

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 16, 2018
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A few years ago, I was vacationing in the city of Atlanta. On the Sunday morning of my visit, I attended Mass incognito (sitting in the pews, dressed in regular clothes) in the parish church nearest my hotel and then I drove to the Woodruff Arts Center – home to the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, various theatre companies and the High Museum of Art. I had gone there to see an exhibition of art from the Louvre Museum in Paris which was on display at the High. I arrived a little before the art museum opened, so I spent some time wandering around the complex, looking at the architecture and the sculptures that made the center so vibrant. In one of the theatres of the symphony hall, a church was meeting – the “Metaphysical Church.” Their service was just letting out and I heard some of those who had attended comment on how wonderful it was to re-connect their inner selves with nature. I didn’t stop them to inquire what this meant and, instead, found the entrance to the Art Museum. I was still about ten minutes early so I sat at one of the nearby tables to wait. As there were only a few extra chairs, I was joined at the table by some Japanese tourists. Eager to try their English language skills, which – they probably realized – were better than my Japanese – they asked me a few questions about the city and about the museum. A visitor myself, I answered as best I could. Wondering why we were waiting, these tourists observed that many attractions and businesses in the United States did not open until noon on Sundays. Why was that, they asked. I explained that many people in the United States are Christians who attend church services on Sunday morning. “Church,” they repeated, with a rather puzzled look on their faces. I wasn’t sure if they understood me, but then they asked, “The church that we passed at the theatre, it is Catholic?” “No,” I answered. “What kind of a church is it?” they pressed on. I told them I wasn’t quite sure how to describe the Metaphysical Church, but I could assure them that it wasn’t Catholic. God undoubtedly smiled at my response because at that very moment the museum opened and delivered a Catholic priest out of uniform from charitably describing a nature based philosophy to capitalist tourists with only a minimal command of the language.

Perhaps you’ve had an experience like that one. Trying to explain a difficult concept to those with almost no common frame of reference. My experience in Atlanta reminded me of all those teachers who tried to help me understand trigonometry or analytic geometry. Apparently, in our time, Christianity is just as much of a foreign concept. Of course, it was a foreign concept in Jesus’ time too. As today’s gospel passage begins, the disciples were heady with excitement. They had witnessed Jesus curing the deaf and the blind, feeding thousands with a few

loaves and fish. He even stood up to the self-righteous Pharisees. So when Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter’s response, “You are the Christ, the Messiah,” was both a statement of faith and a hopeful prayer. Yes, in some sense, Peter believed that Jesus was the longed-for Messiah, the anticipated Anointed One, but more than that he hoped that he was right, he hoped that among all the ages, this miracle-worker, this carpenter-turned-preacher, was at last the One who was promised. And Jesus said, “Shussh, don’t tell anyone about me. Right now, it’s our little secret.” Imagine the joy. All of human history has been leading to this moment, to this cataclysmic event, and we’re in on the secret. The disciples must have expected Jesus to tell them how he was going to seize power, how the miracles he worked would oust the Roman empire and carry him to the restored throne of David. They were hanging on his every word when he told them how much he must suffer, how the elders, the chief priests and the scribes would reject him and condemn him and execute him – but then he would rise in three days.

Well, as you might imagine, the last part of the message was lost on the disciples. They were hung up on the prospect of suffering and death – and then Jesus said that his disciples would have to take up their cross – the hated, de-humanizing Roman instrument of torture and death – every disciple would have to take up his own cross and follow. Only in losing one’s life, Jesus told them, would one save it. Only by following the path of redemptive suffering would one gain eternal life. What had seemed so promising moments before – the arrival of the Christ, the miracles and the healings that he performed – now seemed so bleak, so painful, so unthinkable. They could not grasp it.

And now, some twenty centuries later, our society cannot grasp it either. Jesus’ message of salvation through the cross is either distorted or ignored. Many in our world see no place for religion at all. Like those tourists I encountered who seem confused that people went to church on Sunday, capitalism, the pursuit of scientific knowledge and experience and money is enough for them. Others want a feel-good religion. They want a spirituality that ensures them health and wealth and happiness. Indeed, much of contemporary Evangelicalism preaches a gospel of prosperity. If you are right with God, if you are saved, if you are predestined to be with him, then God will shower his blessings upon you – give you a nice house and a nice car and a nice job. Jesus took up his cross – why should we? And if, by chance, you suffer, well, then you must not have accepted Jesus as your personal savior, you must not be predestined for heaven. As Jesus himself said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.” In other words, you are worshipping the god you want, the god whose message makes you feel good, rather than the one true God who offers you salvation – by asking you to surrender your life. On which side do Catholics come down? Look at the saints of

our tradition. We honor those who did not seek suffering, but accepted it when it came. We honor those who sought not their own comfort, but sought to bring God to others – to the poor, the neglected, the sick and suffering. Next month, Pope Francis will canonize seven new saints. Among them, Paul VI rose to the heights of the papacy, but was vilified by those on the right because he implemented the decrees of the Second Vatican Council and by those on the left because he affirmed the truth of the sanctity of human life and marital love. Nunzio Suprizio was a 19 year old Italian who led a hard and painful life, but whose faith remained unshaken. Maria Katharina Kasper longed to serve God in an area in Germany where there were no religious communities of women – so she established one and dedicated herself to serving the poor. And Oscar Romero, a Salvadoran archbishop, dared to speak of charity and care for the poor and was killed as a result. In the eyes of the world, these new saints and all of the others were fools. Rather than building a company or a country, all they did was to take up the cross of suffering and follow Christ, all they did was live the gospel. Will we think as God does or as human beings do?