

## **5 Hard Truths We've Come to See With 2020 Vision**

*By Msgr. Charles Pope*

Among other things, the events of the past year have taught us that fear can be coercive, and that respect for authority is plummeting. The year 2020 began with great hope and expectation. I distinctly remember welcoming in the new year just after the homily at our midnight Mass. Many remarked that because “20/20” is the term for perfect vision, the Lord would surely give us greater clarity and vision. We had no idea what we were saying!

Though I was in exceedingly poor health from January through mid-February, the year still began with great hope. The economy was roaring, unemployment was near zero, and the President’s State of the Union address brimmed with robust optimism. The annual pro-life march was invigorated by the first attendance of a sitting U.S. President. Although there was debate about immigration, border walls, Russian collusion, race, sex (the #MeToo movement) and whether the president was a hero or a demon, America seemed to be moving forward. Patriotism was strong, at least among conservative Americans.

As early as Jan. 9, though, there were reports of a mysterious viral pneumonia in Wuhan, China. The first case of COVID-19 reached our shores on Jan. 21. On Jan. 31, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency and by Feb. 2 the President had imposed restrictions on those traveling to the U.S. from China. Dire predictions of massive death tolls circulated throughout February (predictions which were later scaled back). By March 13, President Trump declared a national emergency and banned incoming travel from most of Europe. Shutdowns and “stay-at-home” orders quickly followed in many states. The previously bustling economy screeched to a near halt with so many forced closures, and unemployment soared. Then, the unthinkable happened: Catholic priests were ordered to cease all public liturgies. Some bishops ordered churches locked, and a few even forbade the giving of sacraments under any circumstance. The crucial seasons of Lent and Easter were lost to the faithful. I cannot even begin to describe my dismay and shock at the cancellation of Mass. The year was off to an awful start, and it would only get worse with months of racial unrest and then a hotly contested election.

We need to remember the panic-stricken atmosphere in those early weeks of March, lest we be too severe in our judgments of those who had to make difficult decisions. But if 20/20 means perfect vision, we were certainly shown that we had hard lessons to learn and that we got a lot of things wrong. We were quick to entrust ourselves into the hands of professed experts, surrendering many of our rights as well as abandoning our religious duties and blessings.

Rather than merely chronicling what was surely the worst year in a long time, I would like to speak to some of the lessons we were taught. I propose to do this in two articles: this first one focuses on the social and political order while the next one will be on the responses in the Church.

### **Lesson 1: Fear can be coercive.**

One of the most astonishing observations is the worldwide panic that has crippled us with fear. So intense is this fear

that I cannot ascribe it simply to human means such as globalists or the media; it is surely demonic as well.

Scripture attests to this:

*Now since the children have flesh and blood, Christ too shared in their humanity, so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15).*

Thus, Scripture teaches that the fear of death can hold us in bondage. Never before in most of our lifetimes has a fear of sickness and death so assailed us. Our parents, grandparents and other relatively recent ancestors went out daily into a world with far greater dangers than COVID-19. They faced smallpox, tuberculosis, polio and other life-altering and deadly illnesses. Despite this, they went to work every day, many in dangerous and/or unhealthy settings such as mines, mills and factories. They did not have antibiotics or many other of the medicines routinely available today. Yet they went forth.

Today, the level of fear of a virus that kills less than one percent of its victims under the age of 65\* is astounding to me. Media coverage explains part of it, but there is also something mysterious and demonic in the intensity of the fear. Because of it, many are all too willing to surrender freedoms to the heavy hand of the State.

The 20/20 vision granted us here is that fear can coerce us into accepting severe and even draconian measures to make us feel safe. We can argue endlessly about what preventive measures are needed and for how long. Prudent measures have their place, but never before in American history has there been such a lengthy and severe lockdown. We have had pandemics in the past, but we quarantined the sick and vulnerable, not the healthy and strong.

Some 10 months into these severe measures, “cases” continue to rise; the goalposts keep moving, from a vague “flattening the curve” so as not to exceed hospital capacity, to now insisting on a COVID-free world before we can return to normal life (if even then). It is shocking to me that we have accepted for so long these severe measures in what was once called the land of the free and the home of the brave. Fear has us in its powerful grip, and I wonder, “When it will abate?”

In the Scriptures, God repeatedly commands the faithful not to be afraid. Notice, he *commands* this. He is not merely consoling the faithful. We are not to be afraid because he is near to deliver us. Perhaps this crushing fear is a result of widespread secularism and an absence of God in the hearts and minds of many. Whatever its full cause, it has made us vulnerable to manipulation. Life is important, but so is liberty. As Franklin wrote, “Those who would give up essential liberty to purchase a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.”

### **Lesson 2: Other things and other people matter, too.**

The COVID-19 crisis has an almost exclusive preoccupation with those who might get seriously ill or die from the virus. I am one of those predisposed to suffer serious illness from COVID-19 due to lifelong pulmonary weakness. Yes, my life and the lives of other vulnerable people matter, but so do the lives of millions who have been deprived of their

livelihoods, schooling, sports, recreation, numerous life events and rites of passage, and even the ability to comfort dear friends and relatives during their final days.

