

The Icelandic Book of Homilies

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The Icelandic Book of Homilies was composed between AD 1080–1100. Its language is so superb that it truly can be called the Icelandic Philokalia. Jón Helgason once said: “A poet who intends to write pure Icelandic and has not as yet read the Book of Homilies is as well prepared as a priest who has not read the Sermon on the Mount.” Its text displays striking similarities with Egyptian desert fathers’ spirituality perhaps through the influence of Celtic monks who were active in Iceland during early Middle Ages. The present excerpts from the Book of Homilies were translated from the original Icelandic after the following edition: Íslensk hómilíubók. Fornar stólræður. Reykjavík: Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, 1993.

On the Holy Cross

We need to have a deep insight into the significance of the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the sign of His Passion is a token of our salvation and redemption. Until Christ was crucified, the cross had been a sign of death for evil men, after which it became a sign of life for good men. Before Christ’s Passion the cross was offensive and disgusting for men; now it is worshiped by angels and glorified by men but is disgusting for demons. For Christ trampled on the devil and freed all mankind from slavery when He died on the cross, and He did so on the tree of the Passion, the first Man to be tormented on the tree which he desired. The Lord was tortured in the center of the world because it is equidistant from all the world’s quarters. The mercy of His Passion is equally close to all people, for whom He is to be worshiped by good and faithful works. This redemption of all mankind marks the cross in all its parts, for if it is laid down it faces the four ends or the four world’s quarters. The poet Sedulius says about His Passion: “Jesus’ head is directed eastward, his feet westward, the right hand northward and the left hand southward. He was crucified north of Jerusalem.”

Christ’s head signifies His godhead and His feet signify His humanity, for His head is directed to heaven and His feet are stretched downward towards the earth, for the godhead descended heaven and put on humanity on the earth. East signifies His resurrection and west signifies His death because the sun rises towards the east and sets towards the west. Christ’s head was directed eastward and His legs westward because He experienced death according to His humanity and was strengthened to resurrection according to His godhead. His left hand was stretched southward and His right hand northward because the people of Jerusalem and the Jews became left hand people, that is, outcasts, on account of their unbelief. After His Passion He chose for Himself right hand people from heathens of the north.

And when the cross is raised up it partly stands firm in the earth and partly in the air because Christ united heavenly and earthly things, and He reconciled with Himself earthly men and His Angels. On the cross He stretched out His both hands because He offers the embrace of His mercies to all whom He loves. He stretched out His right hand because He released all His friends from hell and carried them along with Him to eternal glories. He stretched out His left hand because He calls many unworthy men to His mercies and cleanses them through repentance. The edge of the cross, which was above the Lord's head, signifies the hope of our ascending to heaven and obtaining a reward for all the good we do. The arms of the cross signify love between God and men.

The upper edge of the cross also signifies God's love, and the arms of the cross signify love towards neighbors, both friends and enemies.

The feet are the end of the body. Hence the significance of that edge of the cross where His feet were nailed is steadfastness in good works until the very end of life. The part that was below His feet signifies humility. For as our mind should rise to God's reward, so it should humiliate itself before men. And the part which was in the earth and invisible to sight, though it upheld all the heaviness of the cross, signifies the unseen might and hidden things. Since it upheld the whole cross and was hidden from sight in the earth, so also the unseen might of God rules all the visible things.

But if we interpret the symbolism of the cross by word of mouth, how it will assist us should we neglect it in practice? In the Gospel the Lord speaks accordingly, "Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of Me." Only that man takes his cross and follows Christ who practices asceticism as the holy men had done. We can bear the cross of the Lord by two ways: on our body and in our soul. We bear the sign of God's passion on our body if we exhaust our flesh in asceticism and chastise ourselves for sins as the Apostle Paul did: "I chastise my body and bring it under control," he said, "to avoid any risk that, having acted as a herald for others, I myself may be disqualified."

We bear the cross in our soul if our heart grieves about others' misfortunes or sins as Paul did: "If anyone is weak, I too am weak," he said, "and when anyone is made to fall, I too burn in agony." "Let him renounce himself," said the Lord, "and take up his cross and follow Me." That man does not take his cross and does not follow Christ who exhausts his flesh in asceticism but seeks human praise instead of God's love or indulges those sinners who think that sin deserves rather encouragement than punishment.

That man takes Christ's cross and follows Him who for His sake chastises his own body and for His love is merciful towards his neighbors. He always hates their sin but loves the sinners and establishes them on the right path as diligently as he can.

The cross of our Lord is holier than any sacred object because it consecrates any Baptism or any Eucharist assisted by the gift of the Holy Spirit. We cannot hallow anything without

the cross, for nobody can come to the heavenly kingdom without Christ's Passion. When we make the sign of the cross over ourselves or over something we want to be hallowed by the cross, we should remember by what it is sanctified, what it signifies and what it can do. Before the Lord's cross demons escape, hell is frightened, death departs, sins are avoided, enemies are disgraced, peace is strengthened, love and all the good things blossom. The holy cross is a sign of God's victory, a sign of men's redemption and a sign of Angels' joy. God hallows it, Angels worship it, men bow before it, all creature glorify it. The holy cross is a shield of help in any danger, aid in happy things, comfort in grief, moderation in merriment, protection in danger, healing in sickness, release from bondage and improvement of sins, victory in battles and strengthening in any temptation, support for the poor and guidance for the rich, peace for the good and fear of evil. By the mercy of Him who on the cross set free from death all mankind, our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and honor with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, forever and ever.

Prayer to Christ

O Lord Jesus Christ, King of eternal glories, almighty Word of the Most High God, Power and Wisdom that beholds all things, I profess You, I worship You, I bow to You, the Redeemer of all mankind. You have taken pity on your world that miserably served death. You, being sinless and innocent, endured cruel suffering even to death which You bore on the holy cross to save sinful men and to have mercy on them. Now I want to thank You with all my heart for Your Passion and for all those torments that You endured to save me and to redeem all mankind. I beseech You, O Almighty Son of the Living God, heal my spirit by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Teach me, O holy Saviour of the world, how I can surely find Your mercy. O my gracious and merciful God, by your mighty cross drive away all temptation. Strengthen me for struggle against sin and repentance which is pleasing to You. I want to join Your battle, and I appeal to You with all my heart. Chastise and cleanse me from all my vices in this world. And allow me to prepare myself for death that in the next world I may find Your mercy and enjoy there the eternal beatitude with You, in fellowship with all the Saints, in that kingdom and dominion, which belong to You with God the Father Almighty and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.

Prayer to Mary

O Saint Mary, mother of my Lord, blossom of chastity, shelter of the Holy Spirit, you are holier than all the Saints and you are greater than them in your merits. You receive all that you wish from your Son, Almighty God. I am in no way worthy to greet you because of my sins. Since I know that your prayers and petitions are the best intercession before God, I want with all my heart to hide in your hand and to find at you all mercy before God. In this way by your kind-heartedness, you may remember me by your help and may not leave me without consolation in my need. O blessed Domina of the heaven and earth, mother of all mercy and kindness, bring me to peace with your only Son and guard me from all God's wrath. Keep all the distresses of this world away from me, safeguard me against all fraud,

and strengthen me for every good work. Be my hope in my death and utter that word for me which will save me when I come to the judgment seat of your Son. O Saint Mary, on account of your merits do not let me be doomed to eternal tortures because of my sins by Him who in His mercy redeemed me from eternal death with His own blood, Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who in the one Godhead lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.