

THE DEACON AS A MINISTER OF HOPE

Prayer and Introduction

Sign of the Cross. Silent prayer. Let's make an Act of Hope. This is the Act of Hope from the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*:

O Lord God, I hope by your grace for the pardon of all my sins, and, after life here, to gain eternal happiness, because you have promised it, you who are infinitely powerful, faithful, kind and merciful. In this hope I intend to live and [in this hope I intend] to die. Amen.¹

Let us also call on the powerful help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Divine Hope: *Hail Mary ... Sign of the Cross.*

I'm delighted to be with you today and I hope you've had a wonderful weekend. It is a joy to have this annual Gathering of Deacons and Wives. On behalf of us all, I want, first of all, to thank Fr. Dominic Adeiza for his excellent and hard work as the Director of our Diaconate Programme, for the promotion of vocations, the support of the diaconate students in formation and also the care of deacons in ministry. Our thanks also to him and his team for expertly organising this conference.

Congratulations to Stephen Patterson and Zacharias Parambi ordained this last summer! We are blessed with over 40 deacons in active ministry in the Diocese, not to forget our students in formation. I have always said that it would be wonderful to have a deacon in every community, especially in light of our ten-year mission plan, which envisages larger parishes that will be communities of communities. But deacons are needed in chaplaincies, schools, hospitals, care homes and prisons. Sometimes too deacons are needed for specialised roles, depending on their gifts: think of Stephen Morgan, Rector of St. Joseph's University in Macau, or Craig, the Bishop's Assistant. Whatever your role, whether you are active or retired, I thank each one of you personally for all that you are and for all that you do: your love for God, your example and prayer, your loyalty to me, and not least your generous service of the priests and people of the Diocese.

Bleak Times

The documents of Vatican II portray the deacon as a minister of charity.² But today, I'd like to offer some thoughts on the deacon as a minister of hope: the deacon, and his wife, as a minister of hope. Faith, hope and charity always go together; they are what are called the three theological gifts. They are gifts from God, given at His initiative. In

¹ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (London, CTS: 2006) 192.

² *Lumen Gentium* 29 in H. Denzinger *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (43rd Edition) ed. P. Hünermann (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 2010) DH 4155

his First Letter to the Corinthians, speaks of them as the ‘higher gifts.’³ They are gifts we should pray for,⁴ gifts that animate our lives, gifts that are meant to become ‘virtues’ or good habits, powers and energies that help us respond to God, to life and to others.⁵

Yesterday I was listening to the BBC news. It began with a lengthy piece on the war in Ukraine: how President Biden had permitted the use of long-range American missiles, and then the Russian response, President Putin doing some nuclear sabre-rattling and then firing an inter-continental ballistic missile at Eastern Ukraine. I have to say, the war in Ukraine looks increasingly ominous. You wonder how on earth it will end.

Next up on the news was an item about what the BBC calls ‘assisted dying’ and how some in the Cabinet were in favour of it and others against. As we know, this Bill is a proposal fraught with danger. To permit assisted suicide and euthanasia is to cross a line. Once crossed, British society will never be the same again. The Bill is being debated later this week in the House of Commons.

Then there was an item about Rachel Reeves and the recent Budget, with UK borrowing at a new high, an increase in the rate of inflation, and how the mess in government finances is taking its toll on the NHS and on our public services. It will take years to repair the damage, they say, to grow the economy and provide what is needed.

I won’t continue, save to mention that there was then a series of items about crime and frauds, then something on prison over-crowding, then the war in Gaza and the Middle East, and then how the use of fossil fuels is worsening climate change. The bulletin ended with a weather warning about snow and wintry conditions.

If you follow the news, the future can look gloomy, bleak, even depressing. The world seems to be in a mess, full of uncertainties, a febrile international situation, major political and economic challenges at home – and this is not to forget all the personal challenges we face in life. It’s easy to lose hope and tempting to despair. Given that faith, hope and charity are linked as gifts to pray for, is it any wonder that in an era when faith is going cold, hope too is diminishing, and worryingly, charity as well? Yes, we must pray and work for a better world, for an end to war, for peace and justice. But to do this, we need to pray for hope, the gift of hope and a renewal of hope.

