

# **Re-Finding Hope in an Atheistic Age**

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## **Confusing Hope With Optimism**

Not long ago, I was facilitating a conversation among religious priests and brothers of a dwindling community in the United States. At one point, a priest in his sixties stood up in front of the entire community and said, with a sour look on his face, "When I joined this community, I expected that we would expand. We were going to build more schools and more hospitals. We would become a large order that had a major impact on society and the Church. Now," he said with a sneer on his face, "Just look at us."

He had become a bitter old man. He began religious life with such great expectations. And his hopes were dashed. He expected success by worldly standards: an expanding community, becoming bigger, more influential, and more powerful. However, this is how the secular world defines success. It is not Christianity.

Christian hope is not the same as secular optimism. Optimism believes that things are going to get better in a worldly sense. We feel optimistic when we see more vocations, when our ministries expand, and when people loudly sing our praises.

Jesus did not end his ministry on an optimistic note. One of his closest followers betrayed him. The others deserted him. The very people he came to serve handed him over to be crucified. Christianity does not promise success. In fact, Jesus only promised his disciples that the cup he drank of, we would drink. He promised us the Cross.

We ourselves, at times, are prone to confusing Christian hope with a worldly optimism. For centuries, Christianity and Catholicism have grown and flourished in the U.S., Europe and other nations, albeit with fits and starts. We went from being a small persecuted sect in Palestine to one of the largest worldwide religions, if not the largest. We have been successful. And thus we tend to measure our ministries in terms of numbers of vocations, new communities established, schools built, parishes started, and the like.

However, many of the great saints suggest another measure. Rather, we should measure ourselves on how we have shared in Jesus' Cross.

One could argue that worldly success is not necessarily even good for the faith. As I look back at my own life, I think that I have been most a follower of Jesus when I was

criticized, vilified, and rejected. It is these times that I have grown the most as a Christian. I can see why saints such as John Vianney were actually grateful to his persecutors; they did more for his sanctification than the crowds who praised him. The Church is no different. Growth in faith is fueled not by power and success, but by persecution and the blood of the martyrs.

And we all know some horrible examples of what happens when the Catholic Church has, in its history, wielded too much political power and achieved much worldly success. We are at our best in poverty and on the Cross.

I believe that this is an important caution for us today. For those of you in areas where Catholicism is growing, you ought to be wary of worldly acclaim and success. This kind of success, while not to be shunned, should be faced with caution. We ought to be particularly careful not to lose our spiritual bearings in such heady days.

And for those of us who live in areas of the world where the faith appears to be under attack and in decline, we may want to refocus our perspective and our thinking. We now have a chance to become more focused on what it truly means to be a follower of Christ.

### **Spreading Atheism**

Atheism is clearly spreading in the wealthier nations. The Church in these areas is increasingly ignored or persecuted in modern, middle class ways. And with our “internetted” world and its super communications, I believe that atheism will steadily spread across the globe.

There are a few spokespersons who are militantly atheistic, such as Christopher Hitchens who authored *God is Not Great*; or Richard Dawkins who wrote *The God Delusion*. They unabashedly and loudly proclaim that there is no god and there is no next life. “Christianity,” as I heard Mr. Hitchens say in a lecture in London, “is evil rubbish.” Perhaps more dangerous are the increasing millions who profess some nominal Christianity or a belief in God but who live their lives completely as if there is no god. I have come to recognize that this, too, is really a form of atheism.

For example, polls suggested that over 90% of Americans believe in the existence of God. But if that is as far as it goes, if it has no real consequences, it remains just an empty intellectual notion in their lives. Even the demons in the New Testament are said to believe in God, and they knew the true identity of Jesus.

We are, in many of the richest nations of the world, being enveloped with atheism, explicit or functional, but atheism nonetheless. And it will spread.

It is tempting for us in the Church to do a great deal of breast beating and self-recrimination regarding the decline of Christianity and the rise of atheism. We, who are charged with spreading the faith, may wonder: what is wrong with us? Where did we

fail? And more than a few of those in the public point to our empty houses and seminaries, and thus justify their accusations against organized Christian religion. The point to our modern decline as indicative of some major infraction or systemic dysfunction in the Church. Such thinking is even found inside the Church itself.

