



Giving an Account of Our Hope: an Easter Pastoral Letter¹

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Christ is Risen! Truly He is Risen!

As the *Exultet*, sung the world over near the beginning of the Easter Vigil, proclaims:

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!
Exult, all creation around God's throne!
Jesus Christ, our King, is risen!...
Let this place *resound* with joy.

Jesus' rising from the dead shatters the bonds of death, and opens us to a new horizon of hope. The resurrection dismantles what had seemed to be the dimensions of human life, where darkness held sway and death had the inevitable last word. Jesus Christ's undoing of the ultimate power of death loosens the human spirit and imagination, allowing us to truly trust that God has the last word, and that word is *life*. In preparing for Easter, I have been thinking about the way in which the Scriptures speak about the dimensions of the human condition, and of the life of faith.

Jesus, citing Deuteronomy, teaches that "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (Mk 12:30);² – that is, with the fulness of our being, whole and entire. And St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, prays for the community: "that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:18-19).

In this pastoral letter, I want to invite us to ponder the breadth and length and height and depth of the hope which is born of the resurrection. What are the dimensions of our paschal hope? In our Easter celebration, after weeks of Lenten restraint, we burst forth

¹ This pastoral letter was the result of many conversations over the past months, and of focused discussion during the diocesan Congress Days held in Kindersley, Saskatoon and Humboldt in January and February, 2011. A first draft was dated April 28, and published in the Diocesan Newsletter distributed to parishes on May 8. This slightly revised version is dated May 18, 2011.

² Cf Mt 22:37, Lk 10:27; Jesus is citing Deut 6:5.

with Alleluias, light the Easter fire and paschal candle, ring the bells through the Gloria, and sing “sound the trumpet of salvation” in the *Exultet* – all humble human efforts to ring out a joy which knows no bounds, to let it resound. There is an old philosophical account of helping a blind person to imagine the colour red by comparing it to the sound of a trumpet. What is the shape and sound and colour of our paschal joy, of the hope that rises with Jesus from the tomb? How do we speak that hope to people whose senses are not attuned to it?

In the First Letter of Peter (3:15), we are exhorted: “Always be ready to give an account of the hope that is within you.” Another translation puts it this way: “Should anyone ask you the reason for this hope of yours, be ever ready to reply.” Verse 16 tells something of the *how*: “yet do it with gentleness and reverence.”

This pastoral letter offers an initial reflection on how we might use mind and heart and soul and strength to undertake this great task: to grasp, and live by, and effectively communicate our reasons for daring to carry such hope within us.

The culture we live in and the threatened character of hope

The world needs us to be bearers of hope, and needs communities of people who are able to articulate why being a people of hope is not foolishly naive, but an intelligent, responsible and faith-filled way of living this human life.

The world we live in is getting smaller and more complicated. While we have access to all the information in the world, many are confused and lost. Our lives are shaped by an economic system based on personal acquisition, which nurtures our desire for more things, but is not adequately focussed on meeting basic human needs, serving the common good and building community. While there are new and creative efforts to uphold human worth, our culture and society also reflect a loss of bearings in terms of human sexuality, and at times a disregard for the dignity of persons at all stages of human life.

We have more wealth than generations past, yet we still grapple with poverty and suffering in our cities and nations, as well as in our hearts. We – and our young people in particular – carry legitimate fears about the future, relating to the environment, climate change, and the rate at which we are consuming the earth’s natural resources.

When we look at the world of international relations, we see that despite the great effort and longing of many for peace, violence and war continue to be an all too common means of dealing with conflicts. There are signs that we are gradually learning to live as a global family, but also counter-signs in the form of deep unrest, terrorism, and a failure to come to any common vision about the future we would seek to build together.

In these reflections and in what follows, the intent is not to sound a voice of doom, but simply to paint in broad strokes some of the decisive challenges facing the human race at

this moment in our history. A recent study indicated that Canadians are among the happiest people on earth, and there is no doubt we have much to be grateful for. At the same time, the challenges facing the world are also our challenges; the struggles of those who live on the margins of our communities are our struggles. As well, increasingly our society and our parish communities are blessed with people coming from other countries, bringing the challenges and experiences of their homelands for instance the poverty of Haiti, the persecution of Christians in Iraq and Pakistan, the natural disasters in Japan much closer to home for us. Faithfulness to the Gospel requires that we expand our horizons of compassion and caring.

