

**Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 3, 2017**  
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I am trying to remember the last newscast I watched that didn't begin with "Breaking News." In the rush to get ratings and to be the first on the scene, everything is breaking news. Sometimes you get three or four items of breaking news in a row. And then, three weeks or three months later, as the story lingers, it is still marked as a breaking news update. Now the only thing these breaking news stories have in common, it seems, is that they are always about violence or tragedy. Someone was killed, there was a terrible accident or fire, this week there has been the devastation of the hurricane and its aftermath – all of this qualifies as breaking news. Each day, in numerous charitable institutions throughout our city, the hungry are fed, the homeless find shelter, the sick are given medical treatment – but none of this qualifies as breaking news. For years now, the television news axiom has been: If it bleeds, it leads.

Things weren't that much different in Jesus' time. Good news caused barely a ripple – but bad news spread like a tidal wave. Throughout the summer, we've been hearing how Jesus travelled from city to village, from one side of the Sea of Galilee to the other – proclaiming the kingdom of God. He cured the sick. He fed thousands miraculously with only a few loaves and two fish. He walked on water. And that brought him fame – for a while. People gathered to listen to his words, or just to see what he might do next. And last week, meeting with his apostles, his closest band of disciples, he promised one of them, Simon Peter, the keys to this kingdom that he had been talking about for so long. Excitement was building. And then Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed. Oh, he also mentioned something about being raised on the third day, but the disciples had stopped listening at the mention of suffering and death. Just like the newspapers and television news programs of our day, the disciples instinctively knew that this bad news would dominate the headlines, that whatever good will or popularity they had managed to accumulate on this tour of the northern part of the Holy Land would be completely undone by this news of suffering, certainly by Jesus' suggestion that each of his disciples must take up his cross and follow. The miracles, the promises of the kingdom of God were wonderful tools for public relations, but this mention of a cross, this mention of death – well, that was just catastrophic. They had to get Jesus off of this topic if they ever hoped to be successful.

Once again, of course, it fell to Peter to speak up. He took Jesus aside and tried to convince him to skip this portion of the message. He knew that it would dominate, that people would be talking of nothing else. When he called Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, last week, Jesus praised Peter as "Blessed." Today, well, Jesus says instead, "Get behind me, Satan!" The rock upon which Jesus intended to build his Church had become an obstacle, a stumbling block. In some respects, everyone is drawn to bad news – why would the networks lead with brutal killings if it didn't give them bigger ratings. Yes, everyone is fascinated by news of suffering and death, but no one wants the story to

be about them. Here was Jesus, promising not just his own death, but also promising that his followers would lose their lives. If they had such things back then, Jesus' message would have made him tops in the ratings, but would have destroyed his popularity. Indeed, his popularity is on shaky ground even today.

Some years ago, I was having a conversation with one of my brother priests. He told me that his parish gathers to pray the Stations of the Cross on Fridays during Lent. And that parish also had a Lenten Fish Fry each week. One Friday, a winter storm came up suddenly. Roads that had been clear in the morning were beginning to be covered with ice and snow. The parish phone began to ring off the hook. The pastor told me that the office had received over a hundred calls. Are you still having the Fish Fry, they asked? Over a hundred people wanted to know about the parish fish fry – not a single person called to inquire about the Stations of the Cross.

That describes us pretty well, doesn't it? Like Jesus' disciples, we are perfectly comfortable here in Galilee with miraculous healings and loaves and fish multiplying, and walking on water. It's not that we reject the difficult road to Jerusalem, the suffering Christ endured, his saving cross. We don't reject them, but we're not too keen on living them out. We'll just stay here and enjoy the fish fry, the social events, the sports program. You carry the cross if you want to – we'll wait for you to get back. Unfortunately, we can read the gospels from cover-to-cover, but we won't find any sidelines to sit on. Discipleship is not about enjoying the good and ignoring the bad. Discipleship is about embracing the entirety of Christ's message – and his message of self-denial, of taking up one's cross, is essential.

Each Sunday, we Catholics are invited to celebrate the life, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord in the holy Sacrifice of the Mass. We come not to be entertained, but to worship. A few years ago, our translation of the Mass was changed. At the offertory, the priest used to say, "Pray, my brothers and sisters, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." But for the last five and a half years, the priest has been saying, "Pray, my brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father." Notice the difference. It is easy to claim a part of "our" sacrifice – even if we don't actually do any of the sacrificing – someone else is taking care of it. The new translation reminds us that at each Mass, I need to sacrifice – and so do each of you. I need to bring my life – my joys and sorrows, my gifts and blessings, my difficulties and struggles – here, to the altar of God, to the foot of the cross, to this re-presentation of the sacrifice of Calvary (which is what each Mass is). At each Mass, we are drawn again to the cross and to the empty tomb – not just to the empty tomb, but to the one, perfect sacrifice of the cross – and we dare not come empty handed. Mass is not a spectator sport – it demands that as members of Christ's body we too are offering ourselves to him – and we receive the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ in return. Do we plan to just sit on the sidelines and enjoy the food, or are we ready to sacrifice? Are we ready to take up our cross and follow Christ?