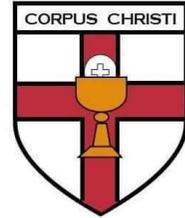




CORPUS CHRISTI COMMUNION

**+His Eminence Jose Israel, DD, CDM.
Presiding Archbishop**



PASTORAL LETTER FOR HOLY WEEK 2018 **Embracing the Cross of Christ**



LOVE IS BEST UNDERSTOOD THROUGH THE CROSS

We all must agree that the cross of Jesus Christ is central to our Christian Faith. The cross reveals to us the character of God: His love for lost sinners and His perfect justice meet at the cross. If we want to grow in our love for God, which is the first and greatest commandment, then we must understand and appreciate the cross, which shows us His great love. If we want to grow in godliness, we must grow in understanding the significance of the cross, which confronts the most prevalent and insidious of all sins, namely, pride.

The cross is the place where all the wounds of sin are healed. If you suffer from emotional problems--guilt, anxiety, depression, anger, or whatever--there is healing in the cross of Christ. If you are going through tragedy or suffering, there is comfort in abundance as you contemplate the sufferings of the spotless Savior on your behalf. Keeping the cross of Christ central in your lives will protect you from the many winds of false doctrine blowing in our days. Satan hates the cross because it sealed his doom and he is relentless in his attacks to undermine and thwart the cross. Every cult or false teaching in some way diminishes the work of Christ on the cross and magnifies human ability. Thus the centrality of the cross is crucial to all sound doctrine.

First Peter 2:24-25 shows us that *through Christ's death on the cross, those who turn to Him are delivered from both the penalty and the power of sin.* All of our problems stem from sin--from our own sins or from the sins of others against us (and our sinful reaction to it) or from the fallen world in which we live. Thus the solutions to our problems center in the cross of Christ. **Through Christ's death on the cross, those who turn to Him are delivered from the penalty of sin.**

This is clearly the meaning of the words, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree." By using the word "tree" rather than "cross," Peter no doubt had in mind **Deuteronomy 21: 22-23**, where it prescribes the penalty for a condemned criminal, that his body be hanged on a tree: "For he who is hanged is accursed of God." The apostle Paul refers to the same text in **Galatians 3:13**: "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us--for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.'*" Both apostles are saying that Christ took on Himself as our substitute the condemnation which we deserved.

When Peter says that Christ bore our sins, he is citing from **Isaiah 53:12**. The holiness and justice of God demand that a penalty be paid for sin; Christ took that penalty on Himself on the cross. By mentioning Christ's body, Peter calls attention to the fact of His humanity. Since the human race sinned, a member of the race had to pay the just penalty God demands. But only one who was sinless Himself could pay such a penalty, since others would have to pay for their own sin. Jesus

Christ, who alone among the human race committed no sin ([1 Pet. 2:22](#); [Isa. 53:9](#)), is the only one capable of bearing the sins of the human race.

That God sent Christ to bear our sins means that God does not just shrug off our sin. We live in a day of loose justice at best. People commit horrible crimes and get off with a slap on the wrist. A man admits to have committed numerous atrocities against boys or girls, but pleads insanity and will likely end up spending some time in a mental ward. Another man can kill 17 innocent youngsters and wound their families forever, and can also plead insanity and most probably spend time on another mental institution. We all know that that is not justice.

Yet I talk to people all the time, many of them Christians, who think that God's justice is like that. They shrug off sin as if it's no big deal to God. They think He will just overlook it. But the Bible is very clear: All sin must be judged! Either your sin is on you and you will bear the penalty; or your sin is on Christ who bore the penalty. Either way, God does not take sin lightly! The just penalty must be paid.

Jesus Christ bore your sin on the cross, but you must take Him up on the offer. If you turn to Him, you will be delivered from the penalty of sin which God justly must impose. That's what Peter means when he says, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross." But that's not the end of the matter. Peter goes on to show that Christ's death not only delivers us from the penalty of sin, but also from its power: **Through Christ's death on the cross, those who turn to Him are delivered from the power of sin.**

There are *four great depths in our Lord's Passion* — and, as we look down into each, though it is but a little way, may He teach us something of *the ocean-depths of His redeeming love!*

1. I think of **all He suffered in the flesh** during those long hours of the night and day, between His apprehension in the garden and the yielding up His Spirit to His Father on the cross.

How was that sinless body tormented with cruel anguish!

