

Christian Hope at the Brink of Environmental Collapse

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Pilgrims of Hope Series

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Our ecological predicament is distressing.

- If you are feeling stressed or sad, it is OK to step out and/or take a break.
- We will pause to recollect and center ourselves once or twice, and I'll invite you to talk over a few things with folks sitting near you.
- This session probably won't make you feel cheerful and lighthearted, but I hope you are able to leave feeling purposeful, connected to good resources, and empowered!



Session outline

Introductions

Our current predicament

The Bible: hope in terrible times – not tame optimism

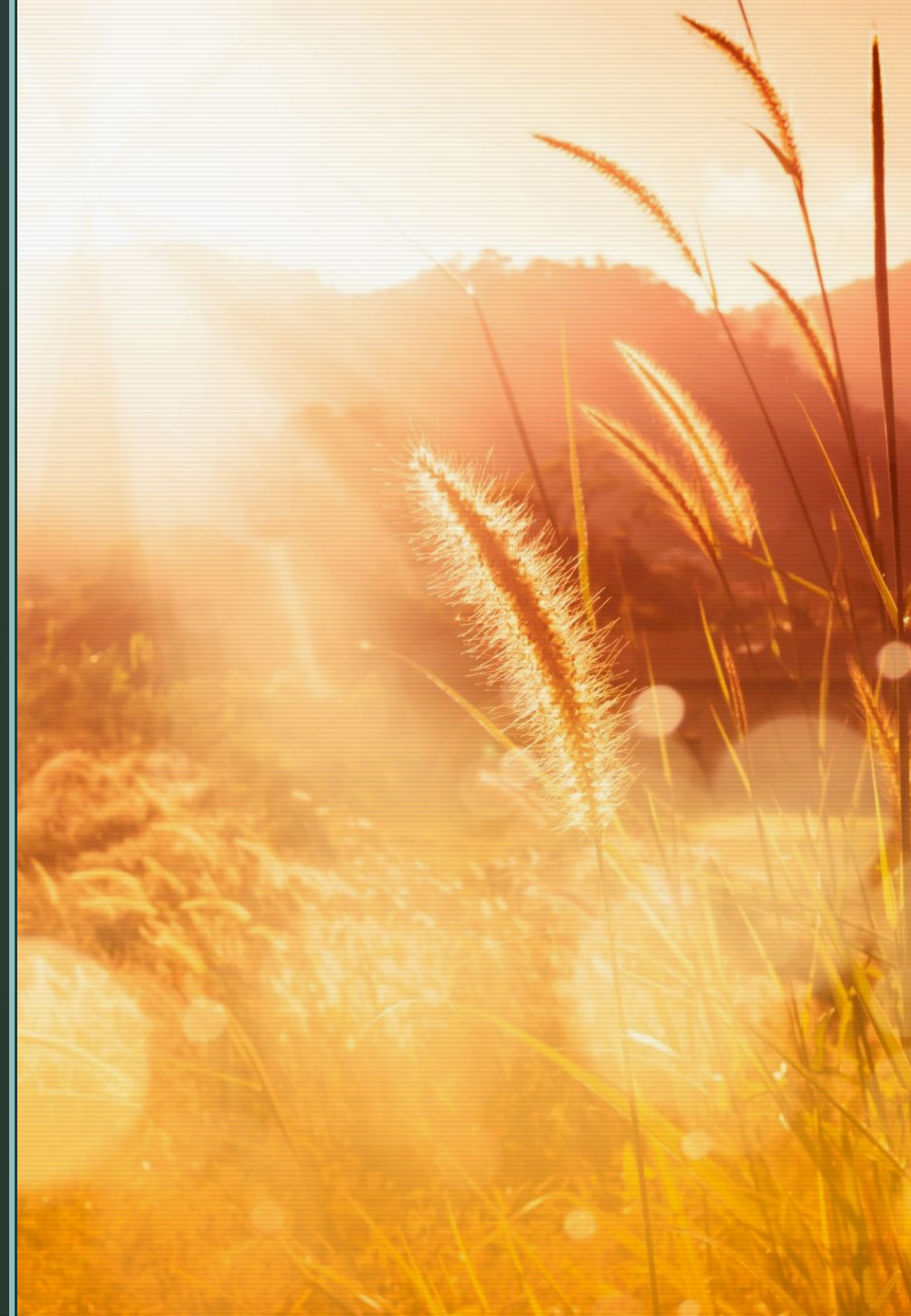
The virtue of hope in Catholic tradition

