugly. As often happens, people whose decision making was all about avoiding conflict ended up with lots of conflict. **[THIS IS THE WISDOM THEY NEED TO HEAR–DELIVER SLOWLY]** As often happens, the hero had the final word - but that’s not how things looked in 335.

Triumph and trouble. That is the reality of the Church’s life. It is the reality of my life. It is the reality of your life. It is the reality of the Cross, whose exaltation we celebrate today. On Good Friday, the Cross was trouble. An innocent Man was being killed on it. On Easter Sunday, the Cross became a sign of triumph, the Crucified One having conquered death and made His Death the Sacrifice for all the sins of humanity, piled up and stinking from Adam and Eve to the end. The instrument of trouble had become the sign of eternal triumph, St. Paul, for example, exclaiming, “God forbid that I should boast, save in the Cross of Christ.”

Today we will venerate the Cross of Christ, the instrument of deadly trouble that became the sign of eternal triumph. We do so as people whose world is troubled, and whose lives are troubled.

Our lives are troubled. We have sins. Yet, as St. Paul says, where sin abounds, Grace does more abound. The Sacrifice of the Cross has the power to absolve all the sins we lay before the Cross, and the Risen Lord has power to give the Grace that turns sinners into saints. We come before Him and His Cross troubled, but looking forward to triumph.

Our world is troubled. Who can forget that on September 11, 2001, hundreds of innocent people were callously slaughtered because some people didn’t like their government’s foreign policy? Who can forget that on September 10, 2025, a publicly prominent American was callously killed in front of his wife and young children because some people didn’t like some of the things he said? A land where your speech can get you killed is no longer entirely free, and that is surely a deeply troubling thought. Troubles abound. But Grace abounds all the more. Grace is at work in people who rise above natural fear to defend the innocent. Grace is at work in people who rise above the fear to speak the truth, as best, with God’s help, they can recognize it. Every day there are triumphs of courage and charity, of faith, and of hope.

Our lives are a battlefield of triumph where, if we persevere in God’s Grace, love and courage throw down hate and fear. Our world, too, can be such a battlefield of triumph. In our world criminals and tyrants have their moment, but they are of dust, and to dust they do return. The humble and contrite heart, attentive to God’s word, is not dust. By the Grace of the Risen One it soars into divine Life, and lifts up the body with it. Even in this world, the memory of criminals and tyrants fades, while the work of the heroes endures. Triumph rises out of the ash heap of troubles.

As we receive the Eucharistic Lord today, and then reverence our veneration cross, with its sliver of the True Cross, we come laden with troubles. May we lay them at the foot of the Cross and entrust them to the Risen Lord, and then rise triumphant, aware that we have been

redeemed, and live in a world that has been purchased forever for God by the Blood the Risen and victorious Lamb of God.