God knows we have our share of sins and dysfunctions, but such has always been the case. When has the Catholic Church ever been without serious human flaws? I would argue that the Church today is perhaps as holy and faithful as it has ever been in its 2,000 year history. On the whole, we have excellent priests and religious, fine bishops and holy popes who believe what they preach and work themselves day and night with little respite because of their commitment and dedication. Their martyrdom is slow but it is a total self-oblation nonetheless.

I do not believe the modern rise of atheism and decline in vocations is fundamentally a sign of the very real flaws in the humans like us who lead the Church. No, the modern decline in traditionally Catholic areas is primarily a result of the societal seedbed from which faith and vocations, do, or do not, grow.

*The drastic modern decline is not fundamentally an indictment of the Church. Rather, it is an indictment of a failing society.* It is time for us in the Church to move beyond the breast beating, excessive self introspection that at times threatens to paralyze us, and to move forward with confidence.

And in those areas where vocations are strong, caution is needed. Will they hold up when it is not so convenient being a professed Catholic? Will they stand against the strong winds of materialism and atheism, when these winds do indeed blow? And they surely shall blow...perhaps even sooner than one would think.

### **Atheism as a Lack of hope**

It is remarkable that atheism could and would be so publicly proclaimed. Books by Dawkins and Hitchens have sold millions. Not too long ago, a public profession of atheism was unacceptable. Peer pressure alone kept atheists silent. But something is changing in the fabric of society that makes it possible to profess publicly such a lack of belief, and even, at times, to make it fashionable.

From a faith perspective, atheism strikes one as a colossal lack of hope. Despite the rich verbal clothing with which it is presented, it must be seen as ultimately hopeless. The seedbed of atheism is the soil of despair.

The great John Paul II suggested that Europe indeed was suffering from a lack of hope, as its birthrates, and ultimately its population, continue to plummet. Their populations are no longer sustainable and they are moving, if not toward a societal extinction, certainly toward a sustained diminution of their people and cultures. Is this the behavior of peoples charged with hope, who drive toward the future with a divine energy in their hearts? I think not.

Atheism and a lack of hope go hand in hand. And the final insult is the last despairing moment of life. I have heard it said by atheists that they are comfortable with the notion that death is the end. This is nonsense. Every fiber of human consciousness presses upward toward the eternal and the infinite. Non-existence became unpalatable at the very instance that human consciousness became self-aware.

As Pope Benedict said in his penetrating encyclical *Spe Salvi*, “*anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life*” (#27).

### **Discerning God’s Will**

It is important for the Church today, and for the future of your religious community in particular, to look at the virtue of hope. What happens in our increasingly hopeless society is not irrelevant to your pursuit. In fact, such societal trends can and do inform, and at times, infect, you and your communities, for good or for ill.

Indeed, the religious previously cited had lost a sense of hope and had become embittered. Perhaps he never had true hope to begin with. His hope was really a secular optimism which ultimately was, and always is, dismembered on the Cross.

It is important for us to begin with an awareness that we, too, are somewhat tainted by secular optimism. We, too, want more, bigger, better. We want our congregations to grow in size. We want to expand our communities. We feel better about ourselves when we are widely acclaimed and our audiences are laudatory. Our planning for the future can easily be confused with planning done by a secular corporation. We might do so in the name of Christ, of course, but it might just lead us to the same hopelessness that infects our world, particularly when things do not go as we planned.

