

## **SEPTEMBER 14 FATHER PETER JAE CHOI**

Over ten years ago a lady came by the parish asking me to bless a necklace with a crucifix pendant on it. She looked distraught, so after I blessed the crucifix I asked her what she was worried about. With tears streaming down her face, she took out the picture of her son. At first, she could hardly speak. After she composed herself, she told me about her son, who was in the Army, and was being deployed to Afghanistan. She was so worried about the safety of her son. So she wanted her son to wear the crucifix I blessed. That took a lot of convincing for him to eventually agree, since he was a self-professed atheist. He had reluctantly agreed just to help to appease her. Unbeknownst to him the crucifix he was going to wear was going to save his life.

While on duty, his team was in charge of sweeping the bridge before the military vehicle travelled across it. After he got out of the car and was leading his team towards the bridge for a routine check, the crucifix suddenly fell off from his necklace. Instinctively he immediately bent down to retrieve the crucifix, and right at that precise moment a bullet flew right above him. And then a lot more bullets after that. Thankfully he and his team survived the ambush! If the crucifix had not fallen from his necklace and he hadn't bent down to retrieve it, he would have been right in the line of fire and died. He came to a realization that the crucifix saved his life. He knew that this was not just a mere coincidence, but a miraculous intervention of God. He phoned his mother to thank her and this experience led him back to faith in God. Why do we hang crosses in our homes or wear crosses around our neck? It is because Cross reveals the depth of God's love for us, which God used as the instrument of salvation from our sin and death.

In the time of Jesus, crucifixion was a capital punishment designed to inflict maximum pain possible and the most humiliating death imaginable, and therefore was reserved for the worst criminals. The Romans also used crucifixion to scare people to submission. I am sure we know that there are different intensities of pain, and the most intense

and extreme kind of pain is described as an “excruciating pain,” which literally means out of the cross. Once nailed to the cross in order for the crucified to breath, he has to lift himself to breath in order to take a breath. This movement causes the same intensity of pain as being nailed to the cross all over again. Eventually, the combination of pain and exhaustion, the one crucified can no longer lift himself and eventually dies of asphyxiation.

And yet, the Cross is what humanity chose to condemn our Saviour, and the Cross is what God chose to surrender His Life in order to save us. Jesus’ death on the cross paid for the sins of the world, making it possible that those who believe in Him can be saved by the merits of His death. So why do we have crosses? It is because the Cross reminds us of the fact that we have a Saviour who unconditionally loves us, who sacrificed His life for us! And yet how often do we forget this? How often we forget that we are loved by God, or remain ungrateful for God’s love.

In our First reading today, the Hebrew slaves were set free from slavery by a miraculous intervention of God. When they were hungry and thirsty in the desert God gave them water, and fed them with Manna in the morning and Quail in the evening. And yet, they were still complaining against God. As a result of their ingratitude, God disciplined them by making them vulnerable to the desert snakes. As they got bitten by the snakes and were dying from the poison, they cried out to Moses for help. In His infinite mercy God heard their cry and gave them a remedy: simply by looking at the bronze statue of serpent they would be healed. The very thing, the snake, that killed them became a means of healing and restoration of life! The very instrument of death became the instrument of life and salvation, just like the cross of Jesus. We all know what satan likes to do, twisting truth into lies, profaning what is sacred, and corrupting what is good into evil. On the cross, Jesus won the victory over sin and death, by surrendering Himself on the cross, overcoming sin with forgiveness, hatred with love, and death with life! This is the work of God, to overcome evil with Good!

Over 25 years ago I went to St. Augustine's Seminary for the first time making a "Come and See weekend retreat" as part of my discernment to the priesthood. In the chapel I saw a picture of a deer drinking from the fountain. I remember asking a seminarian what that image represented. He explained to me that the image of a deer drinking from the fountain was a depiction of Psalm 42, "as a deer yearns for running streams, so my soul longs for you my God." Once a deer gets bitten by a desert snake, as the venom spreads throughout its body the deer becomes dehydrated, and if it doesn't get a drink of water it will die of thirst. So imagine a deer that is in search of water which becomes a matter of life and death. There God offers plenty of water to quench its thirst and bring it back to fullness of life. And that's what God does for us from the cross. Cross is where God's longing for us and our search for God finds its fulfillment. The greatest accomplishment of any saint is not the miracles they performed or their holiness, but their love. Because it was through love that Jesus saves us, and gives us eternal life!