We come together to celebrate this 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time. In our gospel we hear this lengthy passage from the Sermon on the Mount as it repeats the note struck in last Sunday’s gospel where Matthew urges us to seek a more spiritual and personal ideal of moral behavior.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus criticizes those who’s “Virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees”, that is, those whose faith is only skin-deep. The word virtue here has hints of Justice and righteousness – it refers to something you do, not simply something you believe. So Jesus gives examples of what it means to have virtue, that is, how to put faith into action.

So, not only is murder prohibited for Jesus’ disciples, but even angry thoughts, insulting murmurs and abusive words. Adultery is not only the sinful action itself, but even the preliminary lustful thought that reduces a person made in God’s image to a thing that exists only for pleasure. Marriage is not merely a legal contract, but a lifelong covenant. And in his teaching about oaths, Jesus goes beyond the debate about what binds or compels us to tell the truth. It’s not just our words that need to be truthful. In order for our “yes” to mean “yes”, our words have to be supported by the integrity of our lives.

One night on his show, Jay Leno interviewed Juliette Binoche, a French actress about her film “Chocolat” – an amazingly film in which chocolate is a sacrament of the goodness and love which bring to life the universe. Mr. Leno, as is his custom, was making fun of President Clinton. Ms. Binoche was not amused. “You Americans”, she informed Leno, “do not have enough respect for you leaders. You should respect them more.” Leno was stumped. None of his guest had ever said anything like that. He tried to laugh it off, but Ms. Binoche would have none of it. “I’m serious she said, if you don’t respect your leaders how can you respect your country?”

Today we are reminded that external religious observance, though certainly important, will never be sufficient to make us authentic followers of Christ. It is relatively easy to observe rituals and to affirm doctrines but, unfortunately, such observance can easily so-exist with an interior attitude that is judgmental and unforgiving. As the Gospel reminds us, reconciliation with the alienated people in our lives (and often this means our families) is more important than thorough, or even painstaking, religious observance.

Most importantly, whatever the issue, however misunderstood we may feel, the true disciple always makes the first move, takes the first step toward reconciliation, even if the alleged offense exists only in the other person’s mind.

There’s a story about two monks who were on a long journey. They came to a passage in a wide river and wanted to cross. There was an exceptionally beautiful woman with a low cut dress who also waited to cross. One of the monks picked her up on his shoulders and waded into the river carrying her across. When they reached the other side he put her down
and the two monks continued their journey. When at long last they got somewhere they could stay the night the other monk reprimanded his companion. ‘How are we going to explain to the Abbot the disgrace you have brought on the monastery? People would have seen you carrying that woman across the river. Had he forgotten that he was a monk? How dare he touch a woman, let alone one so provocatively dressed.’ He went on and on. Finally, the other monk said: ‘Brother, I left that woman on the bank of the river; you seem to have been carrying her all day.’

To think that we have only to avoid killing, adultery, lying and come to Mass on Sundays is to treat our faith in superficial way. Such faith is shallow and cannot save. Christ challenges us to live life at a deeper and more authentic level to “get into the kingdom of heaven” means allowing an inner beauty to shine through – by our willingness to forgive and to reconcile; by our commitment to justice in our dealing with others, respecting the dignity of every person we meet; and by living lives of integrity, in which we try to express outwardly – in acts of forgiveness, compassion and honesty - the faith that we hold. If our faith is truly rooted in God – the God of mercy, love and truth – then it is God’s beauty that will shine through our lives.

Today we are called to an interior conversion that requires us to recognize our own shortcomings and allow others to be imperfect also. What is most important, however, is an attitude of loving kindness that enables us to notice how others are in need and that we reach out to them gladly, not because they deserve our help, but simply because they are in need. To love in this way is to be a child of that God who certainly loves us more than we deserve. As such, we will also be true followers of Jesus as we make his love present in our world.

In each Mass, each Celebration of the Eucharist, we have an opportunity to renew our inner beauty! Let us be attentive as we move into our Eucharistic prayers and especially pray the prayer that Jesus himself gave us; taking the words; “…and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us…” as guidelines in our lives.