

**Triumph of the Holy Cross**  
**Notre Dame High School: Opening Mass**

14 September 2011

Dear brother priests, dear teachers and staff, students and friends in Christ:

***Introduction***

At this opening Mass of the school year we are invoking an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that Spirit which you first received in Baptism and in whose power you were strengthened in Confirmation. We are calling upon God to guide us safely and wisely through the course of the year: that we may teach and learn well, play fairly, cooperate generously and serve with integrity. For some of you this is your first year of high school – and you find yourself in an exciting new environment: finding new friends, new courses of study. For others, this is your last year at Notre Dame and you experience both sadness, fear of the unknown future of higher education or work and excitement about finishing a stage of your life. For all of you, staff and students alike, I pray that, under God’s guidance, the year will be fruitful, one you will look back upon with satisfaction, grateful for the opportunity to work and study at a great Catholic high school, and more grounded in your faith. A rewarding year is one lived with Christ as your Companion – and the growth of your friendship with him.

Dear students: You are blessed to have so many opportunities to grow not only in mind and body – which are so evident in Notre Dame’s academic standing and prowess in athletics and other extra-curricular activities – but also in spirit and faith. You have Religion classes which help you understand the beauty and challenge of the Gospel, the Christian witness of your teachers, and the opportunities to enrich your spiritual life through the Sacrament of Reconciliation and participation in Mass. I urge you to take full advantage of what Notre Dame offers: an education of the whole student – the body, the intellect, and the spirit.

Now I wish to offer a few reflections on the great feast we are celebrating today, the Exaltation, the lifting up, or the Triumph of the Holy Cross. And on that Cross is the Body of Jesus Christ who, from there high above the earth, draws all people to himself (cf. Jn 12:32).

### ***Sacred Symbol of the People of the Cross***

Religions are identified by their symbols. For Jews it is the Star of David and for Muslims, the Crescent Moon. For Christians, the Cross with the Crucified Christ is, undoubtedly, the greatest symbol of our faith. Among all our religious symbols none is more universal than the Cross. You see Crosses everywhere, on the walls of your school, in every church, in your homes, on chains around your necks and on rings; worn by old and young people, by believers, and by those who are unsure in what they believe. Not everyone can explain what the Cross

means or why they choose to wear one, but everyone has some sense that it is a symbol, perhaps the ultimate symbol, of love and sacrifice.

Christians, then, are “people of the Cross” and ours is the “religion of the Cross” – a designation given to our ancestors in the earliest days of the Church. From the outset, Christianity was distinguished from other religions by its worship of a crucified God. The ancients found it not only astonishing but even offensive revolting that Christians could make a crushed and agonizing man on a Cross the object of their love and worship.

The earliest depiction linking the Cross to Christians was found on the Palatine Hill in Rome, overlooking the great Roman Forum of the ancient world. There was crudely but clearly scratched a Cross, with the body of man – and the head of a donkey. Mockingly, underneath was written “Alemexonos – the name of a Christian man – worships his God.”

### ***The Cross as Provocative***

The Cross then and now provokes questions: Is it a reminder of the defeat of goodness, of a good man, Jesus, put to death by the cruelty of the Romans? Is its lesson that goodness is crushed by evil? Is it the triumph of senselessness, injustice and cruelty, a reminder of the utter powerlessness of the human person in face of his fate? Or perhaps it tells us that God is not all-powerful, that he could not save his Son from

death? Or worse, that God is indifferent before the degrading and shameful torture-death of his “only Son?”

I would answer that it is none of these, though it contains its own mystery and lessons for life. The Cross reveals itself as *the* sign of contradiction to the world. As a gallows used for provoking painful death, the Cross reveals that the world we live in provides no basis for an easy-going optimism which forgets the power of evil and its horrible consequences, both personal and collective.

Make no mistake: the Cross *is* a sign of the power of evil; Jesus, the “innocent one” was led like a lamb to the slaughter. He was the victim of a premeditated murder, the object of scorn, jealousy and fear.

