

**Reflection for the Women's Prayer Breakfast
Saint Paul Church
Highland, Illinois**

March 22, 2025

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

As your Bishop, it is good to be with you for this Women's Prayer Breakfast at Saint Paul Church here in Highland.

A powerfully moving and memorable event took place this past July in Indianapolis, where 60,000 Catholics gathered for our National Eucharistic Congress, and countless more joined us via livestream. We had a smaller but still very significant version of this in our own diocese with our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress held in the BOS Convention Center in Springfield, with 5,000 participants in October of 2023. Our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress and the National Eucharistic Congress were major parts of the National Eucharistic Revival, which now continues with a special Year of Mission. This Year of Mission calls for Catholics to share their rekindled love of the Eucharist with other people. This is an essential aspect of our being disciples of Jesus Christ and stewards of God's gifts of creation.

This year the Catholic Church is celebrating the Ordinary Jubilee Year of 2025. A Jubilee Year is a significant moment in the life of the Church in which she celebrates how Christ showed His love for us through His birth, His suffering and death, and His resurrection.¹ Proclaimed every twenty-five years since the thirteenth century, the celebration of jubilee years typically includes pilgrimages, processions, celebrations of Mass, and an invitation to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. These liturgical celebrations are opportunities to receive the Lord's mercy, especially through the practice of the Jubilee indulgence, and lead to the performance of works of mercy.

The theme for this Jubilee Year is "Pilgrims of Hope," so I thought it would be good to focus our reflection for this Day of Recollection on the virtue of hope, one of the three theological virtues.

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity.

Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself. By faith “man freely commits his entire self to God.” ...

The disciple of Christ must not only keep the faith and live on it, but also profess it, confidently bear witness to it, and spread it: “All however must be prepared to confess Christ before men and to follow him along the way of the Cross, amidst the persecutions which the Church never lacks.” ...

Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our 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. ...

The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man; it takes up the hopes that inspire men's activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, he is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity.

Christian hope takes up and fulfills the hope of the chosen people which has its origin and model in the hope of Abraham, who was blessed abundantly by the promises of God fulfilled in Isaac, and who was purified by the test of the sacrifice. “Hoping against hope, he believed, and thus became the father of many nations.”

Christian hope unfolds from the beginning of Jesus' preaching in the proclamation of the beatitudes. The beatitudes raise our hope toward heaven as the new Promised Land; they trace the path that leads through the trials that await the disciples of Jesus. But through the merits of Jesus Christ and of his Passion, God keeps us in the "hope that does not disappoint." Hope is the "sure and steadfast anchor of the soul . . . that enters . . . where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf." Hope is also a weapon that protects us in the struggle of salvation: "Let us . . . put on the breastplate of faith and charity, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." It affords us joy even under trial: "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation." Hope is expressed and nourished in prayer, especially in the Our Father, the summary of everything that hope leads us to desire.

We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will. In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere "to the end" and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of Christ. In hope, the Church prays for "all men to be saved." She longs to be united with Christ, her Bridegroom, in the glory of heaven:

Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God.

Jesus makes charity the new commandment. By loving his own "to the end," he makes manifest the Father's love which he

receives. By loving one another, the disciples imitate the love of Jesus which they themselves receive. Whence Jesus says: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love." ... "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." ...

Christ died out of love for us ... The Lord asks us to love as He does, even our enemies, to make ourselves the neighbor of those farthest away, and to love children and the poor as Christ himself.

The Apostle Paul has given an incomparable depiction of charity: "charity is patient and kind, charity is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Charity does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Charity bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."²

Hope has been an important theme of the last three pontificates. The biography of Pope John Paul II written by George Weigel is titled, *Witness to Hope*. Pope St. John Paul II was a great witness to hope during the years of atheistic communism, helping to bring down the domination of the Soviet empire.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote an Encyclical Letter titled, *Spe Salvi*, taken from the opening words in Latin, "*Spe salvi facti sumus* – in hope we were saved, says Saint Paul to the Romans, and likewise to us (Rom 8:24).

According to the Christian faith, “redemption” – salvation – is not simply a given. Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.”³

I once asked a good friend of mine who is a lay Catholic, “Do you ever think about death?” His honest answer was, “No, not very often.” I was somewhat surprised since I have been thinking frequently about death for years. This is not a morbid preoccupation of someone who is now a senior citizen thinking about what comes next after this life on earth. In fact, it is not that I think so much about death at all, but rather that I think a lot about eternal life. I do not recall exactly how old I was at the time, but I do remember distinctly as a young child attending Mass and listening to the priest’s homily about how God is infinite – without beginning or end – and how He invites us to share in His everlasting life. I also clearly remember lying awake in bed that night trying to wrap my young mind around the idea that something or someone could have no beginning and no end and what it would be like to live eternally. That concept still remains a mystery to me, but my life-long pondering of that

question most likely prompted my thinking about priesthood at an early age and explains why I wanted to be a priest for as long as I can remember.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope, *Spe Salvi*,

Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive. What they desire is not eternal life at all, but this present life, for which faith in eternal life seems something of an impediment. To continue living for ever – endlessly – appears more like a curse than a gift. Death, admittedly, one would wish to postpone for as long as possible. But to live always, without end – this, all things considered, can only be monotonous and ultimately unbearable.⁴

He addresses this concern by quoting Saint Ambrose, one of the Church Fathers, in the funeral discourse for his deceased brother Satyrus: “Without the assistance of grace, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing.”⁵

Grace, then, is the key to experiencing immortality as a blessing and not as a burden. Pope Benedict explained it this way:

To imagine ourselves outside the temporality that imprisons us and in some way to sense that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality

embraces us and we embrace totality – this we can only attempt. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time – the before and after – no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy.⁶

Pope Francis continues this emphasis on the virtue of hope. The title given by Pope Francis to his document declaring the Jubilee Year of 2025 is *Spes non confundit*, Latin for “Hope does not disappoint,” taken from Saint Paul’s Letter to the Romans (*Rom* 5:5), in which Saint Paul offered these words of encouragement to the Christian community of Rome. Similarly, Pope Francis wrote, “Hope is born of love and based on the love springing from the pierced heart of Jesus upon the cross ... By his perennial presence in the life of the pilgrim Church, the Holy Spirit illumines all believers with the light of hope. He keeps that light burning, like an ever-burning lamp, to sustain and invigorate our lives. Christian hope does not deceive or disappoint because it is grounded in the certainty that nothing and no one may ever separate us from God’s love.”⁷

The Holy Father then makes the connection between the virtue of hope and our Blessed Mother, saying, “Hope finds its supreme witness in *the Mother of God*. In the Blessed Virgin, we see that hope is not naive

optimism but a gift of grace amid the realities of life. ... It is not by chance that popular piety continues to invoke the Blessed Virgin as *Stella Maris* [Star of the Sea], a title that bespeaks the sure hope that, amid the tempests of this life, the Mother of God comes to our aid, sustains us and encourages us to persevere in hope and trust.”⁸

The symbol of hope is an anchor, inspired by the Letter to the Hebrews, which says, “May we who have taken refuge in [Christ] be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered” (*Heb 6:18-20*).

Commenting on this passage, the Holy Father says, “The image of the anchor is eloquent; it helps us to recognize the stability and security that is ours amid the troubled waters of this life, provided we entrust ourselves to the Lord Jesus. The storms that buffet us will never prevail, for we are firmly anchored in the hope born of grace, which enables us to live in Christ and to overcome sin, fear and death. This hope, which transcends life’s fleeting pleasures and the achievement of our immediate goals, makes us rise above our trials and difficulties, and inspires us to

keep pressing forward, never losing sight of the grandeur of the heavenly goal to which we have been called.”⁹

What does it mean to have hope? Hope is not the same thing as optimism. The word “optimism” comes from the Latin word *optimus*, which means, “the best.” An optimist may seek to put the best spin on a bad situation. As such, optimism can be an attitude that looks for something good even when everything looks bad. There is nothing wrong with that, but optimism in that sense could also be superficial or even an act, pretending to look on the bright side of things while feeling miserable inside.

Hope goes much deeper. Hope is based on an interior trust in God and a belief that divine grace ultimately leads to good. It is no accident that hope is one of the theological virtues, along with faith and love. If we have a solid faith in God’s Providence, we will have hope for the future, and this will lead to a life of loving God and neighbor.

During this Jubilee Year 2025 we also celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, which promulgated the Nicene Creed that we still use today and recite right after the homily at Mass on Sundays and Holydays of Obligation. Just imagine, seventeen centuries during which, using these same words, billions of Christians have

expressed their belief in God as the One who loves, the One who is beloved, and the One who is the Love between them. During that gathering in Nicaea, in the year 325, the Council delegates came to a unified statement of who Jesus Christ is. We are the heirs of those who gathered so long ago, and we too believe in the mystery of God's continuing presence in our world, and in our call to live in that mystery while being Christ's hands and feet in our concrete service and generous love for suffering humanity.

The Creed begins with the words, "I believe," and then summarizes the essential points of what we believe as Christians, with separate paragraphs about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, with a concluding paragraph about our beliefs in the Catholic Church and some essential dogmas, such as the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life.

All people believe in something. Even atheism is a belief, namely the belief that there is no God. I would argue that atheism is actually harder to prove than belief in God. The Church "teaches that God . . . can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 36). In contrast, how does one prove the non-existence of God? It is sheer fantasy to imagine

that the exquisite details of the ordered nature of the universe and of human existence came about by some random coincidence.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, as we celebrate this Jubilee Year 2025, may the love we share in the ministry of the Church be anchored in the hope that comes from our faith in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ (Cf. Lk 4:19; John Paul II, *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nos. 11- 16).

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1813-1826.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope, *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, n. 1; accessed online March 20, 2025 at https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.pdf

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope, *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, n. 10.

⁵ St. Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri*, II, 47: CSEL 73, 274.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope, *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, n. 12.

⁷ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, given in Rome on May 9, 2024, par. 3; accessed online December 23, 2024, at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, par. 24.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Spes non confundit*, par. 25.