Many small business owners have lost everything they've worked for their entire lives. We are perfectly willing to see enormous economic and social costs borne by others, especially lower-wage workers who cannot "virtually" sweep floors or assemble products.

Further, there is evidence that depression, addiction, domestic tension, and suicide have all increased. How do we regard their suffering? The metrics are less clear than the 300,000+ dead (from/with COVID-19). But clearly, tens of millions of Americans have seen their lives limited in significant and often devastating ways. I can only speak for myself, but as one of the "vulnerable" (who spent more than 11 days in the ICU with COVID-19), I can say that I am responsible for my health and I do not ask to be protected at such a high social and personal cost to my fellow Americans. How do we balance all these competing interests? In the past, we quarantined the sick and vulnerable. Never before have we shut down the entire nation to protect a much smaller number. The balance is off; simply accusing people who raise this of not caring that people die is neither constructive nor true. All lives matter and the effects on everyone during this time of pandemic must be considered. We need better 20/20 vision.

**Lesson 3: The ability to dissent is rapidly disappearing.**

One of the most serious issues in terms of its widespread effect is the suppression of alternate views to the State and media narratives. Our 20/20 vision has supplied us with clear evidence that free speech is dying in our country. This has been widely noted on college campuses, but more recently we have seen it on the large social media platforms that ban or suppress voices not in agreement with mainstream media narrative.

Posting any COVID-related information that does not agree with what media-approved experts assert could get one's account shut down, or at the very least slapped with a warning label. The rather obvious suggestion that rioting, burning and looting were not good or appropriate responses to racial injustice, could result in similar measures. The media, along with social media platforms, exercise great power in what they report or do not report and in what posts they allow or actively suppress.

The increasing suppression of writing and speech not in conformity with a particular narrative is a disturbing trend indeed. Vigorous debate about ideas has been the hallmark of the American scene. Free speech was once a pillar of liberalism, but this has radically changed. Dissenting views are now regarded by the left not merely as "wrong," but as dangerous, necessitating their suppression so as not to "hurt" others. There is a growing range of views that are labeled hateful, "phobic," "violent" or intolerant. Unfortunately, this trend only appears to be getting worse. With 20/20 vision this matter has become shockingly clear.

**Lesson 4: Those who question are demonized.**

There is always the temptation to dismiss one's opponent on simply personal terms rather than via logical argumentation. Many are quick to label someone a bigot, racist, xenophobe,

homophobe or religious zealot if he has a different point of view.

Regarding COVID-19, some have questioned if the numbers of those who have died are accurate; others point to the low death rate for those under 65; still others question if the shutdown "cure" is worse than the disease. Such questioners are very often simply dismissed as reckless or heartless, not caring that more than 300,000 have died. They are demonized as selfish and unconcerned with the welfare of their neighbor. There is return fire, too, wherein those who support mandates and shutdowns are described as brainwashed sheep or fearmongers.

The racial strife in our land during 2020 has similar parameters. One side is caricatured as filled with racist white supremacists guilty of using their white privilege to profit from systemic racism. The other side is vilified as obsessed with perpetual victimhood.

Somewhere we have lost the ability to have a real argument. Relativism and subjectivism have rendered everything personal; the objective truth is dismissed as non-existent. The year 2020 has brought this problem into clearer 20/20 focus.

**Lesson 5: Respect for authority is plummeting.**

In 2020, the government, journalists and scientists have all lost credibility to a significant degree among Americans. The unrelenting attacks on the current president from the media and the tone of press conferences has given 20/20 clarity to heavy bias in most media coverage. This has been a long trend, but in the past few years all pretense of fairness or commitment to reporting all the facts has been cast aside. The politicization of everything, from science to sports, has not only divided us further but has made people cynical of everything they read or hear. Scientific experts have too easily been coopted to announce facts rather than to discover them. Calls to "follow the science" are met with deserved derision by many Americans who long ago realized that science has become highly politicized and is only to be followed when it serves desired views. It is a sad thing to behold — science should be stubbornly concerned with the facts and data, wherever they lead. This is seldom the case today, at least in the world of media reporting on science. All of this has tended to undermine the respect Americans once had for science, government, and journalism. Add to this the fact that many do not believe the reported results of the November election. There is a broad cynicism that everything is agenda driven, and this has replaced respect and trust for leaders of all kinds.

This, too, is bad for our culture and has led to a situation in which many live in echo chambers in which everyone in our side is of a single mind and we all presume that the other side is lying to us. Whom can we trust? Even in the Church, Catholics have lost faith that the clergy is honestly sharing the truth with them.

There are so many other things I could mention but suffice it to say that we are in a dark and deeply divided place as a nation, and 2020 has brought this into 20/20 focus. In my second installment I would like to look at the Church's response and see if we can find some 20/20 focus there as well.