It is important for us, I believe, not so much to *plan*, but to *discern*. The latter looks toward the future guided by the Spirit, with the eyes of faith. Discernment takes place in a spirit of prayer by a people gathered as a community in the Lord’s name. And as we come in contact with God’s divine life, we are energized by hope. *It may be that in the process of discernment, allowing ourselves to be filled with hope, is actually the more important fruit than what is actually decided.*

As you engage in this process of discernment as a religious community, intrinsic to such a community must necessarily be your fundamental role as a sign of contradiction. If diocesan priests, of which I am one, are called to live in the local society and to be solidly integrated into it, it is a necessary danger that we would be prone to accept too readily the mores and values of a secular life. Certainly one of the hallmarks of religious life is its countercultural stance. In that sense, it is a prophetic Gospel voice, beginning simply with the way that you live.

More is not necessarily better. Bigger is not necessarily more effective. Success is not the standard by which we evaluate our lives. Ultimately, there is only one gold standard for us. We discern and search out only one thing: God's will and life. We move not with the whims of the media, but with the strong, driving wind of the Spirit. At times it will mean abundance; at other times, it will mean poverty. Sometimes we will see our works prosper, at other times they are vilified and seemingly destroyed.

As St. Paul tells us in his letter to the Philippians, *"I know indeed how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance. In every circumstance and in all things, I have learned the secret ... of living in abundance and of being in need. I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me"* (4:12-13).

### **Hope Best Recognized By Its Absence**

One of the most important countercultural voices we can raise today is the true voice of hope. I learned about hope, first hand, in my sixteen years at Saint Luke Institute. At the Institute, we have treated over 5,500 priests and men and women religious suffering from a wide variety of psychological problems, whether it be alcoholism, depression, anxiety, victims of trauma, sexual problems, money problems, drugs and so forth.

These struggling priests and religious come and stay with us for a period of about six months. In our Institute, at any one time, we have between 50 and 70 individuals. We journey with them on their rocky and difficult road to recovery. Most make it; some do not. It is an intense experience where the message of the Gospels is manifest in high relief. If ever you doubted the truth of Jesus' message about life, death, sin, evil, grace, cross and resurrection, come and stay with us. I have seen the personal destruction that comes from sin and evil; I have witnessed time and again the joy and peace that comes from God's grace. It'll make a believer out of you!

Hope is best recognized at our place, and I suspect in society at large, not by its presence but by its absence. When hope is present, things seem naturally alive; we are energetic, we are buoyed up by an unseen force. But when hope is absent, there is a despondency, despair and a lethargy that feel insurmountable.

At the Institute, I meet with each incoming priest and religious to welcome them when they first arrive. It continues to surprise me when one of them will let loose with the line, "There is no hope for me." Many residents will manifest such a loss of hope, even if they do not verbalize it. They do not feel loved or valued. They see nothing good for themselves on the horizon. They feel stuck in the present and believe they are fated to be incomplete and burdened forever. Their step is slow; their eyes are downcast; the light has dimmed in their lives.

This depressive lack of hope feeds the pathology in their lives. There can be no recovery unless hope is re-found. Indeed, it is not uncommon, when I speak to the residents at the end of a successful residential stay, that they will say to me, "I now feel a sense of hope." Or, "This place has been a place of hope for me."

## Re-finding Hope

Perhaps this is what true recovery is, re-finding hope. And programs like ours, if they touch the core of the human spirit, are brokers of that hope.

If religious communities are to move down the path of life, and not death, they too must find hope. We ourselves might be a bit surprised if we realized how little hope we actually have and how much we have been infected by the world's despair. Without true hope, the endeavor of religious life is impossible. Without hope, you will not feel energized; you will not feel excitingly alive; you will lack energy and a compelling vision. On the other hand, with hope informing our individual lives and our religious communities as a whole, we necessarily will bring life to others, and thus be generators of life in its many forms, including some vocations.

People often ask me how I can be so hopeful and energetic after all these years of ministering to priests and religious with serious problems. Each day, I am immersed in the very human weaknesses of our sisters, brothers and priests, and some of these weaknesses are particularly distressing, even scandalous. I think the answer lies in hope.

I am not very optimistic, in a worldly sense. Once a Bishop asked me if we still need a place like Saint Luke Institute. My response was this: as long as we admit to ordination and solemn vows human beings and not angels, then we will have more than enough business to keep our doors open. I am not optimistic that this will fundamentally change.