I see those *hands*, ever stretched out to bless, now pierced with nails!

I see those *feet*, which ever went about doing good, carrying consolation and healing to the sad and suffering — now transfixed to the cross!

I see that *brow*, so full of holy benevolence, now covered with blood!

I see the scourging, and the weariness, and those parched lips, and those hours of bitter agony, as life slowly ebbed away.

Ah, the suffering and the love it manifested! Who shall tell what it was!

In my hours of pain and sickness, let me ever look back to Calvary! As I trust in Him, shall I not regard the suffering that may be appointed me, as *light* beside His; and not now the punishment of my sin — but rather the chastening of a Father's hand?

But I see another depth in those sufferings.

2. What shame, what scorn and mockery and indignity did Christ willingly endure!

He is taken as a thief, with swords and staves. He stands for whole hours as a prisoner before vile and wretched men. He is buffeted — yes, He hides not His face from shame and spitting. His very deeds of mercy are cast in His teeth. A murderer and a robber is chosen instead of Him — the Prince of glory. Oh, what a depth of love do I see in the endurance of all this!

How hard do I find it to bear a word of reproach for His sake! How a slight, a cutting remark, a look — wounds and pains me! How great the trial is to any honorable and upright man, to be taken for a defrauder, and to be condemned by those who formerly had him in honor! And what must it have been to the Son of God, who had been honored and worshiped by the holy angels above — to be the scorn and mockery of men, the outcast of the people?

In this depth of shame and indignity, I see a vast deep of redeeming love!

I see yet another depth.

3. Let me think of the desolation of Christ in those dark hours.

How forcible are the words spoken of Him in the prophetic Psalm: "Scorn has broken my heart and has left me helpless; I looked for sympathy, but there was none, for comforters, but I found none." [Psalm 69:20](#)

We think of *Jeremiah* sitting down amidst the ruins of the city, alone and desolate, lamenting the loss of the sons and daughters of Zion.

But no desolation was ever like that of *Christ*. He was hated and rejected by His own nation. Their chief men unite for His destruction. One of the twelve betrays Him to them. Another of the twelve, in the very midst of His trial, denies Him not once, but three times. The rest all forsake Him and flee.

Where are those who have been *healed* by Him? Where are those who have been *comforted* and *instructed* by His words of love? Not one will now stand up for Him, and plead His cause — not one will show the kindness and sympathy that might, in some measure, have alleviated His heavy sorrows.

But chief of all these, was that exceeding great and bitter cry, "***My God! My God! Why have you forsaken Me!***"

Ah, this forsaking of *God*, this hiding of the light of heaven — this was far more than all! Here was desolation indeed? Forsaken by *man* — this is much. But forsaken by His own Father, as to the comfort of His presence, as to the sweet assurance of His love — this were above all things terrible! And with this, we couple another depth — all the *soul-anguish* that came to Him through our sin. Here is that which we cannot conceive or tell.

The travail of His soul in the work of atonement, in taking upon Him our guilt and condemnation, in making amends to Divine justice for a broken law — all this is in a region which no eye of man has seen, and no foot of man has trodden! So that here, most of all, we see the incomprehensible love, surpassing all knowledge. Oh, to bear such desolation of spirit, to drink such a cup of soul-anguish for our salvation — what can it mean? How can it be?

One thought more.

4. We see the marvels of this love, in the purpose of it all.

It is for our *forgiveness*, our *deliverance* from all condemnation, for our *acceptance* as dear children of the Father in Heaven.

Innumerable are the benefits purchased for us by the precious blood-shedding of the Son of God — and on every one of them we see inscribed the love that endured so great things for us.

Where else could *such* love have been found? What earthly friend would have thus sacrificed himself, to obtain peace and life and salvation for us?

