

EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

SEPTEMBER 14, 2008 – CHRIST THE KING

Today's feast is filled with an irony that cannot be ignored.

We celebrate, we exalt an instrument of execution
and a manner of death the Romans regarded as the most torturous.

For that reason, they reserved it for the worst criminals.

Nevertheless, and despite its obvious cruelty and infamy,
the cross has become a central symbol of our faith.

An instrument of death, because of love,
has become the sign of our salvation and the cause of our joy.

On Thursday, we remembered the terrible events of September 11, 2001. Those events still haunt our memories. As I was reflecting on those events and the irony of the cross, a symbol of death becoming the symbol of life, I re-read an article by Fr. James Martin, SJ. Fr. James is an associate editor of *America Magazine*. His reflection is found in, *We Were There. Catholic Priests and How they responded. In the Own Words*. In his own words, Fr. Martin says:

On the first Sunday after the attack, four of us decided to celebrate Mass for the assembled workers. On that cloudless morning we set up a small altar only a few feet away from the smoking remains of the World Trade Center, and covered it with a simple cloth.

In a few minutes a small group of dog-tired and dust covered rescue workers had gathered. The Gospel reading for that day was almost frighteningly relevant: in a passage from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks of the shepherd who loses his sheep and sets out to find him. So around the altar we spoke of the God who seeks and who finds-- actions mirrored in the work of the rescuers at Ground Zero.

After the Mass, one of the Jesuits pointed to a sign that someone had leaned against our altar. At the time, workers were in the habit of placing large plywood boards around the site, on which were scrawled, in bright orange paint, notices for the workers: "Hot Food," said one. "Eyewash Station," said one. "Morgue," said another.

On the sign next to our altar someone had written: "Body of Christ." Perhaps the anonymous sign maker had concluded, after hearing us distributing Communion and saying, "The Body of Christ," over and over that this is what we were giving out. And he or she was right. But for me the sign pointed to something else. To me it said, Here is the Body of Christ, broken and bloodied and awaiting resurrection. Here is the Body of Christ, the church, gathered together to worship and to work.

Here is the Body of Christ, with you.

I saw many other "signs" of God's presence in my work at Ground Zero: the police officer too concerned about my own welfare to consider dwelling on his own, the Ohio grandmother offering candy bars at a Salvation Army post because "that's just what we do," the Florida firefighter who had driven for two nights straight to be at the site, the Army officer who said he was sure that the presence of so much charity was the work of God.

Each of these people was a sign of God's presence, a sign of new life in a place of great death. In this way Ground Zero always reminded me of Calvary, the site of Jesus' crucifixion: a place of death and a place that held the promise of new life. I remember telling a friend at the time: If people doubt the presence of evil in the world, let them come to Ground Zero. But if people doubt the presence of grace in the world, too, let them come to Ground Zero.

Echoing Fr. Martin's words, if people doubt the presence of evil in the world, let them come to the cross. But if people doubt the presence of love in the world, too, let them come to the cross.

In today's gospel, St. John tells us that God gave us his only Son. God didn't only give his son at the incarnation, but also to the sacrifice on the cross. God gave his Son to show us the depths of God's love for us. Because Jesus died on the cross, everything else, his life and work, all of his words — and even all of human

history, including September 11, can only be properly understood from the starting point of the cross.

In keeping with, and as an expression of this fundamental tenet of Christian faith, every believer is called to embrace the cross and to be signed with it. As early as the second century, Tertullian advised: “At every forward step and movement, at every going in and coming out, when we put on our clothes and shoes... in all the ordinary actions of every day life, we trace the sign of the cross” (de Cor. Mil. 3) The newborn and the dying, the young and old, the sick and the sound, the good and the evil are blessed by this sign. Baptized into Christ and the community under the sign of the cross, WE are called to live their lives as witnesses to its message of salvation.

Think of the times that we sign ourselves with the cross here in the church. We begin with the sign of the cross, which, like the holy water at the entrance of the church, reminds us of our baptism. When the Good news is proclaimed in the assembly, we who hear it signify our receptivity to it by signing ourselves with the cross; on our forehead, that its power may illuminate our minds, on our lips, that we might proclaim its truth, on our hearts that we might better understand and realize its challenges. Today we celebrate the cross of Christ, the sign of death turned into triumph. And before we are sent, we receive a blessing in the name the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—and we make the sign of the cross and are sent into the world to share the life and love of our God with the world.

By the sign of the cross we are saved.