### ***The Cross as the Revelation of God’s Power in Worldly Weakness***

But it is much more than that. It tells us who God is. Christ possesses the divine nature with all its prerogatives. Nonetheless, he freely chose not to live out his divinity in this world under the banner of power, greatness and dominion. On the contrary, he stripped or “emptied himself,” immersing himself without reserve in our human condition.

The Son of God did not only appear as a man, but he became one of us. He truly became the “God-with-us” who is not satisfied with looking down kindly upon us from the throne of his glory, but plunged in person into human history, becoming “flesh” or, in other words, a

fragile reality, like us, conditioned by time and space (cf. Jn 1:14).

This radical and true sharing in the human condition, in all things but sin (cf. Heb 4: 15), led Jesus to death, a death he freely accepted out of obedience to his Father's plan of salvation (cf. Phil 2:8).

The Cross is the sign that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3:16). Gave him, how and where? On the Cross, for our salvation.

### ***A Triumph of Love***

The Crucifixion gives us proof of the sacrificial and limitless love that led the Son of God to become man, vulnerable like us, even to dying as a crucified criminal. His nailed arms are open to every human person, and they invite us to draw near to him, certain that he accepts us and clasps us in an embrace of infinite tenderness: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (Jn 12: 32).<sup>1</sup> The manifestation of divine love is total and perfect in the Cross where, we are told by St. Paul, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Reflection after the *Via Crucis* (21 March 2008).

God's love for us was manifested in Jesus Christ, who himself went in search of the "lost sheep," a suffering and lost humanity. His death on the Cross was the culmination of the search. It "is love in its most radical form. . . . It is from there that our definition of love must begin."<sup>2</sup>

The Cross was Christ's ultimate sacrifice, his ultimate act of self-gift, the perfect expression of his love. Jesus was executed because he refused to stop loving. He knew that his mission in life was to love without limits. In his agony in the garden on the night before his execution, he rejected any compromise of that mission.

In truth, no greater love could ever be shown than that of Christ Crucified. On the crossbars, he radically fulfilled his own commandment of love. In this way he fully revealed the true God, the God who is love. Now we know who God is.<sup>3</sup> When we look upon the Crucifix and gaze at the Face of Jesus, our focus is not first on foremost on suffering, or even on sin and its consequences, but on a love that is absolute. That Face tells us that God is love and nothing but love for us.

---

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Meditation on the Twelfth Station of the *Via Crucis* at the Roman Colosseum (25 March 2005).

Yes, it is from the Cross that we can understand what it means for us to be loved – by that infinite tenderness of a God who not only stooped to wash the apostles’ feet but spared nothing to bring about our salvation. Jesus showed that self-giving love of one who looks exclusively for the good of the other, not to his own self-interest. And even more: he came among us to “beg” for our love in return and to teach us how to love others with the same sacrificial love.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the appalling power of evil in our world, we believe that it is *not* finally victorious. Here is the great paradox of Christianity and of our faith: the Cross seems like the failure of Jesus’ mission, but it is also the moment of the beginning of his triumph – when he was “saved from death,” when the Father took up his cause and raised him on the third day from the throne of seeming defeat. The Cross of Christ became triumphant.

In the Middle Ages those who designed the stained glass in the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe portrayed the Cross in green; green is the colour of life. The Cross was exalted as the tree of life. It was the reversal of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Eden, from which man ate, an act of fateful consequences for all humanity. By God’s power, this tree of defeat became the tree of victory: “where life

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily (29 March 2007).

was lost, life is restored.”<sup>5</sup> Even if the forces of darkness appear to prevail in our world, those who believe know that evil will not – in the end – have the final say.

From Calvary, Christ now invites us to acquire a unique perspective, a vision of the world which he alone can give: a vision where the world is redeemed – at a great price – and radically loved.

### ***Conclusion***

---

<sup>5</sup> Preface of the Triumph of the Cross.

Every Holy Mass, in fact, makes present the redeeming sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The Eucharist is therefore a making present of that act of infinite love with which the Son of God saved humankind and the world from sin and death.<sup>6</sup> We now celebrate the Love raised up for us on Calvary and which calls us to us to imitate it.

By your Cross and Resurrection, you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world.

— J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (11 September 2005).