

## Sermon Easter 7 Year B 2024

In early March this year, the organizing committee for the upcoming Paris Olympics released its official promotional poster, featuring familiar Parisian landmarks - the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Dôme des Invalides - dropped into a brightly coloured and surrealistic landscape of stadiums, Olympic rings, and cheering crowds. But something, though, was conspicuously missing. The poster depicts the Dôme des Invalides (commissioned by Louis XIV and repository of Napoleon's tomb) *without* the gilded Christian cross that has adorned its pinnacle since its construction in the late 17th century. Instead of a cross, the poster shows a simple spike. French conservative lawmakers were outraged, accusing the organizers of erasing France's distinctive history and national identity.

We could blame the militant secularism that has been official French policy since the revolution and tries to confine religious expression strictly to private life. But the missing cross on the Olympics' poster isn't quite the same as France's current ban, for example, on wearing a crucifix (or a hijab) to class at a state school. It's the deliberate alteration - in fact, *falsification* - of an image of an existing cross.

The creator of the Olympic poster, a leading commercial illustrator (Hermès scarves are one of his specialties), explained that he had no “ulterior motive” for omitting the cross in his depiction of Les Invalides. He said that his aim hadn't been to make his images “accurate” but to place them “within a surrealist and celebratory universe.” But the “celebratory” ethos is actually an ethos of genteel skittishness. It is an ethos that other designers of commercial products adopt whenever they come up against Christianity's symbols, especially the Cross. In 2017 a German supermarket chain used a photo of Santorini's famous Church of the Anastasis on labels of its yogurt and other Greek-derived products. The labels photoshopped out the multiple crosses atop the church's iconic blue domes. In 2023 the luxury automobile brand Porsche drew criticism for editing out a statue of Jesus from a television commercial featuring one of their cars speeding along a bridge spanning Lisbon's Tagus River. The crosses that adorn St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow are often blurred out in images featured on calendars, paper napkins, and jigsaw puzzles.

Now, behind all this, there may be a desire not to offend Muslims, who in France now account for at least 10% of the population. Incidents of destruction of crosses in European churches and other venues by radical Muslims are not uncommon.

Alternatively, Europeans may be wary of the politicization of religion that seems to be a feature of the U.S. culture wars and may remind them of their own centuries of religious strife after the Reformation.

But more disturbingly, there may be a sense that secularism has so pervaded the culture of France (and elsewhere in the West) that the symbols of Christianity, which shaped that culture for centuries, aren't viewed so much as dangerous as irrelevant and even embarrassing. Some 51% of the French metropolitan population aged eighteen to fifty-nine professes no religion at all. Catholicism now commands only 29% of the population. Among Catholics, only 8% attend Mass regularly. In England, for the first time in 1000 years, less than half the population now identifies as Christian. It would not be surprising if the artist had erased the cross atop Les Invalides from his poster simply because he considered it insufficiently “celebratory” of a culture that has largely emptied itself of any religion, much less Christianity. It's beneath one's dignity to be overtly Christian - and nobody cares anyway.

This illustration is of course now one of many. I could have settled on any number of examples that once more highlight how most cultures in the West have cut themselves off from their Christian moorings, have distanced themselves from their Christian heritage, and try to imagine a future without it. But it should come as no surprise. We have been seduced – for centuries now – by a false sense of security, that the close proximity between the church and the surrounding culture was our natural habitat. It has meant that - for centuries now - the culture has done most of the heavy lifting for us, in terms of supporting the faith and even propagating the faith.

The gospel today, however, reminds us how this has been a fool's errand. Our natural habitat as Christians is *not* one in which we gain the applause and support of the surrounding culture. This proximity, yes, has given us the highest and best of human achievements in art, music, science, architecture, literature, ethics and the rest. And as that relationship disintegrates so too will be our capacity to continue creating the highest and best. Now, we all probably want a quiet life, one of comfort and acceptance. And *all* humankind *will* suffer as an entire civilization – grounded on our faith – continues to be hollowed out. But as we know from throughout the gospels, what we are promised is *not* a life of ease or acceptance. We follow the Crucified One, and what we are promised is a cross. And so, our Lord says in the gospel today, *the world has*

*hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to this world.* It is this reality we are slowly waking up to.

The gospel portion today is from the 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John's gospel. It is toward the very of what is known as the 'high priestly prayer' of Jesus. It is some *four* chapters that the evangelist dedicates to this prayer offered by Jesus at the Last Supper on the night he was betrayed. In it, he prays for himself, for his apostles, and then for all who will come to believe in him through their word, that is, for the church of all times. In other words, the gospel we hear today is spoken within a breath of Jesus leaving the upper room for the garden of Gethsemane and so to his execution. These are among the very last words Our Lord conveys to his followers, giving them a particular poignancy and importance.

But our Lord's words of difficulties to come, of what we can expect to experience, are not spoken to direct us to hopelessness or gloom. They are spoken to *clarify our mission*. This mission is, in part, described by Our Lord today: *You have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes, I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.* This reminds us, firstly, that the promise of troubles and of hatred is not a cause for withdrawal or disengagement. *I have sent them into the world.* And secondly, the church's mission is that of a people *set apart*, that our identity does not come from the surrounding culture, but from Christ. *Sanctify them in truth.* In some translations, this is read as *consecrated in truth*. The meaning is the same. To be sanctified/consecrated is to be set apart. It is only by being a people set apart that our mission can be seen and recognised.

It is fully possible to maintain a fully robust, fully Christian presence even when the surrounding culture has moved on, or been displaced with another. Coptic Christianity is a good case in point. Egypt was one of the earliest places on Earth to adopt Christianity. Alexandria was one of the major centres of the early church. Think of the desert Fathers and the first forms of monasticism that emerged from Egypt: powerhouses of prayer, spirituality and teaching. The Arab invasion in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century rapidly reduced the majority Christian population to minority status, as it is today. The beheading of 21 Christian construction workers in 2015, now known as the 'Coptic martyrs', testifies to the vibrancy and integrity of the Christian community that continues in that place. In the end, we do not need the advertising gimmicks of the International Olympic Committee or anyone else to prop us up. If we are confident in our identity in Christ, then that is enough to fulfill our mission. Amen.