

Homily for 21st Sunday b cycle

The sixth chapter of John's gospel marks a decisive turning point in the life of Christ. It begins on a high note. Many people are following Jesus. Yet it ends on a discordant note. Many turn away from him.

What happened?

His words shocked and disturbed them. They murmured: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Among the teachings they found unacceptable were the following:

Jesus came down from heaven as the Bread that nourishes life;

He would give his flesh for the life of the world; and

Whoever eats his flesh and drinks his blood has eternal life.

Clearly, Jesus did not always receive a warm reception from his audience. Some of them were so upset that they refused to stand by him and in anger simply walked away.

Tellingly, Jesus allowed them to leave and did not follow after them, begging them to return. This was their decision and He gave them the freedom to make it.

According to the Evangelist, "many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him". (Jn. 6:67). The one-time disciples made a personal decision to take a step backwards. In doing so, they separated themselves from the source of eternal life.

Faith is a gift, and a gift is always a responsibility. Jesus said, "No one can come to Me unless it is granted him by my Father" (Jn. 6:65). Once the gift is freely accepted, responsibility then follows.

Sadly, we can relinquish the gift freely offered to us. We may refuse to believe and trust in the words of Christ. God respects our freedom.

Apostasy is a growing phenomenon in the Western world.

Last week, the Archbishop of Dublin, Cardinal Farrell, lamented the loss of faith in his native country of Ireland. He said that Christianity is vanishing in a country with a proud Christian heritage. For too many, the faith is no longer relevant or meaningful. The tragic consequence of the massive loss of faith is that many have abandoned the Church and may never return.

The Capitol District in upstate New York is one of the ten most secular regions in the United States. Regrettably, religious illiteracy is on the rise. A growing number of baptized Catholics do not even know the basics of the faith.

The question posed by Jesus in today's gospel is one of the most haunting in all of the New Testament, namely, "Do you also want to leave?" We must allow Peter to speak for us. "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (Jn. 6:69).