

**My Dear Sisters and brothers in Christ,**

**It occurred to me that, though I know they never heard it, it's kind of nice to think of those thousands that Jesus fed on the hillside some two thousand years ago singing: "I have decided to follow Jesus! No turning back! No turning back! But as we come to the end of this Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of St. John, we know that is not what happened.**

**When the Lord told them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood, remains in me and I in him," the people now reply, "This saying is hard: who can accept it?" Then John tells us, "As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him."**

**Notice that John doesn't say that many in the crowd turned back or many he fed turned back. That's to be expected. Like many people today, there will always be people who church hop. They just keep shopping until they find a church that gives them exactly what they want.**

**No! John says, "...many of his disciples...no longer accompanied him." These were those who had followed him for a long time. Many were among the 72 he had sent out to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was at hand. They were people who had witnessed his miraculous healings—giving sight to the blind, healing lepers, even healing the Roman centurion, Jairus', daughter, and giving life back to the widow's son. They were people Jesus was relying on.**

**Here it would be like members of pastoral council or the choir or ushers or religious ed. teachers deciding to leave the parish because they didn't agree with a decision that was made or something that I said or did, or didn't say or didn't do.**

**Certainly it had to hurt Jesus to see these disciples walk away from him, as it has hurt me to lose trusted church members. To the casual observer, it might seem as though the ship is sinking. However, with hind sight, it was the right-sizing of Jesus' followers. Sometimes in order to have a body moving in the right direction, you have to risk losing some who don't share your vision.**

**We don't often admit that in church. But some people are actually a detriment to the kingdom of God. It is impossible for any church to move forward if the highest principle it has as an organization is to keep everyone happy.**

**Not too long ago I had to ask the leader of one of our ministries to tell one of the participants not to return because what the person was saying was contrary to the teaching of the Church. The person's constant, carping criticism was not only wrong, but disruptive to the work of the ministry. It was a difficult decision for me and even more difficult for the ministry leader. But leadership often demands making difficult decisions.**

**Jesus did not back down in his teaching. He did not water it down to make it more acceptable. He did not plead with these disciples to reconsider. He allowed them to walk away.**

**Researchers tell us that, nationally, every week over 53,000 people leave the church never to return. But even among those who remain, only about 20% are really committed to their faith. Why is that? Isn't it true that many casual worshippers come only occasionally when it is convenient or out of mere tradition and not because they really believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world; the Bread of Life who feeds us with his own flesh and blood so that we might live with him forever? Interestingly, that statistic of 20% faithful people committed to regular worship in their churches nationally, exactly mirrors our own experience in Our Lady of Consolation Parish.**

**A priest-friend recently visited a fast-growing parish in Minnesota to learn from their staff. It was a privilege, he said, to witness their passion for doing high quality ministry in the name of Jesus. One of the phrases that he heard while he was there, was, "We want our members to wear aprons, not bibs." That's an interesting phrase—"APRONS, NOT BIBS!"**

**Here's what they meant by it. 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 committed to their 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 for are those who love their church, and are excited about telling others how much they love it and invite them to visit with them.**

**A Church growth consultant interviewed thousands of Christians in America and asked them what they thought the Church existed for. 88% said, “The church exists to serve my needs and the needs of my family.” In other words, 88% of American Christians are still wearing bibs. They believe that the church exists to serve them...not so they can serve the world. And again that statistic mirrors our experience at Our Lady of Consolation. Only about 12% of our membership ever put on an apron to serve. The other 88% are content to wear bibs, expecting and wanting only to be served.**

**Too many of us forget that at that First Eucharist, the very Son of God, removed his outer garment, wrapped a towel around his waist, got down on his knees, and washed his disciples feet. When he was done he said, “I have just given you an example to follow.” In other words, Jesus called his disciples to wear aprons, not bibs. To truly share in Eucharist, the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, requires us to wrap ourselves in aprons of loving service.**

**In a sermon he gave on the Eucharist way back in the fourth century, St. Augustine said, “The wedding garment that is required to be worn at the Wedding Feast of the King’s Son is the garment of charitable love.” In the sermon he very emphatically distinguishes between familial love of spouse and children, parents and siblings from “charitable love” which he defines as love of the stranger, the sick, the poor, the uncared for. St. Augustine, therefore, has taught in the Church from the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the present that wearing the apron of loving service is essential to full participation in the Eucharist.**

**Earlier in this Bread of Life discourse Jesus tells us, “...the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” He is telling us that he gives us his flesh to eat and his blood to drink, not just to nourish us spiritually, but that we carry his flesh and blood out of this place to give “life to the world”.**

**Thousands came to Jesus to be fed on that summer day 2,000 years ago. They put on their bibs and ate until they were full. But when challenged to exchange their bibs for aprons, and do the feeding, thousands also turned away. They weren’t interested. Or they didn’t have time. Or they were too tired. Or whatever other excuse came to mind.**

**Sadly, left with a handful, the twelve, Jesus turns and asks them, “Do you also want to leave?” Simon Peter speaks for all of us who are willing to put on aprons of loving service to others, “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.”**

**To those among us who are content to wear bibs; content to be served, Jesus also asks the question, “Do you also want to leave?”**

**How do you answer him?**

