

"I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE TO THE CHRIST"

Galatians 2:19-22

For many, many years, I always looked forward to the 4th of July because it was my Mother's birthday. We always said she came into this world with a bang. Anyway, our family would always gather to celebrate her birthday and the birthday of our nation. I still remember going to Bellevue Memorial Park in the borough where I grew up outside of Pittsburgh in the evening of the 4th, with the other 12,000 people who lived in our borough to watch the fireworks and sometime, during the evening, the people around us would sing "Happy Birthday" to my Mom. She was always so proud. Since the day I was born I think the only time I was not with my Mother on her birthday until she died was the summer of 1976 when I was in Egypt with the New Wilmington Mission Conference.

I love the Fourth of July: the cookouts, the gatherings with others, the fireworks and usually the fact that you get the day off, except when it falls on a Saturday or Sunday.

But it is also a time to celebrate our country: our great heritage, our freedom, our rich history and, as of yesterday, our nation's birthday-233 years of existence. Compared to other parts of the world 233 years is a spit in the bucket. And yet when you read our history and the sacrifices our forefathers and foremothers made so that they could break with the motherland, England it was quite a feat. Those who helped birth our nation paid a tremendous price. After the Americans declared their independence, they had to win it by will and by force. And besides, a larger number of the colonist, about 1/3 were unconcerned with the outcome of the war, they remained neutral. About 1/3 of the population sympathized with Great Britain. They called themselves loyalists and the patriots called them "Torries" after the political group in Great Britain who supported the King. And the other 1/3 was the patriots who made up less than 1/3 of the population.

7,200 Americans were killed during the war; 8,200 were wounded; 10,000 died from disease and exposure- folks, nearly 3,000 died at Valley Forge alone; an additional 6,500 died in prison after being captured and 1,400 soldiers were listed as missing. And what about those 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence? They also paid a huge price- just read the history books about how so many of them suffered. But as many paid a high price there were others who reaped great rewards. Two of the signers became Presidents, 10 U.S. Congressmen, 19 Judges, 16 Governors and dozens of others held other high political offices. Those first patriots of our great land made a pledge to fight for freedom from Great Britain, many paid a tremendous price and those who lived to see the day that the British signed the Treaty of Paris in 1783, nearly two years after the great Battle of Yorktown where 10,000 British troops surrendered, they reaped their reward of freedom, a new land, a new country, a new beginning.

Not that I always do it but every time I recite the Pledge of Allegiance I need to remember the sacrifices, the wars fought, the people who gave up their lives for that very flag so that we might live in a free land.

We make a pledge, a vow to our national flag but did you know that there is another flag that adorns many a sanctuary, many a house of worship and that is the Christian Flag? A long time ago I had found out some history about the Christian flag and the other day I revisited that history and want to share it with you now.

The Christian flag is the only truly free flag in the world. It is different from every other flag, religious or secular, ancient or modern. It is uncontrolled, independent, and universal. Unlike all national flags and all denominational flags of various churches, it has no earthly bonds or allegiances. Christ and Christ alone is its Master. Without limitation, it exists for all the world's people regardless of sex, race, national boundary, economic condition, affluence, or poverty, politics, slavery or freedom.

It cannot be restricted by any nation or denomination. This unique, universal quality makes it like the air we breathe, belonging to all and yet owned by none. For those who want it, wherever and whenever, it is freely theirs.

The Christian flag is one of the oldest unchanged flags in the world. It was conceived at Brighton Chapel, Coney Island, New York, Sunday, September 26, 1897, and was presented in its present form the following Sunday by its originator. Call it chance, or providence, serendipity, or the plan of God, on that day, the Christian flag was born. The white on the flag represents purity and peace. The blue stands for faithfulness, truth, and sincerity. Red, of course, is the color of sacrifice, in this case calling to mind the bloodshed by Christ on Calvary, represented by the cross. The first pledge to the Christian flag was written by Methodist pastor Lynn Harold Hough in 1908. "I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag and to the Savior for whose kingdom it stands. One brotherhood, uniting all mankind, in service and love."

