

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (2024 - B)

Faithful Catholics are hard to find these days. You might say that faithful Catholics are rare birds; they are a rare breed. As such, faithful Catholics comprise just a small percentage of the overall population of our nation. We are a religious minority.

Now before I say more, I should say what I mean by “Faithful Catholic.” I mean those who accept all the teachings of the Church and who do their best to live by them. Keep in mind here that we believe the Church speaks for Christ. Its teachings are His teachings.

Jesus gave His disciples the authority to teach in His name when He said, **“The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Lk 10:16).”** It’s the same way with the Church today. Jesus gave the Church authority to teach in His name when He said to Saint Peter, **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven (Mt 16:19).”** So, when the Church speaks, it speaks for Jesus and we must listen.

Now that doesn’t mean all the teachings of our Catholic faith are easy. In fact, some are very hard, but that’s nothing new. Our holy gospel today tells us that in response to what our Lord taught about the Eucharist, many of His disciples said, **“This saying is hard; who can accept it?”** Then it says, **“Many of His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him.”** So hard teachings are nothing new.

In fact, centuries before this, Joshua had a similar encounter with the Israelites. They were wavering in their faith and were being tempted to follow the pagan gods. How they were called to live wasn’t easy. They were called to be different, and they didn’t want to be different. They wanted to be accepted. They wanted to be like everyone else.

So, Joshua confronted them. He gathered together all the leaders and the elders, and he said to them, **“If it does not please you to serve the Lord, decide today whom you will serve, the gods your fathers served beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now dwelling. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”**

In response, the people replied, **“We also will serve the Lord, for He is our God.”** So too in our Lord’s time. Not all of His disciples left. Some stayed, and when Jesus asked the Apostles, **“Do you also want to leave?”** Saint Peter replied, **“Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”**

Here and now in our own time, the issue is no different. Now as then, the issue is not that some of our Lord’s teachings are hard, but rather, how we respond to these hard teachings.

In many ways, you could say that we faithful Catholics are living in a foreign land. We are living among modern Amorites, modern pagans who serve other gods. They do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord. They do not worship God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Instead, they reject Church teaching and serve other gods, and nowhere is this more evident than our Catholic teaching on marriage.

Marriage is the most fundamental element of our society and of any society for that matter. In fact, marriage is the basic building block of every society. That's because when a man and woman marry, they form a new family, and it is in that new family where love is fostered and new life comes about and children are socialized and taught to become good and decent people and become part of the larger society in which we all live.

From the very beginning, God made us male and female, and God made us this way for two reasons. First for love. God said, **"It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a suitable partner for him (Gen 2:18)."** In that way, the man could love and be loved, and the woman could love and be loved.

The second reason God made us this way was for life. God blessed Adam and Eve and then He commanded them, **"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28)."** God would invite man to join with Him and participate in the creation of new life, new life that would be for the continuation of the human race and would be as eternal as God.

So, this is God's plan for marriage, and that is why Saint Paul in our second reading states, quoting Genesis, **"For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."**

Now, the modern Amorites, the modern pagans do not accept our Lord's teachings on marriage. They deny that marriage is for life, and so, they practice contraception or they get sterilized. If a child is unplanned and unwanted, or is flawed or imperfect or the wrong sex, they have no problem killing it through abortion. They also enter into unnatural sexual relationships between two men or two women which are inherently sterile and which they pretend are marriage.

The modern pagans also deny that marriage is for love, and so, they enter into sexual relationships without commitments. They never promise to be faithful for life. Instead, they just live together and use each other for their own selfish reasons.

The modern pagans also play around. Women dress immodestly and tempt men with their bodies, but at the same time demand to be respected. So men, find it much easier to wallow in pornography where they can find whatever suits them without having to consider the feelings and needs of a real person.

Finally, these modern pagans, have changed the laws to support their ideas about sexual morality. They have equated same-sex relationships with true marriage, they have legalized abortion in most states (including ours), they have made divorce simple and easy, and through the laws, they have compelled all of our institutions to support these things.

In response to these hard sayings, others continue to call themselves Catholics, but reject Church teachings they don't like. Our president with his stand on abortion and gay marriage and transgenderism would be a prime example. He calls himself a Catholic, yet he rejects the teachings of the Church, and he is far from alone.

In this kind of world, it's hard to be a faithful Catholic, and that is why so many who grew up Catholic have left the Church. It's hard to swim upstream and against the current. It's hard when you are mocked or ridiculed for what you believe or when your job is in jeopardy because you won't do something immoral. It's painful when you are asked to choose between your faith and a loved one, a son or daughter or parent or friend who want your approval for a sinful lifestyle. It's so much easier to just go along with the crowd.

For our part, let us see the goodness of the Lord and give thanks that we have been given the grace to live in the light and to know the truth about marriage and about all Church teachings. Especially in this one fundamental area of marriage, let us continue to live as we are called.

So, if you are married, be open to life, and use natural family planning as a moral way to plan your family. Teach your children and grandchildren that living together without commitments is a mortal sin and is not love. Teach them to wait for marriage and forbid them to move in together and don't help them if they do.

Women dress with dignity, not calling attention to your bodies but to yourselves. That way men will see you for who you are and will give you the respect you deserve as persons and as daughters of God, made in His image and likeness. Men treat women with dignity and respect and love. Do not use them as objects, and flee from pornography which is a black hole that has no bottom to it.

Pray for those who are struggling in their marriages and remind them that the road to heaven is not easy and sometimes demands great sacrifices.

Be kind to those who struggle with same-sex attraction and encourage them to live chastely in a world which lies to them and tells them they will find love in disordered relationships.

Be intentional about what you watch and what sorts of ideas and beliefs you let into your home via TV or the Internet or social media.

Today, we faithful Catholics often find ourselves at odds with the pagan culture that surrounds us. We often find ourselves defending our homes and families from the culture's crudeness, lies, immorality and ugliness, and this is hard, but we cannot avoid the battle. We cannot sit on the sidelines. Like it or not, we are all involved, and we will all have to choose.

In response to what Jesus told them, our Lord's faithless disciples said, **"This saying is hard; who can accept it?"** So they left.

On the other hand, Saint Peter said to Jesus, **"To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."** We too have the words of eternal life. We too have the truth. So let us hold tight to it. Let us be faithful Catholics. Faithful to the Church and faithful to Christ.

Even when the teachings are hard, let us not walk away like everyone else. Instead, let us be faithful and say along with Joshua, **"As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."** Amen.