

**Twenty-Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle B**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 30, 2018**  
**Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Pastor**

When I was pastor of Sacred Heart Church in Humboldt and St. Matthew Church in Milan, I received a call one day from a Milan resident who told me that he was Catholic, was new to the city and that he and his fiancée wanted to talk to me about getting married at St. Matthew. We didn't have a lot of weddings in our small little mission church, so I was excited. When could they come to see the church, he asked. I told him the Mass schedule at St. Matthew, but that wasn't convenient for him (Clue Number 1) – so I arranged to meet them one evening at the church. They seemed to be a nice couple. Though she was not Catholic, neither had been married before, they had no objection to participating in the marriage preparation program, and there was no conflict between the date they wanted and the church calendar. Well, this may go OK, I thought to myself. I gave them the booklet outlining the rite of marriage outside of Mass and told them that they had a wide variety of Scripture readings and prayers to select from as we planned their ceremony. That's when the bride spoke up and said that her family might not be comfortable with these Bible readings (Clue Number 2). Thinking that she could not possibly have read all of the 30 or more Scripture passages in the fifteen seconds she had been holding the booklet, but understanding that she might be worried that her family might be put off by a ceremony that was "too Catholic," I assured her that she could look through the booklet and find any number of readings and prayers with which both Protestants and Catholics would be comfortable. She then explained that she and her family were not religious, that they would be offended by any Scripture reading. The ceremony that I was proposing was all about God when she wanted their wedding to be all about themselves. They wanted to use the church, she candidly told me, but they didn't want a religious ceremony. After picking my jaw up off the floor, I explained to them that there was flexibility in the Catholic marriage rite, but that a ceremony without God was just not possible. They were asking to get married in God's house, after all. I never heard from them again.

In our gospel today, Jesus graphically describes cutting sin out of our lives. Rather than just encouraging practices of self-denial, Jesus is more serious than ever about the importance of removing sin and temptation from our daily lives. If a part of our body is leading us to sin, Jesus tells us – cut it off. Better to live eternal life without it than to enter Gehenna, enter Hell with our body in tact but with our soul destroyed. Jesus is that serious. Yes, we must do all we can to preserve human life, to preserve our body – but even more important than that, we must not risk losing our soul. This life is important, but eternal life is essential.

Absent accident or disease, most of us wouldn't seriously consider removing a part of our body – but it is amazing, is it not, how so many people seem to have no qualms about removing God from their lives. Those who would never think of enduring any avoidable physical pain or discomfort, think nothing of avoiding God. Oh they may want the trappings of religion – even a church wedding – but without the substance of faith. They are ready to cut God out – out of their lives, out of any place in the public square, out of society in general.

Sometimes we think that the United States is the most politically correct place on earth, but that would be to ignore what has happened in contemporary European society. A few years ago, the European Union put together a statement on the history of their continent – and they somehow managed to avoid any reference to Christianity. The Barbarians became civilized, the Moors left the Iberian Peninsula, art and literature and architecture flourished all without the involvement of a single follower of Jesus Christ. The Roman Empire built the Coliseum – site of blood sports and massacres. The empire was discussed in the statement. People of faith in the Middle Ages built the cathedrals of Chartres and Notre Dame and the Lateran Basilica – but strangely enough Christ and his church had no role to play.

Now we can sit back and laugh at how ridiculous this is – but as a culture, and as individuals, we are headed in the same direction. Far from extricating sin from our lives, we have nurtured our sin and instead have cut out God. Yes, people periodically file lawsuits against opening meetings of governmental bodies with prayer. But that is only a symptom of a larger disease. What good is a prayer before a public gathering if God is not welcome in the deliberations? In the great debates of our society, in the great decisions of our lives – do we welcome God in or are we keeping him on the outside? We continue to hear a lot about health care and immigration and protection of the vulnerable – but in seeking solutions, almost no one is asking what is moral, what God would have us do. Are we lamenting the present economy and pressuring our politicians to manipulate things to our advantage – or are we forming and informing our consciences, humbly asking God in prayer for the solutions that are the most moral? And unfortunately, this godless society has crept into our homes. God is often cut out or marginalized even in our own families. For example, are we spending more time teaching our children to play sports or teaching them to pray? Do we encourage our young people to prepare for careers that will earn them the most money or do we as Christians encourage them to discern their vocation in harmony with the Holy Spirit for the good of the Body of Christ? Too often these days, it is our bodies that are perfect, while our souls are blind and lame. Jesus challenges us to nurture our souls most of all.