

On the Crisis and the Church

A Sermon on Passion Sunday
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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“Today, if you shall hear His voice, harden not your heart.” This is taken from the Invitatory of the Office of Matins today, the beginning of Passiontide. It has now been one and a half weeks since the general prohibition of public Masses has taken effect in this Archdiocese. Regardless of one’s opinions of the various secondary causes at play in this coronavirus crisis, we know by Faith and reason that God is always the First Cause. Nothing happens without His permission. The situation we face in the city and even throughout the country, where every single diocese is almost shut down completely in its day-to-day operations, most notably, of course, in the offering of Mass and the giving of Holy Communion, is difficult.

This difficult and uncomfortable situation is undoubtedly a punishment from God for clericality and laity alike. But as a good Father, the Lord God admonishes and chastises those whom He loves. He wants to bring good out of the situation. We must be quiet and still and listen, not hardening our hearts in pride, anger and impatience. Many are tempted to point fingers and blame others. Hear these words of the prophet Daniel and see what he thought in his own time of crisis and exile:

... I Daniel understood.... And I set my face to the Lord, my God, to pray and make supplication with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes. And I prayed to the Lord, my God.... We have sinned, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedly and have revolted: and we have gone aside from Thy commandments and Thy judgements. We have not hearkened to Thy servants, the prophets, ... all this evil is come upon us: and we entreated not Thy face, O Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities, and think on Thy truth.... For by reason of our sins, and the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem, and Thy people are a reproach to all that are round about us. [Daniel 9:2-16]

What can we gain from this trial? I’m not going to pretend to have all of the answers. Many have made their own conjectures: “This is a test” or “it’s a Divine interdict” and so forth; and this all may very well be true. But what if the government doesn’t remove the restrictions? What if this goes on for months or a year? The economy could crash. The awful consequences could be frightening. What if we were actually persecuted and threatened with death for practicing the Holy Catholic Faith? Would we be ready? Would we shed our blood for the love of Jesus Christ rather than deny Him?

Perhaps none of these evils result and the Lord gives us more time to change and to work for the conversion of the world in which we live. Ask yourself: if the restrictions were lifted and some of our prior routines were made possible again, how do we live differently? Would we be more fervent, more grateful, or would we take all of these precious gifts from God for granted? Would more Catholics, both clergy and laity, take more seriously the requests made by Our Lady of Fatima, such as the five first Saturdays of reparation to her Immaculate Heart? How many Catholics, clergy and laity, actually try to pray five decades of the Rosary every day?

This is one of the great goods that can come from this trial. We have been given more time to think and to pray about it. This is just as true for the clergy and the laity. I hope - personally I hope - that one of the results of this trial is that bishops, priests and all clergy and religious actually spend more time with our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. I hope that we clergy and religious - and I certainly include myself in this admonition - examine carefully whether all of those other things we were doing before the restrictions were really for the honor and glory of God and the salvation of souls. Was all of our feverish activity really necessary and good for ourselves and for souls, or was it often busy-work or the seeking of self-satisfaction? What have we neglected to do that we ought to have done? We have a lot to examine ourselves on. The Church has failed to bear witness to the glory of God in many ways and in so many scandals, so much lukewarmness and indifference.

So many Catholics want to remain comfortable, to live the same as the rest of the world, while we are called to live in the world, but not of the world. How can we continue to tolerate innumerable profanations of the name of God and so much filth and impurity and even actual pornography in the pop music, videos and movies that we have accepted as entertainment?

We all need good, moderate recreation and rest, but we don't need to be excessively entertained. There is too much good that needs to be done in this world while we still have time. The Church has an obligation to work for conversion of the world by prayer, good example and, yes, sometimes by sticking out and fighting against the evils of our days.