Doubts, the search for meaning, and the need for dialogue

We live in a cultural context where secularizing trends present a significant challenge to religious faith. Insights and perspectives from the physical and human sciences continue to shake the faith foundations of many, and an increasingly pervasive relativism has led to a cultural discomfort with any religious truth claims. Less prevalent but still worth noting is a strident atheism that directly confronts faith, including advertisements on buses in some cities declaring: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life”, and books such as *The God Delusion* and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.³

The decline in membership in many churches in the Western world has been accompanied by an equally troubling phenomenon, the number of people who no longer feel confident looking to churches for meaning. Both in the context of pastoral ministry and in academic contexts, I have had conversations with individuals – people of moral integrity, whose search for meaning is genuine – who are attracted to, or at least not adverse to, belief in God, who would like very much to lay hold of the hope which is borne of faith, but aren’t convinced that it would be intellectually honest to do so.

In turn, many who continue to actively be a part of the Church also struggle with doubts, often unarticulated, which are unsettling and keep us from living the depths of hope and joy to which our faith invites us.

While our culture is struggling to find meaning in religion, our neighbours, colleagues and friends still seek answers to their deepest questions. And even in quarters where faith is not present, one often senses a desire for the foundations of hope. The Russian dissident writer Aleksandr Zinovyev (d. 2006) – not a believer – composed an extraordinary poem/prayer which I believe gives voice to the unspoken yearnings of many:

I beg you, my God, try to exist, at least a bit, for me,
open your eyes, I entreat you.

³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007).

You'll have to do nothing else than this:
follow what is happening here in the world.
It's not much.
But, O Lord, try to see, please!
What hell it is to live without witnesses,
just us human creatures.
This is why I screech aloud, weeping, shouting:
My Father, my God, I beg and cry: exist!"

This experience of doubt, of a searching disbelief, presents a great challenge to the Church in our day. The invitation for us in this context is to find a meaningful and convincing way to communicate our faith and give reasons for our hope – with gentleness and reverence.

The Holy See's Pontifical Council for Culture, under the leadership of Cardinal Gian Franco Ravasi and at the suggestion of Pope Benedict XVI, has recently pointed us in the direction of one way of taking up this challenge. Near the ancient Temple of Jerusalem, there was a large open space entitled the Courtyard of the Gentiles, where those who did not share the Jewish faith could ask questions and enter into conversation with the Jewish faithful. With this as a model, the Pontifical Council for Culture has encouraged opening modern Courtyards of the Gentiles, where – in Pope Benedict's words – people of differing convictions could gather in a "respectful and friendly encounter... to meet one another and to discuss the great questions of human existence."

At the inaugural Courtyard of the Gentiles gathering in Paris a month ago, the Holy Father challenged participants to build bridges and enter into a profound and mutually enriching dialogue. "You have so much to say to one another", he noted, adding his conviction that "the encounter of faith and reason enables us to find ourselves."⁴

This new forum for dialogue, allowing the Church to bring its resources and its hope into conversation with the burning questions and aspirations of non-believers, is a fruitful model to reflect on. In what way can we – as a diocese, in our parishes, in our educational institutions – create spaces for constructive dialogue with non-believers?

In what way are our schools and colleges places of meaningful and mutually beneficial dialogue between the courses or academic disciplines taught there, and the riches of the Catholic tradition? Are there ways in which the encounter between faith and reason can be enhanced in our educational institutions? What can our parishes and diocesan offices offer to assist and encourage those who have a searching faith and at times struggle with doubts? How can we – through our catechetical and faith formation programs – specifically be attentive to the questions of younger generations who have become distanced from the Church?

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI's Message to Courtyard of the Gentiles, March 26, 2011, can be found on the internet at <http://www.zenit.org/article-32135?l=english>.

