

Take Courage in the Storm: Fix Your Focus

Msgr Charles Pope — 2023-09-28

Msgr. Pope spoke to us of the storm we are in today — within the world, within the nation, within the church, and often, within ourselves. He compared the present age to a time not that long ago when the pews were full, divorce was rare, living together outside of marriage was shocking, abortion was illegal, homosexuality was not celebrated and the word "trans" was not a part of our vocabulary as it is today. Back then, generally regardless of our political or religious beliefs, we all agreed on a basic moral vision. Sure, we did have our differences and there was sin, however there was general agreement that certain things were right, and certain things were wrong.

THE PRESENT TIME — Today, everything has changed. When we stop believing in God, we will find something else to believe in, whether it be climate change, the LGBTQIA+ agenda, abortion rights, or many other woke movements that have taken hold of our world. All of these causes are pursued with a religious fervor that cries for acceptance and tolerance while pushing to the margins those who do not agree with them. There has been a great falling away in the church too, with only 17% of Catholics attending Sunday Mass since the pandemic when churches were deemed non-essential. Many Catholic schools and churches have closed. And there is a great deal of doctrinal uncertainty today — it is a time of "weaponized ambiguity" and confusion and many are lost and struggling. Msgr. Pope tells his parishioners that he loves them too much to lie to them, and so tells them hard truths, some of which may drive some away from the church. We are in the storm, and with the Synod on Synodality about to commence, Msgr Pope offered us some words of reassurance. There will be much that is discussed on sexuality, marriage, the priesthood, the sacraments, and there will be pressure to change. However, discussion and pressure does NOT mean the church will necessarily change, nor can it change Biblical teachings.

PERCEIVED DISTANCE — Msgr. Pope used the Gospel story (Matthew 14:22-33) of the disciples caught in the storm on the sea of Galilee as a reference for his talk. First he noted that Jesus "made" His disciples go on the boat, while He dispersed the crowds, and went to the mountain to pray. Sometimes, God seems to hide His presence from us, where at other times He is powerfully present. In this case, Jesus appears to distance Himself from His disciples, though God can never truly be distant from us. Do we want the consolations of God, or do we want the God of all consolations? Do we want a particular consolation, or do we want Him? Sometimes He draws back from blessings, from the experience of His presence in hope, to purify our love and to encourage us to go deeper in our relationship with Him. As we know from the prayer "Hail Holy Queen," that we are in exile now "mourning and weeping in this valley of tears." Life is hard, yet we are used to many comforts, particularly in this modern era. Western civilization has overdone comfort "stuff" to the degree that most people don't long for heaven. The comfort of this world is an illusion — comfort will not bring us happiness. God draws back from us, so we have to look for Him, long for Him. We have to experience some suffering and difficulties to purify us. John Chrysostom said we should go to more funerals than weddings. At weddings we experience mirth and wine, but at funerals we learn wisdom. One form of suffering is when God hides His face, and we feel afraid and we don't understand what He is doing. The Psalms address this frequently (Psalm 13, 30, 44, 22), the "How much longer oh Lord?" psalms. But though each of these psalms begin in a sense of longing and despair, each of them ends with expressions of hope.

PERCEPTION VS REALITY — God's absence is a perception, not a reality, an illusion of distance. God cannot be distant from a philosophical or a theological perspective. He holds everything in existence — He is in all things, through all things, with all things, and transcends them as well. God is so present, we cannot see Him! He is absolutely present, He is everywhere. (see Psalm 139 for example). Yet we experience His absence. Jesus made them get on the boat. The experience of God's distance is our experience, not reality. We must hold onto to the reality that He is more present to us than we are to ourselves. The Lord is right here, He sees everything, He knows what is going on, He is not unaware. And so what must we do? Tend to our vineyards, work on our part of His plan. So much of what happened in the world today, happened on our watch, in our generation. Yet we must not lose heart. We must continue to preach, to teach, to evangelize, to testify to those around us, particularly to our children and grandchildren.

DISTRESS OR AN OPPORTUNITY TO GROW CLOSER? — Perceived distance can lead to prolonged distress, like the disciples experienced on the boat. We become anxious about many things when we do not see the Lord. The storm is a symbol for our distance from God in this world. We become more fearful, more panicky, more alone. The shadows grow longer, and the fears grow deeper. What can we do when we feel distant from God? We can work on our relationship with Him, double down when we feel distant, listen to His voice in scripture. "Be still my soul, God is about to speak to me." Listen with our eyes, this is God's word, and He will speak to us, to our hearts. We need to learn to see the way God reveals Himself to us in signs, in wonders, in the sacraments, and in the liturgy. In the liturgy, God puts on the priestly robes and walks the aisles in the person of the priest; He speaks to us, teaches us, feeds us with His Body and Blood, and sends us out into the world to preach and teach the Gospel.

FIX OUR FOCUS — Jesus comes to the disciples, walking on water — they are afraid and think He is a ghost. Sometimes, the Lord sends us help, and rather than seeing it as help, we see it as more trouble! We can be looking at Jesus and not see Him. "Take courage, it is I. Do not be afraid." Focus on Me, not the storm. Jesus tells us to focus on His Father's presence in our lives, and what He has done for us, and to know that God can make a way out of no way, and can do anything. God can even take this mess our world is in and do something amazing with it. So how can we fix our focus? We need to know the story of what God has done for us through trials. We are still here, we are alright, even if everything did not go as we wanted or expected. As much as we may love our country and want it to repent and turn back to God, it may not. The history of the world tells us that empires rise and fall, nations come and go, fads and fashions have their day, and then disappear, but the church endures through all. Jesus promised us this. How many people have threatened to destroy the church throughout the ages? Where are Caesar, Napoleon, the USSR now? The church perseveres by God's Grace. It will never be destroyed, even as everything else goes away. We are in the right place when we are in the church. There are many difficulties ahead; we need to stay close to Jesus, He has seen things come and go, He has already provided for us. He lives in eternity, which means the future is just as present to Him as the past, as this moment. We need to fulfill our role. We need not lose heart. "Do not be afraid, it is I." Mighty cities are now in ruins, but the church is still here. Stay with the Truth, don't be discouraged, stand firm in the Faith, stay close to the Lord and all will be just fine, not always rosy or comfortable, but all will be well because the Lord is with us.