

# FAMILY CONNECTIONS

## Healing Through the Life-Giving Cross

by Sarah Byrne-Martelli

One day a few years back, I went for a walk with my three year-old godson, Antonios, and his five year-old brother, Evangelos. We stopped at a busy intersection and waited for the light to change. Thinking this was a teaching moment, I motioned toward the flashing signal and said, "Do you know how to cross?" Without missing a beat, Evangelos said, "Oh yes, Nouna Sarah!" (makes the sign of the cross very boldly and proudly). Ah yes, Evangelos knew how to cross. This sign is one of the most fundamental things we teach our children. Even toddlers understand that the cross is central to who we are, as children of God.

As a hospice chaplain, I spend my days journeying alongside people who are dying and their families. People of all faiths and of no particular faith. All of my patients are aware, on some level, that they are on a journey to the end of earthly life. For those people who have neglected their relationship with God and family, those who intentionally or unintentionally have neglected their spiritual health, this is often a profoundly fearful time. For those who have loved God and neighbor, those whose spiritual eyes are open, those who have meditated on the mystery of death and life, this can be a journey of grace and spiritual healing.

I have seen my patients enter into their dying process with astonishing courage. It can become a process of prayer and trust, of lifting one's eyes to the hills, of lifting up one's heart to the Lord, in total hope and total peace.

Ginny, my beautiful patient who died a few months ago, saw "orbs of light" and felt God's love, a comfort brought by a lifetime of faith. She cried as she said this to me, the day before she died peacefully in her home, surrounded by her children; we sang to her as she took her last breaths. Like Christ in the garden, my patients grieve, and cry, and suffer weakness in body and spirit. Like Christ, they yearn for understanding. Like Christ, they break bread with their loved ones, knowing this may be the last time. Like Christ when he said, "Woman, behold your son," my patients lovingly entreat their family members to care for each other after they are gone. And like the thief on the cross, they are united with Christ in paradise.

Let us listen carefully to the words of our Lord: "Whoever desires to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." (Matthew

16:24) The choices we make, over the course of our lives, and the struggles we bear are our personal crosses. But even more so, to take up one's cross means to prayerfully embrace one's death. To take up one's cross means to see our death in light of the healing offered in the life-giving cross. Venerating the cross on the Feast of the Life-Giving Cross or during mid-Lent is not merely a remembrance, but an actual partaking in Jesus' passion. Walking up, prostrating down, and lifting our faces to the cross to give thanks and glory. All this liturgical practice is the Church's way of teaching us to live in constant mindfulness. We learn, as do our children, through the blessed repetition found in our liturgy, to see our lives in relation to the cross. We learn to see the cross as the way in which Christ tramples down death by death.

Almost 10 years ago, I served my first night as an on-call ICU chaplain. The pager rang at five a.m.; a man named Andrew was about to go into major surgery. The nurse said he was tearful and anxious, and could I go visit him? She said he was Jewish. I entered the ICU, which was silent but for the beeping monitors. Andrew was elderly, with a scraggly beard and tearful eyes. He was on a ventilator and therefore could not speak. I said to him, "Hi Andrew, I'm Sarah the chaplain, and I'm here to stay with you until you leave for surgery. I know this is very difficult for you. I understand you're Jewish," I said, thinking that I might try to locate a Rabbi. He shook his head, and went like this (weakly attempting to cross himself in what I realized was an Orthodox manner). "Oh!" I said, "You're Orthodox! Actually, so am I!" Apparently, his religious tradition was misunderstood upon admittance. His eyes registered strange surprise and joy. I taped a paper icon on the wall, made the sign of the cross and chanted the Trisagion prayers and a prayer before surgery. As I said Amen, Andrew again weakly made the sign of the cross on his ailing body. The possibility of death lay before him. With this sign, this one gesture, beyond all words, beyond everything and anything I could have said or done, Andrew saw his own death united with Christ's death on the cross.

In the hymn to the Resurrection, we sing: "Through the cross, joy has come into the world, let us ever bless the Lord! What is this joy?" The joy of the cross is the gift of a new life – the ability to live in peace and to become likened to God. This is referred to in Scripture as becoming a new creation. Healing through the cross brings clarity to our lives and reveals the wonder of the life to come. It replaces fear and bitterness with light and peace; it quenches our earthly thirst with the sweetness of Living Water.

St. Ephraim the Syrian uses a wonderful image to illuminate this. He describes how the Tree of Life – the tree in the Garden of Eden – goes way down into the depths of the earth, and then this wood emerges up out of the ground to form the wood of cross. We sing of this in our funerals: "You are our God, who descended into Hell, and loosed the bonds of those who were there." The wood of the cross redeems Adam and Eve and everybody else from the grave. And St. Ephraim says the birds hop for joy in Paradise. What an image. The birds hop with the joy found

in the resurrection of all creation. "With the Saints give rest, O Christ, to the soul of thy servant, where there is neither sickness nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting." These words from the funeral service confirm that death is not an absurd end, which deprives life of meaning, but a movement towards union with the God who loves us – the return home to God, in whom is all peace, all joy, all light. It is a movement toward Paradise.

When Andrew made the sign of the cross, in this simple act, we had profound fellowship. I knew him as a Christian, as a brother. I recognized him, in the making of the sign of the cross. And we all recognize each other in the sign of the cross. May we never make this sign mindlessly. May this sign, whether it is made by a sweet child at a crosswalk or an elderly man facing death, be a constant, loving reminder of the reality of God's kingdom among us.

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### QUOTES ON THE CROSS

*Let us then not be ashamed to confess the Crucified. Be the Cross our seal, made with boldness by our fingers on our brow and in everything; over the bread we eat and the cups we drink, in our comings and in goings out; before our sleep, when we lie down and when we awake; when we are traveling, and when we are at rest.*

–St. Cyril of Jerusalem

*His path has been trodden from the ages and from all generations by the Cross and by death. But how is it with you that the afflictions on the path seem to you to be off the path? Do you not wish to follow the steps of the saints? Or have your plans for devising some way of your own, and of journeying therein without suffering?*

–Saint Isaac the Syrian

*Trials are of two kinds. Either affliction will test our souls as gold is tried in a furnace, and make trial of us through patience, or the very prosperity of our lives will oftentimes, for many, be itself an occasion of trial and temptation. For it is equally difficult to keep the soul upright and undefeated in the midst of afflictions, as to keep oneself from insolence and pride in prosperity.*

–St. Basil the Great



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