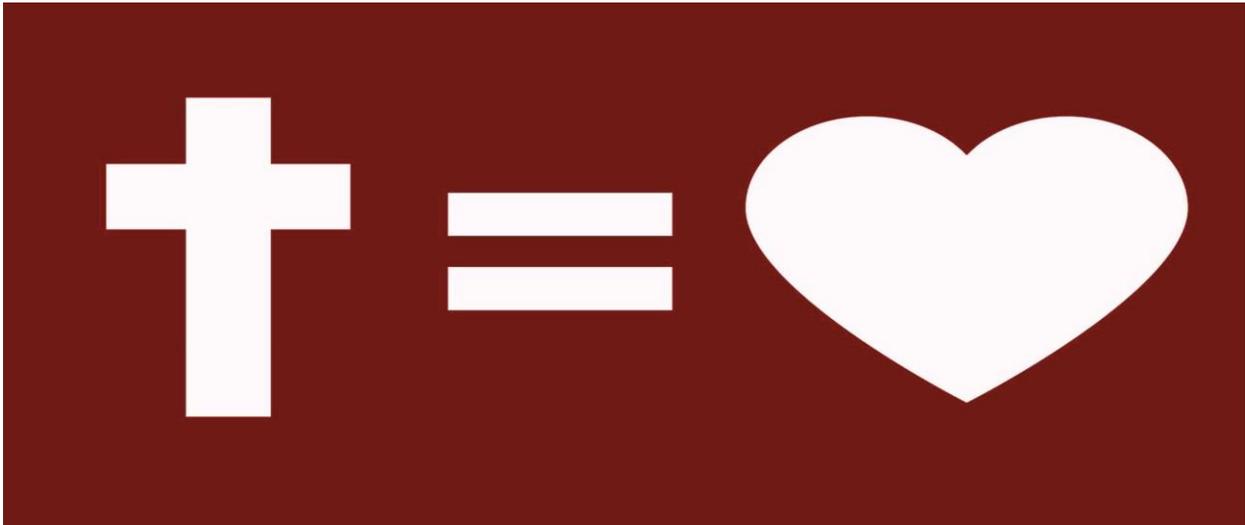
It is a privilege beyond all price, that we may love Christ — that we may have an object that will never disappoint our affections.

He who once died for us, is now our living Redeemer — still retaining all the love He had for us when on earth. And, in the power of His endless love, giving us a safe resting-place for our longing hearts. It is well to set our love on the changeless, ever-living Friend.

Let me lean most on *any man* — and in an hour I may lose my treasure — and my heart's affections will be like ivy trailing on the ground, when the tree on which it grew has fallen. But let me lean only on *Christ*, let my heart cleave intensely to Him — and I shall never lose the One dearest to me, the One who alone can satisfy my soul forever.

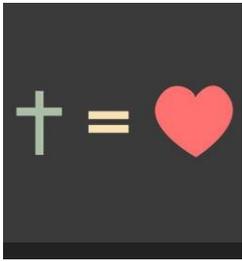
"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." [2 Corinthians 5:14-15](#)

LOVE IS BEST UNDERSTOOD THROUGH THE CROSS



In **1 John**, we see, "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us," so a major point I'd like us to get today: ***love is best understood through the cross.*** Indeed, love is best understood through the cross. The cross and the resurrection are the center point of history. Now, you may not think that, but everything from a biblical perspective before the cross is leading up to the cross. Everything after the cross is in light of the cross, because the cross was an event worked out that God had planned from eternity past, **so when we want to understand love, let's look at the cross and let's see if there are some attributes about the cross that we can distill down and apply to our situation today.**

The cross was certainly the most visible act of God's love towards us. It was also planned. It wasn't an accident. I think sometimes people think that Jesus was this man on earth and he was kind of like a leaf on a river and got carried to and fro and somehow ended up on the cross, got lucky and paid for everyone's sin, or maybe unlucky, depending on how you look at that. That's not actually what it was. Yes, people made choices and decisions that resulted in Christ going to the cross, **but the decision made before the world was created was that Christ would go to the cross to pay for sin, so what we see is this act of love on the cross was intentional. It was planned.**



Also though, the cross was about God, primarily. We often think of the cross as being about us. Now, **we are beneficiaries of the work that was done there, but the cross, first and foremost, was God glorifying himself in the creation of a people for himself, doing something only he could do. So, when we want to understand love let's understand that it's planned, it's about God, but it's also about people. It's about us. The cross is the way in which God shows his love for us, so love has a God-facing component, it often has a man- or woman-facing component, but the cross was also sacrificial. It was undeserved and costly.**

The last point is that it was an objective good. God said the cross was good. God said the cross accomplished his plan, so love is something that has a right answer. It has a God-grounded right answer, so the things we can learn just briefly by looking at the cross: **Love is planned, love is about God, love is about man, love is sacrificial, and there is a right answer to this question, but love is best understood through the cross.**

Now, I think a lot of the confusion about love in our culture and even in the church comes from not understanding the cross. Sometimes people think the cross was an accident, sometimes people don't understand exactly what happened there, so we need to understand the cross better to understand God's love better, and the cross is a lens we can use to refocus all of the New Testament.

