

In the early 1980's, one of the literary giants of the French speaking world, Julian Green, penned a widely acclaimed biography of St. Francis of Assisi. The book's title, "God's Fool", clearly reflects the influence of Christianity's greatest missionary, St. Paul, whose first letter to the Church at Corinth contains some indispensable words of counsel. "If anyone among you considers himself wise", writes the apostle, "let him become a fool, so as to become wise". By the world's standards Francis was eccentric, if not a little crazy. In one dramatic incident, he stripped himself naked in the public square in the presence of his king and father, and declared himself a free man. In the winter months, he walked barefoot. He made a bold attempt to convert the sultan, a Moslem, to the Christian faith.. By all accounts his ministry was crazy!

For St. Paul, "the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God" (I Cor. 3:19). Some of the most venerated Christians in the Eastern Churches are fondly regarded as "Holy Fools". They chose to be counter-cultural. Guided by the voice of the Holy Spirit, and not the social conventions of the day, they were "fools for Christ's sake" (I Cor. 4:10a)

In the writings of the renowned Russian novelist, Dostoyevski, some of his most memorable characters are "Holy fools" in the Orthodox tradition, such as Father Sozzima, Sonia, the prostitute and penitent, Prince Myshkin and Aloysha Karamazov. Indeed, the title of one of his novels is "The Idiot", a reference to a guileless prince who resembles Christ in his characteristic ways of dealing with his neighbor.

How does one become a fool? St. Paul's answer: embrace the mystery of the cross. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God" (I Cor. 1:18).

One can even speak of the foolishness of God, who in his wisdom, allows his Son to be crucified. Truly, God's ways are unsearchable!. In one of the poems of the English writer, Rudyard Kipling, "Cold Iron", an influential member of the king's court, a wealthy baron, rebels against him, and hopes to bring his reign to an end. The baron is defeated, captured and led in heavy chains to the king. The king's loyal subjects expected the usurper to be executed. Instead the king treats him kindly, and sets before him a table of choice meats, fresh bread and a vintage wine. By human standards, what the king did was utter foolishness. But God's ways are not our ways!

Today, especially in our increasingly secular country, Catholics want to be accepted. Swimming against the prevailing current is not an option for most of us. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is especially relevant in view of the virtual collapse of Christian morality today. Christians must be different. There can be no room for compromise. St. Paul calls for the hard way, the distinctive way of living the life of Christ in world where Christ is in eclipse. He is convinced that the worst kind of foolishness is that of thinking oneself wise when one in fact is not.

Recently, I officiated the wedding of one of my cousins. I pointed out to him and his bride that by choosing a life-long commitment in marriage, they have chosen to be fools for the sake of Christ. Our secular culture derides Christian marriage, chastity, virginity and fidelity. Only fools would embrace such out-dated and absurd teachings, or so we are told. And so I paid them the highest compliment of all. I

called them “fools”. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (! Cor. 1:25).

Some years ago, a player for the Boston Red Sox referred to his teammates as “a bunch of idiots”. It was not meant to be insulting. He simply wanted to emphasize that he and his teammates were a close knit group who enjoyed playing the game of baseball, and cared little of what the media and fans may say of them.

This must be our mindset as well. Let our hearts not be troubled by those who scorn and ridicule our faith. St. Paul was faced with the same problem. Nevertheless, he was proud to be a “fool for Christ’s sake”. Could the same be said of us?