In addition to setting forth these questions for discussion, which I trust will lead to some practical initiatives within the diocese, I would also invite us to consider how we might work together with our ecumenical partners in confronting the challenges arising from a predominantly secular culture. Given that these trends confront all Christians with similar challenges, and given also the extent to which in recent decades we have been able to identify a considerable deposit of faith which is held in common, I believe there is ample scope to work together in finding ways to give an account of our hope in ways which capture the imagination, mind and heart of our contemporaries.

Pace of life, technology, and attentiveness to fundamental human experience

New technologies are bringing about significant changes and an intense pace of life. Use of the internet, cell phones, text messaging, social media, and other recent developments in communication, have dramatically changed the way in which human beings relate to each other. They have also changed the way in which we seek information, and the sources we authoritatively turn to not only in search of facts but also in responding to questions of value and meaning. In countless ways, these technologies are a great blessing. Indeed it is hard to even imagine writing (or reading) a pastoral letter such as this without the assistance of such technology.

Yet there are certain risks which must be attended to: for instance, the way in which we can be isolated, rarely engaging in heart-to-heart, face-to-face communication; how our minds learn to race from one subject to the next, rather than cultivating concentration and focus; how virtual reality can end up distancing us from fundamental human experience; how developing technologies are changing our leisure, our means of educating, our ways of grappling with questions of ultimate meaning, or distracting us from asking such questions at all. We human beings have always been prone to cluttering up our lives, being distracted by superficial things, and avoided cultivating deep relationships or practices of mindfulness. There is little value in pointing to an idealized past where life was pure, simple and authentic. But there are changes to be reckoned with here, and they have a moral dimension to them.

One unavoidable aspect of human life which drives us to ask these ultimate questions is the reality of human suffering: Is there meaning in human suffering or not, and if so, where is it to be found? Our Western society is evolving a curious relationship with suffering. We have television networks which immerse us in minute-by-minute coverage of often tragic and dramatic events; yet it is unclear whether this translates into greater solidarity with those in need. As a society, in various ways we try to make ourselves immune from suffering, to avoid it at all costs, through escape, anaesthesia, or, if necessary, death; and we tend to place those who are suffering or dying on the margins of society, at a safe distance.

Within our contemporary context, with its doubts, confusion and fears, its rapidly developing technologies, its blessings and opportunities, its often ill-equipped grappling with ultimate questions, it is vital for us as persons of faith to give an articulate account

of our Christian hope. In doing so, we do well firstly to be deeply rooted in the paschal mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection; and secondly, to make connections between the paschal mystery and our most ordinary and fundamental human experiences.

It is of critical significance that the resurrection takes place precisely in the midst of human pain and torment. For Jesus' disciples, his death had drained the world of meaning. Yet even there, in the disciples who asked for his body and prepared him for burial, we see modelled for us an incipient Christian hope. They did not understand that Jesus would rise from the dead, but they did the only thing they knew how to do. They cared for the broken body of Christ, hoping against hope that death was not the end of their faith in Jesus. Hope neither replaced their grief nor revealed what would happen; hope simply sustained them in the midst of confusion and loss.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of hoping against hope, precisely in relation to God's power to give life to the dead and to call into existence the things that do not exist (Rom 4:17-18). Our hope has its ultimate foundations in God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Jesus' resurrection is the vindication of his life, his mission, his fidelity to the Kingdom of God and to sinful humanity. In light of the resurrection, it is indeed in his self-gift on the cross that we most clearly see the face of God. The resurrection proclaims God's power and God's desire to transform death into life, darkness into light, despair into hope. It is the eternal reminder that we are not alone in the world, that even on this truth-crushed earth, new life can rise from ashes. And it places human freedom, including the freedom to open oneself to the reality of suffering and death, into a larger framework, where these things are not meaningless, but are caught up in God's redeeming work.

In the post-resurrection accounts in the Gospels, the Risen Lord comes back to the disciples in the midst of their ordinary human lives. He comes to the women in their grief, to the apostles back in their fishing boats, joining some of his disciples for breakfast, and another pair on a road outside of Jerusalem. And he transforms their everyday world by his risen presence.

In giving an account of our hope in the midst of our world, with its hectic pace and its rapidly evolving forms of communication and access to information, we also do well to ponder the presence of God in the midst of our ordinary human experience: Easter shedding its light on our daily lives. The God revealed in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ is the same God who authored creation and the human condition within it, creating us in God's own image.

