Father O'Connor's Homily for 14 September 2025
The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Numbers 21: 4b-9
Philippians 2: 6-11
John 3: 13-17

There is an old story about soldiers who ransacked a king's palace. Looking for things to steal, one soldier found a leather bag that contained the precious crown jewels.

However, the ignorant soldier dumped the jewels on a rubbish heap, and only kept the bag. He ran around the camp that night bragging about the beautiful leather bag that he had found in which to carry his lunch.

How often in life we throw away the jewels and only keep the bag that contained them. We can even do this in the realm of religion. We can make a lot of the trappings of religion, and ignore what is central.

On this September 14th we observe the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. But, we might ask, what is there to celebrate? What treasure is to be found in the Cross? What makes the Cross so important?

The Cross is important, first of all, because of what it says about our sins.

On Wednesday, September 10th, Charlie Kirk was assassinated at an event at Utah Valley University. Thursday, September 11th, was the twenty-fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on our country. And nearly every day we hear of shootings and killings in the communities of our nation.

How can we convey the tragedy of sin to our age? As one commentator put it, "We used to boo the villains. Now we go and buy their books." The American psychiatrist and author, Dr. Karl Menninger [1893-1990], asked some years ago, "Whatever became of sin?" You and I know what became of sin. It took up residence in our hearts.

Sin is anti-God and anti-human. Sin brings death and destruction to body, soul and spirit. Sin is the enemy of every good and worthwhile thing in the world. Sin is such a serious matter that it led to the death of God's Son on the Cross for our salvation.

We kid ourselves when we think that our sins are no big deal. Surely, we rationalize, God has more important things to be concerned about than my petty vices.

Not so, says the Cross. We matter to God and, because we matter, sin matters a great deal too. And all of us are sinners.

Secondly, the Cross is important because of what it says about our salvation. The Cross says that salvation is a gift of God's love for us. There is no other reason that God would send His Son, Jesus, who "humbled Himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a Cross" [Philippians 2: 8]. It was all for love of us.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates that kind of love.

A teenaged girl hated her mother. She thought that her mother was the ugliest person in the world. She was ashamed to be known as her daughter. You see, her mother's face had been badly burned earlier in her life and her face was now covered with a mass of scar tissue.

The girl was so ashamed of her mother's appearance that she would never invite any of her friends to her house. She also hid notices of school events, and even lied about them, because she did not want her mother to be seen at her school.

One day, in an outburst of anger, she told her mother that she was the most hideous-looking person that anyone could imagine, and that she hated her for it.

The mother then said to her daughter, "I think that it is time that we talked. I never told you this story before, but when you were a baby, I woke up one night and smelled smoke. When I got to the hallway, I saw flames coming from the nursery where you were asleep in your crib. I rushed in to get you, and just as I picked you up, a burning beam fell from the ceiling and grazed my face. It landed on the very spot where you had been sleeping before I lifted you from your crib."

The girl began to cry, and she hugged and kissed her mother. She saw her mother in a whole new beautiful way. Her scars became proud testimony of her mother's self-sacrificing love for her.

On this Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, we see that "there is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends," [John 15: 13], as Jesus taught us. On the Cross, every scar of Jesus tells the story: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life" [John 3: 16].

When you look at the Cross of Jesus, what do you see? The greatest act of love that the world has ever known? And what do you hear Him say to you? Perhaps five words, one for each finger on His open hand: "I-did-it-for-you."

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you.

Because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.