



## Starting Afresh from A Place of Light

### Exaltation of the Order of the Holy Cross 2008

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*"Ours to glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"*

Visiting the different communities and confreres in the provinces around the world, I have heard from several a recurring question, a troubling problem about the place of honor and present meaning of the holy Cross within our Order. In reclaiming our foundational values it certainly is fitting that the identity of the Crosiers as brethren of the holy Cross deserves prominent attention, fresh inspiration and renewing light.

It is my hope and prayer that this year's solemn celebration of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross can help us approach the Jubilee celebration of our founding as the Order of the Holy Cross by focusing on our Crosier identity as the brethren of the holy Cross.

Most Crosier authors note that the very first name for our Order, *fratres sanctae crucis*, brethren of the holy Cross, extends back to the very early Helena legend of her founding of the first order of the holy Cross in Jerusalem. This first fraternity was charged with (in a literal sense) the guardianship of the newly discovered Cross. We see in icons of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross St. Helena, depicted on one side of the Cross lifted high, presenting her discovery to the bishop of Jerusalem, and the fraters of the Holy Cross, on the other side, accepting the devoted service of honoring and guarding the Cross.

These brethren of the holy Cross of St. Helena were charged also with wearing a sign of the Cross sewn on their clothes to signal (*per figuram*) visibly to the contemporary eye the triumph achieved by the wood (*lignum*) of the Cross over evil (*malignum*). Besides this sewn visible sign, these brethren were charged with a moral duty (*moribus*) to give palpable witness to that triumph over evil achieved because of the wood of the Cross. For these reasons, the Crosier poem tells us, they are called *fratres sanctae crucis*.

Whatever the historical truth value of this early Crosier poem, *ad colendum mente pura*, it is clear that it concentrates artistic and moral value as well as motivational spirit and apostolic inspiration for the 13th Century Crosiers who wrote it. The prime spiritual reason the Crosiers of the second founding (1210) are considered brethren of the Holy Cross has to do less, literally speaking, with guarding the wood-relic in Jerusalem (326) and more to do, morally speaking, with example and witness of life, with giving credible clear witness to the glory and victory of the wood of the Cross over evil. The brethren of the holy Cross were to discharge a duty (*egit*), an ever-fresh keeping alive the memorial of the glorious triumph of God through the Cross.

The language of this classic Crosier poem is strongly sacramental and exegetical. The brethren of the Cross themselves are the outward sign – both in public apparel and in evident demeanor – of the deepset mystery of the Cross. The Cross as mystery will always point beyond itself to the realm of God's plan and salvation design for the world: the plan God intended was victory (*salus*) over every evil. The brethren of the holy Cross sensed that their

lives were watched for indicative, credible signs of God's triumph and victory over evil. The brethren, dedicated to the Cross, lived pre-consciously a pro-active sign of that mystery of the Cross: God accomplishing in their way of living a solid fraternal hope of triumph over evil.

Throughout the history of the Order, the Crosiers, because of their name, have always troubled themselves to meditate and think through their identity based on this elemental numinous name: brethren of the holy Cross. Confrere Matthiu Vinken outlines how this ever-renewing appropriation was always personal and always liturgical. The personal appropriation of the mystery of the Cross often mirrored the contemporary historical context. When a strongly Christological humanism developed, the meditative appropriation tended to be more 'human' as well. Thus, especially under the influence of Bernard of Clairvaux and later Franciscans, the motifs of Jesus' human suffering, personal pain, and, correlatively, our compassion with Jesus, developed also as accents among Crosiers. In the shadow of Anselm's theory of atonement, the personal appropriation for Crosiers of the meaning of the Cross also meant meditating on the great price and sacrifice that redemption cost, paying back the debt of sin and evil. Crosiers tended, then, to personally and experientially offer their felt prayers of gratitude mixed with holy trepidation that the human race was purchased for so great a price.

