

General Retreat of the Society of the Holy Trinity 2017
Office of Sext and Subscription to the Rule
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Galatians 6:14-17

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body.

On February 15, 2015, the Islamic State released a five-minute video, showing the beheading of 21 Christians along a beach of the south Mediterranean coast. You have no doubt heard of, or seen this video, entitled "A Message Signed in Blood to the Nation of the Cross."

In the video, 21 men in orange coveralls, identified in subtitles as "people of the cross who carry the illusion of the cross in their heads," are on their knees before their black-clad captors. They are resigned and dignified, their eyes slightly uplifted. Most murmur prayers, their lips moving. All know their fate: people of the cross who are about to join their Lord in death.

Recently, when faced with the silliness that rears its head in our churches, pastors I know take refuge with each other and lament. As do I. The common refrain is always, "I didn't sign up for this." You know what I mean--Naked and Unashamed, We Navigate Toward a Decolonized Missional Future As Sacramental Entrepreneurs for an Empty Hell. Or something like that. It's much on public display in the ELCA, but the rest of our judicatory bodies have their own share of the heretical, the apostate and the plain stupid. *I didn't sign up for this.*

You know what else I didn't sign up for? Despair, hopelessness, complaining, self-congratulation, and bitter superiority, devoid of charity.

No, actually-- I subscribe to that stuff. I like that a lot. It allows me to feel like Elijah--*I alone have been faithful, O Lord, and they are seeking my life to take it away!* Look at how faithful I am! I hang out with people who know the real truth, I am doing liturgy and preaching right, I belong to the Society of the Holy Trinity, I've left the apostate ELCA, At least I'm not like them over there, O Lord. I can go to my judicatory meetings and sit in the seat of the scoffers and mockers and roll my eyes so. hard, congratulate myself for having survived, smirk at my few friends, and then go home, where I read things on the internet that make me

angry, and spend all evening arguing with the people who are wrong. Look at me the faithful witness.

But in the midst of such delicious, sinful indulgence--do I carry the cross around in my head, so transformed by what my enemies call an illusion that my whole life is shaped by it? Can I lay claim to being of the nation of the cross, not by birth, but united in the water of the font, which is thicker than any blood? Would I die with the name of Jesus on my lips, drinking deep the cup of Christ's suffering?

I like to think I would, but I know me. And I didn't sign up for any of it.

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Instead, it got given to me on November 28, 1971, in sacred chrism. It was marked again on me on May 9, 1998 as I knelt and received the yoke of Christ and the laying on of hands. It was imposed upon me--repeated every year in ashes, but in the same shape--and it is an imposition. Inconvenient, a burden. A terrible encumbrance, the cross-- reeking of death, most particularly mine.

Death to self, death to ambition, death to all measures of success, death to any ideas about making a difference or leaving a legacy or even doing quiet good work in a parish somewhere-- death to anything else except faithfulness. The faithfulness of my Lord to me; and the answering faithfulness he calls forth--no, demands, compels--in me.

I didn't sign up for this, but Jesus signed me up for it. I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. I have nothing to brag about besides that. Not my knowledge of tradition, not my zeal for the truth, not my skill with words, not the illusion I hold of being right. Nothing except the cross. ISIS is right about one thing: this is a message signed in blood. But it's not the arterial blood of poor Egyptian laborers looking for a better life, it's the blood of the King himself, transferring me into the Nation of the Cross, a great multitude that no one can count, from all tribes and peoples and languages. It's the blood of the King, imprinting upon me the sign of his victory so that I have no choice but to have it branded in my mind as it was marked on my skin, imprinted on my heart, *Let the clear inscription be, Jesus crucified for me, is my life, my hope's foundation, all my glory and salvation.*

If we are not the people of the cross, pastors of the cross--if we do not belong to the nation of the cross, then all of this--the Rule, this Society--all of it is meaningless. If we have exchanged the cross for the ecclesial equivalents of pop tarts and justicey service projects OR have become not much more than a well-dressed liturgy appreciation club; if we have taken refuge in self-justification and a spirit of condemnation, and us-against-them siege mentality, if we hold ourselves better than those others who are *wrong*, then we are of all people most to be

pitied, because we have surely set up our own idols, boast of ourselves while pretending not to, and are busy saving our lives only to lose them.