But I am hopeful. I see people getting better all around me. I see God doing marvelous things in people's lives; the outpouring of grace, at times very painful graces, is astounding. And I am privileged to be a part of a group of people who are compassionate, professional and dedicated to something much more than a job—it is, for them, a ministry and a calling. *Yes, I am hopeful because I see God's work all around me and I see the beauty of the human beings that He has created. This is hope.*

My question and challenge to you is this: what do you see? As provincials, dealing with serious difficulties on a daily basis, you too are immersed in problems. Your community is dealing with a need to restructure- with a serious decline in vocations in many areas of the world, and an increase in others. You are pressed with thorny issues such as a disposition of properties, increasing ministerial demands, challenges in assigning personnel and more. This causes uncertainty and tensions both inside each of you and among you. And then there are the seemingly unsolvable personnel problems. Some are just so complicated that there seems to be no good solution, and, in fact, many times there is not. I know such personnel problems can feel like a real mess. I feel it too.

It is important that we do not live in denial. These are very concrete and very real challenges. We cannot ignore these. But, it was ever thus in the Church. A quick reading of the New Testament, especially the conflicts of the early Christian community, should dispel us of the notion that there *ever* was a golden age of the Church.

As religious leaders, you can become better administrators and managers, and deal with these problems more expertly, and this is good. You should be good administrators and good managers of human and community resources. But your real challenge today, especially as you gather at this General Synod, is much deeper and more profound: Where is your hope? What is the Lord doing here and now in your community? Where is the Holy Spirit leading you? If you have an inkling, a taste of that Spirit, there will be excitement here, energy, something binding us together and giving us life. Without it, we are essentially lifeless and we feel lost.

### **Hope as a Communal Reality**

To guide this process, re-finding our hope, it might be good to see what residents do at our Institute. How do they re-find their hope? When they finish our program, I sit down with each of them and listen to their experience. I learn from them what is important; they tell me what has regenerated their life and their hope. And the work we do with our residents is not something detached from your world. The journey to recovery that they walk is essentially the same journey to life that we all must travel.

When I ask them, what made the difference? What changed you? Our residents almost always start with a feeling of gratitude toward the *community* at the Institute. They acknowledge a feeling of being cared for and accepted in the community. They said they never felt judged here but felt rather an overwhelming compassion. Essentially, they found themselves within a Christian community that really does embody some basic Christian values- compassion, caring, and non-judgmentalism. And it changes their lives. *We should never underestimate the power and healing grace of living in a true Christian community.*

I am not suggesting that religious houses should become therapeutic communities per se. Our Institute is a unique kind of community. Nevertheless, in a very real sense, the Christian journey for us all is to be part of a healing community that walks together toward the fullness of life. We are all damaged by sin. We are all called to grow in holiness and wholeness. And we do this, not as individuals, but necessarily as a Christian community.

Pope Benedict's comments about the role of community for hope are important. The Holy Father, in *Spe Salvi*, said that the world, especially Westerners, often interpret hope in a much too individualistic sense. He says that hope ultimately must be rooted in a community. In *Spe Salvi* we read: *"This real life, towards which we try to reach out again and again, is linked to a lived union with a "people", and for each individual it can only be attained within this 'we'."* SS#14

He is saying that hope is a communal reality. We experience this at the Institute. People do not find hope on their own. They discover it in relationship with others; living within a community that they identify with and call these people their brothers and sisters. And,

in fact, if a new resident never “identifies into” the community, as we call it, he or she never really gets better.

Of course, religious life presupposes and is meant to incarnate this truth. One might convincingly assert that for you to find hope is impossible without it being in the context of your religious community. *The measure you discover the communion that you share and the common vision that unites you will be the measure to which you are energized by hope.* Your demons are excessive individualism, isolation, judgmentalism, and narcissism; just as they are for our residents at the Institute.

