This past week, I heard from one of my oldest and closest friends. He is a Professor of Physics in Vermont and so the distance that separates us makes it hard to get together these days. But he will be coming to Ohio (where he was raised) before long and I look forward to seeing him.

We met in graduate school in Minnesota in 1969. He had just returned from a tour of duty in Vietnam where he was awarded the Bronze Star. He had also become a strong opponent of that war and actually returned the medal to Washington (as did many other vets). I too was active against the war and this cause became a bond between us. I remember as well very clearly that he joined me and many others in January of 1974, exactly one year after the Roe vs. Wade decision that legalized abortion, on a march to protest that ruling. We marched from the campus of the University in Minneapolis to the statehouse in St. Paul. I don’t recall how long that was in miles, but it took about twenty minutes by car. It was a terribly cold day and it was a big sacrifice to make this long trek on foot. So this was another cause we had in common.

My friend was and is a man of great integrity. He was and is an authentic human being – and honest as the day is long. He has always been very introspective and self-critical – not in an unhealthy sense but in a way that has helped him to grow. He helped me to grow too. Another issue that we completely agreed on was helping the poor, hands on, and in advocating for the powerless. Today he devotes most of his free time helping his neighbors and seeking ways to make life
easier for the marginalized – including working through the political process to achieve a more just society.

By the way, he is not a Christian believer – at least not an explicit one. He was raised a good Protestant, but fell away after Vietnam. I have been a practicing Catholic all the time I have known him and, of course, he is well aware that I am a priest. It did not rub off very much (apparently). We have talked about it, but he just can’t quite believe. And I am ok with that. Pope Francis has famously said that you have to be human before you can be a Christian. My friend remains probably the best model of a good human being I have ever known. I frankly find that I have much more in common with him than with some Catholics who are certainly pious but who have chosen to skip the human being part.

My friend has made a choice. I have made a choice. In my mind and heart, we have both made the same choice – well, not really the same perhaps but very close to the same. And I am thrilled that, as a Catholic and a priest, I can make that statement. Many Christians actually believe that my friend and those like him will go to hell because they do not have explicit faith in Jesus Christ. But we Catholics believe that God offers the grace of salvation to all people – regardless of their religion or even if they in good conscience have no religion. Did you know that?

Speaking of making a choice, that is what today’s readings are all about. In the first reading from the Book of Joshua, this great leader (Joshua) is dying and he assembles all the people of Israel before him at the sacred place known as Shechem. He wants to make sure that the Hebrews are committed to their Lord. At the command of Moses, Joshua had led the people into the Promised Land which Moses was not allowed to enter. The memory of the golden calf in the desert is still fresh in Joshua’s mind and he wants to challenge his countrymen to be faithful to their God and not to lapse again into paganism. He tells them that
he and his household will choose to serve the Lord. And the people decisively respond that they will make the same choice. They say: “we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”

In today’s Gospel (from St. John), Jesus too invites his audience to choose. This is the last of five passages that we have read on Sundays for over a month now from the sixth chapter of St. John – a chapter which is known as the “Discourse on the Bread of Life.” Following the multiplication of the loaves, Jesus teaches his disciples then and now that he is food and drink and that whoever “eats this bread will live forever.” He says that he gives his “flesh for the life of the world” and that all who eat his flesh and drink his blood become an inseparable part of him.

Today’s story highlights that Jesus’ teaching about eating his flesh and drinking his blood is too much for some of his hearers. They say: “this saying is too hard; who can accept it?” In effect they are saying it is preposterous that we should feed on this man. They perhaps think it is cannibalism. Over the centuries, the church has understood that the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is a sacramental reality and not a crass physical one – but still a solid reality. This passage shows that many will leave Jesus over his teaching on the Eucharist. Then he asks his twelve apostles if they want to leave too. And Peter speaks for them (and for us): “Master, to whom shall we go; you have the words of eternal life.”

We all know that the Eucharist is meant to be eaten. At the same time, it is also meant to be lived. When we receive communion, we are challenged to follow Christ by breaking and pouring out ourselves in service to our neighbor. If we truly believe it is Christ we receive, then we will beg God to help us by grace to actually become Christ in our everyday lives. The great Indian spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi, famously said: “If I believed what Catholics believe about the Eucharist,
I would crawl on my hands and knees to receive it.” Yet he never became a Christian himself because in his experience, he never saw very many Christians living like Christ. What does this mean but that we too often don’t live the Eucharist? Being overly pious in receiving the Eucharist and in adoring the Eucharist does not add up to much if we don’t live the Eucharist! In the wonderful musical “The Sound of Music,” the Mother Abbess and her advisors are talking about whether Maria has a religious vocation or not. Maria’s main problem was that she was simply not called to that vocation; but at one point, the conversation turns to another novice and the Abbess says: ‘oh she is too pious to be a nun!” Pious worship of the Eucharist has little meaning unless it moves us to serve Christ in the needy.

I would like to suggest that my friend from Minnesota days lives the Eucharist even though he does not receive it. He crawls on his hands and knees to worship Christ in the poor. It is a mysterious truth that he inspires me to do the same. I have often prayed that someday he will become a Catholic. But in the meantime, I try to be as good as he is. I know that this sounds strange. But to paraphrase the great monk Thomas Merton, I am convinced that we will never fully appreciate the presence of Christ in the Eucharist until we choose to fully appreciate his presence in the poor.