

*“Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.”* These words of Jesus recall to our minds the words of our beloved Pope John Paul II, who began his pontificate with these same words: “Be not afraid.” Christians are called today to put our faith in Christ as never before, to keep our eyes focused on him and to trust in him who died for our sins. When Peter took his eyes off Christ and began paying attention to the tempest raging around him, he became fearful and began to sink. Peter began to sink not because of the ferocity of the storm, but because he took his eyes off Christ; he saw the trouble in the world around him and he lost his focus. Anxiety rose within him and threatened to overwhelm him precisely because he took his eyes off Christ. There is an important lesson here for us, for when we take our eyes off Christ we too will sink into the troubled waters of the world, we too will become troubled by anxiety, we too will become distracted and lose our focus.

When God calls us to himself he holds out his hand to us by giving us his grace, but we must take his hand, we must pick up his grace and we must do our part. Our part is to stay focused on Jesus. The Lord expects us to make an effort and exercise the freedom of grace that he has given us. When the Lord seems to be walking past us, to have abandoned us to our fate it is not because he has lost sight of us but because we have lost sight of him. Those who think the Lord does everything and we do nothing are sadly and dangerously mistaken. We must do our part and he will do his. We must take his hand in times of peril, we must rise to spiritual vigilance, we must intensify our prayer and be docile to the movements of his spirit acting within us. We must obey readily the promptings of that spirit and turn to Christ in all things, for with Christ all things are possible and without Christ nothing is possible.

There is another symbolism contained within this metaphor of Peter and the troubled waters. In this view the boat that Jesus sends his disciples out in is the

Church and the troubled waters they encounter are the hatred of the world for God. The wind and the waves that threaten to swamp the boat are the noise and the clamor of worldly animosity to Christ. The boat that is the Church often seems doomed only to be miraculously rescued by some saint or pope who has kept his eyes firmly on Christ and who takes Jesus' hand in the fourth watch of the night.

This image of the Church, adrift on troubled waters, nearly swamped by the wind and waves and saved in her darkest hour of peril by the hand of Jesus is a pretty accurate picture of Church history. The obituary of the Church has been written many times by the world, accompanied by a loud trumpeting of the Church's imminent demise. There is nothing new here. From the very beginning, the Church has been constantly threatened with extinction. Because of the jealousy of heretics and the hatred of non-believers, Peter and Paul were martyred in Rome, but because Clement and Ignatius kept their eyes on Christ, the Church survived. For three centuries the Church suffered extreme persecution that literally drove her underground to the catacombs, but because she kept her eyes on Christ, she survived. When the barbarians sacked Rome in the fifth century, the light of Christendom seemed as though it would surely be extinguished, but even as wave after wave of barbarian invasions overran Europe, the dim light of Christendom was sustained by monks who kept their eyes on Christ in the monasteries, and the Church survived. The coming of the Renaissance brought new intellectual and philosophical threats to the faith and the demise of the Church was now thought to be imminent, but she kept her eyes on Christ and the church survived. Because of the great Western Schism of the late 1300's', but because she kept her eyes on Christ, she survived. With the Protestant rebellion the Church was once again threatened with extinction, and yet because she keeps her eyes on Christ, still she lives. During the French Revolution tens of thousands of priests and religious

were executed, the great Cathedral at Notre Dame was seized and renamed the Temple of the Goddess of Reason and the Church was pronounced to be dead, but because the faithful kept their eyes on Christ, the Church survived. Ruthlessly persecuted by the Nazis in the west and Communists in the east the Church was driven to the brink of extinction in the twentieth century, but Hitler, and Stalin and Mao are dead and the Church lives. Today, perhaps more than ever before in human history, we hear the strident voice of rabid anti-Catholic bigotry, rejecting God, denying the Church and defying her teachings. Protected and cared for by her divine spouse, the Church will continue to weather these storms and tempests, as long as she keeps her eyes on Christ, until the time appointed by God for her final perfect union with Him. The Church will experience her passion, her suffering, her apparent death in the world, but all these must be so that she can be resurrected to her eternal glory at the wedding feast of the Lamb when Christ will claim his bride forever.

The world is filled with trouble; it always has been and it always will be because the world is the place where our faith is tested. When we begin to lose our focus upon Christ, our faith begins to falter. When this happens we must make a sincere examination of conscience and when we do we will begin to see where our faith has weakened, where our prayer life has become lax and where we have become less fervent in our spiritual life and in our efforts at gaining self-mastery over our passions. Sin is insidious; it creeps in when we are distracted by the world, spiritually inattentive. It pretends to be less than it is, portraying itself as benign because everyone does it. Sin becomes all the more dangerous the less serious it seems because it dulls our vigilance and obscures our vision of the face of God. When sin is rationalized and tolerated, sin lulls us into complacency and we become spiritually lazy. When our baser passions become engaged, our

spiritual clarity becomes darkened and the light of faith begins to dim. We are in danger of being drowned in the dark waters of iniquity unless we recognize our peril and cry out to the Lord, as Peter did, "Lord, save me!" Then he will extend his hand to us, drawing us back into the safe refuge of his Church, saying to us "*Oh you of little faith, why did you doubt?*" If Christ is with us, we have nothing to fear, no matter the hatred and the bigotry of the world, so let us turn to our Blessed Mother, the Christ bearer who ever kept her eyes on Christ, let us ask her to obtain for us the faith of Peter and the trust of John that we might truly keep our eyes on Christ that we too might not be afraid.