

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Last week we were horrified by the images of Hurricane Harvey, with shrieking 130-mph winds, slamming into the Gulf Coast of Texas and Louisiana, dumping more than 40 inches of rain over a 4-day period. Now, we're shocked by the pictures of Hurricane Irma tearing through the Caribbean islands, headed toward the Florida coast with up to 150-mph winds, threatening to devastate the entire State.

As I've reflected on the calamity these storms has brought into the lives of millions of people—losing their homes, all their belongings, their businesses, and God help them, some, even their loved ones, it occurred to me that, though we are far distant from all of this devastation, every one of us is just a disaster away from such pain—an auto accident, a heart attack, a diagnosis of a debilitating illness. the loss of a job. None of us are immune to a sudden change of fortune, a devastating loss.

We're struggling with such pain in my own family. My nephew, Robert, a seemingly healthy, strapping 6 ft., 2 in., 220 lb. young man of 50, woke up one morning six weeks ago feeling like his legs were made of rubber that would barely hold him up, with his arms and hands and fingers twitching wildly. After six weeks of doctoring, even being rushed to the U. of P. Hospital, all of the specialists are mystified and unable to come up with a diagnosis, let alone a treatment.

As I prayed over all this pain, all this sorrow, all this loss, a favorite Gospel song came to mind. It goes like this:

“Though the storms keep on raging in my life; and sometimes it's hard to tell the night from day; still that hope that lies within is reassured as I keep my eyes upon the distant shore; I know He'll lead me safely to that blessed place He has prepared. But if the storms don't cease, and if the winds keep on blowing in my life, my soul is anchored in the Lord.

Oh, I realize that sometimes in this life we're gonna be tossed by the waves and the currents that seem so fierce, but in the Word of God I've got an anchor and it keeps me steadfast and unmovable despite the tide. But if the storms don't cease, and if the winds keep on blowing in my life, my soul has been anchored in the Lord.”

I share the lyrics of this hymn with you today because in God's Word to us today, in the midst of these devastating storms in the South, and whatever storms are raging in your lives, we are given an incredible promise: “For where two or three of you are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Some of you may remember Fr. Marneni who helped us out in the parish some years ago. Fr. Marneni is a native of India. He told me of an encounter he had one time with a Hindu social worker when he was home to visit his family. At one point the social worker asked

Fr. Marneni, “Do you think that most Christians know what they’ve got?” Perplexed, Father asked what he had in mind. He said, “Every religion has a god. Every religion has an altar. Every religion has worshippers. Every religion believes in sacrifice. But only Christians have a Savior and only Christians have a congregation.”

Isn’t that a good question to ask ourselves, “Do we know what we’ve got?” Of course, we rejoice in our belief that we have a Savior. But do we appreciate the importance of being a congregation as well? We are not simply an assembly of individuals. He has called us into a sacred community. He not only has called us to be his own family, but when we gather together in His Name as we are today He is actually here with us—not just in the Eucharistic Presence, but in the very midst of us in this building.

We also see in this Gospel passage that we are responsible to and for each other: “If your brother sins against you, go, and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’” If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

This is a tough teaching of the Lord. It is one that is often overlooked because most of us shy away from confrontation of any kind. “Live and let live” is our default position. Yet, confronting a fellow-believer who is involved in sinful behavior can be the most loving thing, the most Christ-like thing we can do. Think in terms of the friend who has obviously had too much to drink and confronting him or her to prevent that person from attempting to drive, or the friend who has had severe pain, but appears to have become addicted to pain-killing drugs. These are not just the right things to do, they are the loving, Christ-like things to do.

Some years ago I received an anonymous communication from a person telling me that one of our members who was serving as a Eucharistic Minister was involved in an invalid marriage and if I didn’t put a stop to it, the anonymous person was going to report me to the Cardinal for promoting scandal. I absolutely despise anonymous letters and I hate being threatened. My tendency is to ignore anonymous letters. If a person won’t own what they write, they don’t deserve my attention. However, in this instance, I wasn’t even aware that this particular Eucharistic Minister was involved in an invalid marriage, and I doubted that she even knew that her marital status had anything to do with her service. So, I met with her and related what I had been told and how I was told. While I was angry at the anonymous “tip” I had received, she very calmly asked, “What do I have to do?” I explained that she could apply for an annulment from her previous marriage and if that was granted, I could solemnize her marriage in the Church. She very humbly said, “Well, first of all Scripture says in no thing give scandal, so I will stop being a Eucharistic

Minister until we see if I can get an annulment and have my marriage blessed by the Church. So, let's do it."

It took a long year, but it came to be. Many times Donna Martin has testified to this saving moment in her life. Since I officiated at her marriage to Ken she has resumed being a Eucharistic Minister and Proclaimer of the Word at the 8:00 A.M. Mass, is an aide in the Early Learning Center, a core team member for Life Teen, helps organize and serve all of our funeral luncheons, and helps with just about every other program that involves food service for our parish. Despite the shamefulness of the anonymous tipster and thanks to the humility of Donna Martin, this confrontation turned into a moment of grace for her and for our entire parish.

Finally, the Lord tells us today, "Again, amen, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father."

So, okay, I'm going to take a chance here. I'm going to take the Lord at His Word on this one. But, I need you to take a chance with me. This is not to test God, but rather to test our trust in His Word.

I'm going to ask you to turn to the person on your right or your left, in front of you or behind you; if you don't know each other, at least share your baptismal name with the other; take a moment for each to share his or her special intention; now please join hands and offer a prayer together for those intentions.

I'd like to end with this little story I heard in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. I'm not sure whether it is Gospel truth or fake news. According to the story, southeast Texas was suffering through a drought. An old country pastor implored his people to pray for rain. In fact, he asked each member of the church to join in a prayer vigil that would continue day and night until God granted their request. This vigil continued for well over a week. Finally, the dark clouds started rolling in and Harvey hit with a fury. The bayous overflowed their banks. People had to be evacuated from their flooded homes. The entire community was now under water.

As rescue workers made their way in a boat through the perilous floodwater evacuating the last reluctant stragglers, one of the boats passed that little country church, now almost completely submerged. There sat the pastor on the roof of the church with a look of grand satisfaction on his face. When he spoke to his rescuers, with a broad smile he said, "Not bad for a small church like ours. Not bad!"

Now we know what we have. So even if the storms rage in our lives, we have what the world desperately needs right now—we have a Savior; we are a Congregation; and our souls, our souls are anchored in the Lord.