In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

On September 14th, the Church gives us the second of the twelve Great Feasts. It's called "The Feast of the Elevation of the Cross." The Church does not give it to us merely as a reminder of some great event that happened long ago. No, the Church places the cross in the midst of the Church and adorns it with flowers; it adorns it with incense and candles; and then, at the end of the service, the Church asks us to walk up to the cross and bow before it with deep reverence. The Church is keenly aware that there is something here that cannot be communicated by words alone. We must *see* the Cross. *elevate* the cross; we *bless* people with the cross; we *bow down* before the cross; and we worship the King of Glory who ascended the cross and suffered and died for our salvation.

The hymn of today's feast gives us the words by which we approach this mystery: *"Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master; and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify."* I can not talk about everything the cross means in the New Testament, but I would like to focus very briefly this morning on a few things that are moving and paradoxical in these words.

It is common knowledge among Christians that the Cross was an instrument of execution and public shame. It was created to publicly humiliate and display the defeat of the one who hung upon it. No one in the ancient world would have looked upon a cross and called it powerful, wise or beautiful. And yet today the Church does just that. The Church plants the cross in the very center and raises it up as we bow before it and call it the *precious and life-giving cross.*

Why? Because the Church knows the *Person* who is on the cross! The suffering of the cross shows us who God really is, deep down inside. The cross was the site of a cosmic battle where Christ defeated the powers of darkness. His power was aimed at the defeat of sin, Satan and death. In 1Corinthians (1:18), St Paul writes: *"For 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****."*

The cross also reveals the *wisdom and love o*f God (John 3:16). It's the place where God's wisdom is supremely seen. It's the place that reveals a God who loves the unlovely, who suffers and dies for those who are weak, marginal, sinful and not worthy

of it in any way. The cross is the place where God made things right with fallen humanity so they could stand where they should be before Him. Christ died for the ungodly. That's the wisdom of the cross! St Paul said, *"... but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the* ***wisdom*** *of God." (1 Cor. 1.25)*

It is also on the cross that the world sees the King of Glory. And this is where the *beauty* of the Cross begins to appear. The cross manifests the full extent of God's love for you, and for me. It is not just the beauty of decorated wood or flowers or polished gold. The cross reveals the beauty of the King of Glory. The cross also reveals a God who has come all the way into our human existence - to take upon Himself all the conditions of our sinful humanity without Himself sinning. The cross is beautiful because the death of God becomes the doorway to life. The Crucified One is also the Risen One, and so the Cross becomes an image of glory rather than despair. The Cross is beautiful because nothing is held back. This is why the Cross is the glory of the Church. The world sees humiliation; but the Church sees love; the world sees weakness; but the Church sees power; the world sees death; but the Church sees life.

But the Church does not stop at the cross. The cross is never the last word. The hymn continues, "*...and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify*." The Church places these words together because the Cross cannot be understood apart from the Resurrection. The One who is crucified is also the One who rises; the One who is laid in the tomb is the One who walks out of it. The women arrive at the tomb and discover that the stone has been rolled away. And this is why the cross remains at the center of Orthodox worship. It makes the Gospel clear and central to every other life-giving action of the Church. Every time the cross is raised, the Church proclaims the Gospel. Every time we make the sign of the Cross, we mark ourselves with the mystery of Christ crucified and risen. Every time we eat the bread and drink the cup of the Eucharist, we proclaim the Gospel. St Paul says "*we proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*." (1 Cor. 11.26).

This is why today's hymn is so powerful. It does not give us a long explanation of the mystery. It gives us the response to that mystery: "*Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master; and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify*." We bow because we have seen the crucified King; we glorify His death because we know that He is risen. The flowers that we place around the cross do not

make the cross beautiful. They adorn the beauty that is *already there*. The incense that will rise around it carries the sweetness of our prayers to God. The faithful who will approach it will bow down in great reverence before its beauty.

So when we approach the cross today at the end of the service, let us reverence it in a manner that is worthy of the Lord of glory. This is the Gospel that the Church places before our eyes today. This is the mystery that is surrounded with flowers, incense and song. This is why the cross is so precious and beautiful to us. It is before such a mystery that our highest, best and noblest words fall utterly silent and give way to worship as we sing: "*Before Thy Cross we bow down in worship, O Master; and Thy holy Resurrection we glorify!"*