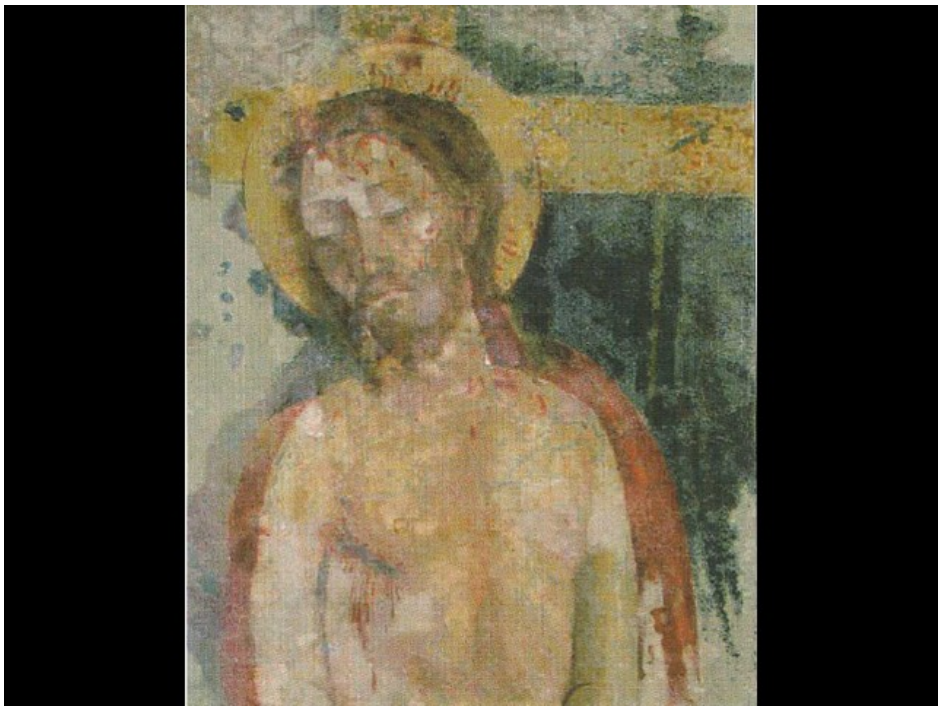
Meditating on the Cross before the Most Holy Crucifix of Piety



This September 14, the Grand Master of the Order of the Holy Sepulchre, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, is in Galatone in the province of Lecce to preside over the solemn opening of celebrations to mark the 400th anniversary of the Miracle of the Most Holy Crucifix of Piety housed there. This sacred icon of Jesus (pictured) dating back to the XV century represents the mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of the Lord according to one of the dearest representations in Eastern theology. In 1621 the image was covered by a veil that removed it from the direct view of the faithful and preserved the image which is considered miraculous. Before the eyes of various witnesses on 2 July almost 400 years ago, the veil lifted revealing the hands of the Lord, no longer bound, which appeared to remove the veil.

On this feast day for the Knights and Dames of the Order in which the Church invites us to meditate on the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, so close to our spirituality, we share some excerpts from the homily delivered by Cardinal Filoni on the theme of the cross.

"Reflecting on the mystery of our Redemption, the expression “the Most Holy Crucifix of Piety” may at first appear singular. In truth, in this context the word “*Pietas*, or Piety” does not refer to a 'pious' sentiment, nor does it evoke the emotionality towards a 'poor suffering man'. It is St. Paul who, before offering us an admirable synthesis of his Christology ("He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory", 1 Tim 3:16), says that it is our profound duty "to confess that great is the mystery of piety (*pietas*),” that is, of God's affection and 'passionate' love for us, a love that offers itself to humanity, a love that transforms and opens.

The Icon of the Crucifix that we venerate presents Jesus with a purple mantle on his shoulders; a cross can be glimpsed behind him, while he is in the middle of a sepulchre with his face slightly reclined, conveying a sensation of peace.

The purple mantle was the symbol of the power and dominion of kings. Christ's shoulders, in truth, do not bear the greatness of imperial power, but the profound mystery of suffering, of a being humiliated and derided by his tormentors, by a Roman Procurator and by leaders of the people who incited the crowd. Jesus' mantle is one of service, of his martyrdom to which the Church is also called in the likeness of her Lord, it is a mantle of the tribulations of the faithful and of the persecutions in so many of her members down through the centuries.

The cross, from being an instrument of death inflicted with a Roman sentence and reserved for slaves for the most serious crimes, became an instrument of reconciliation and salvation, so much so that Paul writes to the Galatians to boast in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Gal 6:14), and he reminds the inhabitants of Corinth that it was a scandal for the Jews, foolishness for the pagans but for believers, Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:23-24).

The Christ emerging from the tomb signifies not only the mystery of his death but, at the same time, of the resurrection. Jesus is alive. With his resurrection he calmed the troubled souls, overcame the barrier of consternation into which humanity had fallen, the disciples and the women who had buried him, confused the minds of the Pharisees and Pilate. The decisive point in all these arcane events was his resurrection. It was not a reanimated corpse, but something totally different from any form of revitalization to which medicine sometimes resorts; it is a new dimension of existence that Jesus acquires and gives us: "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25).

Looking at the mystery depicted in the Icon of the Crucifix of Piety, each of us is questioned by his face full of suffering, but also of peace: What does Christ wish to say to me today? [...]

Does not the prodigious event that we commemorate, that is the veil that is pushed aside and the hands that are loosened, not tell us that Christ wants to speak to us, that he wants to look into my eyes, that he is waiting to be looked at, that he wishes to initiate a dialogue about life destroyed by sins, that he wishes to make me understand that he is not distant, nor indifferent to me, nor to the world in which we live?

The prophet Isaiah, in a poignant invocation, cried: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! " (Is 64,19). The Son of God who also became the Son of man actually tore the heavens open, opened a dialogue, as Saint Paul says, removed the veil from the eyes of our mind (cf. 2 Cor 3:16), he wishes to continue a dialogue with this closed, selfish, pagan world of ours, where God is not denied, but more often we ignore Him, hide Him, avoid Him by thinking, basically with cynical indifference, that nothing will ever change.

I would like to think that the meaning of our celebration and this anniversary will not be a simple historical event, but a propitious opportunity for profound spiritual renewal in the context of this pandemic that has reduced us all; Jesus removes the veil once again and asks for the renewal of our faith in the sign of the Cross and in the context of the many crosses that distress us daily and make us suffer; it asks for an act of trust in God's mercy, of reconciliation in families, of profound conversion. Let us then allow ourselves to be reconciled by Christ! We learn to love in the dimension of the Cross and of a Crucifix that removes the veil of our hypocrisy and looks us in the eye forever. Amen."

Fernando Cardinal Filoni

(September 14, 2020)