

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Defeating despair, finding hope through action



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After a break spent with grandkids from Germany, I am now getting back to my reading and reflecting on the many stories and reports related to interfaith. The recent issue of the Christian Century magazine, in spite of some very disturbing stories, had as its theme "hope."

Publisher Peter Marty noted in his column that hope is very different from optimism; it is not just wishing that things would be different or better. "Wishing is a flat and powerless venture," Marty wrote. "I may wish upon a shooting star, or wish for a brand new car. But so what? What does that wishing add up to? Hope goes so much deeper, requiring risk and assuming responsibility."

Most of the news tells the negative, and there is plenty to report locally and on the international scene. Much of this negative news deals with the assaults on faith and on those who are identified with a faith. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in a recent speech in the British House of Lords, pointed to the increasing threats faced by "people of all faiths, and of none."

"Christians are being persecuted throughout the Middle East and elsewhere." Sacks

said. "Jews are facing a new and resurgent anti-Semitism. Muslims who stand on the wrong side of the Sunni-Shia divide are being killed in great numbers. Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bahá'í and others face persecution in some parts of the world. Religious freedom is about our common humanity, and we must fight for it if we are not to lose it. This, I believe, is the issue of our time."

In many parts of the world, your faith, or your being a part of a minority faith community, can lead to your death. Even your attempts to find safety as refugees can be thwarted by government policy, as evidenced by the recent attempts to deport Chaldean and Eastern Orthodox Christians from the Detroit area back to Iraq, where they likely will be killed because of their faith status. Fortunately, a federal judge has ordered a temporary block so those affected may make appeals.

'HOPE IS LINKED TO ACTION'

The Christian Century also features an article by theology professor Charles R. Pinches on "How to live in hope." He writes, "When we speak of hope in connection with love and faith, we are placing it among the three theological virtues. ... The theological virtue called hope is linked to action or

movement. Hope is a good habit by which we move forward toward a future good that is both possible and difficult to attain. ... Difficulty is a part of the definition of hope. This makes the phrase 'difficult hope' redundant."

PARALYSIS OF DESPAIR

Pinches notes that the term used for life without hope is "despair," and Aquinas calls despair the greatest sin. In St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he extols "faith, hope, and love ... and the greatest of these is love." (I Corinthians 13:13) Why, then, does Aquinas consider the opposite of hope more important than hate, the opposite of the greatest virtue of love? In the absence of faith, I can still act. In the absence of love, even in the midst of hate, I can act and reverse my thinking and restore love. But in the absence of hope, I am paralyzed and nothing can be accomplished — not even love or faith.

Could it be that the increasing use of alcohol, opioids and illegal drugs are signs of despair? Could it be that the government's inability to respond to the needs of many of our citizens, or to act in light of the pressing problems, an indication of despair? Has the country lost hope in its leaders? Has Washington lost hope in its own ability to act for

the common good? Are we in danger of slipping into an irreversible despair?

Let us regain hope! Let us hope that we can restore our commitment to virtues such as justice and compassion. Let us hope that we can share our successes with those different from ourselves. Let us hope that all people of faith and goodwill can come together to strengthen each other and our mutual commitment to the common good.

Peter Marty ends his comments by telling how in the latter part of Nelson Mandela's 27-year imprisonment, he was visited by his daughter and his new granddaughter, who had still not been named. Mandela gave her the name Zaziwe, an African word for hope. Answering the question "Why?" he later wrote, "During all my years in prison, hope never left me."

Marty concludes, "Hope is what sustains us when we're not ready to give up on God beaming light into our darkness."

As people of faith, as well as anyone seeking the common good, let us fight against despair, both personal and corporate. Let us renew our hope. Only in the difficult task of working together can we take the necessary action to restore our common sense of well-being and do what is right for all.

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