

**“This Child is destined for the fall and rising of many ... and for a sign which will be spoken against”
(Lk 2:24)**

✠ Lecture IV: On the Veneration of the Holy Cross ✠

In Holy Scripture, the word ‘cross’ has two meanings – one with spiritual meaning and another with material meaning. In what follows, we shall, by the grace of God, mention some Holy verses that contain the spiritual meaning of the cross but our main focus will be about the veneration of the sign of the cross.

✠ The Spiritual Cross:

Talking and meditating about the spiritual cross is beyond the scope of this lecture, however, we may just mention a few verses:

- “He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.” (Mt 10:37)
- “Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Gal 5:24)
- “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)
- “The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Cor 1:18)

✠ The Sign of the Cross:

The cross is the principle symbol of the Christian religion recalling the crucifixion of Lord Jesus Christ and the redeeming benefits of His passion and death. Thus, the cross is a sign of both Lord Jesus Christ Himself and the faith of the Christians. This is the sign, which will appear in heaven before the second and final coming of Lord Jesus Christ – “Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Mt 24:30). – Before the time of emperor Constantine, Christians were not allowed to portray the cross and to openly display it for such actions might have exposed them to sever danger. After Constantine converted to Christianity in 337 AD, he abolished crucifixion as a death penalty out of respect and veneration to Lord Jesus Christ and the Christians were free to display the cross and to say with St. Paul:

→ “God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal 6:14)

In the 16th century, the Protestants refused the veneration of the cross and rejected its use considering it ‘idol worshipping’ until the 20th century when ornamental crosses on their buildings of worship started to appear. This lecture is intended to answer some of the frequently asked questions about the sign of the cross.

Q1: What is the meaning of drawing the sign of the cross on oneself?

A1: We make the sign of the cross in the following way: We unite the three fingers (thumb and two closest fingers – to signify the Holy Trinity) of the right hand (sometimes the five fingers are grouped together to remember the five holes in the holy body of Lord Jesus Christ – 1 in each wrist, 1 in each leg, 1 in the right side) and bring them to our forehead saying “In the name of the Father,” honoring God the father, the Master of everyone. Next we lower our hand to the mid to lower section of the chest saying, “and of the Son,” which denotes the descent of the Son of God to earth and His incarnation of the holy St. Mary for our salvation. Afterward we place our hand on our left shoulder and finish by crossing over to the right one saying, “and of the Holy Spirit,” which expresses our faith in the reconciliation with God via the work and grace of the Holy Spirit that will transfer us from the left side to the right side (Mt 25:33). – This is basically a summary of the whole Christian faith as we recall several important articles of faith:

- a) Faith in the Holy Trinity.
- b) Faith in the Incarnation of the Son of God.
- c) Faith in Redemption and Atonement through the cross.
- d) Faith in being on the right hand of the Lord in the Last Day.

Q2: What is the benefit of making the sign of the cross and is it biblical?

A2: The benefits are numerous for this is the first lesson we teach our children and thus plant the articles of the Christian faith in their hearts. We also proclaim our faith to the world and thus receive the blessing of the words of our Lord, “whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God” (**Lk 12:8**). – Some of the biblical benefits and blessings of the sign of the cross are:

- a) (**Gen 48:13-19**) → Israel put his right hand on Ephraim’s head who was on his left hand side and his left hand on Manasseh who was standing on his right hand side, making the sign of the cross and blessing them. Thus the sign of the cross became a source and a means of blessing.
- b) (**Ex 12:7**) → The doorpost and the lintel of the house form two perpendicular lines as the sign of the cross. Thus by putting the blood on them the Israelites were actually making the sign of the cross on their houses and they were saved through the cross from the plague.
- c) (**Ex 17:11,12**) → Moses the prophet had his hands outstretched as a sign of the cross and by this sign the Israelites were able to conquer Amalek. Likewise, we are victorious in our spiritual warfare by the grace of God through the sign of the cross for it is written, “having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it [the cross]” (**Col 2:14,15**).

Q3: Shouldn’t we only honor the actual cross upon which the Saviour was crucified and not the others which have been fashioned by sinful men? These are not worthy of any veneration.

A3: Elder Cleopa of Romania answers saying: Then we should also do the same with Holy Scripture.

Today we have an incalculable number of publications of Holy Scripture, which, in your opinion, we should not honor, as sinful or even faithless printers have published them. Only the original text would suffice in this case. This, however, is absurd for a reasoning person, as is your previously formulated opinion irrational.

Q4: How is it possible for us to honor the instrument that was the means to put our Saviour to death?

A4: The cross was the alter upon which Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief High Priest, offered Himself up as a Sacrifice (**Heb 9:11-14**) and thus redeeming us and saving us from the death of sin. The cross is a sign of power (**1 Cor 1:18**) and a sign of victory and triumph (**Col 2:15**). It is the instrument of our salvation and the sign of our redemption thus, the sign of the cross will announce the second coming (**Mt 24:30**) and therefore, is worthy of all veneration and honor. The Copts celebrate two feasts for the cross: on Tout 17th – September 27th (the apparition of the sign of the cross to emperor Constantine) / on Baramahat 10th –March 19th (the discovery of the cross by Queen Helen).

Q5: Why didn’t our Savior die by any way other than the cross?

A5: St. Athanasius answers saying:

- a) It is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (**Deut 21:23**). – Thus if He came to bear our curse, how else could He do so unless He received the death set for a curse?
- b) It is only on a cross that a man dies with outstretched arms. Here, again, we see the suitability of His death on the cross. It was as such that He might draw His ancient people and the Gentiles and join them both together in Himself, “If I am lifted up from earth I will draw all people unto Myself.” (**Jn 2:32**)
- c) The cross provides a death in the air, which is the sphere of the devil, the enemy of our race – “according to the prince of power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (**Eph 2:2**). – Our Lord came to overthrow the devil and purify the air and open a path for us to heaven this was accomplished by His death being lifted up in the air – “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” (**Lk 10:18**)
- d) By the death on the cross His body was kept whole fulfilling the prophecy (**Jn 19:33; Ex 12:46**). – No bones of His body were broken as a strong evidence of the oneness of the Church, which is His Body (**Col 1:24**) thus, leaving no excuse to the heretics who cause schism and divisions.

* This lecture is adapted from ‘*Comparative Theology*’ by H. H. Pope Shenouda III.