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Hope: An Anchor in Time of Crisis

THE TODDLER RESTS ON THE DUSTY EARTH, still wearing the beads her famine-stricken mother had given her, a token of a helpless love. The starving child, bloated from hunger and malnutrition, waits for death. Nearby, a vulture waits for its next meal. This image from the war-torn Sudan was seen throughout the world. It was a vision from hell, a vision of hopelessness, and an icon that should have jarred the consciences of the world. Instead, it faded from thought as the world occupied itself with its latest diversions. And the genocide in Darfur goes on.

The Gospels portray Jesus as the Servant of God who will bring justice and peace to the people—not only to the people of Israel but to the far distant lands as well:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and release to the oppressed, to announce a year of favor from the Lord. (Lk 4:18–19)

Jeremiah foresees this when he says:

I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare, not for woe! Plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, when you go to pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you

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seek me with all your heart, you will find me, says the Lord, and I will change your lot. (Jer 19:11–14)

Hope in Crisis

As we look at the horrors human malice and ignorance continue to visit upon the world, as well as the toll from natural disasters, we may well ask what has become of the “hope” promised to the Gentiles. Perhaps half of the human family can say, “My tears are my food day and night,” while others continue to cry, “Where is your God?” (Ps 42:4). What can a Christian say in the face of terrorism and war, famine and disease, human trafficking and the displacement of peoples? Even in lands where food is abundant, we still encounter despair caused by the loss of jobs; the breakup of families; physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; and the abandonment of people. As we degrade our planet, we plant seeds of yet more despair for the future: “Where is God?” We shall see that God is with us and is known where people of good will bring the light of hope.

Hope and Radical Trust

Leonardo Boff, in reflecting on the Psalm 23, tells us:

There is indeed a dark valley, a valley of death; there are enemies and persecutions. *It is within this very darkness* that God comes to us as a Shepherd and host, and assures us: I am with you.¹

It is in this landscape of darkness that we find hope. God is with us, though we may not see him because we are blinded by the sorrows and the tragedies of life. Those who trust in God, however, will never be put to shame. And those who cling to God in trust, like a deeply rooted tree on a storm-swept mountain, will know hope. The sun will come out, and, in time, God will bring them through the darkness and draw them gently into the Light of wholeness. The hope that they receive can then be shared with others.

Radical trust is deep-rooted trust, and it engenders hope when it changes human relationships. We know that reality shapes every person hourly, weekly, and yearly as it presents them with choices that are often not clear. I encounter personalities that are different

from my own. My attitude toward them, like ripples in a pond, affects the way I respond to them and to others. I may think them selfish, bigoted, and mean spirited. I may be right or wrong, but if I treat them in the same way, I put selfishness, bigotry, and meanness into the world. If I allow my vision to be dimmed by lust and greed for power, I may not even see the poor surrounding me. Or worse, I may use them to attain my own ends. When I bring radical trust in God into these dysfunctional and destructive human relationships, I will change and others will change as well.

Hope: An Influential Attitude

Radical trust is a determination to do what is right with the help of God. When we do what is right and trust in God, we build relationships of love, compassion, and sharing. We choose life over and over again. This *choice for life* is the staying power, the hope that holds people and their relationships together: "Blessed is she who trusted that the word spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled" (Lk 1:45). To live with an attitude of hope in the midst of everyday cares challenges us to believe that God is present and wants the very best for us.

Hope in the Face of Death

In times of disaster, we often get flashes of the grace of hope at work in the lives of ordinary people. On August 28, 2005, Hurricane Katrina hit the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts with a vengeance. Its storm surge destroyed thousands of homes. The levees of New Orleans were breached, and large sections of that city were flooded by the roiling waters of the Mississippi. A young woman was trapped in her home as the waters had begun to rise. Unable to leave, she climbed to the roof with only the clothes on her back, and she remained there until her rescue four days later. When asked how her trust in God had been affected by her experience, she replied, "My trust has only deepened. God sustained and comforted me on the roof for four days. I don't know why I didn't drown as some of my friends

did. God has saved me for a reason." An older woman was asked the same question after her rescue. She was quiet for a moment and then replied, "My trust has only deepened. I have lost everything. All my material possessions are gone. But my children are alive, and for that I am deeply grateful." Hope refused to allow despair to rule the day.

