

Amend My Life
26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)
(Mk 9:38-48)

The Act of Contrition is one of the most important prayers we learn, and it concludes by saying, “*I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace... to amend my life.*” Some versions say, “...*avoid whatever leads me to sin.*” True contrition requires firm purpose of amendment, that is to say, the implementation of necessary changes to ensure that one will not fall into the same sins again.

An “amendment,” such as an amendment to the Constitution, is a change that is added to the document so as to improve it. Likewise, an amendment is a change incorporated into one’s lifestyle in order to make it a life less prone to sin. Some causes of sin are outside of ourselves – “scandal” – and woe to those who are the occasion of sin in this way, better for them to drown in the sea tied to a millstone. There is not much that can be done about scandal unfortunately (Lk 17:1), except to throw such people into the sea with a millstone – but other causes of sin are things we do have control over: our hands, our feet, our eyes.

In today’s Gospel Jesus stresses the need to remove occasions of sin, those things in our life that cause us to fall. And he says we need to be decisive and strict: better to enter life crippled and maimed, then retain everything in this world and go to hell. This teaching is a great example of Jesus’ use of parables to teach, and his wry sense of humor: If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off! Throw away your foot! Gouge out your eye!

It is through the **hands** that we engage in activities. It is the hands that grab and take; that strike and shove, that hold and embrace. It was through their hands that Adam and Eve “took” the fruit in order to eat it. The hands are our primary tools for accomplishing our work. They are good and necessary, but when they lead to sin, Jesus says it is better, *necessary*, to be without them. When we reach for what does not belong to us (person or thing), or reach for that which will harm us, or strike out at our neighbor, the hands must be cut off, prevented, stopped. The alcoholic must “amend” his life in such a way that he is unable to reach for a drink; the adulterer must be physically unable to embrace the accomplice.

Parents do a good job in training their children not to use their hands for sin, often with a little slap on the hands. They train their children how to cut off certain behaviors before they become selfishness, fighting, gluttony, theft.

Similarly with the **feet**. It is through the feet we go places and get into situations. Each individual must know the places and persons that are dangerous for him and stay away, amending his life in such a way that he is prevented from being able to “go there.”

Here too, parents train their children well. Their long arm pulls small children back from cupboards and doors they should not enter. Teenagers are grounded. There is a discipline to be learned with regard to “feet.” Something (or someone) may not be evil in itself, but may be a moral danger to a particular individual given his weaknesses or immaturity. A youth once asked the priest, “Father, how far can I go with a girl before it becomes a sin?” Answer: “you’re grounded!” Better to stay far away from the cliff edge and the slippery slope that leads to it, separated (and protected) by a tall wall, than to risk falling off.

The **eye** is the difficult one. Whereas hands and feet tend to deal with activities and situations external to ourselves, which parents and others can help with by enforcing certain boundaries, the eye represents our interior knowledge and thoughts, our imagination. Parents try to control this as much as possible for their children, limiting the kinds of information and media they have access to, but the world makes it an enormously difficult challenge.

It is not merely the issue of explicit pornography and impurity so rampantly available. It is also the issue of profanity in language and art, especially music. It is the issue of moral depravity and absence of virtue in stories, written or visual. It is the corruption of politics in the public sphere, and even the corruption of the Gospel in the Sunday pulpit. It is the vast manipulation of wants undertaken through the consumerism of the advertising industry, that overwhelmingly assails us when we try to get information off a website, view a television program, enjoy a sporting event, or drive down the road. It is the public education system.

In light of today’s Gospel, and Jesus’ teaching with regard to the custody of the eyes, homeschooling is becoming a virtual necessity for parents, affording them the best opportunity to ensure that what their children see and experience is good, wholesome, and truly beneficial for wisdom. Much has to be “cut out” if parents are going to raise their children well.

Beyond childhood, what makes us adults is that we take upon ourselves the responsibility to self-discipline our hands, feet, and eyes. We are cognizant of our weaknesses and blind-spots, and amend our lives in such a way that we are protected if not inured from the devastating harm these things will cause. Very often, that “amendment” is another person: a trusted brother, spouse, or friend who has my best interest at heart and has my back. Alone we are doomed, in a true friendship we have protection. As we pray the Act of Contrition and reflect on the changes we need to incorporate into our lives, let us not overlook the help the Lord God may have already lined up for us in the very people, the good people, He has placed in our path.