

The Nazarenes gathered for the Sabbath in their hometown synagogue were “filled with fury” at Him, so much so that they wanted to throw Him off a cliff.¹

The Gadarenes “begged Him” to leave them alone.²

Many in the congregation of the synagogue in Capernaum walked out of one of His sermons, shocked and disgusted.³

The Pharisees were driven to distraction by Him.

Moneychangers in the Temple in Jerusalem detested Him.

And today, as we heard, a rich young man had heard all he cared to hear from Him and joined so many others in walking away, wanting nothing more to do with Him.⁴

All of this probably shouldn't surprise us too much, though we tend to forget just how polarizing Jesus was in His day. The various factions and institutions of His time surely didn't forget it, tending, as they did, to agree on only one thing: they found Him deeply alienating.

No wonder they were annoyed: He just wouldn't endorse any of their factions or interests.

He was no cheerleader for the Roman Empire; but He wasn't out to overthrow it, either.

He was devoutly Jewish; but He had His share of problems — and then some — with the religious authorities of His day.

He honored Mosaic Law; but He was never one to mistake legalism for faith.

He had little patience with the empty pieties of His day — and wasn't shy about expressing it.

And perhaps most grating of all for many of His contemporaries, He insisted that the outcast and marginalized of His time — the lepers, physical or moral; those tormented by

¹ Lk 4:18; 29 (NAB)

² Mt 8:34 (NAB)

³ Jn 6:66 (NAB)

⁴ Mk 10:22 (NAB)

whatever demons that afflicted them; the tax collectors, the Roman centurions, the sinful; those leading dodgy personal lives in one way or another — all of them, too, He said, were children of God who bore the image of the Creator and must be treated with dignity and compassion.

What's more, if all of that weren't maddening enough, Jesus showed little interest either in reinforcing the status quo or trying to overturn it. He came instead to preach the Good News of a better way, an interior way — the first moniker for His disciples was, in fact, "The Way" — that sought instead to reinforce what it meant to be created in God's image and to overturn the sinfulness found in every human heart, a Way that one entered through conversion.

Jesus refused to be anyone's partisan, and so He managed to be provocative and challenging to both religious and political grandees and to everyday people alike. It was all just too much for many of His contemporaries, and so they walked away.

People are still walking away.

As an example, fast forward two thousand years where, by virtually any measurement, the vitality of the Catholic Church in the United States is waning, at least as measured by how engaged individual Catholics are with the Church. The statistics are daunting. According to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, since 1970 the percentage of American Catholics who attend Mass weekly has fallen by more than half, from 55% to 23%. At the same time, the number of people who self-identify as former Catholics has increased nearly seven-fold, from 3.5M to nearly 24M.⁵

Why? Why are so many walking away today, and not just from the Catholic Church but from the Christian community generally?

⁵ "Frequently Requested Church Statistics," Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, [cara.georgetown.edu](https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/), <https://cara.georgetown.edu/frequently-requested-church-statistics/>.

Those who walked away from Jesus in the first century did so in large measure because they couldn't "tame" Him; they just couldn't force Him into whatever cubbyhole — religious, political, social — they held dear. Today, though, I suspect people walk away for the opposite reason; that is, because we've largely succeeded in domesticating Jesus, homogenizing Him, and smoothing out the sharp edges of His teachings, the ones, that is, that hit a little too close to home.

This takes many forms, from becoming convinced that Christ was most concerned with things He never talked about while ignoring the things He talked about all the time, to making our political or social ideologies the test of the Gospel instead of making the Gospel the test of our ideologies, to, in one of its more extreme forms, reducing the Gospel to the Christainment of megachurches, a kind of floor show or religious theme park that seeks to amuse us rather than, as Jesus instructs, to call us to take up our own Cross if we wish to follow Him.

There are undoubtedly many other reasons why people are walking away today, a complex mix of social and demographic factors, but in the end, I suspect much of the reason comes down to a resistance to conversion — the Church's, the Christian community's, own conversion.

Part of this stems from the passage of time — a lot of time — and part of it stems from the institutionalization of His Gospel and, with that, a kind of "theological narcissism," as Pope Francis once put it.⁶ It's as if, instead of remembering that we and everyone else are created in the image of God and bear His sacred mark, something that might have uncomfortable implications for our individual and collective behavior, we want to recreate God in *our* image and keep Him at a comfortable distance, a distance measured by our certainty that He approves of our every thought and action.

⁶ Quoted in Jim Manney, "Letting Jesus Out", [ignatianspirituality.com](https://www.ignatianspirituality.com), <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/letting-jesus-out/>.

This is an affliction that strikes both individuals and the Church itself, as Pope Francis observes:

The evils that, in the passing of time, afflict the ecclesiastical institutions have a root in self-referentiality ... In Revelation, Jesus says that he is standing at the threshold and calling. Evidently the text refers to the fact that he stands outside the door and knocks to enter. But at times I think that Jesus may be knocking from the inside, that we may let him out. The self-referential Church presumes to keep Jesus Christ within itself and not let him out.⁷

Just as conversion is the portal through which one enters the Good News, conversion is the doorway through which we, as individuals and as a Church, can let Jesus out into the world more often.

My suspicion is that much of the Church's waning influence has its roots in trying to keep the door closed; that is, trying to keep Jesus in His box by turning on its head how Jesus teaches us we're to engage with the world around us and how we're to engage our own conscience.

With regard to the former, how we're to engage with the world around us, which is simply to say, with every daughter and son of God, Catholic or not, Christian or not, American or not, etc., Jesus couldn't be much clearer. In a myriad of ways, He tells us throughout the Gospels that we must "stop judging that you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven."⁸ This is simply an elaboration of what Christ summarizes as the entirety of the Law and the Prophets, that we love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. Put simply, there's no love of God where there's no love of our neighbor, for they, too, bear the image of the Creator. And our neighbor, as Jesus makes quite clear, is anyone in need. This needs to be proclaimed in practice, not just in word. Is it what people see and experience?

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lk 6:37 (NAB)

The Psalmist tells us that in order to practice the love of God and neighbor, we first have to examine our own conscience. “If you, O Lord, mark our sins, who can stand? ... But with you is forgiveness,” he proclaims.⁹ Again, Jesus emphasizes this same point over and over again. He told those preparing to stone an adulteress, for example, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”¹⁰ Or, perhaps even more to the point, on another occasion, He asks, “Why do you notice the splinter in your brother’s eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your eye?”¹¹

I suspect the baleful trends documented by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate and other researchers have much to do with the Church’s oft-unerring instinct for spotting and condemning the splinters in someone else’s eye and a certain blindness regarding the beams in the Church’s own. In a few moments we’ll be celebrating the Eucharist, and the Eucharist calls us to remember that Jesus sacrificed Himself on the Cross not just for the “good thief” to one side of Him, but for the “bad thief,” too, on the other. And sometimes all of us — and even the Church herself — are the “bad thief”.

When we get right down to it, it’s a failure of humility. Were we more honest in acknowledging both our individual and the Church’s own shortcomings and sinfulness, we might feel more keenly our own need for forgiveness, and, as a consequence, become more forgiving of others, more welcoming of others, despite their flaws and stumbles. And in the process of the Church’s own ongoing conversion, we might find that others are more willing to accompany us as partners and guides in theirs.

Who knows? In letting Jesus out, we might be surprised at the number of people He brings in. And then instead of walking *out*, people might start walking *in* once again.

⁹ Ps 130:3-4 (NAB)

¹⁰ Jn 8:7 (NAB)

¹¹ Mt 7:3 (NAB)