

# Good Friday

## I. In Hoc Signo

The Church historian, Eusebius, writing in the fourth century, recounts a conversation he had with the Emperor Constantine. Battling Maxentius for control of the Roman Empire, Constantine was about to do battle at the Milvian Bridge that spanned the Tiber River. In the sky there appeared a luminous banner with a Cross emblazoned upon it, with the Greek inscription, “*en touto nika*” – or in Latin, “*in hoc signo vinces*” . . . which means, “in this sign you will conquer.”

At first, we are told, Constantine did not know the meaning of the apparition, but on the following night he had a dream in which Christ explained to him that he should use the sign of the Cross to defeat his enemies.

The role of Constantine in the history of Christianity is hotly debated and it is not my intention to enter into that debate today . . . except to extract, as best I can, the truth of the Gospel from that motto: “in hoc signo, vinces” – “in this, the sign of the Cross, you will conquer...”

## II. The Passion According to John

We have just read the account of our Lord’s passion and death according to St. John. In that Gospel, especially in his exchange with Pontius Pilate, Jesus makes it clear that he did not come to overthrow the Roman Empire, which, at that time, occupied Jerusalem and the Land of Israel. His mission was not to establish an earthly Kingdom. “My kingdom,” Jesus said to Pilate, “does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over . . . . But as it is, my kingdom is not here.”

Throughout the Gospel account of John, however, Jesus’ true kingship shines forth. Jesus strides royally through his suffering. He voluntarily he lets himself be taken away, like a sovereign he tells Annas that he had always spoken openly, and tells Pilate that his kingship consists in testifying the truth. Pilate presents Jesus to the people as a king, and in executing him orders the inscription “The King of the Jews.” For all its tragic suffering, the Cross becomes the royal throne from which Jesus draws all humanity to himself and from which he founds his Church when he

entrusts Mary his Mother to the beloved disciple, John.

The Cross, the very instrument of defeat and torture, became instead that means by which Jesus would establish his kingdom on earth, the Kingdom of the Beatitudes – where those are blessed who are poor in spirit, clean of heart, thirsting and hungering for holiness, seeking peace, and willing to endure even persecution for the sake of the Gospel. In this sign, Jesus has conquered not earthly kingdoms by military or political power; rather he has unleashed into this world a love that is stronger than sin and more powerful than death.

By this sign, the sign of the Cross, we too conquer . . . we conquer our sins and failings and attain the freedom to become virtuous; we conquer our fear of taking up our Cross, whatever it may be, and following Christ; we conquer the hearts of those who no longer practice the faith by our example of self-less love and service for the poor and needy; yes, in this sign, the sign of the Cross, we share in Christ's royal priesthood, a priesthood of self-mastery and self-giving to God and to others.

How accurately Pope St. Leo the Great described the Cross in one of his homilies: "How marvelous the power the Cross; how great beyond telling the glory of the Passion; here is the judgment-seat of the Lord, the condemnation of the world, the supremacy of Christ crucified . . . ." (Office of Readings, Vol. II, p. 359). Truly we must 'glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ' (cf. Gal. 6:14).

### **III. The Cross and the New Evangelization**

In a homily Pope Francis preached to the Cardinals just after his election, our new Holy Father held up the Cross of Christ as central to the Church's mission of spreading the Gospel in our secular culture wherein so many, including many fellow Catholics, have fallen away. He spoke of how futile it is to try to follow a Christ without the Cross... "When we walk without the Cross, when we build without the Cross, when we profess a Christ without the Cross, we aren't disciples of the Lord. We are worldly . . . but not disciples . . ." and he added . . . "I wish that all of us . . . might have the courage, yes, the courage, to walk in the Lord's presence with the Cross of the Lord, to build the Church on the blood of the Lord that is poured out on the Cross, and to witness to the sole glory: the crucified Christ. And thus will the Church move forward.

A mild, bland, version of Christianity that asks little of us, that allows us to lead a relatively comfortable life with a veneer of faith, will not enable us to conquer our sins or to bring the Gospel into the world. Only when, like Christ the King, we seize our Cross and willingly carry it, uniting our crosses – our sufferings and struggles to the Lord’s – and helping others to bear their crosses – only then will we be those witness to Christ who will win a hearing for the Gospel in our hardened secular culture. Only in the Cross will the Church’s mission of evangelization triumph.

And, as it turns out, Pope Francis’ coat of arms itself points to the sign of the Cross. At the center of his coat of arms is the emblem of the Society of Jesus with the letters I H S in the center of the sun, with a cross impaled atop the H . . . letters which in Greek are the first three letters of Jesus’ name and which in Latin can stand for “in hoc signo” . . . “in this sign . . .” and beneath these letters are found the three nails with which our Lord was fastened to Cross by which Christ triumphed over sin and death.

United in closest communion with Pope Francis may we glory in the Cross by faith; embrace the Cross in life of worship and prayer; and proclaim the Cross by how we live and how we serve.

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, for by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world!”