

Hope is Gift and Task

Pope Francis reminds us that as well as being a gift that consoles us, hope is also a task. Hope prompts us to build a better world. Sometimes, in the past, it was said that Christianity proposed a vision of hope that was too individualistic. We were only concerned, it was said, with the salvation of our individual soul and getting to heaven. The world around us and our relationships were forgotten. There is some truth in that, but today we realise more that it is precisely our hope in God’s plan for our world and its future that prompts us already here on earth to do our part to generate a new more fraternal world, a world of peace, a united world.

Often in recent years, the parable of the Good Samaritan is put before us as an inspiring example in carrying out our task of being bearers of hope. Pope Francis has said: *“The parable shows us how a community can be rebuilt by men and women who identify with the vulnerability of others, who reject the creation of a society of exclusion, and act instead as neighbours, lifting up and rehabilitating the fallen for the sake of the common good”*. (Fratelli Tutti, n. 67).

Keeping Hope alive for Others

How are we to carry out our task of being bearers of hope for others? On the one hand, we do so by keeping hope alive in our family, workplace and communities. Little gestures matter such as sharing words of encouragement, offering compliments,

making useful suggestions. Sharing hope also calls for us to speak up in defence of human dignity from conception to natural death. We need to speak out against a false rhetoric of compassion regarding, for instance, assisted suicide which ends up threatening people at their most vulnerable. Assisted suicide now accounts for 5% of deaths in Canada.

Practical actions

St. Augustine wrote that hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that we can do something. We must do our part to reduce suffering in its various personal and social forms.

Reaching out to the marginalised

There are many types of situations of people marginalised around us, not least migrants. The Community Sponsorship initiative is about local people coming together and welcoming a refugee family or individual to Ireland. It is a project parishes or pastoral units might consider for their area.

Taking care of our planet

Recently, representatives of various parishes in the Diocese attended a gathering entitled, “seeds of hope”. It was a day full of energy and ideas, celebrating Pope Francis’ encyclical on the care of the planet, Laudato Si’ and exploring how to return biodiversity to parishes. It outlined many practical initiatives parishes can do in co-operation with others, such as Tidy Town groups in promoting bio-diversity and greater attention to environmental issues.

Hope in Eternal Life

Ultimately, focus on hope prompts us to dream! Dreams, yes, of a better world. But our dreaming reaches right into the dream of dreams - eternal life in heaven. Teresa of Lisieux said: “God would never inspire me with dreams which cannot be realised! So, in spite of my littleness, I can hope to be a saint”. That hope is true for all of us. The last words spoken by the great Teresa of Avila before she died were: “My Lord, it is time to move on... O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another.” She approached death with the belief and hope that she would be meeting Jesus who would introduce her to eternal life. Indeed, it is the teaching of the Church that, on death, we encounter Christ. Our great Christian hope is that we, with all our loved ones who have died, will be united in Christ in the eternally dynamic life of the Trinity. May Lent be a time of renewed hope for each one of us.

+ Brendan Leahy

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A Lenten Message from Bishop Brendan Leahy



“Hope Does not Disappoint” Living Lent 2025 as Pilgrims of Hope



In this Jubilee Year 2025 Pope Francis wants us to focus on the theme: “Pilgrims of Hope”. Lent is a good time to ask the Holy Spirit to grant us an increase in the virtue of hope.

What is Hope?

Hope is not simply optimism. It is a strength that comes from God. It instils a confidence in us that no matter what happens in life, God is looking after us and is working for our good. We can move forward into the future trusting in God’s providence. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that hope is “the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life a sour happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (§1817).

Hope as a “little sister”....

In the Christian life, we speak a lot about faith and above all love. But we can forget the importance of hope. The French writer, Charles Péguy spoke of faith, hope and love as three sisters saying: “Hope, the little one, walks beside her two older sisters, practically unseen... Yet she, the little one, drags everything along. Because faith only sees what exists. And charity only loves what exists. But hope loves what will be... She is the one who makes the others keep walking. She is the one who leads them on and makes them all walk together”. In other words, hope is what keeps faith alive and helps us to persevere in our love of God and neighbour.

Jesus Christ - the Anchor of Hope for the Soul

There are many models of hope in the Old Testament – Abraham and Sarah, Job, King David, Queen Esther. We are very familiar with psalm 23 “The Lord is my Shepherd” as a song of hope so often sung at funerals. Christians see Jesus a sour anchor of hope keeping us safe in the midst of life’s storms. His life and teachings offer us a vision of hope of a world of peace and justice. Jesus not only teaches us, he accompanies us always, drawing us to new life. Having gone through betrayal, abandonment and death, in rising from the dead, he has become for us a source of hope whenever we encounter negative situations in our lives. He is with us always, opening doors of hope whenever doors of darkness close around us. Notice, however, that when the Risen Jesus met the apostles, he showed them the marks of his wounds. His message was clear – while he is our hope, that doesn’t mean we get an easy pass from the wounds of life. Our hope comes from knowing that a transformed future can grow out of our present negative experiences.

