

# SAINT THEODORE THE STUDITE

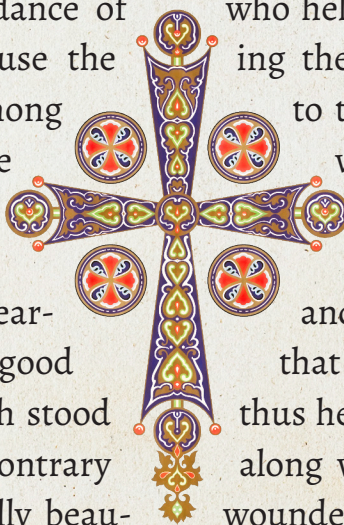
## *Oration on the Veneration of the Precious and Life-Giving Cross*

*for the Sunday of Mid-Lent<sup>1</sup>*

**T**HIS IS A DAY OF GREAT exultation and festal delight because the symbol of joy is in our midst. Today's feast is a choral dance of praise and doxology because the all-holy Cross is present among us. How inestimable is the value of this precious gift! How magnificent is the beauty of this sight! Its appearance is not a mixture of good and evil, like the tree which stood once in Eden, but to the contrary it is wholly good and wholly beautiful both to behold and to partake, because the wood of this tree brings not death but life. It gives light and not darkness. It leads us into Eden, it does not send us into exile from it.

*cf. Gen 3:6*

*cf. Gen 2:17*



This is the wood upon which Christ ascended like a king mounting a chariot,<sup>2</sup> with which he destroyed the devil who held the power of death, freeing the human race from slavery to the tyrant. This is the wood with which, as if he were a great warrior, the Master was wounded in his hands, and in his feet, and in his side, that is, the very body of God, and thus healed the bruises of our sins along with our nature which was wounded by the evil dragon. And if I must add something to these praises, this is the wood upon which the Master's blood was spilled, endowing it with invincible power that burns the demons and illumines the world.

*Isa 53:5*

<sup>1</sup> "Mid-Lent" renders the Greek word μεσονήστιμος ("the middle of the fast"), which appears frequently in early liturgical texts and rubrics. <sup>2</sup> The Greek term (τέθριππος) denotes a chariot with a team of four horses yoked abreast, which is perhaps an allusion to the four arms of the Cross.



Who, then, would not hasten to gaze upon this most desired and sought-after sight? Who would not long to embrace this green and divinely planted shoot? Come, then, gather round, all people and nations, of every race and age, whatever your rank or way of life, priests and kings, rich and poor. And because this festival has been established by God, it seems to me that angels will also gladly join our celebration, and that the apostles with one accord will dance together with us, along with the multitude of prophets, the array of martyrs, and the assembly of all the righteous. For how could they not rejoice with us at the appearance of the trophy by means of which, in imitation of Christ, they defeated the hostile power of the devil and were crowned with heavenly glory? It also seems quite possible to me that even things lacking perception will rejoice with us too, by which I mean the earth, who like a mother produced from her womb this great fruit; and with the earth, *Ps 95:12* *all the trees of the forest*, since they now share in the honor bestowed on the wood of the Cross. And the all-shining sun; and the gleaming moon; and the brightly beaming stars; and the great and revolving heaven itself—all these, I say, rejoice with us today because through the death of Christ on the Cross all things have experienced a change to a superior condition.

Let the prophet David therefore strike his spiritual harp, singing what is now most timely: *Ps 98:5<sup>LXX</sup>* *Exalt the Lord our God and worship at the footstool of his feet, for He is holy*; and let Solomon, who is unsurpassable in wisdom, join him in song and say: *Wisdom 14:7* *Blessed is the wood through which righteousness comes*. The Church, as you now see, has become Paradise sprouting forth *the Tree of Life in its center*,<sup>3</sup> in which there is no deceptive demon deceiving Eve but rather an angel of the Lord Almighty protecting all who draw near. Today the all-holy Cross is venerated, and the resurrection of Christ is announced to all. Today the life-giving wood is raised up, and the entire world is given new life to praise the Lord. Today the arms of the Cross are raised up, and jubilation resounds to the four corners of the world. *How beautiful*, it says, *are the feet of those who preach the Gospel of peace and good things*, and blessed also are the eyes, I might add, of those who see the trophy which procured the peace of the whole

