

While attending this conference in Lyons, we heard a story about a catechumen from Benin in Africa. Benin has a state religion which establishes its code of ethics. For example, occupations are passed on through families; if your father made shoes, you will make shoes. Certain medical procedures, like circumcisions, are performed by state priests in a pagan ritual. This occupation, too, is passed on through families. One morning some people arrived at the door of a catechumen, saying it was his turn to perform the circumcision ritual. He said, "I can't do that; I am following Christ." They said, "You must do this; our society depends on this ritual, and your family performs it." He can only get out of it if he sells his property to another family. But if he does that, he can no longer take care of his own family. So you see his dilemma? Does he worship two Gods at once? Does he send his family into poverty? Or does he deny the society the stability which comes from its rituals of birth? I'm glad I don't have to advise this guy. I thought it was hard enough finding out whether our catechumens could all get together on Sundays or Tuesdays.

It's hard to hold firmly what we believe: Teenagers, for example, generally enter high school believing they can resist peer pressure. They say they won't be talked into sex, drugs, or abortion; they say they will devote themselves to faith and education. But remaining faithful to what we believe is hard--even for adults. Imagine if ten years ago we'd written down a list of all the absolutes we believed in, things we'd never do as a parent, as an employee, a student, or a Catholic. Do we still hold what we believed? What made us change? Or, what helped us keep faithful?

Two parables today reveal the great value of the reign of God. It's like a treasure, or a pearl. For Jesus the reign of God is so priceless it's worth giving up everything else to possess it--giving up things like peer pressure, self-absorption, and greed.

The catechumen in Benin, incidentally, decided on the most radical solution. He's refusing his priestly service, regardless of the consequences. This is a catechumen, a beginner, not a founding member of the parish church. Christianity already means more to him than the esteem of his peers. If we knew the value of the treasure we hold, we'd do the same.