

Suffering and the Cross in the Message of Our Lady of America®!

Variations of the cross symbol have been used throughout antiquity, mostly for ornamentation and with different meanings in different cultures. **The use of the cross that is of the utmost importance to us as Christians is that which was used by the Roman Empire as a method of punishment, the most cruel punishment, for slaves and the worst of criminals.** Roman citizens were never condemned to crucifixion no matter how heinous their crimes. St. Paul, a Pharisee and a Roman citizen who persecuted the early Christians before his encounter with the resurrected Christ, became the great apostle to the Gentile world and the greatest preacher on the glories of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Tradition tells us all the apostles, save John, were martyred. Peter was crucified upside down on the cross as he felt unworthy to die the same way Jesus had because of his three-fold denial of Jesus during His bitter Passion. Paul is believed to have been beheaded around the mid 60's A.D. during the reign of the madman Nero Caesar whose name deciphered by the Hebrew alphabet is "666", the number of the beast in the Book of Revelation. Nero is credited with setting Rome on fire and blaming the Christians so he would have an excuse to kill them.

The symbol of the cross is one of the most sacred in Christendom for it speaks to the awesome mystery of God's saving love for all mankind, that unconditional and limitless love, for nothing, not even the most vile and vehement sufferings inflicted upon the Son of God could put any limits on His love or on His forgiveness. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do," Jesus uttered as He poured out every drop of His Precious Blood from such a multitude of open wounds. Can we even imagine such love? Often the early Christians feared to use the cross symbol too openly lest they be identified and persecuted. By 135 A.D. the Roman wars that followed those early persecutions had destroyed much of Jerusalem and the holy places connected with the saving Passion, death and burial of Jesus. These places were desecrated as pagan shrines were built over their ruins.

We have all heard the story how Emperor Constantine I, a sun worshipper whose mother Helena was Christian, had a vision in which he saw a cross of light superimposed over the sun, and saw the words "in hoc signo vinces," "in this sign you will conquer," and how the emperor had his soldiers put that sign of the cross on their shields. Victory in battle came swiftly to them at the Melvian Bridge in 312 A.D. Thereafter Constantine embraced the Christian's God and began to inaugurate reforms and laws that favored Christians. In 313 A.D. he issued the Edict of Milan legalizing the practice of the Christian faith in the Roman Empire and outlawed crucifixion and made

Sunday the day of rest. In 325 he called on the bishops to convene the Council of Nicaea, the first true ecumenical council, and formulated the Nicene Creed to condemn the Arian heresy by confirming the divinity of Christ. It is said that much of his life was anything but Christian and that it wasn't until shortly before his death that he was actually baptized.

It was Constantine's mother, St. Helena, grateful for the conversion of her son and his favor to Christendom, who went to Jerusalem in search of the holy places and sacred instruments of Christ's Passion. After locating what was believed to be the site of Christ's crucifixion and that of His burial, the Shrine of the Holy Sepulcher was built on the spot. Tradition speaks of a number of wooden crosses found there, but only one brought healing to the sick when touched and was thus determined to be the true cross on which hung our Savior. The dedication of the Shrine of the Holy Sepulcher, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, is one of the greatest feasts of the Orthodox Church and took place on September 14, 335 A.D. That feast that gives a festal tone to the veneration of the cross that is not possible on Good Friday, is also celebrated in the Western Roman Catholic Church on the same day.

Reference: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_I_and_Christianity

The power of Christ's cross is prefigured in the cross with a bronze serpent that Moses raised in the desert and which brought healing to all who were grievously ill when they gazed upon it. It is this same power of the cross that Our Lady of America® addresses in her message to Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil. Prior to Our Lady's appearance, St. Michael the archangel appeared to Sister offering her a palm and a sword. When Sister became suspicious of a palm for victory, not thinking of any victory of hers that would warrant such a reward, St. Michael offered her the cross, which she readily accepted. As Bishop Fulton J. Sheen would say, **you cannot be crowned until you have fought the battle, until you have suffered.** In February of 1957, Our Lady spoke to **the meaning of the cross-- that Divine Love that knows no bounds in what it will suffer for the sake of the beloved.**

My Son asks of souls love, that true love willing to sacrifice itself for the One loved. O my little one, daughter of my Pure Heart, you must pray with greater fervor and offer yourself with greater love to the Heart of my Son. My humble one, my small flower, we must have more souls who love, love unselfishly and without reserve. Who does anything who does not love?

I wish to gather about me, my tender child, soldier and valiant bearer of the torch, an army of brave lovers, who as my torchbearers will enkindle the fire of Divine Love in the souls of men. Only those who are

strong in love can become my soldiers to bear aloft, not the sword of destruction, but the sword of fire, the flaming torch of Divine Charity.

I come to you, O children of America, as a last resort. I plead with you to listen to my voice. Cleanse your souls in the Precious Blood of My Son. Live in His Heart, and take me in that I may teach you to live in great purity of heart which is so pleasing to God. Be my army of chaste soldiers, ready to fight to the death to preserve the purity of your souls. I am the Immaculate One, Patroness of your land. Be my faithful children as I have been your faithful Mother.

I am the Mother of the sacred humanity, and it is my special work as co-redemptrix of the human race to help souls reach the sanctity of the Father in eternal union by showing them how to put on Christ, to imbibe His Spirit, and thus become one with Him. (Sister Mildred (Mary Ephrem) Neuzil, Diary, OUR LADY OF AMERICA©, Fostoria, Ohio, Pgs. 15- 24.)