The wisdom of our faith: being a creature, the cross, Resurrection, the Holy Spirit

“Hope is a discipline”: Christian practices for Earth’s next chapter

Introductions

- Introduce yourself to someone sitting near you who you do not already know very well
- Share with them a 1-minute memory of a positive experience you've had in nature



Why did we do that?

- We remember the beautiful world that we love and want to protect
- We connect to each other
- These actions give us energy for the work ahead



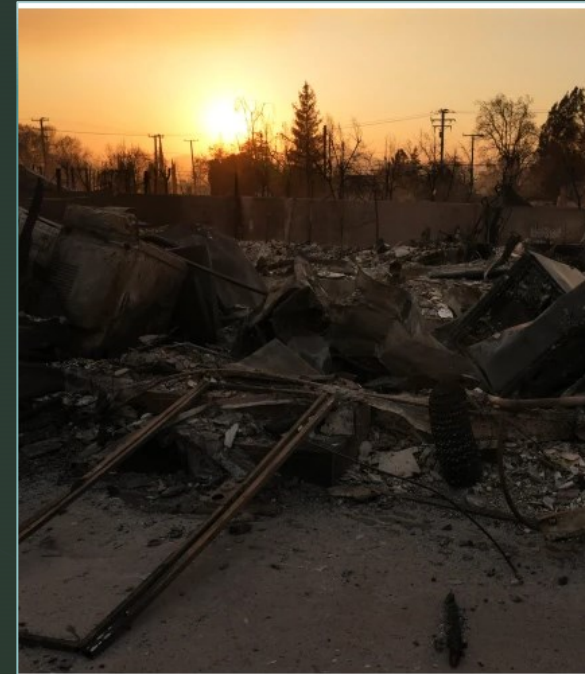
Our current predicament

- Each of us knows something about the ecological disruptions that threaten life on Earth as we know it
- Take a few minutes to share with those sitting near you – what are some of the crises we face?
- These can include the natural world as well as political, social, and economic systems



Systemic, interconnected crises

- Climate-related disasters, water scarcity, pollution, mass extinctions
- Social instability as more people scramble for dwindling resources; migration as people seek safety
- Control of technological & economic power by relatively few, with little accountability
- Economics built on extraction, consumption, and endless “growth”
- Lack of confidence in institutions and leadership
- . . . To name just a few issues



on the ruins of a house after it was destroyed by the Eaton Fire. Jan. 9, 2025. in Alt

Photo: remains of a house in Altadena, CA. From the Associated Press.



What does the future hold?

- One thing is certain: hard times are coming.

- ▶ Four possible scenarios from Brian D. McLaren, *After Doom* (2024)

