Editor's Note: The following article first appeared in the Sept. 2018 Print Edition of *Catholic Family News* under the headline, "Finding the True Cross" (subscribe HERE; current subscribers can access the E-Edition HERE). We reprint it here today in honor of the 1,707th anniversary of the famous Battle of the Milvian Bridge, which took place on Oct. 28 in A.D. 312. May the words which Emperor Constantine saw emblazoned in the heavens – *In Hoc Signe Vinces* ("Conquer by this sign") – galvanize all the faithful to lift high the standard of the Holy Cross and "fight the good fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12) with great zeal and perseverance.

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"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ: by Whom the world is crucified to me, and I to the world." ~ Galatians 6:14

Crucifixion – Brief Historical Background

The origins of the symbol of the cross predate Christianity by centuries. Long before Jesus walked the earth, the Romans popularized the use of the cross as a mortal punishment for non-Romans. Typical victims of crucifixion were slaves behaving like criminals, pirates behaving like pirates, and so on. Typically, the guilty were bound with rope to the cross. The more heinous offenders were nailed to the wood.

The actual crucifixion was the climax of a series of humiliations. First the ne'er-do-well was scourged. Then he was made to carry the cross (usually the transverse beam) to the site of his crucifixion. On the way, he was treated to insults and blows from onlookers. Upon arrival the criminal was stripped naked, then bound or nailed to the cross and left there to die.

Death did not always come quickly. The crucified could suffer for days. Birds of prey and hungry animals increased the suffering.

The Hebrews preferred execution by stoning. It was not until the Roman occupation that crucifixion as a form of punishment appeared in Palestine. Jesus' suffering, death, and Resurrection transformed the meaning of the cross as an infamous form of torture and death. It was the crucifixion of Christ that redeemed the symbol of the cross, giving it a supernatural, positive meaning.

But in fourth-century Rome, Christians were still a persecuted minority and the Romans still crucified criminals as if the cross of Christ had never happened. It was not until A.D. 312 that circumstances changed. The instrument of change was a man named Constantine.

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Enter Constantine the Great

Constantine was a Roman general and one of the would-be rulers of Rome. Constantine's army had proclaimed him Caesar, but Rome itself was occupied by his nemesis, Maxentius, who publicly berated Constantine as a pretender to the throne. In response, Constantine pointed his army at Rome and advanced.

Maxentius began loading Rome with supplies. He was preparing for a siege, which he believed would allow him to out wait Constantine. It was a tactic Maxentius had used before with success. But as Constantine approached, Maxentius changed his plans because of omens.

First, Maxentius noted that the day of the battle would be October 28, the same date he came to power. Maxentius also consulted the Sibylline Books (the Greeks regarded the sibyls as oracles and sources of divine counsel), where he read that "on October 28 an enemy of the Romans would perish." Concluding the "enemy of the Romans" mentioned in the book was Constantine, Maxentius decided against a siege and chose to be the aggressor in battle.

The Miraculous Sign

Constantine also sought divine counsel, but unlike Maxentius, he received a sign from the one true God. Stories vary on the details of his visions, or if it was a dream instead of a vision. But the Christian historian Eusebius, who insisted he got the story right from Constantine's mouth, describes how the general, even though not yet a Christian, was in fervent prayer for divine assistance in battle, believing this to be more important than all his arms and soldiery. As Constantine poured out his heart in prayer, he received a miraculous sign:

> "About noon, when the day was already beginning to decline, he (Constantine) saw with his own eyes the trophy of a cross of light in the heavens, above the sun, and bearing the inscription, CONQUER BY THIS (In Latin: *In Hoc Signo Vinces*; in Greek: *En Touto Nika*). At this sight he himself was struck with amazement, and his whole army also, which followed him on this expedition, and witnessed the miracle…"

There were precious few Christians in Constantine's army. The vast majority were, like their general, more or less pagans who believed with varying degrees of conviction in this or that

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false god. It was to this audience that the cross appeared: not as a sign of shameful crimes and ignoble death, but as a glowing symbol on high of victory, of good overcoming evil. The vision rocked Constantine to his bones.

"And while he continued to ponder and reason on its meaning," Eusebius continues, "night suddenly came on; then in his sleep the Christ of God appeared to him with the same sign which he had seen in the heavens, and commanded him to make a likeness of that sign which he had seen in the heavens, and to use it as a safeguard in all engagements with his enemies."

