

From the New Testament I hold up for your consideration the person of Demas. He is mentioned only three times. The first instance is in Philemon. Paul introduces him by saying: *Demas and Luke, my fellow workers*. At that moment we can see what great esteem he was held in. He is equal with Luke, a fellow worker, and is even mentioned before him. It is evident that at this point he is a faithful follower of the Lord. The second time he is mentioned is in the Book of Colossians. Paul now writes: "*Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas.*" Now something seems to have changed. Luke is mentioned first, rather than Demas. Not only that, there are words of praise for Luke, but Demas is mentioned only by name.

Later, in Paul's letter to Timothy, he writes: "*Demas deserted me, having loved this present age.*" There in a few words you have the story of a man's life. What started out with so much promise ended in disappointment.

Following the lord has never promised an easy life. Even after feeding 5000, curing the sick, exorcising demons, some of his disciples – not just folk in the crowd but disciples – were disturbed by what he said. He wasn't turning out to be the messiah they hoped for; the things he said would require them to change their views, their expectations. Jesus asked them if they wanted to leave and a lot of them did.

At one time the city of Steubenville had eight parishes but as the population shrank when steel mills closed and the number of priests declined that had to change. Over a decade or so they closed and consolidated down to now three parishes. When they consolidated the last few parishes into Triumph of the Cross

– now the cathedral parish – the number of people attending mass instantly went down by at least a third. Records suggest that they didn't go somewhere else they simply decided not to go anywhere if they couldn't go to the Polish parish or the Italian parish or whatever parish they had gone to as a kid. Jesus asked his followers if they want to leave and some of them said yes

When Fr Huffman was transferred from St Ambrose the weekly mass count immediately dropped by about 50 people but the interesting thing is they quit coming in the weeks just before I even got here. And then some left after I got here but I'm pretty sure they already had made the decision to go even if they pretended to give things try. I hope they found a church somewhere that would make them happy. But honestly making people happy was never a mission of the church. Jesus asked his followers if they want to leave and some said yes

I have heard, as a priest for almost 40 years, hundreds of reasons for quitting the church, but never has anyone said to me, *I'm leaving the church because I've found someone better than Christ.* Do they really believe that shopping or golf or sleeping in or nursing hard feelings bring something ultimately good into their lives? I guess they must think that.

In the preface to her book, *Amazing Grace*, writer Kathleen Norris tells of an evening when she was making a presentation concerning her book. A woman in the audience asked her a painful question. *"I don't mean to be offensive,"* she said, *"but I just don't understand how you can get so much comfort from a religion whose language does so much harm."*

Norris understood the question all too well, for she had, herself, been distanced from faith for many years. She knew what it was to struggle with the commitment of faith. Suddenly she realized the troublesome word in the woman's question was the word "**comfort**." The questioner had asked her how she had found "*such comfort in her religion*."

Kathleen Norris answered that she didn't think it was comfort she was seeking or comfort she'd found. "Look," she said, as a rush of words came to her, "As far as I'm concerned, this faith has saved my life, my husband's life, and our marriage. So it's not comfort that I'm talking about, but salvation." The folk looking for salvation don't leave for trivial reasons.

The pastor of fast-growing church talked about what they want from their members and he commented, "*We want our members to wear aprons, not bibs*." That's an interesting phrase--"aprons, not bibs." Here's what they meant: Bibs are for people who only want to be fed. Bibs are for those who are not yet ready or willing to feed themselves. Bibs are for those who are more interested in being served than in serving. Bibs are for those who insist that the church exists for them and their needs. Bibs are for babes in the faith, those who haven't caught God's vision for the church, or those who are not yet of the faith. On the other hand, aprons are for those who have a heart to serve others in Jesus' name. Aprons are for those who know that they are the church. Aprons are for those who don't mind getting their hands dirty. Aprons are for those who take the time daily to feed their spiritual hunger. Aprons are for those who are growing in faith, and hunger

to help others grow. Sadly even folk who have been around the church for many years are still wearing bibs rather than aprons.

Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.” Have you come to that knowledge? Do you know what Kathleen Norris meant when she said her faith had saved her life, her husband’s life, and their marriage? Is it that important in your life? Many who followed Jesus turned back. Only his most committed disciples remained. Are you part of that group?

Do you also wish to *go away*? Honestly, I think we would all admit that there have been times when we were tempted to say yes – even though we don’t like thinking this about ourselves. But in times of temptation, in times when we deceive other people to avoid trouble or get what we want, in times when we deliberately close our eyes to the sight of those who are poor or marginalized because we don’t want to feel guilty or bother to help. At those times we too are the ones who wish to go away.

Asked if he wanted to leave, Peter’s response is striking. He doesn’t say yes but he doesn’t quite say no either. Learning from his master, he answers back with another question: ***To whom else can we go?*** It is not, perhaps, the most flattering answer in the world, but it is honest. It’s a little reminiscent of Winston Churchill’s famous description of democracy as the worst form of government except for every other form that has ever been tried.

Following Jesus may not always be easy or pleasant, or even totally comprehensible, but when it comes to the eternal-life business, to tell the truth there's not much out there in the way of alternatives.

A church member who had been devoutly active for many years suddenly was absent. One cold winter evening the pastor knocked at his door. Actually, the pastor and the church member had been long-time good friends.

As they watched the wood burn in the fireplace, the minister mentioned the parishioner's absence from church. The man candidly confessed that he had decided he was just as well off without the church as with it. The minister didn't say a word. He took the tongs from the rack, reached into the fire, pulled out a flaming ember, and laid it down by itself on the hearth. He still said nothing.

Both men sat in silence and watched the glowing ember lose its glow and turn slowly into a crusty, black lump. After some moments of thoughtful silence, the man turned to his pastor and said, "I get the message, my friend, I see what you mean; I'll be back next Sunday." And he was.