Collapse Avoidance

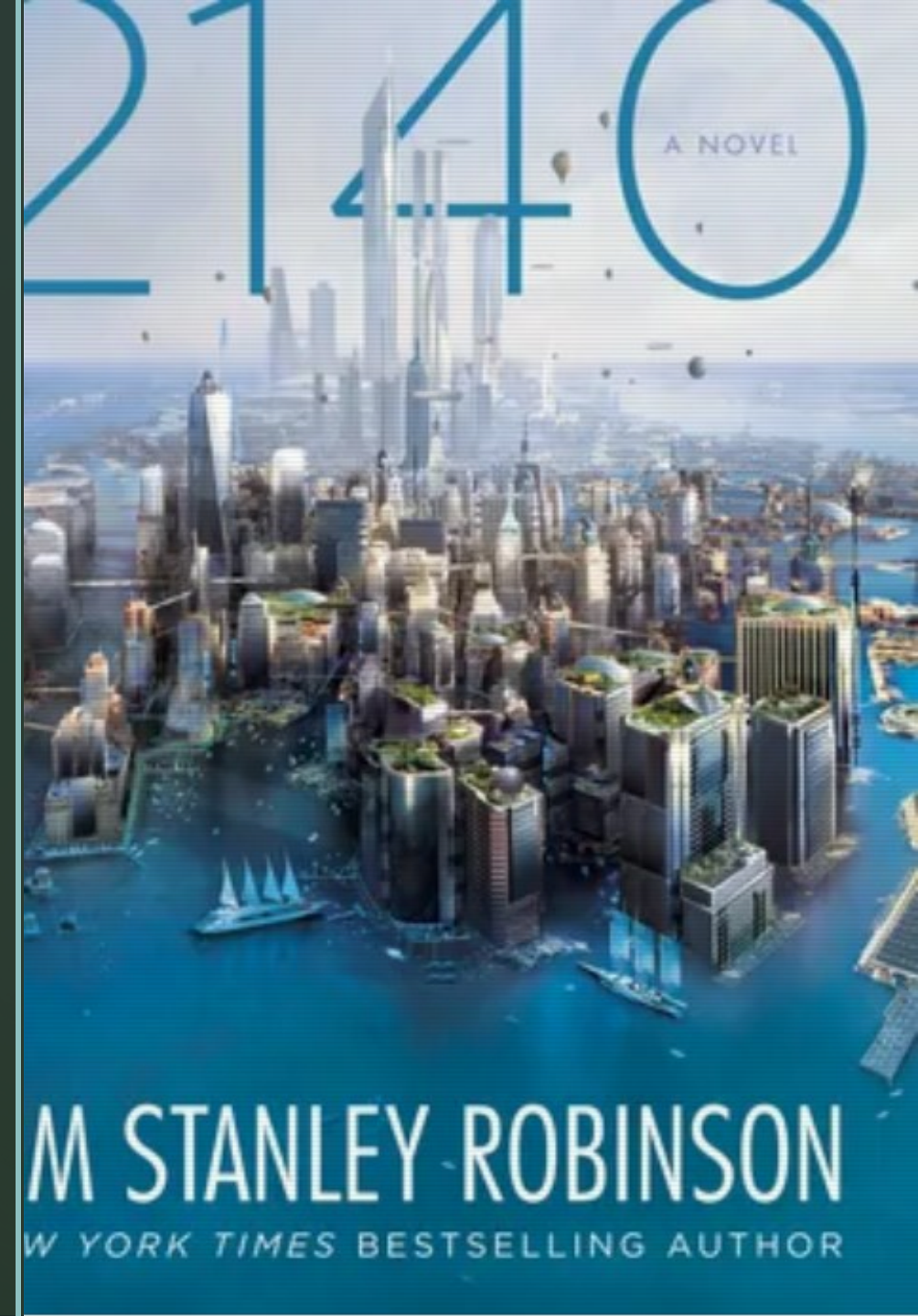
Collapse/Rebirth

Collapse/Survival

Collapse/Extinction

The **best-case** scenario: Collapse Avoidance

- Our downward spiral of mutual destabilization (ecosystems and civilization) continues
- Enough people “will wake up and respond with sufficient urgency, unity, and wisdom” to transform and “learn to live within environmental limits”
- However, “we will face many turbulent decades . . . before reaching a new, sustainable normal” (McLaren, 27)



Let us sit with the seriousness of our situation for a moment.

Take time to recollect yourself. Take a breath.

Notice what is happening in your body when you consider that life as we know it will not be the same.