As the story is told, Constantine instructed "workers in gold and precious stones" to construct a banner and cross in the likeness of what he saw in the heavens. Lactantius notes:

> "Constantine was directed in a dream to cause the heavenly sign to be delineated on the shields of his soldiers, and so to proceed to battle. He did as he had been commanded, and he marked on their shields the letter X, with a perpendicular line drawn through it and turned round thus at the top (P), being the cipher of CHRISTOS. Having this sign, his troops stood to arms."

Following his own omens, Maxentius positioned his men in front of the Milvian Bridge, which spanned the Tiber River. Constantine's troops bristled at the larger army of Maxentius. The battle of the omens began.

Historic Victory

On this day, Constantine had the initiative from the start. He battered his enemy with cavalry charges, then sent his infantry to push his foe into the river. Maxentius' troops fought bravely but were no match for their more aggressive foe. The weight of Maxentius' retreating troops on the Milvian Bridge caused it to collapse, trapping his army on the northern river bank. The battle turned into a rout.

Maxentius tried to escape by swimming the Tiber back to Rome, but drowned in the attempt. Following the practice of the time, Constantine's men fished his corpse out of the river, beheaded it, and paraded the head into Rome. Other than that, Constantine was magnanimous in victory, refusing to punish the army he had defeated.

The following year (A.D. 313), Constantine issued the Edict of Milan legalizing Christianity.

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Soon afterward, he outlawed crucifixion as a punishment. This was welcomed by his mother, Helena, who also converted to Christianity. She was Greek and not nobly born (she was probably an inn keeper) when she entered a civil union with Constantine's father, Constantius. After bearing Constantius a son they named Flavius Valerius Aurelius Constantinus (Constantine for short), Helena was forsaken by the boy's father. Constantius followed his ambitions and proved himself so adept at politics that he became Caesar. He was less adept at avoiding death, however, which found him in 306.

Constantine was proclaimed Caesar, but this claim was only one of several. Nevertheless, Constantine brought his mother, Helena, to Rome, gave her the title of Augusta, handed her the keys to the Imperial Treasury, and ordered that she be treated as royalty.

In addition to being a consummate general and warrior, Constantine proved himself a sincere Christian. At the time, Christians formed perhaps one fifth of the population of Rome, but under Constantine's watchful eye Christianity flourished in Rome and elsewhere. Some historians believe that Constantine had a greater influence on the spread of Christianity in Europe than the Apostle Paul.

The Emperor's Mother

Helena's conversion to Christianity was not a mere political expedient to ingratiate herself to her powerful son. She proved herself a sincere and zealous Christian who, even though late in years, successfully expanded the faith in the West and the East. According to Eusebius:

> "Especially abundant were the gifts she bestowed on the naked and unprotected poor. To some she gave money, to others an ample supply of clothing; she liberated some from imprisonment, or from the bitter servitude of the mines; others, she delivered from unjust oppression, and others again, she restored from exile. While, however, her character derived luster from such deeds … she was far from neglecting personal piety toward God.
>
> She might be seen continually frequenting His Church, while at the same time she adorned the houses of prayer with splendid offerings, not overlooking the churches of the smallest cities. In short, this admirable woman was to be seen, in simple and modest attire, mingling with the crowd of worshipers, and testifying her devotion to God by a uniform course of pious conduct." (The Life of Constantine, XLIV, XLV)

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She is known to have built churches in Rome and Trier, but it was Helena's travels and church building in the East for which she is most remembered.

In Search of the Holy Sites

It was not until 324 that Constantine finally vanquished the last of his competitors for Caesar: the treacherous Licinius. After achieving this feat, he gave his blessing for his mother to travel to Palestine to search for the holy places that were the origins of the Christian faith of a growing number of Romans. By this time, Helena was in her seventies, but the thought of walking where her Savior had walked seems to have put a spring in her step.

When she finally arrived in Palestine, Helena found that many of the sacred sites were, quite literally, underground. The Roman Emperor Hadrian, who ruled from A.D. 117-138, had a scorched earth policy regarding any religion other than the worship of Roman deities. An equal opportunity destroyer, Hadrian worked hard to ruin the rest of Jerusalem the way Emperor Vespasian (via his son and heir, Titus) had razed the temple during the revolt in A.D. 70.

Hadrian had an equally dim view of Christianity. Lacking any buildings to destroy, Hadrian leveled the top of Mount Calvary and capped it with a temple to the goddess Venus. One account has Hadrian enclosing "the entire place of the resurrection and Mount Calvary within a wall, and had, moreover, ornamented the whole locality, and paved it with stone."