God’s Gift of Hope

What do we mean by hope? The *Catechism* gives a clear definition: “Hope is the confident expectation of divine blessing and the beatific vision of God.”⁶ (The ‘beatific vision’ is seeing God face to face in heaven). In other words, hope is not mere optimism,

³ 1 Cor 12: 31 – 13: 13

⁴ Cf. Mark 9: 23-24 “Jesus said to him, ““If you can’! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

⁵ See *Catechism of the Catholic Church. The CTS Definitive and Complete Edition* (London, CTS: 2016) 1812-1832

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church. The CTS Definitive and Complete Edition* (London, Catholic Truth Society: 2016) 2090.

or wishful thinking, the resolve to overcome a problem or a way of getting through the day: Christian hope is far more thrilling! Hope is that joyful confidence that at any moment now, we will receive a “divine blessing,” an answer to prayer, that God will act. He will act with power. He will come and bring change. He will come into the darkness to renew things. This is what we pray for. More, He will act in such a way that one day, thanks to the victory of Christ on Calvary, He will bring us to heaven; He will grant us the “beatific vision;” He will make all things new in the Kingdom of heaven. Hope is not only about God acting now; it’s about the hope of being with God in heaven.

When I was in the primary school, the Church was in a period of flux with the Vatican Council. My parents and their generation were taught the old *Penny Catechism*. We began learning a few things from it, notably those excellent first two questions:

“Q. 1. Who made you? God made me.

Q. 2. Why did God make you? God made me to know Him, to love Him and to serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him for ever in the next.”⁷

However, this Catechism went out of use and we stopped learning it. I have a copy of it here and I looked up what it says about hope. It’s actually very good, and of course, it says exactly what the modern *Catechism* says, although in different words:

“Q. 136. What is hope? Hope is a supernatural gift of God, by which we firmly trust that God *will* give us eternal life *and* all the means necessary to obtain it, if we do what he requires of us.”⁸

Hope, then, is the power that drives us on, longing to serve God in our lives, and one day to be united with Him for ever, in the happiness of heaven. Hope makes us desire God and eternal life. It makes us long for heaven. It makes us place our trust in the promises of Christ. It makes us rely on the Holy Spirit, asking for the grace to persevere in God’s love to the end of our earthly lives.⁹ The basis of our hope is the risen Christ. Easter is the greatest miracle of all. Easter means death is no longer the end.¹⁰ Jesus Christ is risen, and He sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts, so that we too can encounter Him today as once the Apostles did in Galilee. We can encounter the risen Jesus in His Church, in prayer, in the Sacred Liturgy and the Sacraments, in the Mass, in the Word of God, in the beauty of creation and in other people, especially the poor.

Not long before his death, Pope Benedict XVI sent a touching letter of condolence about a friend of his, Fr. Gerhart, a Cistercian priest, who had died. In the letter, he spoke of his own longing for Heaven: “Now that Gerhart has arrived on the other side, surely many friends await him. I hope I too can join their company soon.”¹¹ In his 2016 book *Last Testament*, Benedict was asked what he thought heaven would be like. What was he expecting? He answered:

“Heaven: there are many dimensions to it. Some are theological. St. Augustine says something which is a great comfort. He interprets that line from

⁷ *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine. Revised Edition 1985* (London, CTS: 1985) 3

⁸ *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine* 22.

⁹ Cf. *Compendium of the Catechism* 387

¹⁰ See Rom 6: 5-11

¹¹ K. Hattrup “Benedict XVI shares his longing for Heaven in letter on death of ‘closest’ friend” in *Aleteia* 20th October 2021: <https://aleteia.org/2021/10/20/benedict-xvi-shares-his-longing-for-heaven-in-letter-on-death-of-closest-friend/> (November 2024)

the Psalms ‘Always seek the face of the Lord’ as meaning: Seek it for ever, for all eternity! God is so great that we can never finish seeking [His face]. He is always new. With God there is perpetual, unending encounter, with more and more new discoveries and new joys. Such things are theological matters.