The evil that butchers young Christian men on a Libyan beach is the same evil that blinds us to what is truly at stake when we preach and teach and administer the sacraments. We get weary, worn-down, worn out. We wonder if anything we say or do makes a difference to anyone; at night, we wonder if we believe what we say at all; we know that sometimes we, too, fall into the trap of Nice Jesus Don't Make Waves Let's Just Be Happy and Get Along, and we hate ourselves for it. We know we phone it in a lot, whether it's at church or with our family or friends. We know that we're busy with a dozen things that are less important than the clear witness to Christ Jesus. We know how far short we fall of the witness of the Holy Martyrs of Libya, of all the martyrs, heck, even of our own faithful grandparents. How easy it is to be grateful for their witness, but think "that's not me."

Except it is. You, also, are bidden to come and die. Indeed, you have already died and your life is hidden with the Lamb who was slain, once for all. Only under, in and with his cross can your life, your work as a pastor in Christ's church, have any power or meaning at all. Paul asks that no one make trouble for him, but he knew and you know that to be branded with Christ is trouble. Seeking faithfulness is trouble. Signing the Rule of the Society, recommitting yourself to your ordination vows--all of it is trouble. If you are marked with the cross, you *will* be crucified. And it likely won't be any public, heroic death that would gratify the old Adam. No, no--instead, you'll die painfully to all the selfish little things you hold on to, like old Mrs. Ruby Turpin in that Flannery O'Connor story, your face shocked and altered as even your virtues are burned away.

But out of death comes life. Again and again and again. Out of the blood of the martyrs, out of the faithful proclamation of one parish pastor in a boring town, is seeded the rising of a vigorous Church, a Church that has nothing except the cross of Christ, and so has everything. In the cross has all evil been overcome, all death, every sin which clings so closely and becomes so cherished: all of that is vanquished. Every child you catechize, every parent you gently remonstrate and encourage, every beginning Bible study you teach (again), every Host delivered to hungry mouths, every sign of the cross traced on the sick and the dying: these are the weapons of the Spirit. Far from being afterthoughts, or things peripheral to any supposed political or ideology-based work of the Church--they are the mission of the Church. There can be no other.

So ordinary, so unexciting, so unsexy. But the gates of hell cannot prevail against them, or us, even as busted as we are. Because *in hoc signo vinces*: in this sign, you conquer.

At the end of the video message from ISIS, the camera pans across the severed heads of the new martyrs, placed between their own shoulder blades. Eyes closed, they look remarkably peaceful. The spokesman tells us, "safety for you crusaders is something you can only wish for. This filthy blood is just some of what awaits you." The video closes with an artful shot of rolling, red-foaming surf.

The people of the cross, we know water. We know blood. We've already been covered with both, and nothing--not even death can separate us from the Lamb. Not all the ocean in the world, not barbaric tyrants, not our own fickle hearts, not our virtues mingled with our vices, not sin, not hell itself. We've been drowned and then yanked up into the light, gasping new life, rising up out of the scarlet flood, dripping with chrism, marked with the cross forever, clothed with the host arrayed in white, led from the fountain filled with blood to the altar which holds the cup brimming with Blood, and this not *on* us, but *in* us, lifeblood poured into our mouths.

Oh, no. We do not seek safety. As Chrysostom says, "Let us then return from that table like lions breathing fire, having become terrible to the devil; thinking on our Head, and on the love which he has shown for us."

Cutting off heads will never from the Lord his children sever. You didn't sign up for this, but the sign is written on you. You may have signed this book here, or will, but the most important signature is engraved in blood, it is inscribed on the palms of His hands. Amen.