



Feast of St. Helen

Reflection by Fr. Richard Vega, KCHS

Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, was a 4th century historian who gives us a chronological account of early Christianity from the 1st to the 4th century.

From our history books, we remember that Constantine seized power in the year 312, and the following year, legalized Christianity with the Edict of Milan. About this time, Constantine's mother, Helena, converted to Christianity. According to Eusebius, Helena was about 63 at the time of her conversion. With the authority of her son, Helena went to Palestine in search of sacred sites about the year 324. In the following years, Helena would build churches marking the place of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the site of the Ascension.

Around the year 326, the temple of *Jupiter Capitolinus* was demolished, and excavation of the area began. Discovered were the remains of the tomb that was reported to be that of Jesus. A new shrine was built over the tomb, which has been modified over the centuries, but today stands in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.

The temple of Venus was also demolished, thereby exposing the site where Christ was crucified. Just east of the site, three crosses were found in a rock-cistern as well as the wood plaque inscribed with the words, "*Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews*". The question then arose, "Which was the cross of Christ?" Details provided by others of the era are lacking and sometimes contradictory. The essence of the story follows: Three crosses and the wooden plaque were removed from the cistern. A woman, dying from a terminal disease, was brought to the spot. She touched the crosses, one by one. After she touched the third cross, she was cured, thereby identifying the True Cross. St. Ambrose preached that when Helena found the True Cross, "she 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."

Helena's life was motivated by true Christian zeal. Eusebius described her: "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." (*The Life of Constantine*, XLIV, XLV).

In commemorating the feast of Helena, we too are called to embody Helena's spirit of generosity and Christian zeal by bestowing "our gifts on the naked and the unprotected poor". Our fundraising efforts have had to be creative and reimagined by COVID 19 but there are opportunities for the sharing of our goods with those who are poor or oppressed by their situations. Like Helena we are called to bring that spirit of liberation to the lives of others by our good works and gifts.

Key to identifying the True Cross was the desire for authenticity. The dying woman touched the True Cross and was restored to life. Today, men and women search for authenticity. This is what we as an Order do for others, not our own aggrandizement but to signal our authentic participation in the Lord's paschal mystery.

Today, the world and in particular, the Holy Land, seeks healing, sharing, removing oppression and the life-giving presence of the Risen Christ. Like the cross that Helena found, our true and authentic self needs to be life giving and transformative. A guarantee that it is Christ we reveal to our world by our zeal, good works, and generosity. This is our mission and call as an Order today.

Outside of the Order, few remember Helena. People do celebrate and exult the presence of the True Cross. May Helena's feast remind us that we all are in search of the True Cross of Christ; all the while sharing love, zeal, and passion for the Lord as demonstrated by our generous and zealous works on behalf of others giving witness of our sharing, as did Helena, in the True Cross of Christ.

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