



## ST. BARTHOLOMEW the APOSTLE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday 2021

The question in this gospel is one that every generation of believers has had to face at one time or another: "*Will you also go away?*" **Some in fact, have gone away. Left the church.** I suspect that there are very few of us here, if any, who do not know of someone, even members of our own family, who has gone away; left the church. Some have gone loudly and publicly, and others have gone quietly and privately, and still others have just drifted or faded away.

**Some** have found the *message* of Jesus too hard to take, too unrealistic.

**Some** have found Jesus' *message* beautiful and compelling, but could find no one who practiced it.

**Some** like Jesus, but can't stand his church; we have witnessed this with the sexual abuse crisis and the coverups by its leaders.

**Some** wanted a church of all *saints*, and got a pack of *sinners* instead. **Some** wanted a church of *sinners* and got bothered by the *saints*.



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**Some** *liked* the rules, since they brought security. **Some** *hated* the rules, since they brought imprisonment and moral brainwashing.

**Some** have been attracted away from the church by false gods.

**Some** people gave their hearts and souls to the gods of materialism and consumerism.

Whatever the reason, people: family, friends, coworkers have left the church.

**But there are others, such as ourselves, who have responded to Jesus' question with Peter's words: "To whom shall we go?"** For all of its limitations, this is the church where we have touched God and God has touched us. Or, to put it another way, the question for us is not "**Will you also go away?**" But rather, "**Why do you stay?**"

For some, that's easy to answer; for others, they find it harder to put an answer into words other than "*I was born a Catholic.*" I suppose, if pressed, I could try to offer some lofty philosophical or theological reasons, *but* on reflection I think that, in the long



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run, stories and experience are the lived reasons why most of us really stay. And so I would like to share with you the stories of three people who are three reasons why **I** stay. You have, I am sure, your own private list, but here's mine.

**One is an archbishop, another is a housewife, and the other is a mystic.**

**As for the archbishop**, most of you know by now that in 1977 Oscar Romero was a quiet traditional cleric when he was consecrated archbishop of San Salvador.

In fact, he was deemed so safe by the authorities that they used his very installation as bishop as an excuse for more government-sanctioned murders. This shook the archbishop deeply. He was even more troubled when some of his priests who lived among the poor people got to trust him enough to share with him the saying they had: "***The church is where it always should have been: with the people, surrounded by wolves.***"

When one of these same priests was murdered by the government, the archbishop delved more deeply into the gospel, met Christ in a most profound way for the first time, and soon



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was **transformed from an amiable cleric to a forthright disciple of Jesus against injustice.** And, like Jesus, he earned the hatred and fear of the establishment. The shadow of the cross began to cast itself over his life and ministry. But he was compelled by the gospel to speak out. And so it happened on March 24, 1980, Archbishop Romero celebrated Mass at the Chapel of Divine Providence in San Salvador. As he came to the part of the Mass that we all know so well, he lifted up the Host and Chalice and said—as we shall say at this Mass—the ancient words, *“This is my body, given for you. This is my blood shed for you.”* At that moment a rifle shot rang out, a bullet pierced his heart and he fell dead in the sanctuary. **He became Eucharist.** Like Jesus,

- he became a martyr for the truth,
- a prophet of justice,
- a man caught by the gospel.

Experience has shown us that there have been unworthy, worldly, and profane archbishops, but **this** archbishop, who lived and died like Jesus, who is in **my** tradition, **my** church—he is a reason I stay.



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**Then there's the housewife.** She tells her story. She says she was out shopping and came across a delightful gift shop. *"I almost tiptoed into the gift shop,"* she says. *"I saw hundreds of fragile items that were displayed on the glass shelves, and pausing to admire a one-of-a-kind sculpture of an English village, I strained to see as much detail without actually touching it. And suddenly a female voice behind me said, 'Please pick it up if you like.' I turned around and there was a woman who smiled and said, 'Don't worry" you can rely on our store policy.'* She pointed to a small sign on a display case. It read: **'If you break it, please tell us so we can forgive you.'**"

The housewife said she laughed and said to the saleswoman, *"Now, that's what I call a novel approach in modern business."*

The saleswoman nodded and said,

*"Yes, since we put that sign up breakage hasn't really changed, but it's wonderful how much more comfortable everybody feels. In fact, it's made such a change in my own attitude that I took one home and my kids love it."*



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After she left the shop, the housewife mused to herself, "***I guess it's human nature. There's something about knowing you'll be forgiven for a mistake that frees you to relax and enjoy yourself.***" And then she had a sudden thought: "***It's like the forgiveness of God,***" she concluded. And she smiled to herself.

I suppose there are hundreds and thousands of housewives who shop daily and visit a million gift shops, but ***this*** housewife of my tradition resonates with an ordinary shopping event and hears the message of God's forgiveness. And she is why I stay.

**The third person is a mystic**, the medieval, mystic, St.

Catherine of Siena. She was asked by one of her nuns, "*How can I pay God back for all of his goodness to me? How can I give back to God some glory for all of God's compassion, mercy, and generosity?*"

St. Catherine answered,

*"It won't do you any good to do any more penances.*

*It won't do much good to build a great church.*

*It won't do you much good to add more quiet time in prayer.*



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***But I'll tell you something you can do to really pay God back for the compassion God gives you. Find someone unlovable and give that person the kind of love that God has given you."***

I suppose that in the course of history there have been fraudulent, misguided, and ivory-towered mystics, but **this** mystic is genuine, sound, and practical, and she stands in **my** heritage and I in hers and she is why I stay.

And so we have an **Archbishop**, a **housewife**, and a **mystic**. And when someone asks me, "*Will you also go away?*" I respond, "***What! And leave all these people? Not on your life. Like Peter, they have shown me who has the words of eternal life.***"

My friends, today *too* many disciples of Jesus walk away from him.

- They no longer gather with their fellow Christians to hear his word proclaimed and preached.



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- They consider his voice just one voice among many vying for attention.
- They see the Eucharist as something far less than his very Body and Blood and not worth their attendance at Mass.
- They allow their moral standards to be set by a changing society with fluid definitions of right and wrong.
- They forget that the Cross of Jesus calls us to sacrifice for others and to put the will of God before our own.

Many Christians are walking away from Jesus since they find his teachings increasingly hard to accept and to live out in a *society* that keeps sinking deeper and deeper into sin, self-centeredness, consumerism, and immorality. A society that Pope Francis describes as having a "**throwaway culture**" where all things are considered disposable even the *unborn*, the *poor*, the *powerless*, the *elderly*, the *immigrant* and the *sick*.

The *more* our society becomes post-Christian, the *more* it becomes secular, materialistic, narcissistic, and addicted to sensual pleasure, the *more* the teachings of Jesus and of his Church seem out of step and suited for another age.





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As this happens, some people who claim to be Christians do the unexpected.

- Like many of the disciples of Jesus in Sunday's Gospel, they walk away.
- They no longer accompany Jesus.
- They decide to embrace the values of the society around them and reject those of Jesus Christ.

**My friends, in the face of such faithlessness, may we have the solid faith of St. Peter, may we never forget what he told Jesus when he was asked if he would also leave:**

***"Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God."***