Saint Pope John Paul II who lost his parents at a young age and suffered the repression of the Communist regime, gave his personal testimony to young people: “Although I have lived through much darkness, I have seen enough evidence to be unshakably convinced that no difficulty, no fear is so great that it can completely suffocate the hope that springs eternal in the hearts of the young... Do not let that hope die! Stake your lives on it! We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures, we are the sum of the Father’s love for us and our real capacity to become the image of His Son.”

Temptations against Hope

Discouragement

Life’s circumstances can drag us down. People disappoint us. The direction of world events, the challenges facing the Church and our own limits, failures and sins can discourage us. Indeed, discouragement is one of the Devil’s favourite tricks to block us in our Christian life. We can end up listless, lacking enthusiasm for life. It can result in what is called “sloth”, not bothering to love God and neighbour.

At times like that we need to turn confidently in prayer towards God who is merciful and keep going outside ourselves in love of God and neighbour. Our limits, setbacks and sinfulness can be occasions to cast our burdens onto the heart of God, trusting in his help. St. Bonaventure maintained that a person progresses further on the way to God in forty days if he or she never stops, than another person in forty years, who stops every now and then “*in the valley of imperfections and venial sins*”.

Presumption

Presumption is something we don’t hear too much about these days. But it is a temptation for Christians, especially today. It boils down to a false confidence in ourselves, a sense that “*I/we can do it all myself/ourselves*.” While appreciating the positives of science and technology, presumption is today experienced in those who believe they can create a heaven on earth without reference to God. Presumption is being no longer prepared to wait in hope as we discern what is God’s will about this or that project or

plan. It is the desire to achieve everything immediately. It is a lack of patience, waiting for God’s time.

Despair

Despair is the sin of giving up on God’s promise to be with us always with his mercy. In extreme cases, despair results in people handing back the entrance ticket to life by committing suicide. Despair is not to be confused with a state of depression and darkness that is a physiological condition that needs to be attended to medically. In the past, there was a deep taboo almost to talk about suicide because it was considered a great sin of despair that merited the punishment of hell. Today, we all recognise there are many factors that go into the drastic action of someone taking their lives. We cannot judge them. The Church is hopeful for them.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “*We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives.*”

Practices that can help us grow in hope

Prayer

A great saint and teacher in the Church, St. John Chrysostom wrote that “*prayer is the place of refuge for every worry, a foundation for cheerfulness, a source of constant happiness, a protection against sadness*.” In a lovely letter on hope written just a few years ago, Pope Benedict commented: “*When no*

one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me.

When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me. When I have been plunged into complete solitude ...; if I pray, I am never totally alone.”

Train ourselves in recognising hope

It is a good practice every evening, to go back over the day and recall signs of hope you experienced that day – an act of kindness, a smile, a good deed, a moment where you yourself managed to do something good for others... We need to train ourselves in recognising hope.

Begin again always

A good motto to repeat often to ourselves is “*begin again always*”. Never let ourselves be imprisoned in our failures and sins. The Patron of Europe, Edith Stein, a convert to Catholicism who always remained grateful for her Jewish roots, gave good advice when she wrote: “*And when night comes, and you look back over the day and see how fragmentary everything has been, and how much you planned that has gone undone, and all the reasons you have to be embarrassed and ashamed: just take everything exactly as it is, put it in God’s hands and leave it with Him.*” Obviously, the sacrament of Confession (Penance and Reconciliation) is wonderful medicine to ensure our hope levels remain high. In the sacrament we meet Christ who speaks words of mercy, hope and trust to us. Confession renews hope in us. It is good to go to Confession regularly, but it is also important not just to wait for

confession. Begin again always to love God and neighbour in the present moment.

Share a word of hope

St. Peter says that we should always be ready to “*give account of the hope within us to others*” (1 Pet 3:15). Certainly, we need to know how to defend and explain our faith. But it is also good simply to share our experiences of faith with one another. That’s why small Christian communities of faith are so important. I would love to see such small communities grow in our diocese. Fr. Micheál Liston who began the Muintearas Íosa community in Limerick often makes the point that we should share and articulate to one another our experiences of faith. Not to show off or out of pride but to build each other up in faith and hope and love. Recently, in a message to journalists, Pope Francis urged those who work in media and communications to “*tell stories steeped in hope*”. It’s a word for all of us. Narrative 4, an initiative based in Limerick, encourages people to share their stories to build empathy and create a better world.

Keep in contact with the Risen Jesus among us

The first Christians recognised that when they were tempted in any way, it was important to return to the community meetings and there find new strength and hope in the Risen Jesus. He promised that where two or more are gathered in his name, he is there among them (Mt 18:20). When he is present, the anchor of hope is present. Keeping in a lively contact with the faith community builds us up in hope. Obviously, weekly and daily Mass is a privileged moment of renewing hope through contact with the faith community.