

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

The Dogwood

One of my favorite pictures from my youth was taken in the backyard of my parents' house in Rockville, Maryland. It shows my sister and me, on an Easter Sunday from about 1970, wearing what could only be called our "Sunday best" and standing in front of a large, blooming dogwood tree.



The tree was a familiar fixture from my childhood, and its first blooms were a sure sign that spring had arrived. With the Easter season itself now in full bloom—it is Easter, after all, until Pentecost—I thought it was a good time to talk about the dogwood tree, and the unusual story behind it.

As Wikipedia puts it:

There is a Christian legend of unknown origin that proclaims that the cross used to crucify Jesus was constructed of dogwood. As the story goes, during the time of Jesus, the dogwood was larger and stronger than it is today and was the largest tree in the area of Jerusalem. After His crucifixion, Jesus changed the plant to its current form: He shortened it and twisted its branches to assure an end to its use for the construction of crosses...

Yet another description of the story puts the tree in a more sympathetic light:



To be put to such a cruel use greatly distressed the tree. Sensing this, the crucified Jesus, in His gentle pity for the sorrow and suffering of all, said to it: 'Because of your sorrow and pity for My suffer-

ings, never again will the dogwood tree grow large enough to be used as a gibbet.

Henceforth it will be slender, bent and twisted and its blossoms will be in the form of a cross—two long and two short petals. In the center of the outer edge of each petal there will be nail prints—brown with rust and stained with red—and in the center of the flower will be a crown of thorns, and all who see this will remember.'

Whatever the origins of the dogwood, and whatever the reason for its curious, cross-shaped buds, it remains a welcome harbinger of spring, a reminder of this season of renewal and rebirth.

We should savor the buds of the dogwood while we can—seeing in their beauty a mute testament to the season that manages, in a matter of days, to bring us both the agony of the cross and the joy of the Resurrection.

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