

Sunday.12

There are two life-long friends who end up together in a nursing home. Everyday they relive their youth, the days when they were stars on their high school baseball team. They make a pact with each other, that whoever dies first must come back to tell the other one if there is baseball in heaven. One dies and, true to their promise, comes back to tell his friend the good news: “Yes, there is baseball in heaven. We play every day,” he tells his friend, “and the weather is always perfect, and we are all young again.” “That’s great news,” the remaining friend replies. “Yes, it is,” the other answers, and then adds: “By the way, you’re pitching on Tuesday.”

Do you think the remaining friend would think that this last bit of information was good news? I doubt it. Despite our faith, despite the promise of our faith that we are made for life beyond the grave, most of us are really afraid to leave this life. We reflect that in little ways, some of them very ordinary and even funny. I remember a man who worked on the grounds at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. Very often when I met him and said that it was a beautiful day, he would answer: “Father, every day is a beautiful day when you are on this side of the grass.” Most of us would

agree. We would say the same thing, at least on the beautiful days when we are in good health and life's problems are pretty much under control. But when it is a bad day and when we are sick or confronted with many, many problems in our lives, some of us might disagree. We might even say that it would be better to be free of this life. And, as you know, our society is more and more accepting the fact that people should have the right to end their lives. And many of us who assist the very old and the very sick say to ourselves: It would be better if God would take this person. Life for her or him here and now is nothing but a burden, even a painful one. It is time to go.

Today's Gospel speaks of taking up one's cross and following Jesus who took up his cross. Clearly, if we are going to follow Jesus, we have to be willing to take up our cross. But the first thing that we should remember is that Jesus himself took up his cross only very reluctantly. We have that impressive passage in the Letter to the Hebrews which describes Jesus' agony in this way: "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplication with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death." And the Gospel accounts of the night in the garden are even more impressive. All three tell us that Jesus prayed that this cup (his suffering) would be removed. But he added this

condition to this prayer: "... but not as I will but as You will, Father."

We know from the Scriptures that great sinners like David often imposed penances upon themselves to make up for their sins. They fasted and prayed long hours and wore hair shirts. And even the Lord himself includes fasting as one of the three essential acts of our religious lives. The other two are giving alms and praying. But sometimes people can get all mixed up in their self-imposed penances and can at the same time forget or refuse to accept the penances that life, and therefore God, imposes on us. Can you imagine Mother Teresa concentrating on wearing a hair shirt while the sick and dying were at her door in Calcutta? No, she knew that her penance was her service of these people, not some artificial penance she might make up for herself.

What about us? Do we accept in faith and love the penances that life, and therefore God, imposes on us? And let us not forget that, like the Lord himself, our first reaction ought to be to pray that these penances be removed. But if they cannot be removed, then we must conclude, again with the Lord, that it is the Lord's will that we accept them. What are these ordinary penances which life,

and therefore God, at least in an indirect way, imposes on us? They can be the penances of our personal limitations. I am not very bright. I am not very powerful. I am not very healthy. Therefore, these limitations make it impossible for me to do much to change the world in which I live. Nevertheless, they are givens and I must accept them. Not to do would be to reject the person God has made, namely, myself with all my limitations. But we must be careful here. We must not short-change ourselves. We must not underestimate what God has given us by way of personal gifts. Rather we must recognize them and develop them and use them in order to bring peace and love to our world. Our gifts may be greater than we imagine, especially when we use them not for our own satisfaction but simply to help others because of Christ's love for them.

Of course the greatest cross is the acceptance of our own mortality. Our time here is short, even though we really don't believe that. It is therefore good to remind ourselves of the fact that someday, sooner or later, we are going to be asked to accept our own deaths, and the choice will be either to despair or to believe that Jesus will bring us to life in and through death, that death is not just an end but a new beginning. "Tuis enim fidelibus vita mutatur, non tollitur," we pray in the Preface of the Mass for the Dead: "For

your faithful ones life is changed, not taken away.” Indeed, if we really believed that, we should be anxious to go. Then, to go back to our joke, we would not be terribly disturbed if our friend told us that we were scheduled to pitch next Tuesday.