If you read through the New Testament, in some books you won't even find the word "love." That doesn't mean it's not necessarily talked about, but it's definitely not at the forefront, but the cross is always talked about. The cross is present in every single New Testament work or letter, and it's a theme that's important.

We need to value not just what Jesus did at the cross, but what God showed at the cross. As Christians we understand the cross better than the non-Christian world, hopefully, but for the non-Christian world I think one of the reasons they can't understand godly, biblically centered love is because they don't understand the cross, so Christians, in a way, have been shown a love, the greatest love, that no one else has yet to know, but this also comes with an obligation. We've been let

in on what this greatest love looks like and we've been told to act in light of it towards other people, so there's a greater responsibility in terms of how we love also.

A BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF LOVE

We've looked at some attributes of the cross, and what I think would be helpful is to look at a definition. When we think of love, yes, let's think of the cross, but let's use a definition like this.

"Love is God-honoring action taken in response to God's grace for God's glory and/or a man's good,"

Yeah, that's a mouthful, but I think it captures what scripture says and defends against some of the errors in thinking about love today. This fits very well with what Christ did at the cross, because what he did at the cross was for God's (his) glory. It was also for the good of mankind.

Giving: It trains us in the way of righteousness. It trains us to not hold onto things, so even in giving there is a response to God's grace that's for God's glory and for our good.

Evangelism: I don't think there could be a clearer example of God-centered love than evangelism. We are responding to the grace of God. We are doing it for the glory of God and we are sharing something that is for man's good. **Bible study** is the same way. We study our Bibles to learn more about God. That certainly shows that we prioritize him, but it's also for our good to learn more about what the God of the universe has said and revealed to us, and the list goes on and on, from feeding the homeless to inviting someone who doesn't look like you over to your house for dinner to befriending someone of a different religion. All of these things, like being sacrificial to your spouse with correct intent, all of these things are opportunities to show biblical love.

In [John 14](#): "The person who has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my father, and I will love him," so what we actually see is that loving God fulfills this command, but we're actually loving God when we love other people, and this is what Jesus is getting at in [John 13](#) when he says, "Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Sometimes we think, "I'm doing great in the loving God department," and if we're honest with ourselves maybe we'd say, "Well, I'm not doing so well in the loving my neighbor, loving my fellow Christian department." Well, based on Scripture, if you're not doing well in the loving your neighbor department, you're not doing well in the loving God department either, and I think this passage right here should be one of the most convicting for us as a church today.

If we're supposed to show the non-Christian world that we are Disciples of Christ by our love for one another, how are we doing? Loving God has a love for God component, obviously, but also a love for people component, and it's hard to say we're loving God as we should be if we aren't loving his people. Our treatment of each other should be like a beacon that draws the attention of the non-Christian world, so when we get hurt and we are quick to forgive, and not "forgive but not talk to the person," but "forgive and welcome back into fellowship," that looks weird to the world today, where when someone hurts you you're supposed to get back at them, and when you actually practice biblical love and turn the other cheek, that stands out. That shows people that we are Christ's disciples.

When we give of our time and our money to people who can't help us, who can't give anything to us in return, and don't post it on Instagram like, "Look at me, I'm over here on this missions project," when we do that type of thing and someone actually finds out but not because we blasted it on social media, that stands out as something countercultural that shows we are Christ's disciples.

I think of Peter asking Jesus how many times he should forgive a brother in Christ. Getting in Peter's mind, when he says, "Should it be seven?" he probably thinks he's shooting really high, like, not three. "I'm going to forgive seven times. How's that, Jesus?" Jesus says, "How about 70 times seven?" and he's not saying, "Peter, you need to get a longer scroll so you can keep track of this." What he's saying is, there's no limit.



Biblically-based, God-centered love forgives every time. It welcomes back into fellowship, if there's been repentance, every time, because love will cause us to forgive, to cover a multitude of sins (going back to the cross) just like Christ's love covered a multitude of our sins. So if the cross is the best example of God's great love for us and it's supposed to be how we're supposed to love, then we should love as much as we're able, like Christ loved on the cross, in a sacrificial way, in a costly way. It should make us quick to forgive, quickly to say we were wrong, and quick to say we're sorry and mean it. But along with this, love trumps personal preference.

