

July 7, 2019 The Iron Cross Homily: It is likely that you are familiar with the popular comic strip “Peanuts”, featuring Charlie Brown and his unforgettable companions. Snoopy, the pet dog, is one of them. Fancying himself an aviator, Snoopy is often perched on the roof top of his doghouse, ready to engage his arch-enemy, the Red Baron, a German flying ace, in an aerial battle. The character of the Red baron was inspired by a true historical figure, Manfred Von Richthofen, an accomplished fighter pilot and one of the heroes of the First World War. It is worth noting that the image of the Iron cross is emblazoned on the wings of the Baron’s plane. The “Iron Cross” is a military medal once awarded to German soldiers for gallantry, bravery and personal sacrifice. Very few are deserving of the medal. The recipients of the medal wear it proudly. To be identified with the “cross” is a privilege, indeed, a rare honor.

On the day of our baptism, we are marked with the sign of the cross.

In today’s second reading, St. Paul tells us that he boasts in the cross of Christ. “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world”. (Gal.6:14) His boast must have unnerved many of his listeners. The cross was an instrument of torture. To die on the cross was considered shameful, a fate reserved for slaves and criminals. Crucifixion was indisputably the cruelest form of execution ever invented by man. What was a sign of disgrace has become for Paul, the one-time tormenter of the early Church, the boast of the Christian.

According to Paul, many Jewish Christians were loath to preach the message of the cross, fearful that they may encounter fierce opposition from their fellow Jews. They would much rather talk about the rite of circumcision, which, for the Jew, is a mark of the covenant between God and the Chosen People. Circumcision assured them that they belonged to a special race, and that they enjoyed the good favor of God Himself. But St. Paul pushed back. He would have none of their temporizing. St. Paul writes, “It is only self-interest that makes them want to force circumcision on you... the want to escape persecution for the cross of Christ.” (Gal.6:12). Paul insisted that, in the light of the cross, circumcision is meaningless.

Paul spoke of the marks of Jesus on his body. Those visible marks gave him the authority to proclaim the gospel of the cross with integrity. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks honestly of the sufferings he has endured for his crucified and risen Lord. “Five times I had the thirty-nine lashes from the Jews; three times I have been beaten with sticks; once I was stoned; three times I have been shipwrecked and once adrift in the open sea for a night and a day. Constantly traveling, I have been in danger from rivers and in danger from brigands, in danger from my own people and in danger from pagans; in danger in the towns, in danger in the open country, danger at sea and danger from so-called brothers. I have worked and labored, often without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty and often starving; I have been in the cold without clothes. And to leave out much more, there is my daily anxiety for all the churches.” (2 Cor.11:23-28)

In our age of declining belief and religious practice, what are likely to be the reasons for boasting? Let us enumerate some of the possibilities: our personal wealth, our connections with the influential and the powerful, our academic degrees, our good health, our station in life and our many accomplishments in

athletic contests. In his commentary on the Letter to the Galatians, The Angelic doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas, maintains that “each person glories in that through which he is considered great”. One example: “a person who regards himself as great in wealth, glories in them.” Thomas is quick to point out that St. Paul does not glory in the things that are in the world. He glories only in the cross of Christ. In the cross, every Christian should be able to find support and strength in his daily life.

From the time of our Lord’s death and Resurrection, the meaning of the cross has undergone a remarkable transformation. What was once considered offensive and greatly feared is now a badge of honor. It can be found in churches, in many of our homes and even on our persons. The cross is the center of our faith!

Although he is a villain in the comic strip, the Red Baron has the wisdom and good sense to recognize the beauty and power of the Holy Cross of Jesus. That alone makes him a sympathetic character!

Amen!