Seeds of Love, Seeds of Hope

Though hope may grow and deepen in the midst of uncertainty and suffering, it grows especially where there is love, kindness, and acceptance. God calls each of us to be love for one another. When we plant seeds of love, we also plant hope. We plant those seeds when we give of ourselves to others without counting the cost. Our talents, our wealth, and our time all come from God. God is present in these gifts, especially when we share them freely with those most in need. Serving others, without thought of repayment and in a spirit of sharing, acceptance, kindness, and gratitude, plants seeds of hope. When we see people sharing among themselves, we know that these seeds have taken root and that there is hope for the world.

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Hope and Reality

Those who have hope are not immune to anger or frustration about events that have been so costly or circumstances that seem so unfair. We have only to watch news broadcasts and see the faces of people burdened with tragedy. Hope is what enables them to continue to live and to be courageous enough to change apathy into positive action. Hope in God's promise *to be with us* changes a person's perception of self and world. As Robert Heilbroner has put it:

One who has hope sees life as a mystery wrapped in silence, calling him to grow in skill and knowledge, testing his spiritual endurance, inviting him to respond in unconditional love.²

In the reality seen and the new life yet to be received lies the anchor of hope.

Hope and Silence

Hope not only enables us to see life as a “mystery wrapped in silence,” but it enters into silence to find the very presence of God. The darkness and suffering that surround us in the world can blind us to God’s presence and deafen us to the “still, small voice” of God. We are busy people and seem to have little tolerance for spending time alone with God or with ourselves. Technology has bombarded us with mindless chatter from iPods, cell phones, and the like. Traffic and industry fill our cities with a pandemonium that can drive the thought of God from our minds. When we enter into silence to spend time with God, we experience God’s enduring love and mercy. In this silence we learn the greatness of our human dignity and the emptiness of our own grasping. In silence we learn humility through a new awareness of the trivial things we often settle for. These encounters in silence strengthen us to rise above our egos and reconcile our strained relationships. Graced and energized for the work of the Gospel, we become vessels of hope for the world.

Hope and the Contemplative

Hope fixes its gaze upon the “already seen” and the “yet to come.” This fixed gaze is what we call *contemplation*. The contemplative is ever attentive to the Second Letter of Peter, which says, “We possess the prophetic message as something altogether reliable. Keep your attention closely fixed on it as a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pt 1:19). Every Christian is called to have a contemplative attitude and to gaze reverently on the mystery of God revealed in Christ. There are, however, people who have been given a special charism of contemplation. They stand in the presence of God and gaze on this mystery for the sake of others:

For it is God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts, that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels, to make it clear that its surpassing power comes from God and not from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed, not driven to despair,...always carrying in

the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor 4:6–10)

Contemplatives not only stand in the presence of God, but they stand within the life of God. There they hold the broken world as a mother holds a sick child. Present to their sisters and brothers in the world, contemplatives serve by a ministry of presence that is the fruit of their graced insertion into the Body of Christ. As members of this Body, they are a “lifeline,” as it were, interceding and offering prayers to God on behalf of all who suffer. Emptied and transformed in union with Christ Crucified, contemplatives witness to a power that comes from beyond themselves. The Spirit of the Risen Lord enables them to do what they would never have done on their own and makes them vessels of hope who carry the life of Christ to all humankind.

