



QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND GROUP SHARING

- Can we think of other examples illustrating the difference between *espoir* and *espérance*? Have we ever lived a situation where we felt our hope shift from *espoir* to *espérance*?
- What have been our times of greatest joy? Do I thank others and praise others readily? Who should I offer thanks and praise to today?
- What have been the times when we have discovered more deeply the meaning of our life, or when we felt the need for greater meaning?
- What do we see as challenges to hope in our world today? What ideologies do we see arising to try and provide answers?
- How deep is my love for God? How have I felt God's love for me?



PASTORAL LETTER FOR THE JUBILEE OF 2025

ENTERING INTO HOPE

Dear brothers and sisters,

Greetings in the name of Jesus! As we together prepare to celebrate the great jubilee of the year 2025, Pope Francis has given us a special theme for this jubilee: **Pilgrims of Hope**. I was delighted when I learned of his choice, because the virtue of hope is at the heart of my own spirituality. And so, as we begin this Jubilee Year, I thought to offer you this pastoral letter, to provide some spiritual reflections for the season of Advent prior to the opening of the Holy Door to Saint Peter's Basilica on Christmas Eve.

What is a jubilee?

Before getting into the spiritual themes of this letter, I realise that some people may be wondering what a jubilee is all about. The concept of jubilee can be found in the Old Testament, as a time of special celebration every 50 years. The word "jubilee" comes from the Hebrew word "yobel", which means a trumpet made from the horn of a ram as well as the special blast from such a trumpet to inaugurate the celebration. As you can see at the top of this letter, my own coat of arms as a bishop includes this kind of trumpet.

The concept of a special holy year was picked up by Pope Boniface VIII, who declared the first Catholic jubilee to commemorate the year 1300. At first this kind of jubilee was supposed to be celebrated only every 100 years, but soon that was reduced to 50, and then, in 1470, to 25. There have also been exceptional jubilees outside of the usual cycle, such as the Jubilee of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis for the year 2015. The greatest of these

celebrations in recent memory was, without a doubt, the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, with which Saint John Paul II called us all to a renewed commitment to Christ.

During a jubilee year we are invited to renew our relationship with God, with one another, and with all of creation. Pope Francis has written a special letter to the world, entitled ***Spes non confudit*** (“**Hope does not disappoint**”), in which he proposes many different ways we can celebrate the jubilee. We will be publishing a program for our own diocese which will outline simple ways for all of us to join in the activities of the jubilee. But as Advent is meant, first and foremost, to be a season of spiritual preparation, I wanted to start by offering this letter as a reflection on the theme of hope itself.

The common meaning of the word “hope”

The theme of hope started to become part of my personal spirituality when I began my studies in the seminary. I did my studies in French, and soon I learned that the French language actually has two words for what, in English, we call “hope”. These are ***espoir*** and ***espérance***, and while both relate to a sense of expectation, they do not mean quite the same thing.

The expectation behind the word ***espoir*** can best be understood as a kind of wishful thinking. It is the feeling we get when we know there is a possibility of some sort of desired outcome. Consider the purchasing of a lottery ticket: although the odds of winning might be very low, it could still happen! Buying that ticket gives us the chance to start to dream of what we might do if we win. This is the kind of hope that offers no guarantees, but nonetheless lets us focus on the possibility of something positive.

Espérance is different from ***espoir***: it doesn’t just focus on a possible outcome, but on the anticipation of something far more certain. A fun example I like to use to explain this is an analogy I call “Grandma on the train”. Imagine some young children learn that their beloved grandmother is planning on coming for a visit. They really want her to come, but no date has been set, and Grandma doesn’t know when she might be able to make the trip. The children have ***espoir*** that she will come and visit: they are wishing for a desired outcome. But one day, they are told that not only has Grandma decided to come, she has already boarded the train to make the trip, and soon the family will go and pick her up at the station. From the point of view of the children, this is not just wishful thinking anymore: Grandma is on her way! They may not know exactly when she is expected, and indeed they might ask repeatedly “how much longer” until she comes. But they are living in the “sure and certain hope” that they will see her soon. Grandma is on the train. Their ***espoir*** has turned into ***espérance***.

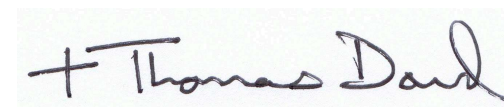
Renewing our hope

Hope is at the heart of my personal spirituality because I want joy and meaning in my life. It is at the heart of my ministry because I want others to also find joy and meaning. I know that joy and meaning are ultimately found in a life full of love, both received and given. The possibility of that life is offered to us by God, who is infinite love. The more we grow in virtue, the more we, with God’s help, come to resemble that infinite love. In this life, we gain the capacity to weather tougher times, and also get a foretaste of the infinite joy that will come with eternal life.