Immersing ourselves in the natural world – the smell of the moist earth, the song of the meadowlark the first time you hear it in the spring, raking away the dried crust of winter on the lawn, walking on a prairie road under the sheltering sky – can be a renewing and transcendent experience. Taking time to be with others – holding a newborn baby and marvelling at the miracle of life, having coffee with a friend, taking time to be with someone in the cancer ward or prison cell – such fundamental encounters can be a

reminder of the dignity and sacredness of the human person. The experience of beauty – a sculpture or painting that moves you beyond words, the sound of a flute leaving you smiling as you walk down a street, or looking on the face of one you love – can be a portal opening the human heart to an encounter with God.

Hope is evoked in all these places, just as it is evoked in the simple tasks of daily life, and in moments of quiet and contemplation. Above all it is born in love, the love which helps us move outside of ourselves, freely given and freely received. The experience of love vanquishes doubt much more than any intellectual argument does, no matter how much the latter is needed.

How can we as Church deepen our understanding of the paschal mystery, and its relationship to our everyday lives? How can we foster a deeper attentiveness to fundamental human experience, and do so in such a way that it helps others to see the coherence between their experiences and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ? Recognizing, investigating and pondering this relationship between experience and revelation is rich terrain to explore as we seek to give an account of the hope within us in our day.

Conclusion

This letter began by reflecting on the dimensions of hope. There's one last scriptural text in this regard which has always stirred my imagination. In the Book of Job, after Job and his friends have exhausted their arguments about suffering and human meaning, God comes to Job (Ch. 38ff.) and asks him a series of questions. While they sound as though God may be putting Job in his place, I think principally God is assuring Job – and us – that everything is in God's creative and life-giving hands:

Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements...
or who laid its cornerstone
when the morning stars sang together
and all the children of God shouted for joy?...
Have you ever in your life commanded the morning,
and caused the dawn to know its place...
Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?...
What is the way to the place where the light is distributed,
or where the east wind is scattered upon the earth?...
Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?

From whose womb did the ice come forth,
and who has given birth to the hoar-frost of heaven?...
Who has put wisdom in the inward parts,
or given understanding to the mind?⁵

In an extraordinarily poetic way, the text moves us to recognize that the dimensions of the created world ultimately open onto mystery. In the midst of this flurry of questions, the text states that in making the thick darkness a swaddling band for the sea, God “set bars and doors” and said, “Thus far shall you come, and no further” (Job 38:9-11). The American author Annie Dillard, commenting on this passage about God setting limits to our ability to understand the mysteries of the created world and the human condition, asks the poignant question: “But have we come even that far? Have we rowed out to the thick darkness, or are we all playing pinochle in the bottom of the boat?”⁶

Faced with the magnitude of God’s questioning, Job entered into silence. Often the questions rising from our most intense human experiences also end in silence. But Annie Dillard’s question is the right one to ask, especially in relation to the subject of this pastoral letter. Within the limits of the possible, have we adequately searched out the dimensions of hope, have we said as much as we can? I don’t think so.

Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI after him, have called for a new evangelization at the beginning of this new millennium. When the Diocese of Saskatoon produced a Diocesan Vision statement three years ago, evangelization was identified as the first of its six priorities. Finding a language for that new evangelization is a challenging task – worthy of our time, our sustained efforts, and requiring the best we can offer – with all our mind and heart and soul and strength.

Hope is deeply attractive. Being a people of hope, and allowing that hope to shape everything we do and are, is a vital form of evangelizing in our day. We can do this even without words – the witness of our hope and joy itself speaks a powerful word. Yet if we can find gentle but convincing words which name the foundation of that hope, which give coherent, intelligent, convincing reasons for that hope, that will be a still greater gift to those around us.

May we continue to be guided by the Holy Spirit as we creatively seek ways of giving an account of our hope. And may we experience the joy of being able to name life-giving reasons for our hope, letting those reasons shine forth for all to see and hear.

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⁵ Job 38:4-5a, 6b-7, 12, 16-18a, 24, 28-29, 36.

⁶ Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1974), p. 7.