Hadrian also leveled the hillside where Jesus' tomb had stood, and erected instead a temple to Jupiter Capitolinus. Helena's task was daunting, but she wasted no time getting her son's permission to begin excavation. First the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus was demolished, and then, in A.D. 326, workers discovered the remains of Christ's tomb, over which a church was eventually built, namely, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Meanwhile, the excavation at Mount Cavalry had removed the temple of Venus. Under direct orders from Constantine himself, Macarius, the bishop of Jerusalem, aided in the search for the True Cross. After consulting local sources, the searchers focused on a rock-cistern (a well with a waterproof lining) just east of the demolished temple and on September 14, A.D. 326, three crosses were found. Also discovered were crucifixion nails and the titulus (plaque above Jesus' head) containing the words Iesus Nazaranus Rex Iudaeorum ("Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews").

Ironically, Hadrian's destructive actions served to preserve Mount Cavalry and the three crosses. But the plaque was not attached to any of them. How was Helena to determine

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which cross bore the Savior?

Identifying the True Cross

There was in Jerusalem at that time a lady of prominence who was stricken with an incurable disease. Bishop Macarius, Helena, and her attendants came to her bedside when she was near death. Macarius told Helena and the others that he was going to bring each of the three crosses in contact with the dying woman. And so, after some time in prayer at the bedside, each of the crosses were laid on her. The first two brought no reaction from the sufferer, but when the third cross was brought to her, there was an immediate reaction. Witnesses saw the dying woman open her eyes and literally spring from her death bed, healed.

An alternate version of the story has the dying woman brought to Mount Cavalry to encounter each of the crosses, which makes sense if the crosses were kept intact, but less sense if only small portions of each cross were used to heal the woman. Another version is that the True Cross was applied to the coffin of a dead youth, with the result that he came back to life. It is of course possible that both stories occurred at different times.

Helena, in the words of St. Ambrose, “worshiped not the wood, but the King, Him Who hung on the wood. She burned with an earnest desire of touching the guarantee of immortality.” As a token of this zeal, Helena had two churches built in the Holy Land. One was erected in Bethlehem by the cave where Jesus was born. The other was built on the hills of the Mount of Olives, the site of Our Lord’s Ascension into Heaven.

Helena sent part of the True Cross and the crucifixion nails back to Constantine. The rest of the cross was enclosed in a silver reliquary and given to the Bishop of Jerusalem, who deposited it with care in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

Eventually Helena returned from Palestine to live out her final days with her son the Emperor. Constantine was with her when she died, probably around A.D. 330, which was the last year coins were issued bearing her name. This would have made Helena eighty years old or more. She was buried in the imperial vault in Constantinople (Later her remains were transferred to the French Archdiocese of Reims). Helena’s life of piety, care for the poor, and zeal for the True Cross led to widespread devotion which spread to Western Europe.

Legacy of the True Cross

The history of the True Cross continued well after Helena’s death. In A.D. 614, Persian

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forces invaded Palestine, looted Jerusalem, and impiously took with them the relic of the True Cross. Fifteen years later, Emperor Heraclitus of Constantinople returned the favor by invading Persia and recapturing the True Cross. As the story goes, Heraclitus clothed himself in sackcloth and walked barefoot to Jerusalem to return the cross to Jerusalem. On September 14, the same day on which it was originally discovered, he arrived in the holy city and restored the relic of the True Cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. In honor of this event, the universal Church commemorates September 14 as the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Today, one may observe a large portion of the True Cross in Rome at the basilica known as Santa Croce in Gerusalemme ("Holy Cross in Jerusalem"), along with other relics of the Passion, including a large piece of the titulus. There are numerous other relics of the True Cross spread throughout the world. In the words of St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "the whole inhabited earth is full of relics of the wood of the Cross."

Skeptics, including Protestant dissenter John Calvin (1509-1564), would speciously claim that if all the supposed relics of the True Cross were gathered, their size would "be comparable in bulk to a battleship." In response, the location and size of all known relics of the True Cross were catalogued. It was concluded that the volume of the cross was 178,000,000 cubic millimeters. The known volume of the True Cross and all its relics, according to M. Rohault de Fleury, was only about 4,000,000 cubic millimeters. No battleships here, Mr. Calvin, just some precious remains of the instrument of redemption.

So, like the Holy Shroud, the True Cross has had its share of controversy. Also like the Shroud, relics of the True Cross are not worshiped for themselves. They are venerated for what they represent: the Passion, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. They are precious reminders of a love so great that it defeated death. Therefore, may we always lovingly venerate "the wood of the Cross, on which hung the Savior of the world" (*Ecce lignum Crucis*, chanted on Good Friday).

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