“But at the same time, in an entirely human perspective, I look forward to being reunited with my parents, my siblings and my friends. I imagine it will be as lovely as it was at our family home [in Bavaria].”¹²

Pilgrims of Hope

This brings me to the Holy Year. With his Bull of Indiction *Spes non confundit* (‘hope does not disappoint’), Pope Francis has announced that next year 2025 will be a Year of Jubilee, a Holy Year.¹³ Holy Years occur every 25 years. A holy year is a time of prayer, repentance and acts of mercy. They are times when we are invited to go on pilgrimage, to visit designated churches and shrines, to recite special prayers, to go to Confession, to receive Holy Communion and to gain a plenary indulgence, that is, a remission of the temporal punishment due for our sins. The 2025 Jubilee will begin this Christmas Eve with the opening of the Holy Door at St Peter’s Basilica in Rome. It will close on the feast of the Epiphany, 6th January 2026. Pilgrimages to Rome are being encouraged and there is a programme of jubilee meetings throughout the year, including a Jubilee for teenagers in April and a Jubilee for young people at the end of July. During the Jubilee for Teenagers, Bl. Carlo Acutis will be canonised, and during the Jubilee for Youth, Bl. Pier Giorgio Frassati will be canonised.

Spes non confundit permits diocesan bishops to designate churches within their dioceses that are pilgrimage places where the Jubilee Indulgence can be gained. So for our Diocese, I have nominated six shrines: Jersey and Guernsey, the Cathedral, Sacred Heart Bournemouth, St. James’s Reading and St. Edmund’s Southampton.

The Holy Father has chosen a theme for the Year: ‘Pilgrims of Hope’. In his Letter, he recalls the suffering and hardships still experienced after the pandemic, the impact of war and violence in many parts of the world and the climate crisis. The Holy Year is thus an opportunity to pray for a renewal in our lives of the gift of hope, a time to restore hope, a time of rebirth, and an opportunity across the world for people to re-establish a proper relationship with God, with one another, and with creation. Pilgrimages symbolise the human quest for meaning and the artistic masterpieces and the beauty of creation seen on the journey inspire us to praise God for His wondrous works. Finally, the Pope wants us to renew our practice and use of the Sacrament of Confession.

I’d like to encourage you to look at the diocesan website and the page about the Jubilee Year. It has been designed by Fr. Ansel D’Mello and has many resources and ideas. I’d also like to encourage parishes, groups and individuals to organise a pilgrimage to one

¹² Benedict XVI *Last Testament in His Own Words* (London, Bloomsbury: 2016)

¹³ Pope Francis *Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025* (*Spes non Confundit*): www.vatican.va (November 2024)

of the Shrine Churches. If you are going as a group, Fr. Gaston Afah has designed a format for this, with prayer, Rosary, Confessions and Mass.

The Ministry of Hope

Let us now turn to deacon's role in all this as a minister of hope.

Every Christian is meant to be a pilgrim of hope. There is a natural desire in the human heart to love, to be happy, to be loved, to belong and to live forever but, as St. Augustine once said, none of this can be achieved without a relationship with God.¹⁴ The God-given gift of hope is an energy that enhances and purifies us. It focuses us on God and the Kingdom of heaven. It keeps us from discouragement; it sustains us during times of abandonment; it opens our hearts; it enables us to serve and care for others; it helps us look forward to good things ahead and to the next world; it promises us that God will make all things new.¹⁵ The *Catechism* puts it like this:

“Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁶

In my own experience as a priest, the Church's funeral liturgy, the Requiem Mass, when celebrated with beauty and solemnity, can speak volumes to people, giving them hope. Once as a parish priest in Stockport I remember having to deal with the rudest and most demanding man in the north of England when his mother had died. Yet after the Mass, he was all over me – thank you so much, father! He even made a donation to the church.

