

May 17, 2020 – Reason for Your Hope

What is your reason for hope?

1 Peter 3:15 -“Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence,”

This is a serious question - A question that comes to the sense of faith today. What is the content of our hope? Is it more than just optimism? A vague hope for a future reality? Or does it have concrete meaning?

St. Pope John Paul II speaks of “The Catechism of the Catholic Church, lastly, is offered to every individual who asks us to give an account of the hope that is in us (1 Peter 3:15) and who wants to know what the Catholic Church believes (JP II, Fidei Depositum, 3).”

I was in a Chaplain program out in Michigan with seminarians from different faiths. One young man, who was a Universalist Unitarian, asked great questions. I would say to him, “you are a heck of a lot smarter than I am - Someday you will end up being a Catholic.”

This led to a conversation about what our Churches actually taught. We agreed to bring our Catechisms - His was a single piece of paper with 5 items and I brought him the Catechism. This was a major mistake. Every day he would come back and refer to a number 372, 899, 1077 and expect me to know what it was. The Catechism has 2,865 statements of faith.

Pope John Paul II pointed out one hope is that we are a teaching Church. We take seriously that what we have been given, we are to pass on to those we encounter. The very action of the priest receiving the Eucharist first tells us that we give nothing that we have not first received.

Several weeks ago, Archbishop Jackels gave a homily that challenges us and all of our assumptions after the pandemic is over. For the Archbishop, the pandemic shows us that our Church is in need of repair. He said, “To repair the Church, the Mass has to aim at spiritually transforming worshippers, to be agents of transformation, on mission to be joyful, and guides us to serve the poor.” Wow, what does that look like?

For me, his next statement hit me even harder. He said, “And we’ll still do faith formation, **maybe even have Catholic schools**, but to repair the Church, faith formation programs have to form us in Jesus’ teaching on poverty and guide us to serve the poor.”

How can he say “maybe even have Catholic schools”? Between St. Columbkille and St. Joseph the Worker, we subsidize our Catholic School system at a rate of about \$1.5 million every year. We have cut staff, delayed maintenance, and cut every corner to keep our schools going. I, as Fr. Tom and Fr. Paul, all grew up being educated in Catholic Schools. My hope is that we are not simply educating students but that they will assist us in transforming worshippers and become agents of transformation.

Do all of my assumptions about Catholic schools, about education actually pan out? Or, am I causing more damage to our church by supporting a school that does not actually help others become “agents of transformation?”

Two experiences that remind me of the importance of education. The Universalist Unitarian asked me “Who put this whole thing (the Catechism) together?” Jokingly, he said, “It is like it is 2,000 years in the making!” I realized I took it for granted. The Church as a teaching body, for all its flaws, gives us an image of God and life that is complete and whole. Just to give a sense of its depth, it has 32 pages of Scripture citations alone. We are reminded that we cannot and do not have to do this alone.

The second experience is Mike Faley. As his wife, Sharon Faley will tell you, he needs lots of transformation! He invited me to a monthly meeting of the 1953 graduating class of St. Columbkille High School. He changed their schedule so that I could attend. One of his classmates said he couldn’t make it because he has a golf group. Mike responded, “Who is going to be at your funeral? Your classmates from St. Columbkille or your golf buddies?” Mike’s classmate showed up. Mike’s Catholic education gave him two things: 1. To know what is important - true friendship and 2. To know our true end - not to run away from death but to embrace the resurrected life.

What is your reason for hope? Knowing this is part of repairing the church.

No matter what happens as we come out of this pandemic, we will need to be able to give a reason for hope. I believe good education and formation is a necessary component for hope and for transformation. I believe the gift of a teaching church is a signal of what can be done together rather than divided. I believe we must check all of our assumptions: Is how we celebrate Mass able to transform in hope? Do our Catholic schools actually support that mission? Do we actually help people encounter Christ, embrace deeper faith, and empower Christian action by everything we do?

I cannot answer that question alone. An empty church is a tremendous reminder of who is missing. When possible, will people participate in Mass to Encounter Christ? Is the teaching church seen as a gift or taken for granted? Is deeper faith something to be embraced? Does my faith empower Christian action?

What is your answer? Can you give a reason for hope?