Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Many of the Jews read this inscription for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek. So the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, “Do not write ‘the King of the Jews,’ but rather, this man said, I am King of the Jews.” Pilate answered, “What I have written I have written.”

If there were a single theme that could apply to the entire season of Lent and especially to this holy evening it would be, “Behold the cross of Christ!” Look at it as it continues to appear on church steeples and altars, in homes and schools, and even in the form of jewelry about the necks of women and men. But as you gaze and meditate on the cross be careful to do so from the point of view of God and with eyes of faith in and love for the God/Man who hangs there. Ironically, many who view the cross totally misunderstand its meaning.

When on the first Good Friday the leaders of the Jews walked along a familiar path outside the walls of Jerusalem and passed by the central cross on Golgotha, they mistakenly looked at it with a sense of triumphant relief. Their wily contest with Pontius Pilate and Roman Law had been successful. Jesus of Nazareth, the popular Rabbi, despite His powerful words and signs and wonders, was finally out of the way for good. For them He posed no longer a mortal threat to their relationship with the Roman government. They had seen Him as one who had the kind of following that might raise up a rebellion against Rome, a rebellion that would endanger their comfortable, profitable alliance with the Empire. To be sure, under Rome they were not free! Yes, they were subject to certain indignities, including usurious high taxes and the presence of pagan Greek cities like Caesarea in the promised land, but they controlled the wealth and splendor associated with the Holy Temple.

With Jesus gone, things could go back to normal! With their leader dead His followers would soon enough lose heart and disappear into the backwoods of Galilee. It is ironic that they should come to this conclusion by gazing at the dying Jesus. In a very few years a series of rebellions would arise, Jerusalem
would lay in ruins and not one stone of the temple would be left standing on another. They looked at the central cross and saw it as their chosen instrument. Their old, narrow, exclusive ways had prevailed. Gone was His interpretation of the Law, gone were His revelations of God who was concerned with Jews and Gentiles alike! Gone was the way of unchanging, universal love for all people! They were wrong! Ironically, Christ their opponent would rise and change the dreaded instrument of death into God’s symbol of love and everlasting life.

When Pontius Pilate had an inscription written to be placed on the cross above the head of the crucified Christ, he too must have had mixed feelings. He would have his revenge on the Jewish leaders who had prodded him into passing the death sentence. The place of execution was near the city and crowds would be able to read his words. He made certain that anyone who could read would understand why this man was being put to death. It read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Moreover, it was written in Aramaic, the mother tongue of the people; in Latin, the language of government; and in Greek, the language of business and commerce. Despite the protests of the chief priests Pilate refused to alter the inscription, declaring, “What I have written I have written.” He too must have been relieved that the ordeal of the trial that had disturbed both him and his wife was past, and what lay ahead were merely the usual Passover problems. He thought the cross and the inscription were his perfect revenge, but ironically the words he had written were in a sense the first written Gospel proclaiming who Christ was and what His life and death were accomplishing. He imagined that one more problem had been removed from Judea, and things would get back to normal. It is ironic that he should think this, for the divine influence of Jesus the Christ was just beginning. In roughly fifty days the apostles would begin carrying out the commission of the Lord Jesus to make disciples of all nations. The Church of Christ would quickly grow in Jerusalem by the thousands. Indeed, tradition indicates that even his wife eventually became a Christian, while he became obsessed with the washing of his hands. The cross of Christ had triumphed! God transformed the tree of death into the triumphant tree of life everlasting for all who believe.

Today there are many secular folk in the world who look at the cross and ironically still miss the fact that the cross is Christ’s cross, not man’s, that and it accomplishes God’s purpose. For them the cross is still a common means of identifying church buildings, and, when worn, even Christian people. It appears in every city and town in the western world. But what do these people see in it? A vanishing Christ! They are aware of the fact that virtually all denominations are shrinking, and in some areas they are shrinking quickly. For them the ubiquitous cross is no more than the last vestige of a
once powerful Church that had a mighty influence over the people of much of the world. As the powerful influence of the Church diminishes, secular influence increases. It is now possible to escape the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and to concentrate on the glorification of self. Customs and social practices that were once considered wrong and sinful are becoming acceptable, and things that were never even mentioned in public are becoming commonplace. The secular people are wrong! The cross of Christ and the crucified One remain the only way to everlasting life. Indeed the Church will remain until the end of time, and not even the gates of hell will be able to prevail against it.

But we have gathered together on this holy evening once again to gaze at the cross of our Divine Redeemer. We have come with God’s truth and faith in our hearts. We have come to adore the cross of Christ from the point of view of God Himself. What do we see? Not a symbol of evil! Not a symbol of man’s cruelty to man! Not a symbol of a miscarriage of justice! From God’s point of view the deadly tree of the knowledge of good and evil has become the tree of glory, love and life. The God/Man hanging on the tree is not a victim, but the victorious Redeemer of the world. He is there before our eyes to make the perfect and all sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. He is there to die that, believing in Him, we shall never die. The death-dealing heritage of Adam has been transformed into the life-giving heritage of the Son of God. While we sorrow over the spiritual and physical sufferings of our Lord, we rejoice that by the grace of God, through faith in the Redeemer’s saving death, He has given us life.

Christians see the cross of Christ quite differently from way in which the secular world sees it. This must remain true, for we see it as God sees it. Let us never forget! Neither the treachery of Satan nor the sinfulness of mankind play a role in the cross of Christ. The cross is entirely God’s doing! It is the sign of God’s invincible, immutable love for fallen mankind! It is the symbol of Christ’s perfect and all-availing sacrifice for the sins of the world! It is the guarantee of Christ’s victory over death, hell and all that is evil! It is for these reasons that the Holy Catholic Church lifts high the cross and proclaims Christ and Him crucified to all the world, and it will do so until the end of time. Amen!