That, my friends, is what we mean by the word “salvation”. It is growing, day by day, into a capacity without limit to receive and give love. That is the meaning of Heaven, and it is the ultimate object of our hope. Of course, there is still the possibility for this goal to not be achieved. After all, if we are “pilgrims of hope” together, we have to keep walking! The person who stops, or who changes direction away from God, cannot attain the goal. But we can count on God to always call and welcome us back to the path that leads to Him.

This is my desire for all of us in the time of the Jubilee: that we may rediscover the full meaning of salvation, and return fully to walking that path. As we journey together, may we also rediscover the mission of the Church and our place in that mission. I intend to write more pastoral letters during the course of the year to flesh out these themes further, and it is my hope that each will serve as a kind of rest-stop on our pilgrimage where we can take in the grand view of God’s plan for us and for our world.

In the meantime, I would like to offer each of us some reflections questions, for use in groups, classrooms, or just personal reflection. You can find them at the end of this letter. With that, I wish you all the best in our shared pilgrimage of hope for the Jubilee of 2025!



+Thomas Dowd
Bishop of Sault Ste. Marie

December 1, 2024
First Sunday of Advent



I believe that the theological virtues of faith, hope and love are actually answers to deep existential questions found in the human heart. The questions are there in everyone, but it is as though the presence of the Holy Spirit in us, activating these virtues, guides us to the answers. The virtue of faith answers the question “What?”, i.e. what should we believe? The virtue of hope answers the question “So what?” In other words, why should we care about those particular beliefs, as opposed to any others? What difference do they make? Finally, love answers the question “Now what?” As we come to see the plan of God and our place in that plan, the pattern of our spiritual and moral lives comes into greater focus, guiding us to become the best version of ourselves.

In my opinion, global civilization, particularly that part influenced by Western philosophy, is living in a crisis of hope. Since the Second World War there has been a concerted effort by philosophers to drive out from human life the question of meaning, and to challenge the validity of any sort of overall sense of overall purpose within Western society. The result is that it is groaning under the weight of terrible selfishness. Governments pile up debt, knowing that voters will typically resist the austerity that comes with fiscal discipline. People volunteer less and give less to charity. Families have fewer children, leading to birth rates well below replacement levels. The institution of marriage falls into crisis, with more divorces and fewer weddings than ever before. And while in the past becoming a self-sufficient adult was seen as an element of pride and dignity, we now see more patterns of extended, even listless, adolescence. After all, success in any of those domains requires some degree of effort and sacrifice. But why would anybody do that, if their attitude is “So what?”

This crisis of hope has deeply affected the Church too. Ideologies have crept into theology, leading to factions which often follow political patterns. A therapeutic mindset has also often set in, such that instead of spirituality and psychology working together the latter displaces the former. And we see the symptoms of the crisis of hope in the Church by a generalized reduction in gratitude to God, as well as a reduction in overall patterns of generosity. Most significantly, we see less and less enthusiasm for the Church’s mission. Indeed, we often aren’t even sure what that mission is.

In other words, with all of these trends in the Church and in our world, a jubilee with a focus on hope can come none too soon. The question “So what?” deserves an answer!

A classic way of seeing the distinction between the two forms of hope is found in the image of pregnancy. A couple who are trying to conceive have the desire of getting pregnant, but must wait, month after month, to see if a new life has actually started. This is their *espoir*. The test may come back negative, and they will feel disappointed, but they knew there were no guarantees. But once the pregnancy test comes back positive, their attitude to the future shifts: assuming all goes well, they will greet their child in about nine months! This is their *espérance*. And the rest of their life starts to change as a result.

Where things get really interesting is when our *espérance* doesn’t depend on trains or biology, but on people. Think of a car salesperson who sees a potential client come in the door. At first, there is only the *espoir* of a possible commission from a sale, but once the person signs the contract, the commission becomes an *espérance*. The commission payment isn’t right away, as the money still has to come in, but assuming the contract is honoured, the salesperson has something to look forward to. But what if the person who bought the car doesn’t plan on paying? So in the interpersonal realm, hope is rooted in more than expectation. It takes trust, preferably rooted in a stable relationship.

The “virtue” of hope

Within our Catholic tradition we speak of hope (*espérance*) as being one of three “theological virtues”, namely faith, hope and love. But what does this expression mean?

A virtue means a stable component of our identity that is oriented towards the good. The most basic type of virtue is a talent. A person who is able to expertly play a violin, for example, is called a *virtuoso*, because they can pick up a violin and make something beautiful come from it. In other words, they have the talent, the virtue, of playing that instrument. (I do not, by the way, have this talent/virtue. If I was given a violin and a bow, there would be far more screeching than melody coming from it.)

