

## THE CROSS AND THE CROWN

Rom 8:31-39; Jn 19:25-27

Over 70 years ago, the Irish pilgrimages donated the Crowned Cross to the Sanctuary of Lourdes. That great golden Cross on the dome of the Rosary Basilica dominates the esplanade.

Its design is interesting. It's not a Cross with a crown on top; it's not a Cross surrounded by and contained within a crown. It's a Cross rising out of a crown.



That is saying something about the crosses that we meet in our lives. The crown symbolises the power and glory of God. The glory doesn't sit above the Cross, separate from it and out of reach, as if we first have to endure the suffering and only then to rise into glory. [Sometimes that's exactly how we feel – just grimly enduring, with no sign of light.] But that's not what Jesus says. He says, “Blessed *are* the meek; blessed *are* those who mourn; blessed *are* those who suffer persecution for the sake of justice” (Mt 5: 2-10).

He says that those who receive his word wholeheartedly will receive, thirty, sixty, a hundred fold in this life “and in the age to come, eternal life” (Lk 18: 30, cf. Lk 8:4-15). Even in the darkness of our pain, there can be a deep sense of trust and peace because we are already living in Christ who is our hope,

The glory of the crown doesn't surround and cover the Cross, hiding it, so that we do not have to face the pain and the sorrow of our suffering, so that we do not need to feel our vulnerability [We can sometimes feel that way too when things are going well: for instance we rode the Celtic Tiger without a care in the world although all tigers are potential man-eaters. We can easily forget how fallible and vulnerable we are.] That's not what Jesus says either. He tells us to take up our cross and follow him if we want to be his disciples (Lk 14: 27). He tells us that when he is lifted up on the Cross, he will save those who look on him - - as the bronze serpent that Moses set up in the desert saved the Israelites who looked at it, and believed, and were cured (Jn 3:14, 15).

No, the Cross rises *out of* the crown. On the Cross Jesus died for us. He showed the love greater than which no one has (Jn 15:13). His was a love of utter generosity. But, infinitely more than that, he showed us the love which is the very essence of God. God *is* infinite love which flows without limit in the endless ocean of the life of the Blessed Trinity.

That love is invincible because it is the love which made and which sustains the whole universe and every part of it. “Not a sparrow falls to the ground without your Father knowing it” (Mt 10: 29). That is why the Cross growing out of the crown of God's glorious life is not the bloodstained wood of Calvary. It is what the Cross has now become – the great symbol of the love that was shown by the death and resurrection of Jesus – the glorious, unconquerable life and love of God. It is a golden Cross of light and life which points to the new creation, the new Jerusalem, which is lit by the crucified Lamb (Rev 21: 23).

The meaning of the Cross is to be found in the infinite life and love that was revealed on Calvary. The only Son was sent by the Father so that the world might believe in that all-powerful love (Jn 3:10). What God promises is beyond our wildest imagination. But we know that God's love will answer every longing; remove all evil; overcome every injustice and lead us into the communion of all the blessed, where every human tear will be wiped away; every human gift will flourish and be celebrated without envy or rivalry. We will see in every gift a reflection of the love which has saved each one of us and in which we all rejoice. We will be gathered as God's family in God's love, in the presence of our Father, as sons and daughters in the Son, united by the Holy Spirit.

That is why we can be certain of the victory of the Cross in the lives of those who follow Christ – not any power, or height, or depth, nor any created thing can come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord – made visible most clearly on the Cross [First Reading].

At the first Apparition here in the Grotto, Bernadette initially found that she couldn't move her hand to make the Sign of the Cross until the Blessed Virgin showed her how. From that day on, Bernadette *always* made the Sign of the Cross with extraordinary reverence. Pope Benedict, speaking about that first apparition, said "The sign of the Cross is a kind of synthesis of our faith, for it tells how much God loves us; it tells us that there is a love in this world which is stronger than death, stronger than our weaknesses and sins.. It is this mystery... that Mary came to reveal here in Lourdes." (Eucharistic Celebration, Lourdes, Sunday 14 September 2008)

When we make the Sign of the Cross on ourselves, we recognise our vulnerability, and our suffering, past and present – and whatever suffering may be yet to come. We express our willingness to suffer with Jesus, to take up *our* cross and follow him, even to Calvary, even to death. We know that he never promised us freedom from pain. But he showed us that our suffering is not just some meaningless, pointless agony to be endured.

We sign ourselves with the sign of his Cross, but we do so in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We say that not only does suffering have a meaning, but its deepest meaning is the infinite love which is the inner life of the Holy Trinity – a love which is compassionate and merciful, a love which suffered for us on the Cross, a love which is the very foundation and meaning of the whole universe.

That is the love that Mary believed in, even on Calvary; that is the love that filled her heart as she made the Sign of her Son's Cross with Bernadette; that is the love that must now, as the Gospel shows us, continue between Mary and John and among all his followers; that is the love that we come here to learn.

In the first Apparition here, Mary taught Bernadette the entirety of the message of Lourdes" -- the unconquerable love of God that shines in the Cross for us.

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