

**Homily of Archbishop Dominique Mamberti,  
Secretary for Relations with States,  
to the staff and seminarians of Haarlem Seminary  
on the occasion of their pilgrimage to Rome**

**Feast of the Triumph of the Cross**

**14 September 2010**

Historically speaking, today's feast of the Triumph or Exaltation of the Cross commemorates two events. The first is the consecration of the basilicas which the Emperor Constantine built in Jerusalem over the places where Our Lord was crucified and buried. This ceremony took place in the presence of the Empress Helena on 14 September 335. The second event is the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem in the year 630, following the victory of the Emperor Heraclius over the Persians who had removed the precious relic from the city sixteen years earlier.

These events illustrate in a tangible and material way the significance which Christians have always attached to the Cross of Christ. They recall the surprising and sometimes disconcerting ways in which God works in the world. In the Passion of the Lord Jesus, the humiliating instrument of death becomes, in a paradoxical way, the instrument of life, freedom and salvation. This transformation is

certainly not in accordance with the logic of this world: it makes sense only in accordance with another logic, God's logic. It is a logic we find difficult to understand but which we must learn if we are to be true followers and servants of Christ.

The first reading speaks of the rebellion of the Israelites against God. Not for the first time in their journey through the desert they complain about the trying circumstances in which they find themselves. They are tired of eating manna, the food which God provides for them, because they find it "unsatisfying". Succumbing to purely human desires and believing that anything would be better than what God has given them, they lose faith and no longer wish to be nourished and guided by him. The people suffer the consequences of their rejection of God. Fiery serpents invade the camp and their bite brings death to many. In the face of this grave danger they come to their senses and admit their sin. They plead with Moses to intercede for them. God takes pity on them and instructs Moses to fashion a bronze serpent. In this way, the very symbol of the evil which afflicts them becomes the instrument of their salvation: anyone who looks at the bronze serpent will live.

As Jesus indicates to Nicodemus, the bronze serpent is a symbol of his own exaltation, which brings life to anyone who gazes upon him and places his faith in him: "The Son of Man must be lifted up, as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that

everyone who believes may have eternal life in him". Jesus too will be lifted up on the wood of the Cross. Once again, a symbol of death becomes an instrument of salvation.

The Cross seems to represent defeat. It was the instrument of execution reserved for common criminals who were not Roman citizens. As we know, it was a particularly atrocious form of punishment, intended to cause hours, if not days, of intense suffering for the condemned, before they eventually expired.

Yet St John continually emphasises that through the Cross Jesus is exalted and glorified. It is no longer an instrument of shame but of triumph. Above all, it points in a powerful way to the extent of God's love for man. Jesus Christ willingly accepts this most humiliating and painful of deaths in order to make man understand how far God is prepared to go in order to prove his love and save man from the clutches of evil. God chooses not to convince or save man by means of an astounding and irresistible display of power. He chooses to do so by means of a humiliating means of execution. In this way, man's freedom to accept or reject God and his gift of salvation remains completely intact. He has to respond in freedom. He could easily reject the Cross as unbecoming of God or he could see in it the manifestation of love supreme.

We know that many reject the Cross either because they interpret it in purely material terms merely as an instrument of torture and death or because they simply do not wish to acknowledge that they are sinners in need of God's saving love. It is therefore important for us to keep the Cross continually before our eyes. Since the death of Christ, the Cross is the symbol of the greatest love possible. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn* 15:13). If we celebrate the Cross today, it is because we know that Jesus has transformed it from a shameful instrument of death into the symbol of love's victory. In the Cross, we see the love of God revealed. In it we place our hope. In it we learn that God's ways are not our ways; we see that we too must learn the humble logic of love if we are to serve the Lord not on our own terms but as he wishes.

During these days of your pilgrimage in Rome, you are walking in the footsteps of the martyrs who shed their blood gladly for Christ, because they saw in his Cross the pathway to true life. Their example inspires us to adopt the logic of the Cross in our own lives. We too must learn to see God at work in the difficulties and trials of everyday life, in what at first sight seems to be failure. In this way, we too will learn to place our trust in God who continues to guide us, even when it appears he is far away. By contemplating the Cross, we will come to understand

how God wishes us to live and to act. We will discover that true life is to be found only in the gift of ourselves. By gazing in faith on the symbol of God's supreme love we too will learn to love and give to others the one gift that truly matters, the gift of God's love which brings salvation and life.

May the logic of the Cross always guide you in your preparations for the priesthood. May you learn how to be priests after the heart of God himself. Amen.