What we usually think of as a virtue, however, is a positive personality trait. A person with the virtue of courage, for example, is able to face danger more easily than a person who has the opposite vice of cowardice. This does not mean that the courageous person never becomes afraid, or never runs away from danger, but simply that, by being courageous, they have more ability to face a challenge than if they didn’t.

An important thing to understand about virtues is that they can grow and develop. Consider the violinist: very few people have an instinctive knowledge of how to play! Instead, the virtue comes from having a teacher, and from practice, practice and more practice. The

same can be true of the personality virtues. Police officers and firefighters undergo specialized training to be able to enter into dangerous situations in a positive manner. That training helps build up their courage, so they know how to act, with a clear head, when others might freeze and panic.

So what do we mean by a “theological” virtue? The Greek word for God is *theos*, so in this context it means “a virtue related to God”. In other words, if we really do have a close relationship with God, it will change us. That change might not happen all at once, but as our friendship with Jesus grows, then the Holy Spirit which he pours into our hearts is going to have an impact on us. The positive influence of the Holy Spirit dwelling within us causes our personality to shift, bit by bit, gradually causing us to come to resemble God more and more.

A good analogy to understand these three theological virtues is the pattern of a couple in a committed relationship. Imagine a husband and wife. When they first met, and started to get to know one another, they eventually came to the point where they could trust each other. That is the stage of faith - faith in each other. Then, they began to make plans for a life together. Their common and mutual support gives them the foundation to live the present moment with joy, and to face hardships with confidence. That is the stage of hope - hope together as they face their future. And in it all, they develop their love. What might have started as attraction and infatuation grows into mutual consideration and gratitude. This is the stage of charity - the stage of the gift of self.

Have you ever noticed that people who have been in a long-term committed relationship eventually start to resemble each other? It is as though each person has become a pattern of personality for the other. Each becomes, in a sense, each other’s virtue. The same is true in our relationship with God. In the first stage of faith, we come to know about God, learning more and more about him, and turning to him in prayer. In the second stage of hope, God’s plan begins to unfold for us - a plan for us personally, and for the whole world. And we start to live our life according to that plan. Finally, in the stage of charity, we grow into people of spontaneous love, with hearts full of gratitude and an easy readiness to give of ourselves.

Pilgrims of hope

Pope Francis has chosen as our jubilee theme the expression “Pilgrims of Hope”. In other words, this jubilee is not just about hope in general, but also about a journey we are taking together. In my view, it isn’t just about journeying *in* hope, but journeying *to* hope. In other

words, we are being invited to rediscover the patterns of hope for the sake of our own lives, and that of the world.

Of course, if we are going to be on a journey, it is good to have a way to measure our progress! There are, in fact, ways to measure how we are growing in the virtue of hope. I call these “symptoms of hope”, and there are two of them: joy, and meaning. Together they are like two sides of the same coin.

Joy, as a sign of hope in our life, has the remarkable property that it does not need to be justified to anyone. If anyone ever criticizes someone else’s joy, you know right away that the critic is the one with the problem. So we must cultivate joy in our lives! In my experience, this is best done by developing an attitude of gratitude for all the good things that we have received in our life. Praise and thanksgiving to God, and an intentional way of living gratitude to others for the good things they bring, are not only signs of a joyful heart, but help that heart to grow. So let us not be stingy in our praise or resentful in our thanksgiving, to God or to others. Remember, hope is a virtue, so it grows by practice, and the practice of gratitude helps the joyful dimension of hope to expand.

Of course, on a purely emotional level, joy cannot always be lived at every moment. Tough times do sometimes come, and joy can seem elusive. No one should ever feel guilty about this, or judge others for it. The lack of the immediate presence of the emotion of joy does not mean hope has been lost! It is here we see the opposite side of the coin: hope is understood, not as joy, but as meaning in life. When life becomes difficult, the virtue of hope helps us get through it because we are able to find meaning in whatever challenge or suffering life may bring. Meaninglessness is often a prelude to hopelessness. Having a vision of our future that can take into account tougher times is a clear sign that the virtue of hope is truly becoming a stable part of our personality.

The urgency of the “jubilee of hope”

I am increasingly convinced that the virtue of hope has been considerably weakened in recent decades. We are presently living in the wealthiest society human history has ever known, but it doesn’t seem to be the happiest. Joy often seems to be replaced by bitterness, and many people are reporting a lack of meaning in their lives. From what I can see, many of the challenges we face in our world and in the Church are in fact rooted in a crisis of the virtue of hope.