“Our goal is not to amass information or to satisfy curiosity, but rather to become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”

- *Laudato Si'* 19



The Bible: hope in terrible times

- Most of the Hebrew Bible was written in the shadow of the Babylonian Exile, an unparalleled disaster for ancient Israel
- The Gospels were written during Roman occupation, after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple
- Example: the Visitation and Canticle of Mary (Luke 1:39-56)



Biblical hope vs. tame optimism

- Optimism lulls me into complacency– “everything will work out OK”
- “Discoveries in science and technology will save us”
 - Ignores the deep social inequalities and unintended consequences of science & technology
 - While there is much good in these fields, they are not a magic “fix” – they must be used within a new cultural revolution (*LS 102-114*)
 - Tame optimism cannot challenge the destructive tendencies of our civilization
 - Do not domesticate hope!



What is hope, according to Catholic tradition (Aquinas)?

- Hope as virtue or strength (*Summa theologiae*, I.II. Q55 a. 4)
 - A virtue is a stable “habit of the mind”
 - A virtue enables us to **will -- to choose** paths toward a good
 - Hope is a *theological* virtue: given by God’s grace, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit
 - Do you notice how this sounds different from our usual ideas about hope?

Hope's object or goal

- The virtue of hope is directed toward something that is:
 - Good
 - Future - not yet possessed
 - Difficult to obtain
 - But possible
 - *Summa Theologiae* I-II, Q40 A1 and II-II, Q 17 A1





How does the virtue of hope work?

- “The virtue of hope sustains our intention for an end that is difficult to attain (friendship with God or just relations with others)” by looking to a helper who can assist.
- We are strengthened in the face of difficulties that might cause us to despair or give up. **Hope motivates.**
- “When we hope properly in God or neighbor, we already begin to participate in the very community we are hoping for.”
- God-given hope strengthens us to avoid both over-confidence and despair

(Lamb, 2016)

Hope informed by wisdom

- Hope empowers us to look for help from God and each other, to attain good things that are difficult to get
- Knowing what to want requires the gifts of the Holy Spirit – especially wisdom (*Summa theologiae* II.II Q45 A2-3)
- What may we hope for? What does the wisdom of our faith tell us?
- Let's consider the wisdom of creation, the cross, Resurrection, and the work of the Holy Spirit in us