Vinken also adds that the liturgical appropriation was, by contrast, always more mystic and biblical than primarily personal. When the brethren of the holy Cross were celebrating the liturgy, they recited the praise of salvation for God's action in Jesus Christ: the *magnalia dei*. The appropriation in the liturgy was less subjective, emotional and personalized and more euchological, cosmic, objective, ecclesial. The whole new people of God benefited from the work of God accomplished on the Cross. Crosier liturgy responded with joy, jubilation, and thanksgiving. Vinken writes, "The same shouts of joy resound in the text of the mass and the breviary on the feasts of the Finding and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross...celebrated as a second Easter." The shout of "salvation" in cruce was standard Crosier fanfare.

The brethren of the holy Cross vocally echo the praise of the church, when gathered in liturgy, praising the Father for the mystery of love accomplished in giving all that God is and intends for humanity through the Cross of Jesus. This liturgical-sacramental mysticism for Crosiers was more like that of the first millennium church, where mysticism meant appropriating the transpersonal depth and inner sense (*mysterium*) of Word and sacrament more than what it came to mean, in the second millennium, a pursuit of heightened personal and emotional experience.

For brevity sake, let us jump to the last century. The 1925 Constitutions of the Order made a serious attempt to name explicitly how Crosiers appropriate contemplatively the holy Cross: The brethren devote themselves to the Cross by meditation and contemplation and instill in others a love for the Holy Cross by conversation, preaching and good example. The 1962 Constitutions articulated something similar, but with a slight variation: Salvation is in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the brethren shall live in community...in unanimous love and combine apostolic life in service of the church with the divine office. The brethren shall particularly venerate our Savior, who leads us by his Cross to the joy of the children of God. All brethren stimulate the veneration of the mystery of the life-giving cross both in themselves through the divine office and meditation and in others through conversation, exhortations, and good example.



Although these 20th century texts -- almost by default -- retain clear emphasis on the brethren's service of the Cross, by meditation and contemplation, the modern 'turn to the subject' accentuates meditation and contemplation (*ad intra*) in conjunction with preaching, conversation, and example to others (*ad extra*). The axis of apposition seems to be personal appropriation, on the one hand, and other-directed ministry, on the other. Furthermore, the liturgy, by close connection with meditation, would almost seem -- so uncharacteristically for Crosiers -- to be reduced to personal devotion (*ad intra*).

Contemporary Crosiers, on the eve of our celebration of the 800th Jubilee of our founding, do well to ask again the question of identity. Who are we and how are we the brethren of the Holy Cross? Likely there will always be personal and experiential reasons for each of the brethren to be devoted to the Cross of Jesus, reasons and images chosen from his own personal meditation, life experiences, brushes with evil and failings. The great jubilee, nevertheless, gives special warrant for answering the question of Crosier identity through a broader attention to history and ecclesial continuity with the longer transpersonal tradition. The *fratres sanctae crucis* of the 13th Century were able to experience in their own foundation as the Order of the Holy Cross a re-foundation, a second foundational identity and Starting Afresh in their connection with Helena's novel establishment and charge to the *fratres sanctae crucis* at the time of the finding of the Cross. The continuity of identification was understood to be a participation in God's triumph in the Cross of Christ and victory over every evil, human and inhuman throughout history.

Especially our younger members, in the course of their initial formation and theological study, are again exploring the identity of the brethren of the Holy Cross, and their own adequate fit in this fraternity of the Cross. I warmly encourage this search and research into the Crosier theology of the Cross. It is important for all of us and for the future vitality of our charism. Meditate it, contemplate the mystery, and share what you discover. Write out, paint, and chant what you learn. The wide variety of available theologies and contemporary spiritualities of the cross, of atonement, of redemption, salvation and liberation, deserve the best thoughtful efforts and consideration of our thinking young men, to keep alive and fresh the heritage and charism given to us. Our communities should be places of light and enlightenment for our candidates and, even more certainly, places where all of us are brethren of the holy Cross, identifying with and celebrating the great mystery of the triumph God accomplished for all times and places, for all peoples and cultures, in the Cross of Jesus, raised up in the plan of God to experience new life with Christ our Lord. Our life lived in community as *fratres sanctae crucis* is itself an apostolic proclamation of that good news. Even in 2010, Crosier identity as *fratres sanctae crucis* will always incorporate both personal and liturgical experience of this mystery of the Cross which God spoke as his final Word: salvation.

