

*In the face of storms and changes*

# Seeking new approaches

## Pope Francis

*Below are major excerpts from an April 28, 2023 speech given by Pope Francis in Hungary during his meeting with bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, seminarians and pastoral workers in the Co-Cathedral of St. Stephen in Budapest. In affronting the challenges of our time, Francis warns against both the risks of rigidity, lack of acceptance, and closure towards others, and a spiritual worldliness that lacks prophecy and discernment.*

[Christ] is “the Alpha and the Omega... who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev 1:8), the beginning and the end, the foundation and the ultimate goal of human history. In this Easter season, as we contemplate the glory of the One who is “the first and the last” (Rev 1:17), we can face the storms unleashed upon our world, the rapid pace of social change and the crisis of faith affecting our Western culture without yielding to resignation or losing sight of the centrality of Easter. The risen Christ, the center of history, is indeed the future. Our lives, for all their frailty, are held firmly in his hands. If ever we forget this, we, clergy and laity alike, will end up seeking human ways and means to defend ourselves from the world, either withdrawing into our comfortable and tranquil religious oases, or else running after the shifting winds of worldliness. In both cases, our Christianity will lose its vigor, and we will cease to be the salt of the earth. Let us return to Christ, who is the future, so that we do not fall into the shifting winds of worldliness. That is the worst thing that could happen to the Church: a worldly Church.

These are the two approaches – I might say the two temptations – against which, as a Church, we must always be on guard. The first is a bleak reading of the present time, fueled by the defeatism of those who insist that all is lost, that we have lost the values of bygone days and have no idea where we are headed... Then there is the other risk, that of a naive reading of our time, based on a comfortable conformism that would have us think that everything is basically fine, the world has changed and we must simply adapt without thinking critically about it. This is bad. So, to combat a bleak defeatism and a worldly conformism, the Gospel gives us new eyes to see. It gives us the grace of discernment, to enable us to approach our own time with openness, but also with a spirit of prophecy . . .

Here I would like to reflect briefly on a parable used by Jesus: that of the fig tree (*cf.* Mk 13:28-29). He brings it up in the context of the Temple in Jerusalem. To those who were admiring its magnificence, in a certain spirit of worldly conformism, placing their security in the sacred space and its solemn grandeur, Jesus says that nothing on this earth is absolute; everything is precarious: a day will come when stone will not remain upon stone. In these days, we are reading from the Book of Revelation in the Office of Readings where we see

that stone will not remain upon stone. At the same time, lest he induce discouragement or fear, he goes on to say that when everything passes away, when human temples collapse, terrible things happen, and violent persecutions erupt, *“then they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory”* (v. 26). He asks us to consider the fig tree: *“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that it is near, at the very gates”* (v. 28-29). We are called, then, to be open to the times in which we live, with their changes and challenges, and to see them as a fruitful plant pointing, as the Gospel says, to the time of the Lord’s future coming. In the meantime, however, we are called to cultivate this present season: to interpret it, to sow the seeds of the Gospel, to prune the dead branches of evil and to allow it to bear fruit. We are called to *receptivity* with prophecy.

Receptivity with prophecy: it is about learning how to recognize the signs of God in the world around us, including places and situations that, while not explicitly Christian, challenge us and call for a response. At the same time, it is about seeing all things in the light of the Gospel without yielding to worldliness, as heralds and witnesses of the Christian faith. Pay attention to worldliness. Falling into worldliness is perhaps the worst thing that could happen to a Christian community. Even in this country, with its solid tradition of faith, we witness the spread of secularism and its effects, which often threaten the integrity and beauty of the family, expose young people to lifestyles marked by materialism and hedonism, and lead to polarization regarding new issues and challenges. We may be tempted to respond with harshness, rejection and a combative attitude. Yet these challenges can represent opportunities for us as Christians, because they strengthen our faith and invite us to come to a deeper understanding of certain issues. They make us ask how these challenges can enter into dialogue with the Gospel, and to seek out new approaches, methods, and means of communicating. In this regard, Benedict XVI said that different periods of secularization proved helpful to the Church, for they *“contributed significantly to her purification and inner reform. Secularizing trends... have always meant a profound liberation of the Church from forms of worldliness”* (Meeting with Catholics Engaged in the Life of the Church and Society, Freiburg im Breisgau, 25 September 2011). With every kind of secularization, there is a challenge and an invitation to purify the Church from every type of worldliness.