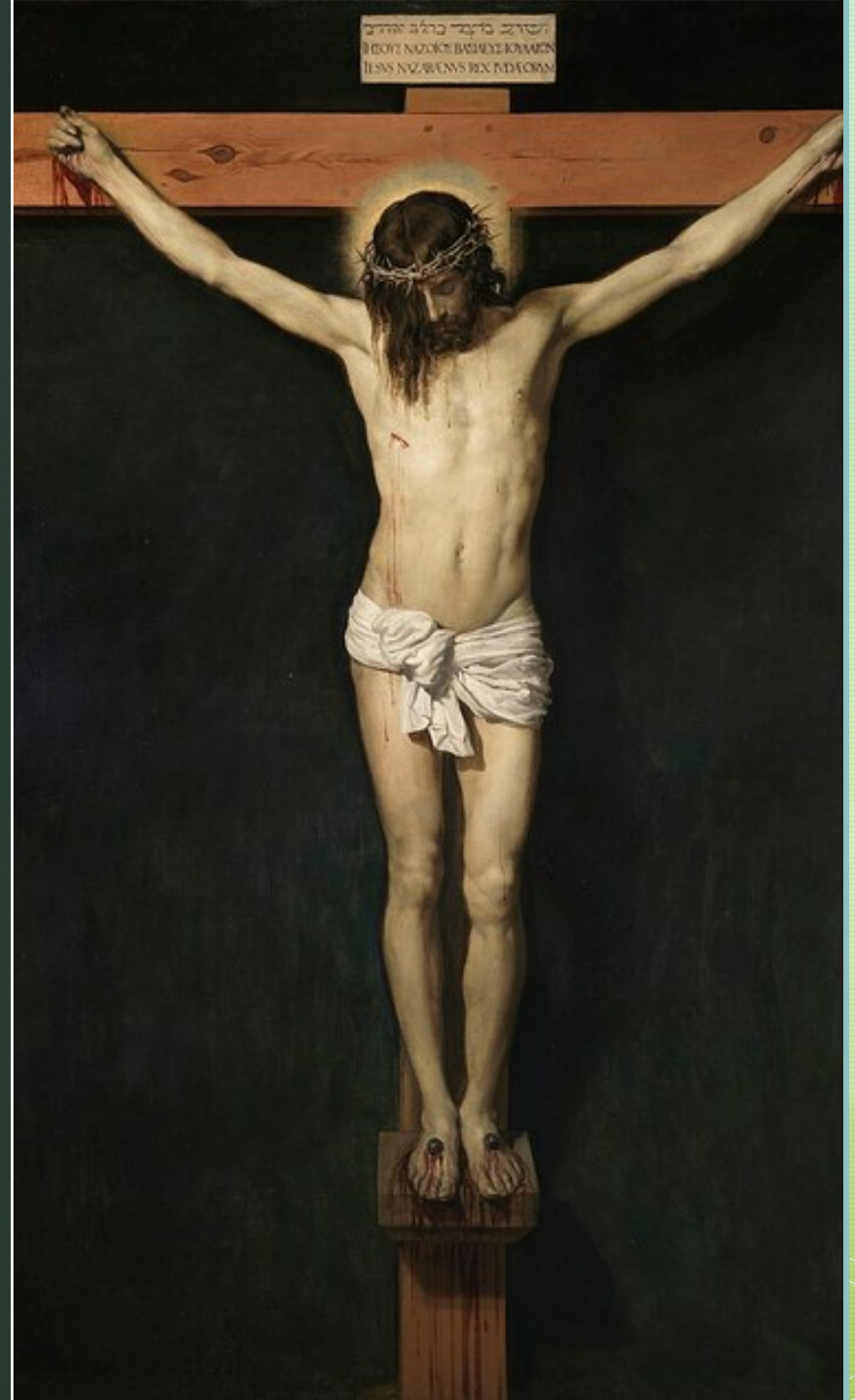


Embrace creaturely limits

- We are profoundly good (Gen 1:31), and we are not God.
- No creature, no civilization, lasts forever.
- This wisdom can free us to live into the future with trust, letting go of defensiveness and fear.
- “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:21).

The cross

- Jesus shows us the way to respond to overwhelming evil: keep loving, even your enemies
- Jesus did not avoid suffering and death
- Jesus embodies God's solidarity with the world's suffering, and we are called to practice solidarity, too