### **Facing the Pains and Struggles Together**

But simply passively living in community is not enough. In addition, it is important to recognize that our residents find this communal hope, not in some superficial relationship of facile smiles and cheap love. Rather, they spend their months in this community digging down deep. They face the pain and suffering inside their hearts and souls. They do the hard work that is needed, indeed demanded. A real transformation in hope demands it.

They dig down deep in themselves. They face all the scars and buried pains which are sabotaging the inner peace that Jesus wants to give them. Their community relationships are built on this inner honesty and depth. They support each other and prop each other up, at times, when the pain becomes particularly intense. And they challenge each other as well.

Facing the truth together, sometimes distressing truths, leads to deep bonds that often last a lifetime. This is not, as Bonhoeffer calls it, a “cheap grace.” It is a grace and a hope born of sweat, pain, and tears. And our residents know in their hearts that they have found something that will last.

This suggests that you too must find your hope in digging down deep. As a community, you will find this hope in the measure that you are able to suffer together, in the measure that you are able to honestly face the truth, and the weaknesses within ourselves and our communities. This also includes the painful struggles and challenges of being religious in the midst of a creeping societal atheism.

True community life is not instantly and easily attained; it is the fruit of a consistent, faith-filled, and often painful, struggle. But I suspect I do not have to tell you that. You have experienced community as a consolation and as a constant struggle.

What I am saying that our residents do in finding hope, and that we too must do, is embracing the Cross. We find the Cross partly within; our own personal weaknesses and the weaknesses of our community are a suffering for us. If we do not face them squarely, they will drive us and our community in dysfunctional ways.

Also, we find our Cross outside of us as well. We are planted in a fallen world that is, at times, violent, angry and atheistic. Jesus told us that no disciple is greater than the Master and he promised, “If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first” (Jn 15:18). A better bell weather of our integrity as true Christians is not in how we are being bigger, better and more, but rather in the measure we share the Cross of Jesus.

It is critical, however, as face the crosses within ourselves and in our community, not to fall into a destructive judgmentalism. If the community needs to face its pains and weaknesses, then each of us must face how we have contributed to these weaknesses and how we ourselves are called to face the challenges of today. Ultimately, facing these pains and struggles together, and sharing the Cross together, should unite us more deeply as a Christian community sharing a common charism.

However, if we are motivated by a secular optimism, then facing the challenges of a religious community in an atheistic age can easily lead to discouragement. The Cross will be perceived in shame. We will likely feel less appreciated and less relevant. We will be tempted to change our lifestyle in inappropriate ways so that we will be more accepted by the world around us.

But as a true Christian hope quietly grows among us, we will begin to recognize that we have something that the world desperately needs. It is not we are who irrelevant. “*What profit would there be for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?*” (Mt 16:26). We listen to the rant of the atheist and we recognize that a hellish rage has taken root in that soul. We feel a profound sadness for such despair and we fervently desire to share the joy and hope that God has so generously given to us.

*“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”* (Lk 23:32).

### **Experiencing God’s Personal Love**

I have spoken of the need to find hope in the setting of a Christian community and to face individually and collectively the sufferings and Cross that are necessarily our lot. But the process of finding hope does not stop here. It cannot stop with a shared experience of the Cross. If it does, it can easily become stuck in hurt and pain. This is a danger for anyone on a healing journey. We can wallow in self pity and anger at others and the world without ever moving on to new life. It is easy to forget that the Cross is *not* the last word.

As our residents at St. Luke’s dig down deep in their relationship to others and to God, they bring their true selves to the light of day. They bring to others and to God the depths of their humanity and pray in very human groanings. These are honest prayers that demonstrate a human vulnerability and a real trust in God.

When this happens, they become open to experiencing a love from others and from God which is transformative. They begin to realize what they have preached and read about for so many years, but failed to experience in their own lives: God does indeed love them without reserve, just as they are.

