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HOMILY

Mass of the Holy Spirit – 125th Anniversary of the University of Scranton
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“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” These are pretty sobering words to proclaim on a day as festive as this – the beginning of a new academic year – an exciting and hope-filled time especially for you who are students at this great university – and particularly at this time in which it celebrates its founding 125 years ago.

These words from Saint Matthew’s gospel capture the essence of the entire New Testament as they confront us with the mystery of the cross and challenge us to integrate the reality of Jesus’ suffering – and our own – into our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. They spell out the demands, value, and rewards of authentic discipleship.

Yet, these words from Saint Matthew’s gospel are often more misinterpreted and misunderstood than most any other. Unfortunately, what often is gleaned from this passage is that if we want to live as a Christian, we’re promised all sorts of crosses – humiliation, pain and suffering – not to mention an endless list of “don’ts” that somehow is supposed to equate with living a life that redounds to happiness in this world and into eternity. Who would want to join an outfit like this, especially in our world today and in a society that equates freedom with the license to do whatever we want whenever we choose, and promises fulfillment in the things that we are fortunate enough to acquire and amass?

To reach this conclusion is to misinterpret Jesus’ words to “take up your cross.” A cross, remember, is made up of two crosspieces – and so, therefore, it becomes a symbol of decision similar to what we face at a crossroads. You can go one way or the other. And quite often, some of the most burdensome crosses that we face in life in our day and age are very often related to the struggle that comes from making hard decisions and hanging on to them in life – from living with conviction and being truly free – from embracing a value system in which we believe and living according to it, come what may.

This is what Jesus meant when he shared the words that we’ve been reflecting upon in Matthew’s gospel. “Unless you take up your cross daily, unless you make daily choices rooted in the values of the gospel message, you’re not
worthy of me.” That’s the nature of the cross that Jesus refers to so often in the scriptures, and sometimes that’s a far heavier cross to carry, in one way, than the physical suffering that we so often equate with a cross.

Many of you are familiar with Viktor Frankl’s seminal work, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, that chronicled the author’s time spent in the death camps of Nazi Germany. I’m sure it’s on some reading list here at the University of Scranton, even today, almost sixty years since it was first published.

In one section of his work, Frankl reflects upon the meager pleasures of camp life that would occasionally occur – pleasures that ultimately redounded less to a moment of happiness and more to a moment free from suffering. One pleasure that Frankl wrote about often occurred for him when, on returning from a day of hard work, he would be admitted to the cook house after a long wait and would be assigned to the line filing up to a certain prisoner-cook who was dispensing soup. The cook stood behind a huge pot and ladled soup into the bowls which were held out to him by the prisoners who hurriedly filed past. He was the only cook who did not look at the men whose bowls he was filling. He kept his head bowed low and only looked at the worn and broken hands of prisoners as they held their bowls. He was the only cook who dealt out the soup equally, regardless of the recipient. He made no favorites of his personal friends or countrymen or those with particular jobs, picking out the potatoes for them, while the others got the watery soup skimmed from the top in the hope that they, in turn, could provide him with a warmer shirt or a cigarette butt or a bit of medicine to dull the pains that so often came from life in the camp.

Who would ever criticize a prisoner-cook in a death camp for wanting to favor someone who might lighten his burden – even in the most miniscule of ways. No one! Yet, this particular prisoner chose to act in a certain manner. Every day, he faced a cross. Not just the obvious cross of his own physical suffering and pain, but the cross of deciding how to treat his fellow prisoners when he had something to give. Would he favor some to benefit himself? Or, would he treat each one equally, justly, and with dignity and respect, even if that meant that he might suffer more?

The example of that prisoner is the lived reflection of St. Matthew’s gospel and the cross of Jesus – a cross that he embraced selflessly, not for what it would provide for him, but for what it would provide for the whole of humankind: a way forward rooted in service and the means to acquiring a life that matters.

My friends, the University of Scranton hopes to graduate “men and women for others.” That’s the goal that this university has established for itself and nothing reflects the heart of the gospel and the mystery of the cross more beautifully: As Jesus offered his life in loving service, we can be nothing less than men and women for others.
In reflecting upon the mission of the University of Scranton as a Catholic, Jesuit institution of higher learning, it is very clear that its ideals are rooted in service, a concern for the common good, and a commitment to promoting justice. Indeed, the very spirituality of the Jesuit community that so permeates this university calls each of us “to engage under the standard of the Cross, in the crucial struggle of our time: the struggle for faith and that struggle for justice which it includes.”

Use your time at the University of Scranton well. Grow in wisdom and knowledge. But also take care to recognize the reality of God in every relationship, situation and experience of life. And then respect and reflect that reality of God through your service of the lives God entrusts to your care. In so doing, you will surely come to experience a life of meaning, purpose and peace promised to all who seek to live as authentic disciples of Jesus.

As Bishop of the Diocese of Scranton and on behalf of this local Church, I would like to thank the Board of Trustees, Father Quinn and the administration, faculty and staff for the care that you and those who have gone before you have given and continue to provide to the University of Scranton. For one hundred and twenty-five years, the University of Scranton has stood as a shining example of a Catholic University and a beacon of hope and opportunity for many in our corner of the world and beyond.

And finally, a word to the Jesuit community, so integrally woven into the life and identity of this great university: For hundreds of years, you have served the Church well. Now, you really are running the Church. So far be it from me to stand on the wrong side of history at this moment in time. Thank you for your commitment to the gospel and to the spirit of your founder, Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

My sisters and brothers, today’s gospel challenges us with the reality of the cross as an integral component of authentic discipleship. “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” Pope Francis, whose spirituality and values are so beautifully reflected in the life and mission of this great university, spoke powerfully and with great hope to the struggle that we all face when confronted by Jesus’ words. May we take the Holy Father’s words to heart and make them our own. “Don’t be afraid of the cross. Have the courage to go against the tide. Encounter and welcome everyone. Serve generously with love. What must guide us is the humble yet joyful certainty given to those who have been found, touched and transformed by the Truth who is Christ.”