In my research I found another version of the pledge so let me share it also with you: "I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands. One Savior, crucified, risen, and coming again with life and liberty to all who believe."

For anyone who is a believer in Jesus Christ, for anyone who calls themselves "Christian" you too have made a bold declaration, you too have pledged allegiance to Christ.

If you were baptized as an infant you would not remember that occasion, but if you were baptized later on as a youth, teen, young adult or adult hopefully you do remember that day. When you were confirmed or joined the church, hopefully you remember. For whether baptized, not as an infant, or when you joined the church you came forward and confessed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and you pledged your life to Him. You swore allegiance to the Christ.

In a way, when we swear allegiance to Christ, we join with the Apostle Paul who declared in Galatians 2:20, "and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." This is the declaration from a man who, before he came to know Christ, was a Pharisee, a religious leader of the Jewish people who actively sought to persecute the Christians. But Saul had a conversion experience on the road to Damascus when he met the risen Christ and he later became known as Paul. And you can read all about this in the book of Acts, chapter 9.

In verses 19-20 of our passage Paul is describing the unbelievable power that God gives in justifying His people. And this power is found in being crucified with Christ. Here, Paul uses the perfect tense in the Greek where it really reads, "I have and continue to be crucified with Christ," where he is indicating an action in past time that continues to shape the present. This dying with Christ in this context is not primarily a reference to baptism but rather it is describing what it means to live out of and for this

new Lord to who we believers are subject to. "The phrase, 'Christ lives in me,'" implies a risen figure, but one with nail prints and wounds very much in evidence. There is no cause for triumphalism or religious flag-waving. [Our] Christian existence remains existence 'in the flesh,' in this human [experience] where pain, suffering, injustice, and oppression still must be endured and ... fought against. At the same time, it is existence 'by faith' – taking the leap, rejecting all false offers of security, risking the confession that life can be found in death, and trusting the one 'who loved [us] and gave himself for [us].' Being crucified with Christ is not a temporary stage to be quickly passed through in the journey toward an [idyllic] life without pain, anguish, and struggle. [This] remains the daily experience ... [for those who are in Christ.]" (*Interpretation, Galatians*, Cousar, p. 61)

Those called to be a priest or a monk in the Catholic Church sacrifice and give up much to follow Christ.

Those who are called to be a Benedictine monk go through a very meaningful service as they make solemn vows to a life committed to the Benedictine community and the monastic life. At that special service, the brother prostrates himself before the altar of the chapel in the very spot where his coffin will be when he dies. He is covered in a funeral pall, and the death bell that tolls at the earthly parting of a brother is rung, sounding the solemn gongs of death. Then there is silence—the silence of death. The silence of the gathered community is then broken by the singing of these words from Colossian 3:3, “For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God”. After these powerful words, there is more silence as the brother reflects on his solemn vow. Then the community breaks into singing Psalm 118 which is always a part of the Easter service in the Benedictine community; “I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.” (v. 18). After this resurrection proclamation, a deacon shouts the words from Ephesians 5:14, “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine

on you.” And then the bells of the abbey ring loudly and joyfully. And with that the brother stands up with the funeral pall falling off, and the robe of the Benedictine order is placed on him. He receives the kiss of peace and is welcomed into the community to live a life “hidden in Christ.” This great liturgy of death and resurrection is a symbolic reenactment of what Paul is writing about in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”

Yes, it is the 4th of July weekend and this is the Sunday when we pause to remember our nation’s birthday. But as we pause to think about our founding fathers’ allegiance to this great country, never forget the allegiance we have to the Christ who saved us and who gave us the gift of eternal life.

“I pledge allegiance to the Christian Flag and to the Savior for whose Kingdom it stands. One Savior, crucified, risen, and coming again with life and liberty to all who believe.” Amen.

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Our nation's 233 years of existence

Those who helped birth our nation paid a tremendous price

Besides the American flag, there is another flag that adorns many a sanctuary... and that is the Christian flag

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Conclusion: As we pause to think about our founding fathers' allegiance to this great country, never forget the allegiance we have to the Christ who saves us and gave us the gift of eternal life