In the first petition of the Our Father, we pray "hallowed be Thy name." The Catechism of the Catholic Church, issued by St. John Paul II during his papacy, gives some good insights on the seven petitions of the Our Father. In the first petition, "hallowed be Thy name", we find a depth of meaning even beyond the reverence due when speaking of the name of God. We find a deeper meaning. We find, in the context of the Old Testament scriptures, that because God made man in His Image and likeness, the way a man lives and prays and carries himself has consequences for how the name of the true God is known in the world.

We all know how a son can bring great honor or dishonor to his family name, depending on how he lives after leaving home. But this is also true about us with the name of God. Dear friends, we are not only created in the image of the Triune God, we are made one in Jesus Christ, the Divine Word in flesh, by our baptism. We are members of His body.

If we claim and profess to believe in the true God, the Most Holy Trinity, and that we are followers of Jesus, what will unbelievers think when they see us living just as bad, or worse, than the rest of the world? Or even worse, pretending to be holier than others while hiding our own corruption? Did not Our Lord say, "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another"? [John 13:35]

We are commanded by God not only to love our brethren, our friends, but even our enemies. So then, what will the rest of the world think when they see Catholics detract against the good name and spewing vitriol against their brothers and even against the bishops and the Pope? We can disagree with our superiors at times. We can even feel sorrow and lament their sins and errors, but we must still have a reverence and respect for them. When Moses' sister, Miriam, spoke against him, God struck her with leprosy as a punishment.

St. Peter Chrysologus wrote that, in the prayer of Our Father, we ask that this name of God should be hallowed in us through our actions, for God's name is blessed when we live well, but is blasphemed when we live wickedly. And this is why the Lord God proclaimed, through some of the prophets of the Old Testament, that the people of Israel had profaned His name among the pagan nations: because they lived in an unholy manner, especially by the sin of idolatry, so that the pagans were led to think that the God of the Israelites was just like their gods.

These people are just like our people. And likewise, in our own day and age, even though every unbeliever and fallen-away Catholic is responsible for his own sins, still we could live holier lives, pray more fervently, avoid sin and do more good works. Did not Our Lord say, "Let your light shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father Who is in heaven?" [Matt. 5:16]

O, we must not fail in this! In this time of seclusion, while so many are deprived from receiving the Holy Eucharist and attending Mass, and the sacraments are not as easily available, this is a true trial. Instead of complaining and detracting, giving into discouragement and slacking our Lenten penances, let us persevere in prayer. Let us be more fervent than before. Let us persevere in our Lenten penances, by embracing even more the penance which God himself has chosen for us at this time. There is much more merit in accepting the cross directly from our Lord's will than the penances we choose for ourselves.

Let us profit from this time of desolation, living more by faith, not worrying about what might happen, not putting our trust in money, in our own plans. No, let us put our trust in God. He will never abandon those who truly seek Him with their whole heart. The sinful Ninevites when they heard from the prophet Jonas that the Divine judgement was upon them, repented of their sins and amended their lives, hoping for mercy saying, "Who can tell if God will turn, and forgive: and will turn away from His fierce anger, and we will not perish?" [Jonas 3:19] This is what the Ninevites did and God was pleased with their repentance.

Perhaps God will bring this current trial to a quick end. Or, perhaps He will not. Either way, we hast needs must be ready. We should entrust and consecrate our lives to Mary Immaculate and to St. Joseph so we are not led astray in this time of confusion. As they cared for and guarded the Child Jesus, so also they will do for us, if we entrust ourselves to them.

And so, we can end with the rest of that prayer that I started with, the prayer from the prophet Daniel, and make it our own:

“Now, therefore, O our God, hear the supplication of Thy servant, and his prayers: and show Thy face on Thy sanctuary, which is desolate, for Thy own sake. Incline, O my God, Thy ear and hear: open Thy eyes, and see our desolation, and the city upon which Thy name is called: for it is not for our justifications that we present our prayers before Thy face, but for the multitude of Thy tender mercies. O Lord, hear: O Lord, be appeased: hearken and do: delay not, for Thy own sake, O my God: because Thy name is invocated upon Thy city, and upon Thy people.” [Daniel 9:17-19]

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.