

Just to the south of the rectory is a home housing a family with young children. We're separated by just a fence. When I first moved into the rectory a couple of years ago I found a small ball in our backyard. As is often the case, kids playing games send balls into the neighbor's property. I went out to throw it back across the fence (it's only about ten yards away) -- only to miss! The ball hit the fence half-way up and bounced back. I was horrified. I had, to use the politically incorrect term of my generation, "thrown like a girl." Or think of a Tyranosaurus with its tiny arms trying to throw. What had happened to me? It had been many years, maybe decades, since I had thrown overhand. My mind knew what to do, but my muscles had forgotten how. I tossed the ball back over the fence *under-handed*, but then picked up some pinecones and tried to throw. I had to tell my muscles what to do. It felt awkward. It took a while to relearn the motion.

I remember that experience of re-learning old skills when thinking about our second reading today from I Peter 3:15-16. "Always be ready

to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.” This past month I’ve been reading a couple of books that have a common theme, The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation, by Rod Dreher and Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World, by Archbishop Charles Chaput. As the subtitles suggest, what these books have in common is that they address the question of how Christians should live in a society that is no longer based on a Christian view of the world and the human person. They are both interesting – one can argue about the details and merits of their answers, but the question they ask is valid, I believe.

Most of us have been in social situations, or even within our families, when we realize that what we believe isn’t accepted or perhaps even understood by the others in the room. When that certain topic comes up, and the discussion goes in a direction we’re uncomfortable with – what do we do? It’s here that St. Peter’s words

should come to mind. “Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence.” The first part of that statement means that we’re on for knowing the reasons for our beliefs.

But notice that St. Peter also assumes that we are hopeful – and that others have seen that hope, and wonder about it enough to ask about it. Is that true of us? Do people wonder why we’re different from others in a winsome, positive way? Much of the time non-Catholics, or non-Christians in general, assume that we are meanies – we’re exclusive, judgmental, nasty people. Some of us are! But that’s not the program Jesus laid out. And here is where my experience trying to throw that ball comes in. In the early days of the Catholic Church, under the Roman Empire, we believers certainly gave reasons for our hope – and the pagans did notice that hope! But the main thing Christians did was live differently without fear. There was a lack of hope in that society. It was filled with anxiety, fear, a sense that life led no-where.

But the Gospel taught otherwise, and enough Christians lived it well enough to stand out in the crowd. They were living question marks for the rest of society. Even as they murdered many Christians, they also wondered why they didn't react with violence or fight back.

We are back in that old situation today. We Catholic Christians in the West today are needing to re-familiarize ourselves with how it feels to be that minority and how we are to act. How do we throw that ball again? It's been many centuries. We've done this before, but we're rusty.

There are two main points. The first is that we're to be hopeful members of our culture. As the cliché goes a Christians may not be optimistic, but he or she should always be hopeful, because the future depends on Jesus who has already won the war for us. Therefore, we should have peaceful hearts. We know that in the long run we're OK.

We still participate in the politics and controversies of the day. Both books I mentioned stress that fact. But it does mean that the most

important thing is to react to opposition, and even prejudice and persecution, differently than the world does. The early Christians didn't engage in guerilla warfare or terrorism when they were persecuted. They didn't riot. They lived out charity even in their suffering.

And that's the second point. We're meant to respond to the secular world's disdain with "gentleness and reverence," as St. Peter writes. Today in our society there are mounting political and cultural tensions. I know from my counseling and hearing of confessions that many of you are experiencing the fear, hatred – and most corrosive of all – the deep contempt we have for what we can think of as "the other side." It's tempting to respond in kind. I know that when I get in a public position where people question the faith, I'm tempted to react as if engaging in a verbal combat. I want to retaliate if mocked or insulted. This person in front of me can seem like an enemy.

But that is not Christian way. It wasn't historically. People are won over to the gospel by our lives and our words, more than by heated arguments – even if the arguments are logical.

In the political and cultural place we find ourselves in today, we American Catholics are called to re-learn that ancient Christian way. We're back where we started. We're not in charge of society anymore and those who are, are often hostile to our way. But that's nothing new. It's just been a while for us in the West since we had to live out the faith that way – and that well. We need to re-train those muscles. But we can do this – with gentleness and reverence for those who don't yet know Christ. We don't have to despair and lose heart. We've done this before – and, besides, we know how it all ends.