

Encouragement During the End Times:

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The West is burning, the pandemic continues, the economy prepares for another crash, civil unrest prevails, sharp political division easily makes one nervous for November, the perpetual changes and chances of today's home life is often stressful, and most of us are feeling a little more (or a lot more) anxious than usual. What is happening on the larger scale, especially when we see the eerie spectacle of a red sun over our heads?! The word "apocalypse" is thrown around, and believe me, the rapturists are having a heyday right now: saber-rattling continues between nations, end-time signs are claimed around the middle east, the ice caps are melting, meteors approach the earth, and we are reminded of the increase of wickedness (and of this increase no one can deny).

Are we living in the end times/the last days? Of course we are, but we must keep this in the perspective of God's Holy Word and we must not succumb to the fear that the enemy tries to elicit in us during this time. There is so much more that is going on "behind the scenes," that is glorious and true.

St. Paul wrote to St. Timothy, "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty..." (2 Timothy 3:1). The writer of Hebrews says in a straight-forward manner: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..." (Hebrews 1:1-2). The last days have been for millennia, and they are now.

But God, my dear Christians, is unchangeable. Our LORD is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). He will never break His promise to hold you so firm that "they [you] will never perish, and no one shall snatch them [you] out of my hand" (John 10:28). In the midst of all the worldly threats, Jesus says to you and me: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:38) and "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). He says to you and to me: "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.' For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. You will not fear the terror of the night, nor the arrow that flies by day, nor the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor the destruction that wastes at noonday. A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you" (Psalm 91:1-7)

Everyday for the baptized into Christ is a day in which the LORD encourages you: "And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?" (1st John 5:4-5) So with a living faith, we heed Christ's Word and hear the Christ who has already conquered death: "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" (Exodus 14:14, words spoken to the Israelites and completely applicable to the Church today!)

And, "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted in the earth!" (Psalm 46:10)

We keep everything in perspective according to the eyes of faith in Christ, "for we walk by faith and not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7)

Right now, don't go along with the crowd: do not permit yourself the myopic view of the nightly news that makes politics everything. The three estates must be maintained for this is true life: the government (yes), but also the family (that the world wants to reduce to rubble), and of course the Church (that which the world wants to ignore). All three God works through. We have nothing to fear. God is in control, and He gives us so much to do that we haven't time to sit around and worry. Live in the holy vocations He has given you to live in especially the most sacred one: your baptized child-of-God life testifying to His love and mercy, and then all of the other ones as well as father or mother, husband or wife, child, brother, sister, cousin, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, friend (never underestimate the biblical import of this word), neighbor, co-worker, church member, citizen, grandfather, grandmother, grandchild, student, teacher, servant, witness, worshipper, evangelist...indeed, with all of this to do: "Therefore [Jesus tells us], do not be anxious about your life...But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." (Matthew 6:28a, 33-34) And, 1st Peter 5:7: "casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you."

Luther taught how we should live as Christians: be fasting, be watching, be working... the fasting may come in many ways, but what we are doing is not drowning in dissipation, but controlling our bodies; the watching is living every day prepared to lift up our heads as Christ comes in glory; and the working is to be about the work the LORD has given you today as a form of worship to God through faith (Romans 12) and as a way of loving and serving your neighbor. Let us fast, let us watch, and let us work...and let us be ready, joyful, prepared, confessing our anxiety, and receiving God's gifts. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) One more thing: remember we are the Church...we do not go along with the stark individualism of our day, but continue to pray, "OUR Father" and to love one another...we are brothers and sisters in Christ; let us know "Life Together" as Bonhoeffer referred to it, and let us encourage one another and all the more as the day of Christ approaches (Hebrews 10:25). We live as described in Colossians 3:16-17: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the LORD Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." And love each other: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:2)

Jesus loves you. He will not let you go! He has made you an heir of God's Kingdom, He has baked you into Himself in Holy Baptism, He has granted you the Holy Spirit...God walks with you; His Word is your sword and shield. We have nothing to fear. The last

days? Yes, and with God on our side, they are blessed days.

In Your Service and To Christ's Glory,

Pastor Alfonso

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"...and with his stripes we are healed." -- Isaiah 53:5