We have reached the midpoint of Great Lent. If we have up to now in a serious manner increased our physical and spiritual struggles and efforts during the Great Fast, then it is no wonder that having reached the midpoint we should feel fatigued, despondent and even bitter. Like an oasis in the desert, the Cross is brought out today in order to refresh and comfort us. Our Savior tells us today that if we would be His disciples, we must deny ourselves, take up our Cross, and follow Him. What does this mean, to deny ourself and take up our Cross? It means to follow the Gospel teachings and commandments of our Lord, even when our own desires and feelings tell us that we would rather live our lives differently. St. innocent writes that it means “to accept and bear unmurmuringly everything unpleasant, painful, sad, difficult and oppressive that may happen to us in our life. And therefore, whether anyone offends you, or laughs at you, or causes you weariness, sorrow or annoyance; or you have done good to someone and instead of thanking you, he rises up against you and even makes trouble; or you want to do good, but you are not given a chance; or some misfortune has happened, for example, either you are ill yourself, or your wife, or children, or in spite of your activity and untiring labors you are suffering from want and poverty, and are so hard up that you do not know how to make both ends meet; or besides that, you are in some difficulty without malice, without murmuring, without criticism, without complaint, that is, without regarding yourself as offended and without expecting any earthly reward in return; but bear it all with love, with joy and firmness.” St. Theophan the Recluse tells us that “Abundant privileges and a life of pleasure do not suit a true Christian. His task is to cleanse and reform himself. He is like a sick person who needs cauterization or amputation; how can this be without pain? He wants to tear himself away from the captivity of a strong enemy, but how can this be without struggle and wounds? He must walk counter to all the practices that surround him, but how can he sustain this without inconvenience and constraint? Rejoice as you feel the cross upon yourself, for it is a sign that you are following the Lord on the path of salvation which leads to heaven. Endure a bit. The end and the crowns are just around the corner!” Going back to St. innocent, the holy hierarch and missionary points out that the injunction to deny ourselves and take up our cross means that this must be a voluntary act of free will. “Jesus Christ does not compel or force anyone to follow Him. He does not want to have as His disciples those who are unwilling or those who have no special desire to follow Him, but wants us willingly and without any compulsion to surrender ourselves wholly to Him.” “Christians, your salvation or perdition depends on your own will!” Unless we are willing to deny ourselves (which means killing our sinful passions) and bear our crosses, whatever they might be, without complaint, we will not see the Kingdom of God. Fr. Alexander Schmemann writes that “If throughout the first part of Lent our effort was aimed at our own purification, we are made to realize now that this purification was not an end in itself but must lead us to the contemplation and comprehension and appropriation of the Mystery of the Cross and Resurrection. The meaning of our effort is now being revealed to us as participation in that mystery to which we were so accustomed as to take it for granted, and which we simply forgot. And, as we follow Him going up to Jerusalem together with the disciples, we are “amazed and afraid.” This then, Brother and Sisters, is the meaning of the midpoint, the 3rd Sunday of Great Lent, as we behold the Holy Cross of our Lord and make it our own, by denying ourselves, voluntarily lifting up our crosses, and following Him. Amen!