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Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Date: Sunday, September 14, 2025 | **Season:** Ordinary Time after Easter | **Year:** C
First Reading: Numbers 21:4b–9
Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 78:1–2, 34–38 | **Response:** Psalm 78:7b
Second Reading: Philippians 2:6–11
Gospel Acclamation: We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you because by your Cross you have redeemed the world.
Gospel Reading: John 3:13–17
Preached at: the Chapel of Emmaus House **in the** Archdiocese of Harare, Zimbabwe**.**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today we lift high the Cross. Once a sign of shame, now the sign of love. Once an instrument of death, now the tree of life. The liturgy itself says it best: "For you placed the salvation of the human race on the wood of the Cross, so that, where death arose, life might again spring forth."

This feast has deep roots in the Church's history. It recalls the discovery of the relic of the True Cross by St. Helena in A.D. 326, and its solemn veneration in Jerusalem after the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in 335. Centuries later, when the Persians carried off the Cross, it was recovered and restored by the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius in 630 in a great act of triumph. From then on, the Church has kept this day not only as a memory of relics and emperors, but as a celebration of the Cross itself — the instrument of Christ's saving death and the greatest sign of God's love for us.

We celebrate, then, not only a piece of wood, but what it proclaims: Christ crucified and risen, the one who turns death into life and suffering into glory.

We celebrate the Cross itself — the wood on which salvation was won. The crucifix, which most of us pray before, shows us Christ's suffering love in flesh and blood. The Cross, lifted high today, proclaims that this suffering was not the end, but the victory. The crucifix reminds us of Christ with us in our pain; the Cross declares the triumph of life over death. Both belong together — but this feast points us especially to the Cross as the sign of God's great victory.

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And every time we trace that sign on our own bodies — in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit — we proclaim the same truth. It may feel like a simple habit, but it is always a prayer of faith. The Cross marks us, claims us, sends us, and transforms us. That same Cross we mark on our bodies is the Cross Christ asks us to carry in our lives.

As we take up our cross each day (cf. Mark 8:34), we are called to hold together the paradox at the heart of our faith: humiliation and glory, weakness and strength, death and life.

In the desert, Israel grumbled. They were tired, hungry, angry. And the serpents came. Death spread through the camp. Yet God gave them a remedy: a bronze serpent raised on a pole. A symbol of death became the sign of healing. Lift your eyes, and live. And here is the striking part: God didn't take away the serpents — He asked them to face the very thing that terrified them. Healing came through confrontation, not escape. The Cross does not cancel suffering; it transfigures it.

The psalm sings it: "He, being compassionate, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them." Israel forgot God, but God never forgot them. He forgave. He endured. He remained. This is not a God who stays far away. This is a God who suffers with his people. He does not erase the desert; he walks it with us. And in Zimbabwe today, he stands in the food queue, he sits in the crowded clinic, he searches with our young people for work. God is not absent. He is here.

Paul sings his hymn. Though he was in the form of God, he did not cling to equality with God. He emptied himself — *exinanuit* in Latin. The tradition calls this *kenosis* (from the Greek *ekenōsen*): the self-emptying of the Word, who takes on our humanity while hiding his divinity. Christ humbled himself in incarnation and crucifixion, and God highly exalted him. His humiliation became the very path of glorification. This is not weakness. This is the deepest power of God.

And we still see it today in the way many of you carry your cross. A parent who goes without so a child may eat. A nurse who stays past her shift with a frightened patient. A neighbour who shares the last cup of mealie-meal. The world may call it weakness. But the Gospel proclaims it the true sacrificial strength of the Cross.

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Then the Gospel itself speaks: “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.” (John 3:14-16) Death becomes life. Surrender becomes victory. Weakness becomes power. That is the contradiction of the Cross.

And the Cross is not far from us. It is as close as daily life. We all live contradictions. We all carry paradox: despair and hope, fear and courage, scarcity and generosity, love withheld and love poured out. Faith does not erase these tensions. The Cross teaches us to carry them, to hold them, and to find God right there in the middle of them.

Our land knows the desert: drought, corruption, inequality. Empty cupboards. Empty pockets. Empty futures. It would be easy to grumble like Israel. But the Cross says: Lift your eyes. God has not abandoned you. Christ is lifted up for you. His love heals, here and now. And if the liturgy reminds us that giving thanks is “our duty and our salvation,” then that thanksgiving must take flesh in how we live: lifting up the poor, defending the voiceless, sharing water with the thirsty, building justice where corruption strangles hope.

St Ignatius of Loyola often invites us, in his Spiritual Exercises, to place ourselves at the foot of the Cross. Just as the Church through history has lifted high the Cross — St. Helena uncovering it, Heraclius restoring it, the faithful venerating it — so each of us is asked to lift it high in our own prayer. To look at Christ. And to let him look at us. Picture it: you are tired, wounded, uncertain. And then you lift your eyes. You see him lifted high. His gaze meets yours — not with anger, but with love. And if you let that gaze hold you, it will heal you.

So here is the challenge:

- Lift your eyes. Each day this week, stand before a crucifix. Let Christ look back at you.
- Lift someone else. Do one act of mercy: share water, listen to the ignored, stand with the vulnerable.
- Lift your heart. In your examen, ask: where have I resisted the Cross? Where is God calling me to trust again?

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Friends, the Cross is exalted.
Lift it high in your prayer.
Lift it high in your actions.
Lift it high in your hearts.

Amen.

Let us pray too for our Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, on his 70th birthday this morning: that the Lord may bless him with good health, wisdom, and courage as he guides the Church in love and compassion. Let us pray to the Lord. Lord, hear us…

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In preparing this homily, I consulted various resources to deepen my understanding of today's readings, including using Magisterium AI for assistance. The final content remains the responsibility of the author.