*cf. Rom 10:15*

3 The same phrase appears in St Theodore's canon for the Third Sunday of Lent (Ode 5).



world; and blessed are the lips that have kissed this sign which transcends all good things. Grace is set before all of us unbegrudgingly and everlastingly; it is a fountain gushing forth sanctification, never at any time sending anyone away from the riches of its goodness, but purifying even more those who are impure, cleansing them of their stains and defilement. It humbles the proud, rouses those who are *slow and dull of heart*, invigorates those bound by paralysis, and softens those who are unfeeling and merciless, if, that is, each one approaches with the promise of turning towards what is better, and does not advance rashly and recklessly toward divine things, since grace recognizes those who are modest and reverent and turns away those who do not bear these qualities.<sup>4</sup>

Prov 12:8

When we look upon this live-giving tree, it heals our vision which, having been deceived, formerly looked to that alluring tree in paradise. Pressing our lips and eyes to this life-giving tree, we are delivered from the taste of the tree that produced death. How great is the gift which stands before us! How joyful is this blessedness! Since formerly it was on account of a tree that we died, it is now through a tree that we have found immortality. Through a tree we were deceived, and through a tree we trampled on the serpent who deceived us. How strange is the exchange! Instead of death, we have received life; instead of corruption, we have received incorruptibility; and instead of shame, glory! Well did the holy Apostle cry out: *As for me, may I never boast, except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*, for it was from the Cross that a wisdom beyond wisdom blossomed forth, *making foolish the boasting of the world*, and it was from the Cross that the knowledge of all good things came to fruition, cutting off at the roots the first shoots of evil. Even the mere symbols of this tree, across all time, have betokened great miracles. Take heed, therefore, you lover of learning! Did not Noah, through the just judgment of God, together with his sons and their wives, and all the animals of the earth, escape the destruction of the flood by means of a small quantity of wood? Did not Jacob place the peeled wooden

Gal 6:14

cf. 1 Cor 3:19

4 The preceding first three weeks of Great Lent, with their fasting and ascetic exercises, are part of the preparation and purification required to approach and venerate the Cross with the "qualities" mentioned by St Theodore.



branches in the watering troughs of Laban's flocks during mating season after which he took those flocks as his own? And what was the rod of Joseph, the top of which Jacob the patriarch venerated, if not a symbol of the life-giving Cross that we are venerating today? And what again was the rod of Moses? Was it not a figure of the Cross, which at one time turned the water to blood and another time swallowed the pseudo-serpents of the soothsayers, and which with one blow divided the sea into two, and again united it, drowning the enemies in the sea but sparing the lives of the true Israelites? And the rod of Aaron was likewise a figure of the Cross, which blossomed immediately and indicated who was worthy of the priesthood.

I will surely seem to be extending my discourse beyond measure, gathering together figures of the wood of the Cross, such as the time when Abraham bound his son Isaac and placed him upon a pile of wood; and when Jacob, blessing the sons of Joseph, placed his hands on them crosswise. Observe with me, too, Moses, who extended his arms in the shape of a cross and repelled Amalek. And let us not fail to mention Elisha, who floated a piece of wood in the water and drew up the axe from the depths of the Jordan. And the figure of the Cross appears not only in the Old Testament but also under the dispensation of grace: it includes victories over barbarians, exorcisms of demons, cures from illnesses, and many other miracles the number of which is beyond calculation.