Those who continually gaze on the face of Christ embody him in their being and discover that their contemplative vocation is ultimately a call to be Christ for others. Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) explains this as she writes to a friend:

There is a vocation to suffer with Christ and thereby to cooperate with him in his work of salvation. When we are united with the Lord, we are members of the mystical body of Christ! Christ lives on in his members and continues to suffer with them. And that suffering borne in union with the Lord is his suffering, incorporated in the great work of salvation. That is the fundamental premise of all religious life, above all the life of Carmel, to stand proxy for sinners through voluntary and joyous suffering, and to cooperate in the salvation of humankind.³

Whether at home or in the workplace, how many times have we not been in the mood to answer another’s question or respond to a need? We may be so annoyed as to make the person pay for the inconvenience. We may ignore a person or reply curtly or rudely. Those who gaze on the face of Christ, who see Christ in the other, cannot act this way. Their manner of being with others must reflect hope. As St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “Let your speech be always gracious and in good taste, and strive to respond properly to all who address you” (Col 4:6). People today often speak of the importance of relationships, of love, of wanting to love, of being love for one another,

but love does not happen in a vacuum. As John of the Cross reminds us, “Where there is no love, put love, and you will find love.”⁴ To the extent that contemplatives do this, they are cocreators and coredeemers with God in the world as they motivate and empower others to transform their hearts and change the world. Edith Stein’s writings indicate that she understood this well:

Actual acts of kindness must now be carried out in a different way. I believe that I will be able to help you more by them than with words.... It is hardly possible to think individually of every intention that is commended to me from so many different sides. All one can do is to try to live the life one has chosen with greater fidelity and purity in order to offer it up as an acceptable sacrifice for all one is connected with. The confidence placed in us, the almost frightening importance placed on our life by so many outside, is a constant stimulus [to do better].⁵

Hope and the Committed Life

I believe that the Christian brings hope to the world by living with awareness and conviction. What does this mean? St. Thérèse of Lisieux understood that we must all be committed and dedicated to the path that God has laid out for each of us, even when this requires sacrifice and unselfishness. In a letter to her sister Céline, she wrote:

Be content when you have nothing to give or when Jesus takes away the pleasure of your giving—draw profit from all things, big, small, good, not so good, be unconcerned about results, and do not give in to discouragement.⁶

And again:

When you are unable to do great things for God, when you cannot pray or are in the midst of great darkness, you have to look for opportunities of grace in a word, gesture, smile. Nothing done for God will go unnoticed. Live in the present moment as if it were the only moment, giving God the simple, pure love of your desire, regardless of how/what you feel and, in giving, only to please Jesus without discouragement.⁷

Conclusion: Hope and Love

At the heart of the Gospel message is Jesus’ command, “Love one another.” He tells us, “Whatever you do [or fail to do] to the least of

my sisters and brothers, you do to me” (Mt 25:31–46). The child in Africa, wasted away by starvation and disease, is Jesus. The displaced person who wanders without a home is Jesus. The victim of abuse is Jesus. The abandoned and excluded of humankind are Jesus. And those bound together by the love of Christ are also Jesus.

In the face of the horrors that humankind and nature visit upon the world, we do ask the question, “Where is God?” The answer is found by those who are present to the darkness with their eyes fixed on Christ. Those who have gazed into the mystery of Christ and lived by his Gospel recognize Jesus in their neighbor, and they bring their neighbor hope. Like lights in a dark storm, they light the path for others so that they, too, may bring love and life to those who live in despair.

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NOTES

1. Leonardo Boff, *The Lord is My Shepherd* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2006), p. 29.
2. Robert L. Heilbroner, in *Horizons of Hope: The Quest for a New Consciousness*, compiled and edited by Adrienne Blue and Louis M. Savary, SJ (Winona, Minn.: St. Mary’s College Press, 1969), p. 172.
3. Edith Stein, *Collected Works of Edith Stein*. Vol. 5, *Self-Portrait in Letters, 1916–1942*, eds. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, OCD, trans. Josephine Koeppl, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1993), Letter 129, p. 128.
4. John of the Cross, *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, OCD, and Otilio Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1979), Letter June 6, 1591, p. 703.
5. Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters*, Letter 164, p. 166.
6. St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *General Correspondence, Vol. 2, 1890–1897*, trans. John Clarke, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1988), Letter 142, pp. 794–796.
7. *Ibid.*, Letter 143, pp. 800–801.

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