

Christianity without the Cross is ‘sterile,’ says Pope Francis at Byzantine Divine Liturgy



On the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Pope Francis celebrated the Byzantine Divine Liturgy and called Christianity without the Cross worldly and sterile.

“Crucifixes are found all around us: on necks, in homes, in cars, in pockets. What good is this, unless we stop to look at the crucified Jesus and open our hearts to him, unless we let ourselves be struck by the wounds he bears for our sake, unless our hearts swell with emotion and we weep before the God wounded for love of us,” Pope Francis said in Slovakia on Sept. 14.

“Witnesses of the Cross have but one strategy, that of the Master: humble love. They do not look for triumphs here below, because they know that the love of Christ bears fruit in the events of daily life, renewing all things from within, like the seed that falls to the ground, dies and produces much fruit,” he said.

The pope presided over a live-streamed Divine Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite in Prešov, eastern Slovakia, and delivered a homily in which he posed the question: Why did Jesus die on the Cross?

“Why did he do this? He could have saved his life, he could have kept his distance from the misery and brutality of human history,” Pope Francis said, according to a Catholic News Agency report.

“Instead, he chose to enter into that history, to immerse himself in it. That is why he chose the most difficult way possible: the Cross. So that no one on earth should ever be so desperate as not to be able to find him, even there, in the midst of anguish, darkness, abandonment, the scandal of his or her own misery and mistakes.”

“There, to the very place we think God cannot be present, there he came. To save those who despair, he himself chose to taste despair; taking upon himself our most bitter anguish.”

Pope Francis said that Jesus even experienced abandonment so that no one would ever be alone in their trials.

At the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, the pope spent a moment in prayerful veneration of the Cross.

A large Byzantine cross with three transverse arms hung above the outdoor altar in Prešov, flanked by an icon of Mary, Mother of God, and the Christ the Teacher icon.

“‘We proclaim Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God.’ So St. Paul tells us, but he does not hide the fact that, in terms of human wisdom, the Cross appears as something completely different: it is ‘scandal’ and ‘foolishness,’” the pope said in his homily.

“The cross was an instrument of death, yet it became the source of life. It was a horrendous sight, yet it revealed to us the beauty of God’s love. That is why, in today’s feast, the people of God venerate the Cross and the Liturgy celebrates it.”

The feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross dates back to the 4th century, when the solemn consecration of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre took place on Sept. 13, 335, at the site of Christ's crucifixion in Jerusalem.

“We can fail to accept, except perhaps in words, a weak and crucified God, and prefer instead to dream of a God who is powerful and triumphant. This is a great temptation,” Pope Francis said.

“How often do we long for a Christianity of winners, a triumphalist Christianity that is important and influential, that receives glory and honor? Yet a Christianity without a cross is a worldly Christianity, and shows itself to be sterile.”

Pope Francis arrived at the Divine Liturgy in Prešov in the popemobile, which passed through crowds of people standing along the streets waving Vatican flags. Around 40,000 people attended the liturgy, according to local authorities.

Prešov was part of the Kingdom of Hungary until the mid 20th century and is home to many of the country’s more than 200,000 Ruthenian Byzantine Catholics.

The Ruthenian Catholic Church is one of 23 Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with the Holy See.

In April, Byzantine Catholics in Slovakia and around the world celebrated the 375th anniversary of the Union of Uzhorod, an agreement that brought the Ruthenian Orthodox Church into communion with the pope after nearly six centuries of schism.

Since the Union of Uzhorod, eparchies have been created to shepherd Ruthenian Catholics wherever they live, including the Metropolitan Eparchy of Pittsburgh and its three suffragan eparchies in the United States, and the Metropolitan Eparchy of Prešov in Slovakia with its suffragans, as well as a Slovakian eparchy in Canada.

At the Divine Liturgy in Prešov, Pope Francis recalled the witness of Byzantine Catholic priests and bishops of the eparchy of Prešov who were imprisoned and martyred by the communist regime in the 1950s.

“Here I think of the martyrs who in this nation bore witness to the love of Christ in troubled times, when everything counseled silence, taking cover, not professing the faith. Yet they could not help but testify,” the pope said.

“How many generous persons suffered and died here in Slovakia for the name of Christ! Theirs was a witness borne out of love of him whom they had long contemplated. To the point that they resembled him even in their death.”

Pope Francis said that there is no lack of opportunity for bearing witness today if Christian witness is not weakened by worldliness and mediocrity.

“Dear brothers and sisters, you have seen such witnesses. ... Lowly, simple persons who gave their lives in love to the end. These are our heroes, the heroes of everyday existence, and their lives changed history. Witnesses generate other witnesses, because they are givers of life,” he said.

“That is how the faith is spread: not with worldly power, but with the wisdom of the Cross; not with structures but with witness. Today the Lord, from the eloquent silence of the Cross, is asking all of us ... Do you want to be my witness?”