On February 11, 1958, Our Lady spoke further to Sister about suffering:

My child, nothing is accomplished without pain. Prepare to suffer much. You see the sword in the Heart of your Mother. Suffering completed the work of divine grace in my soul. He who refuses to suffer will never abide in the Spirit of Christ, will never be formed into His image.

I ask greater sacrifices of the most favored and beloved of my children. I ask in the Name and for the love of my Son, Who so desires this. If I ask for reform of life, it is first from the chosen that I look for it. They must by the example of a sacrificial life lead the way for souls to union with Christ, honoring the Father by putting on His Spirit and His likeness in all things. O my small one, beloved of my Son's Heart, prepare yourself by prayer, penance, and suffering for what is to come. (Diary, Pgs. 23-24.)

On March 11, 1958, St. Joseph came to Sister Mildred in this image and with some words of his own regarding suffering.

As St. Joseph ceased speaking I saw his most pure heart. It seemed to be lying on a cross which was of brown color. It appeared to me that at the top of the heart, in the midst of the flames pouring out, was a pure white lily. Then I heard these words: "Behold this pure heart so pleasing to Him Who made it. ... The cross, my little one, upon which my heart rests is the cross of the passion, which was ever present before me, causing me intense suffering. I desire souls to come to my heart that they may learn true union with the Divine Will. " (Diary, Pg 28.)

The cross speaks of a Love that will stop at nothing to lay itself down for its loved ones, sacrificing its life so they might live. This is what Jesus did on Calvary for each one of us, and no one on earth could be more united in that suffering, crucified with Him than His own Mother who shared so intimately every moment of His life and His death with Him – He the Redeemer, she the Co-redemptrix through whose Immaculate Heart He would choose to pour out His grace upon all her children, ransomed with His Blood and bequeathed to her at the foot of the cross. “Son, behold thy Mother; Mother, behold thy son.”

Although St. Joseph was not physically present on Calvary, His heart, so one with Jesus and Mary, was truly there and sharing in that one work of redemption with them in some deep and mysterious, mystical way.

My heart suffered with the Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Mine was a silent suffering, for it was my special vocation to hide and shield, as long as God willed, the Virgin Mother and Son from the malice and hatred of men. The most painful of my sorrows was that I knew beforehand of their passion, yet would not be there to console them. Their future suffering was ever present to me and became my daily cross. I became, in union with my holy spouse, co-redemptor of the human race. Through compassion for the *sufferings of Jesus and Mary* I co-operated, as *no other*, in the salvation of the world. (Diary, Pg. 13.)

This is the meaning of the cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the cross of our salvation. It was offered to Sister Mildred on a First Friday in June of 1956 when Our Lord appeared to her as she describes in her August 16, 1956 letter to her spiritual director, Father Paul F. Leibold.

Jesus came to me holding a large cross and a crown of thorns. He said to me smiling, as though He knew what the answer would be (He did of course). “I come with My cross and My crown of thorns, will you accept Me My spouse?” You know the only answer I could give Father. Who could refuse Jesus anything? During the night I awoke and Jesus said to me, and He said it with a profound emphasis: “I have placed you upon the Altar of Sacrifice.”

On June 14th, anniversary of my perpetual union with Jesus, He asked me again: “Bride of My Heart, do you still wish to suffer all things to give Me to souls?” I answered: “Yes, yes dear Lord, I am poor and wretched, and unworthy, but you know what is in my heart.” He said, “My little white dove, will you then continue to wear the Crown of Thorns, and permit yourself to be nailed to the Cross?” I told him in the best way I could, how much I desired Him to do with me just as He desired. So in this way my desires are wholly united to His.

It is the same cross that Jesus offers us when we are baptized into His death and He challenges us to be His disciples, **“If you will be my disciples, pick up your cross and follow Me.”** How many times do we sign ourselves with the cross, the mark on our foreheads saying we are consecrated to Jesus and will inherit a share in His glory?

Your Cross

The everlasting God has in His wisdom foreseen from eternity the cross that He now presents to you as a gift from His inmost Heart. This cross He now sends you he has considered with His all-knowing eyes, understood with His Divine mind, tested with His wise justice, warmed with loving arms and weighed with His own hands to see that it be not one inch too large and not one ounce too heavy for you. He has blessed it with His holy Name, anointed it with His grace, perfumed it with His consolation, taken one last glance at you and your courage, and then sent it to you from heaven, a special greeting from God to you, an alms of the all-merciful love of God.

Will we be as quick to accept our cross as Sister Mildred was in accepting hers, and in refusing Jesus nothing for the salvation of souls? Let us pray with her to the Most Holy Trinity to be filled with such Divine Love as to be able to say “Yes!”

O Father, Infinite Goodness, behold Your child, clothed in the likeness of Your Son. Extend to me Your arms that I may belong to You forever.

O Son, Divine Lord, made man, crucify me with Yourself that I may become, in union with You, a sacrifice of praise for the glory of Your Father.

O Holy Spirit, Fire of Everlasting Love, consume me on the altar of Divine Charity, that at the end of life, nothing may remain but that which bears the likeness of Christ.

O Blessed Trinity, worthy of all adoration, I wish to remain in spirit on my knees, to acknowledge forever Your reign in me and over me, to Your everlasting glory.

And with St. Paul, let us proclaim:

"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world".

“With Christ I am nailed to the cross. ... ” (Galatians 6:14; 2:19.)

... and laid on the altar of sacrifice!

Copyright © Contemplative Sisters of the Indwelling Trinity, Fostoria, Ohio, September, 2010. All rights reserved.