The Mass and the Church's Liturgy gives us the greatest hope and, so to speak, the greatest amount of hope. In the Liturgy the Holy Spirit fills our hearts with the fire of Divine Love through the gathering of the faithful as Christ's body the Church, through the hymns and prayers, through the Scripture readings and through the action of the Sacrament. In the Mass, Jesus Christ Our Lord and Saviour lays down His life for us, nourishing us with His Word and with His flesh and blood, the Food of Immortality. Indeed, in every Mass we pass-over with Christ from death to life, and renewed in hope, we are sent forth ‘in peace to glorify the Lord by our life.’ The dismissal, the *Ite missa est*, sends us out as pilgrims of hope to be ministers of hope to others. We are to bring them what we have received, the gift of hope, especially to the poor and needy, the lonely and the lost, to the sick and the dying, to those who are suffering and those who might be tempted to despair. This is where deacons and their wives have a special role. Let's remember this when at the end of Mass you give the Dismissal to the assembly.

¹⁴ “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Augustine *Confessions* Lib 1, 1-2, 2.5, 5 (CSEL 33, 1-5). This passage appears in the Liturgy of the Hours Office of Readings for the Ninth Sunday of the Year.

¹⁵ Cf. *Catechism* 1818

¹⁶ *Catechism* 1817

Practical Suggestions

Three points. First, the deacon himself has to be a man of Christian hope. We should constantly ask God to increase within us the gift of hope and to make us more holy. Many of the psalms in the Breviary make good prayers of hope, for instance, Psalm 62: “In God alone be at rest, my soul, for my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock, my stronghold, my fortress; I stand firm. In God is my safety and glory, the rock of my strength.”¹⁷ Again, why not pray every day an Act of Hope, such as the one we used before from the *Compendium*? Or use for prayer Newman’s *The Pillar of the Cloud*:

“Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th’encircling gloom, lead Thou me on!

The night is dark, and I am far from home: lead Thou me on!

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.

“I was not ever thus, nor prayed that Thou shouldst lead me on;

I loved to choose and see my path; but now: lead Thou me on!

I loved the garish day, and, spite of fears, pride ruled my will.

Remember not past years!

“So long Thy power hath blest me, sure it still will lead me on.

O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till the night is gone,

And with the morn those angel faces smile,

Which I have loved long since and lost awhile!”¹⁸

It would also be good to reread Pope Benedict XVI’s beautiful 2007 Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* on the theological gift of hope. Why not download it from the Vatican website? It’s not a long document, just 30 pages; you could take a paragraph a day.

One of the challenges we face in our parishes today is a lack of hope, discouragement, a tendency to despair, people who glory in the past and are forever complaining. You can see the interplay of hope and cynicism sometimes in parishioners and even in ourselves as clergy, especially in those who are quick to criticise and be negative. As ministers of the Gospel, we need to be people of joy who communicate Good News. Our ten-year mission-plan, *You Will be My Witnesses* is good news. It is an exciting vision about growing in faith and reaching out to others in faith. It is not about closing parishes; it’s about turning the ship, renewing the Church, releasing the gifts and putting the Diocese on an active footing. Yet it all depends on the hardest change of all: changing *ourselves*. How can I change? How can I become more holy, closer to Christ? How can I know my faith better? How can we change the culture of our parish and the culture of the Diocese? The whole plan is dependent on prayer and on the Holy Spirit.

So first, the deacon becoming more effectively a man and a minister of hope.

Secondly, I’d like to suggest as priests and deacons we ensure our preaching speaks not just about this life but about eternal life. In *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict notes that “a distinguishing mark of Christians [is] the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they do know in general terms that their life

¹⁷ Psalm 62: 6-8

¹⁸ Given in *Laudate: A Hymn Book for the Liturgy Volume Two* (Brandon, Decani Music: 2007) n. 961

will not end in emptiness.”¹⁹ When preaching, it’s a good thing to remain rooted on the ground proposing practical applications, but it’s a bad habit to neglect heaven and the *vitam venturi saeculi*, the life of the world to come. This world, St. Paul says, is passing away²⁰ and so the vertical dimension of faith should always be present in our preaching and teaching. Actually, people want to hear this from us. They want hope. They want reassurance. They want arguments to use with those who ask them why they believe in immortality, life after death and heaven.²¹ In the debate about assisted suicide and euthanasia, you can see two different views of human life: one that is horizontal, , ending at death, God-less, the other that includes the vertical, is immortal, is God-given. We need to share our hope which is based on Christ’s resurrection that in the Father’s house there are many rooms and that Jesus has gone there to prepare a place for us.²²