Do you see, beloved, what great power there is in the prefiguration of the Cross? And if these figures are so powerful, how much greater is the symbol of the crucified Christ himself? For it is obvious that the greater the power of the archetype, the more beneficial are their copies. But perhaps someone will say: "I seek to understand exactly what the type of Christ was in all the figures you mentioned." In response I say that it was the things themselves that trace out the figure the Cross, for just as the extension of Moses's hands was a figure of the Cross, so too was Moses himself a figure of the crucified Christ, who repelled the invisible Amalek. It follows that we must understand the same relationship in the other figures we considered, namely, that the one figure is present in the other. "But in the case of Moses," someone might say,

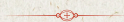


“the figure is alive. What do you have to say about inanimate objects?” Even in the case of the figure of the Cross, when what is seen (when it is the source and subject of the miracle) is something inanimate—as when the form of the Cross appears in an icon—we say that every image that has the form of Christ is of a nature to work miracles, whether it is animate or inanimate, since it has within itself both the shape and the form of the archetype, and thus it is obvious to everyone that it is identified just as much with the honor and veneration of the original as much as it is with name of the original. If these things appear to be a digression, they are in fact a refutation and overthrow of the heresy of iconoclasm, which seeks to overthrow the mystery of Christ’s dispensation of salvation. For the one who abolishes the image clearly abolishes with it the archetype, insofar as the two—as anyone with any intelligence knows—are simultaneously known and bound together.

But let us return to the Cross and let us delight, as it were, in the study of its holy name. The Cross is something more precious than all the things in the world. The Cross is the safest refuge of Christians. The Cross is the lightest burden borne on the shoulders of Christ’s disciples. The Cross is the most comforting consolation of tired and troubled souls. The Cross is the unhindered road for the journey leading us to heaven. The height and length of the Cross is wider than the expanse of the dome of heaven. The power and might of the Cross destroy every opposing power. The form and shape of the Cross is a sight more beautiful than all other forms and shapes. The ray and light of the Cross is brighter than the rays of the sun. The grace and glory of the Cross are greater gifts than all the gifts in the world. The Cross binds together heaven and earth and bestows peace upon them. The name of the Cross is sanctification, especially when spoken by the tongue and heard by the ear.<sup>5</sup> Through the Cross, death was put to death and Adam was restored to life. The Cross was the boast of every apostle, the crown of every martyr, and the sanctification of all the righteous. Through the Cross *we have been clothed in Christ and cast aside the old man*. Through the Cross, we have been marked as the sheep of Christ and placed in the sheepfold of heaven. Through the Cross, we strike

cf. Mt 11:30

cf. Gal 6:14  
Gal 3:26;  
cf. Eph 4:22

5 Hence the repetition of the word “Cross” more than fifty times in this oration.



*Lk 1:69* down our enemies and *raise up the horn of salvation*. Through the Cross, we put the passions to flight and freely determine to live our lives above the heavens.

*cf. 1 Cor 1:1* Whoever carries the Cross on his shoulders becomes an *imitator of Christ* and is glorified together with Christ. Seeing the Cross, angels are adorned and

*cf. Lk 23:43* devils are scorned. Finding the Cross, the thief entered paradise and in place of his thievery received the kingdom. The one who simply makes the sign of the Cross disperses his fears and, in their place, receives peace. The one who has the Cross as his protection will be safe from all harm and inviolate. Everyone who loves the Cross hates the world and becomes a lover of Christ.

O Cross of Christ, you are the esteemed boast of Christians! O Cross of Christ, you are the precious preaching of the apostles! O Cross of Christ, you are the royal diadem of the martyrs! O Cross of Christ, you are the priceless adornment of the prophets! O Cross of Christ, you are the splendid ornament of the entire world! O Cross of Christ, I speak to you as if you possessed a living and rational soul:<sup>6</sup> may you protect those who ardently sing your praises, and may you save those who venerate and embrace you in faith. Guide the faithful in peace and in the ways of Orthodoxy. Bring us all to the joyous day of the Resurrection of Christ! Protect bishops and kings, those in monasteries and those in the world, everyone in Christ Jesus our Lord, with whom is glory and power together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.



**THE PAPPAS PATRISTIC INSTITUTE**  
*Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology*

<sup>6</sup> The same phrase appears in Theodore's canon for the third Sunday of Lent (Ode 1). <sup>7</sup> For the Byzantine headpiece and Cross, and the layout and design of the text, the Pappas Patristic Institute is grateful to Newrome Press.