In Paul VI's little gem, *Gaudete in Domino*, he speaks about finding joy. He said if we want to find this transforming joy, we should first look at the source of Jesus' joy. Jesus promised us his joy. He said, "That my joy might be yours and your joy might be full." So, clearly, Jesus had a penetrating joy. Where did it come from, Paul VI asks? He wrote: *But is necessary here below to understand properly the secret of the unfathomable joy which dwells in Jesus and which is special to Him. It is especially the Gospel of Saint John that lifts the veil...if Jesus radiates such peace, such assurance, such happiness, such availability, it is by reason of the inexpressible love by which He knows that He is loved by His Father...."*

Time and again, we face our own limitations and those of our community. You have and will continue to share these personal and community problems. But ultimately as you bring these to prayer, as a community, there is a grace needed, one that God will surely give...

A priest who recently finished our healing program sat down in front of me and said it had gone very well for him. When I asked him what worked, he said that he finally came to experience for himself what he had been preaching for more than 25 years. He finally experienced, despite his serious flaws or perhaps because of them, that God loved him just as he is. He saw that he was unique in God's eyes and greatly cherished.

We speak of this theological truth so often, it can easily sound trite and lifeless. But the reality, when *personally* experienced, is powerful and transformative. It is a grace for an individual and it is a grace for a community as well.

Have you, as a community, come to an awareness of your own unique identity in God? Do you know that your community is loved and valued by God? Are you a unique, unrepeatable grace that God has given to our world? Indeed, you are.

It is no accident, then, that Pope Benedict said, in *Spe Salvi*, "*A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer*" (#32). Private prayer is essential, of course, but especially communal prayer. You are asking God to give your community as a whole a taste of the divine truth that your community is loved, that your community is cherished, that you are an unrepeatable and important gift for the world. In the days ahead, let us pray together for this grace.

We will pray daily in that most excellent way, in the Eucharist. We will also pray the prayer of the Church in the Liturgy of the Hours. We ought also to pray together in silence, united in heart and listening intently as a community for the Divine Voice. We need to be filled with this Spirit, this is where our hope will come.

### **Toward A New Evangelization**

But there is one final step that is needed on the road to recovery and thus to re-finding Christian hope. We have an expression in recovery work: recovery is not yours until you

give it away. Indeed, this is true of the faith as well. For the faith to be strong in us, we must share it.

We, Catholics, have, at times, been wonderful evangelizers. We all know the stories of the great missionaries who have spread the faith around the world. But in these modern days, it is easy for us to sit in our houses and wait for people to come to us. At times, the demands of ministry are so large, that it is all we can do, responding to the flood of needs coming our way.

But this is not enough. We ought to see the spread of evangelical faiths in some parts of the world as a challenge to us. Their ministers are often on fire with a desire to spread the faith. They step outside their circle of comfort and are not afraid to proclaim the Gospel of Christ. So should we.

We can only do this when we have been fired by Christian hope, when we know that we are loved by God and that we are unique in God's eyes. Moreover, we have a message that is so urgently needed in our world. Our sisters and brothers may have food in their mouths, but the belly of their souls are empty and crying out for manna from heaven.

And we have a message and a grace that are of infinite value. There is salvation in no other name, as our Scriptures tell us, than in the name of Jesus. Only in Jesus do we find the definitive self-revelation of God. And we further have come to know that in this Catholic Church of ours the fullness of the Church of Christ subsists. Thus, we, like St. Paul, are filled with a desire to share this unique and wonderful grace with others, the grace of our Catholic faith and, for you, the more specific grace of being a Passionist.

The despairing world around us needs this hope. Much of the world, with its lack of hope and slow suicide, is on the road to self-destruction. It is a subtle danger for us as Church to be infected with this lack of hope. If we trade true hope for a secular optimism, the Cross of Christ will become a stumbling block for us.

But as we re-find true Christian hope, when we experience the powerful presence and work of God all around and in us, we will become alive with the Spirit and united in a joy that is attractive and compelling. This is what the world needs from us today. Hope is the light that dispels the spreading darkness. Hope is what is needed today.

I wish this grace for you during these days of discernment. May you and your community re-experience the powerful divine reality, that

*You are loved by God.*

*You are a divine treasure.*

*And you have a unique gift that the world desperately needs.*

*Thus, you are a people of hope.*