It’s easy in our busy world of secularism, constant work, shopping and entertainment, to become horizontalized, to overlook the vertical dimension, to lose awareness of the sacred canopy of God, the angels and saints. Living at Bishop’s House in the city centre in Portsmouth, if in the evening you go out for a walk, thanks to the street lamps, the cars, the shops, you cannot see the stars or the night sky. So too our culture, if you allow it, easily drowns out the Transcendent. This is where as a minister of hope, the deacon should draw people upwards - *verso l’alto*, as Pier Giorgio Frassati put it.²³

And thirdly, those who most need the gift of hope are suffering people. During the Jubilee Year ahead, I would like to suggest that as a minister of hope, deacons should give special time, care and attention to anyone in the parish, at work, in your family, who is suffering, in whatever way that might be: physical, emotional, practical, social. In his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul has a consoling message:

“The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. .. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.”²⁴

The Saints are always the best examples here, above all, the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the “Star of the Sea.” She guides us safely across the stormy waters of life to Christ her Son. One of my favourite prayers to Mary is *The Memorare*, which begins:

“Remember, O most loving Virgin Mary, that it is a thing unheard of, that anyone who ever had recourse to your protection, implored your help or sought your intercession, was left forsaken. Filled, therefore, with confidence in your goodness, I fly to you, O Mother, Virgin of virgins.”²⁵

Another man of hope is St. Maximilian Kolbe. He was imprisoned in Auschwitz where despite the horror and suffering, he bravely continued his priestly ministry, hearing confessions and smuggling in bread and wine for Mass. One day, a prisoner escaped

¹⁹ Benedict XVI *Spe Salvi* (London, CTS: 2007)

²⁰ I Cor 7: 31

²¹ Cf. 1 Pet 3: 15

²² Cf. Jn 14: 1ff.

²³ L. Frassati *A Man of the Beatitudes Pier Giorgio Frassati* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press: 1990) 125

²⁴ Rom 8: 28

²⁵ Cf. *Compendium of the Catechism* page 188 (slightly amended)

and as a punishment ten inmates were chosen for execution, one a young father with several children. St. Maximilian offered himself in exchange: “I am a Catholic priest” he said. “I wish to die for that man. I am old, but he has a wife and children.” It was hope that enabled him to face such savage sufferings and obstacles, whilst encouraging others to trust in God. Hope made him a man of joy in the darkest hour. It sustained him through to the end. It was His hope in Christ, that compelled him confidently to step forward and say: “I wish to die for that man.”²⁶ Hope enabled him to bear his suffering.

By the way, if you are ever able to visit Auschwitz, you should go and see the cell of St. Maximilian; it’s now a shrine. It’s very moving.

So summing up, as priests and deacons, we are meant to be ministers of hope. That means being persons of hope ourselves, ensuring our preaching speaks about heaven and eternal life, and being ministers who are close to those who suffer. The forthcoming Holy Year 2025 is a great opportunity to put all this into practice more energetically.

Conclusion

To conclude. Hope is a gift from God that “transforms life and the world from within”.²⁷ Hope is faith disposed to the future, making a difference in the present. Hope is the grace of the Lord’s resurrection enabling us to carry the Cross. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit filling us with trust in the future, a future that includes the hope of heaven. Many people today seem to think heaven is about living on clouds, playing a harp and drinking as much beer or wine as you want. For the Christian, heaven is being united with the Blessed Trinity in the communion of the saints. It is this hope, made real in the Church, above all in the Liturgy, that empowers us to bear any sickness, suffering and sadness.

So let’s finish by entrusting ourselves into God’s providential love by praying the Lord’s Prayer and then the *Libera nos* prayer from Mass that follows it. Let us pray for a renewal within our hearts, within our lives and our ministry of the gift of hope.

Our Father ...

Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil; graciously grant peace in our days, that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin, and safe from all distress, as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”²⁸

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and for ever. Amen.

Thank you for listening.

²⁶ See P. Burns ed. *Butler’s Lives of the Saints. New Concise Edition* (London, Burns and Oates: 2003) 377-379

²⁷ *Spe Salvi* 6.

²⁸ *Roman Missal. English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition* (London, Catholic Truth Society: 2010) 699