

Dismissed in peace

By [Thomas G. Long](#)

December 22, 2014

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Long's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

Last year, humanities professor Stanley Fish wrote [a piece about selling his books](#). The books that had nourished his academic soul for half a century were wheeled unceremoniously out of his home. The ostensible reason for this sale was downsizing—Fish was moving from a house to an apartment. But the real reason was that he was approaching the end of his scholarly career, and the exit of his library was a symbol of a phase of his life coming to a close:

What I saw on the shelves was work to which I would never return, the writings of fellow critics whom I will no longer engage, interpretive dilemmas someone else will have to address. The conversations I had participated in for decades have now gone in another direction (indeed, in several other directions), and I have neither the time nor, if truth be told, the intellectual energy required to catch up. Farewell to all that. So long, it's been good to know you. I'm sure you'll do fine without me.

As I have been moving toward my own retirement from teaching, I have been thinking a great deal about this “you’ll do fine without me” moment, both in terms of career and, inevitably, in terms of life itself. Theologically, two factors seem to be at play. First, there is humility, as in Paul’s admonition, “I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment” (Romans 12:3). Frankly, the world got along without me quite well before I was here; the academy, and the world, will do fine without me when I am gone.

But humility alone is insufficient. What we do in life still counts, yes, counts even to God. So we add the second theological affirmation: that the whole of one’s life is an investment in God’s future. Maturity in faith is both the willingness to grasp our

vocation when the call comes and then the willingness to let it go and trust the providence of God. In faith and love, we work as hard as we can for the kingdom; in hope, we believe that God's kingdom will come even when our own strength is spent.

John Baille's prayer puts it well: "Grant...that as the end of my earthly life draws ever nearer, I may not grow to be a part of these fleeting earthly surroundings, but rather grow more and more conformed to the life of the world to come."