

There are 240 million atheists in the world. Jews number 18 million, Buddhists: 314 million, Hindus: 732 million, Moslems: 971 million, and Christians: 1 billion 833 million. Christians make up one third the population of the world. All in all, I'd say Jesus was a success.

But at the end of today's Gospel, success is what Jesus cannot imagine. He's afraid he has failed. Jesus has just revealed the mystery of the eucharist, the foundation of our Catholic belief that the bread and wine at Mass truly becomes the body and blood of Christ. We do not simply symbolize the presence of Jesus. We believe that Jesus is truly present. However, that teaching, which in the Gospel Jesus dearly hopes will unite his followers, actually splits his audience. In this case, it's not just the crowd that drifts away. It's disciples who leave him. Turning now to the twelve, one of whom he knows is Judas the betrayer, Jesus asks in sorrow, "Do you, my closest friends, do you also wish to go away?" Peter speaks for the group, and we want him to say what he says so well in the other Gospels: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." But instead, Peter, depressed like Jesus, says, "Lord, to whom can we go?" It's like saying, "Lord, you're the best we can do." How empty Jesus must have felt. I imagine this is how President Clinton has felt this week about the crime bill and national health care. Regardless of what you think about how good the bills are, the leader who expected a strong following within his own camp, discovered many of his supporters turning away.

It's a feeling I hear in our neighborhood. We work hard at our community. We invest in friendships. Why do so many friends move away? Why don't more people come to church? It's a feeling that turns up in families. Why do teens seem so remote? Why do parents not understand? The affections of a spouse--where have they gone? We start to wonder why we're staying behind. I'm sure Jesus felt like that.

Now, Jesus being Jesus may have had some idea that two thousand years later he'd have two billion followers. Perhaps he took it in stride that a handful of Galilean fishers would walk out on his lecture one sunny afternoon. But we don't have that perspective. When we don't get support for the decisions we make about family and community, it gets pretty tough to keep on going. How we'd like to say to past generations, "Thank you for founding St. Regis; thank you for handing on the faith; thank you for supporting Catholic education, for building families that passed on the values that we enjoy; thank you for fostering racial tolerance, for seeing that we'd have a better life." It's clear now that our ancestors made wonderful decisions, but they looked pretty risky at the time. A century from now people can say those things about us. But in the meantime, we forge on often in the dark, often in disappointment, aware like Jesus that many disagree, that friends may desert us, and that we must preach the truth, no matter how hard it may be for others to hear and for us to find support.