

Begin the new year with new dose of hope

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Physicians tell us that the human body can survive four to six weeks without food, up to three days without water and for about 10 minutes without oxygen.

How long can a human being survive without hope? Our own experience suggests that without hope the human spirit begins to die almost immediately. Even our bodies show signs of sagging when our horizons show no future or purpose.

Hope is about defining loss or resistance as challenge, not defeat. Hope says that if we aren't getting what we prayed for it is because we are being directed to something better. A hopeful person keeps going forward despite resistance or setbacks, believing in St. Paul's words that even suffering can serve to enlarge us, because "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

This kind of hope, of course, is more than just optimism. Ultimate hope is grounded in God's promise that, at the end of day, truth and love will triumph over every obstacle, even death. Hope is among the theological virtues because, like faith and love, it holds us in relationship with God, the source and guarantor of our deep innate trust in the goodness of human life, cast into mystery yet toward a destiny beyond itself.

Hope is not a feel-good emotion and does not depend on evidence. In fact, it thrives best in adversity, like the light that is most visible in our darkest hour. It does require endurance and a commitment to the long haul, a capacity to interpret the silence. Hope is more than waiting out bad times. It is an active virtue that inspires us to be the future we want, to choose and work toward the changes we envision. Hope prompts us to live as though our prayers were already being answered.

Who needs hope on this threshold of a new year and new decade? We all do, but especially all those who fear that the larger dream of a more open, shared church promised by the spirit of the Second Vatican Council is being deferred to protect official privilege.

Women need hope that, just as birth cannot be postponed, the Holy Spirit will complete the promised renewal in amazing ways, bringing new life to our faith communities.

Peacemakers need hope that despite a world set on edge toward endless violence, new ideas and strategies will rise out of the exhaustion and failure of the politics and economics of war.

Young people need hope that the world being handed on to them will not have been wasted by the selfishness and indecision of their parents and elders.

The world's have-nots need hope that, if not out of love then because of enlightened self-interest, governments and societies will make room at the table for everyone and foster development as the only path to stability and

security for all.

We leave behind the old year wondering if it is safe to exhale. Let us begin the new with a deep, fresh breath of hope.

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