

Ash Wednesday - 2018

Here in Texas, we are surrounded by crosses.
Some people hang ornamental crosses on the walls of their homes.
 Pretty girls wear gold crosses around their necks.
 Some fellows tattoo crosses on their chests.
 Crosses stand proud on the steeples of our churches.
 Other crosses mark the site of tragic accidents alongside our roads.
 Catholics sign themselves with a cross at the table.
 Some basketball players cross themselves at the free-throw line.

These crosses are all different...yet these crosses are all the same.
Though they exist in different places
and represent different meanings,
each one of them is the same insofar as they exist
in the outside, visible world.

Today, I want to talk about a different kind of cross.
Not crosses that you can see, but crosses that you cannot see.
 I am going to speak about private crosses, inner crosses,
 crosses that are secret
 and deep
 and hidden from the outside world.

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The first of these crosses I will call The Cross of Juan Garcia.
(Juan Garcia is not the true name of the young man I have in mind,
but the man I call Juan in this homily was a true friend of mine.)
 Juan was also a parishioner at my church.
 He was married.
 He and his wife—I will call her Lupe—had three daughters.
 One afternoon, on the way home from work,
 Juan rolled his pickup and was killed.
 When I arrived at the house,
 Lupe was holding their daughters in her arms.
 She was wailing.
 I held her hand.

After an extended time of crying,
she looked at me and, between her sobbing,

said something odd,
something I did not expect to hear.

At first, I thought I misunderstood her words.
Then she said it again: "I am thankful."
She breathed deep.
"I am thankful that,
before Juan left the house this morning,
he blessed each of the girls.
For Jim," she squeezed my hand,
"his last touch on their skin
was the Sign of the Cross.
That will be their last memory of their father,
the Sign of the Cross."

A famous writer once wrote:
"The Cross, the Cross goes deeper than we know.
It penetrates the skin and enters the soul."

...

The second hidden cross I will call Cross of Joe.
Like Juan, Joe was a friend of mine.
But we shared more than friendship.
We were cousins, so we also shared the same last name.

Joe and I also shared love of farming.
Joe and his wife Linda raised a family of six children
on a dairy farm in Ohio.

Just at the point in their lives when their children were getting married
and they were looking forward to being grandparents,
Joe came down with cancer.

For three years he fought the disease.
The cancer continued to grow,
but Joe's faith all the more.

There came a point at which he knew the cancer would kill him.
To prepared himself, he decided to set the alarm on his watch
to ring at three o'clock every afternoon.

So, every day,

at the hour that the Lord Jesus
gave His life on the Cross,
Joe prayed that he would have the courage
to place his life in the hands of the Lord
with courage and confidence.

For more than a year, Joe paused at three o'clock each afternoon.
He would turn off the tractor or,
if he was in his truck,
he would pull to the side of the road
and remember the Passion of Christ.

Eventually, Joe could no longer work.
Eventually, he took to bed.
But, before he died, he lingered a long time.
For many hours, his family prayed rosaries
and sang hymns at his bedside.

They prayed that the Lord would take him into his arms.
And, finally, He did.

In the three o'clock hour,
the hour of the Lord's death
brought salvation to the world,
Joes passed from this life to the next.

***The Cross. The Cross goes deeper than we know.
Through the skin, and into the soul.***

My last story is about the Cross of a woman named Elizabeth.
Elizabeth was my grandmother.
As a child, she spoke German.
In her old age, she came down with Alzheimer's disease
which took her memory.

In the last years of her life,
she no longer recognized her surroundings
or anyone in our family.
She no longer remembered our names.
She no longer remembered our language.
On the night she died,

she was agitated and anxious:
She was in a strange world
and a strange place
and surrounded by people
she thought were strangers.

None of us knew how to speak German,
the language in which she now murmured incoherently
as she struggled to breathe.

But then, my mother did something remarkable.
She reached for the crucifix that hung on the bedroom wall
and gave it to my grandmother.

My grandmother grasped the Cross!
It was the only thing she knew.
The only thing she recognized!

And she held that cross tight...
tight against her chest,
next to her heart
until her strength gave way.

The Cross.

The Cross goes deeper than we know.

Through the skin...and into the soul.