

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

One of the young priests in our diocese told me that he is careful about eating because many of his classmates from the seminary got very fat after they were ordained. It's true; many of us priests are overweight. One Catholic says that the total number of priests in the United States may have diminished over the past few decades, but the total number of pounds that they weigh has remained exactly the same. When priests make the transition from seminary life to parish life, they need to make changes. The same is true of many students going off to college, or people who leave the home of their parents to start out on their own. When the center of your life changes, everything else starts to change as well, even the size of your body.

After World War I, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." He described how fragile the center of peace can be. Things fall apart today when racial prejudice leads to violence, when citizens attack police who protect them, when politics divides nations from one another, and when people cannot admire the character of their own presidential candidates. The center cannot hold when things fall apart.

In individual lives, the loss of a center can cause problems much worse than weight gain. In some families, the death of a parent creates a void of leadership; or the unexpected death of a child can put stress on the parents' marriage. If you lose your possessions through robbery or fire, you may not be able to start all over. If you lose your integrity through an internet scam, you may have to rebuild your trust. When the center does not hold, things fall apart.

The true center of our lives is Jesus Christ. If we do not put him at the center, we can expect trouble. For the next few weeks our second reading at Sunday mass comes from the Letter to the Colossians. It opens with a hymn about Jesus Christ that says, "all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Christ is our center; he is also the center of the universe.

Christians find strength in Christ even if we lose our family, our possessions or our friendships. You may have disagreements with your family, with other Christians, with your neighbors, or with strangers. But we are one human family, all held together in Christ Jesus.

Christ is also Lord of things invisible. Good people sometimes feel that they are doing battle with invisible evil forces and losing: they lie to people they love; they fall in love people they should not; they cannot overcome sins of anger, hatred and revenge; they think about taking their own lives. They don't want to do these things, but they do. Some Christians feel that they are losing the battle to invisible powers of evil. However, the Letter to the Colossians gives powerful witness that we cannot lose such battles. All things are subject to Christ. No force, visible or invisible, is more powerful than Christ. He has already won the battle, and he already dwells within us. Our struggles are real, whether they concern our love for other people, our beliefs in God, or even how much we weigh. But we cannot lose the battle. Even when things fall apart they can never do so completely. Christ holds the center.