It's the same with what Bible translation you use. Some churches mandate you use a certain Bible translation. Why are we causing division when it's not necessary? Some other personal preferences that sometimes cause division: what the pastor wears. Do we divide over the dress code on a Sunday morning or the layout of the sanctuary or what time the service is or "this small group did this and this ..."

If the cross displays the greatest form of love and Jesus laid down the independent exercise of his deity when he came to earth, and in [Philippians 2](#) Paul says, "The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in bodily form, and he added humanity to himself and humbled himself," well then, gosh, what should love look like for me? Should it look like humbling myself? **Should it look like putting my personal preferences second? Certainly.**

Also, when we think of how we treat each other and what that looks like, how do we talk about each other on Facebook? How do we talk about someone on staff at our church or another church or a previous church or our current church or whatever? How do we talk or judge each other? Does it try to build up, or does it tear down?

The better question, the easier question, is, *does this tell the world I'm a disciple of Christ?*

How can Jesus say that our love for each other will announce to others that we're his disciples? Because Christian love is different. It's not the "I love pizza" sort of love. It's a love of the cross, and no one can fully understand love without understanding the cross, so when we live in such a way and we love in such a way that draws the attention of the world and they say, "This is weird," why is it weird? Because they don't understand the cross. Because they don't understand the motivation for our love. They don't understand that we're responding to the grace of God that's been poured out in such a magnificent, powerful way. So love is best understood through the cross.

That's the theological point. When we want to understand love, we must look to the cross. Love is a God-centered action taken in response to God's grace for God's glory and man's good, and I've had to repeat that many times because it's kind of a tongue twister, but it's important. It really captures what the Bible teaches on love.

My dear Brothers and Sisters...

The cross says that God especially loves those who are hurting--those who are under the penalty and power of sin.

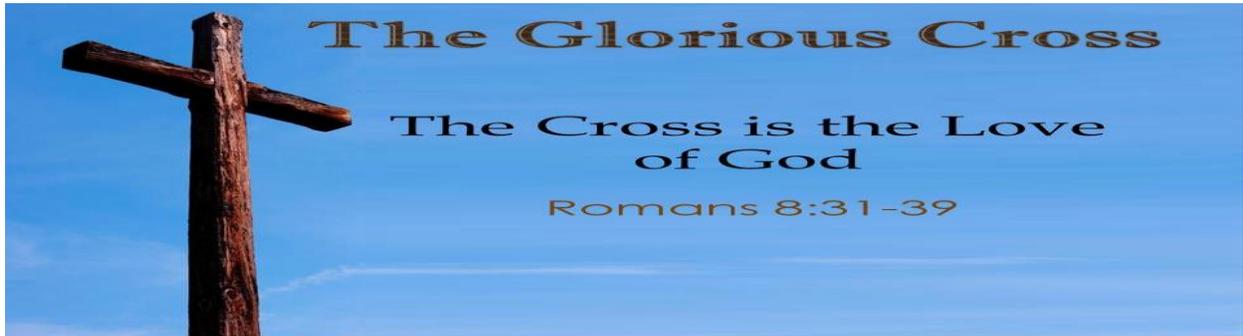
If you will turn to Jesus Christ and put your trust in what He did for you in taking your just penalty for sin on the cross, He will deliver you from sin's penalty and from its power.

He wants to be your Shepherd and Overseer.

He loves you just as you are, but He loves you too much to leave you that way.

He wants to heal you from the devastating effects of sin.

Will you turn to Him?



PRAYER

O blessed and merciful Redeemer, I would come to Your footstool. Draw me — and I will run after You. Reveal to me Your heart of love, and make the light of Your countenance to shine upon me. O send Your Spirit to lead me into the fuller knowledge of Yourself.

I thank You, O gracious Savior, for laying down Your life for my sake.

I thank You for the pain, and mockery, and desolation of heart You willingly endured.

I thank You for drinking to the very dregs, the bitter cup of holy wrath, which my sins deserved.

I thank You for all wondrous benefits You have thus purchased for me.

O that You would make my heart Your dwelling-place, and fill me with Your love. I bless You, that I may love You; and that in loving You, my soul shall be satisfied as with marrow and fatness. O make me love You more and more continually.

May Your love constrain me to live to Your glory. Crucify within me all selfishness and self-will, and teach me to serve You and do Your will.

Make me like Yourself — meek and gentle and loving unto all men. Fulfill these my desires, and make me wholly Yours, for Your name's sake.

Amen.

Blessings,

+ Jose Israel

