

This past Monday the front office of the Kansas City Royals telephoned the St. Regis Convent and asked Sr. Marie Neff if she would please throw out the first pitch for Wednesday night's game, in honor of the fifty years during which Sister taught the value of religion and promoted the thrill of professional sports. Even on such short notice, Sister graciously accepted. The weather kept her waiting for over an hour, but in time the rains paused, the tarp was rolled back and Sr. Marie marched proudly onto the field. There she delivered a pitch of such skill that the bullpen hoped manager Tony Muser wasn't looking. When the rains started up again it looked like Sister might be the only pitcher to take the mound that night. As things turned out it would have been better for the Royals that way.

The time honored ceremony of the first pitch comes with another great baseball tradition, the singing of the national anthem. I have to admit, in recent years I've grown more and more disappointed with the way the national anthem happens. It seems to me a national anthem should be an anthem sung by a nation regarding its flag. Instead it has become a solo performance by one citizen only, and at Kauffman Stadium, the singer lip-syncs to prerecorded music while a live image of the flag is broadcast on the left field Jumbotron, the city's largest television set. The flag itself is perfectly visible in right field, but most people prefer to watch the telecast of the flag in left. Our country places a lot of value on technology and celebrity. But for me the end result of the national anthem at the start of a local baseball game is a vicarious experience of patriotism. We let our cultural values obscure our national pride.

Watching out for those cultural values is especially challenging to Christians. For example, a news report this week explained some advances in embryo research. There's reason to believe that the use of brain cells from aborted fetuses could help advance treatment for Parkinson's. The scenario affirms many values that our culture accepts: the abortion of unwanted children, the preference not to restrain technology, and the repugnance of illness. However, Pope John Paul II made this clear several years ago: "The use of human embryos or fetuses as an object of experimentation constitutes a crime against their dignity as human beings who have a right to the same respect owed to a child once born, just as to every person. The killing of innocent human creatures, even if carried out to help others, constitutes an absolutely unacceptable act."

St. Paul tells the Romans in today's passage, "You are not in the flesh. You are in the Spirit. If you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you will live." Paul was trying to free the Romans from strict observance of the old law. Living in the Spirit of Christ should help them feel freedom. What threatens Christians today is that many who feel free of the old law now seek freedom from Christ. Many Christians find the church's guidance on sexual morality and the value of human life too restrictive in a permissive culture. We are tempted to let our cultural values overtake our Christian values. We received the Spirit of Christ in baptism. If we live by that Spirit we will experience the true freedom of Christ.