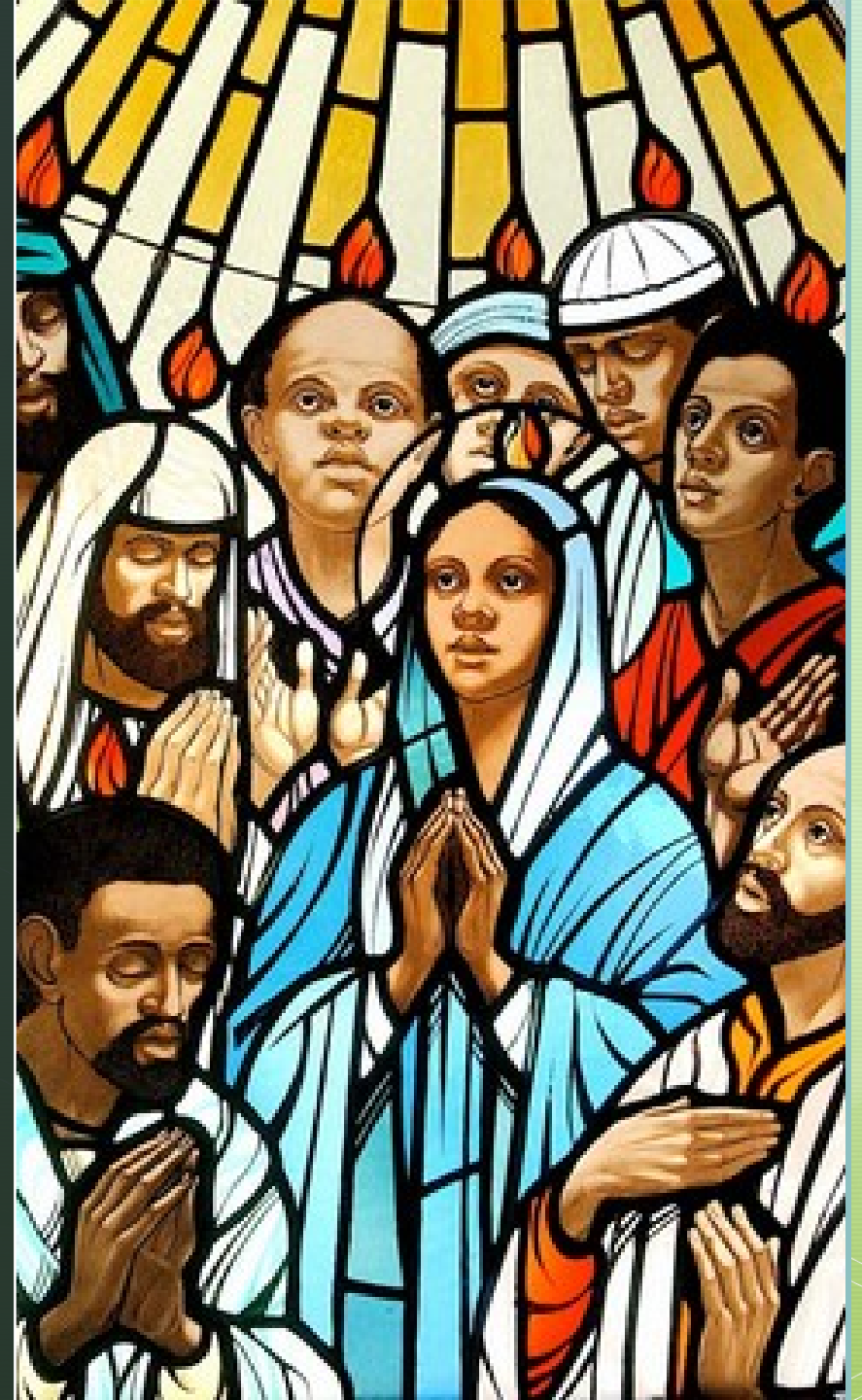
Resurrection

- The Resurrection teaches us that death is not the end
- Amidst our global turmoil, what new thing might God bring about?



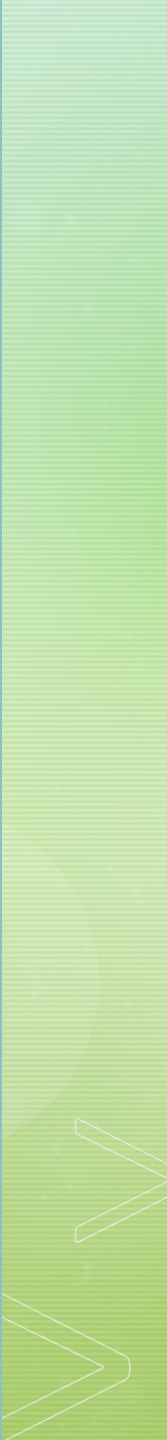
The work of the Holy Spirit in us

- “for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.” – 2 Tim 1:7
- The Holy Spirit is the same Spirit that indwells Jesus. The Holy Spirit in us equips us to think, feel, and act like Jesus!
- Gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, strength/fortitude, counsel, piety, awe/reverence
- Given to us as a community
- How might we respond to our ecological crises as Jesus would, as his body?





To sum up: our ecological hope is:

- Grounded in our being as creatures dependent on God
 - Committed to a path of love that seeks solidarity with those who suffer (human and others)
 - Open to new life beyond death and destruction
 - Empowered to act like Jesus -- together
- 

A “feral hope” is . . .

- Not the tame hope of optimism or “progress”
- *Radical*, “directed toward a future goodness” we can’t fully envision yet
- *Active*, seeing present reality clearly and taking steps toward the good as far as we can see it
- Able to remember, mourn, and feel grief & rage – the opposite of complacency and apathy

(Sanders, 2024)

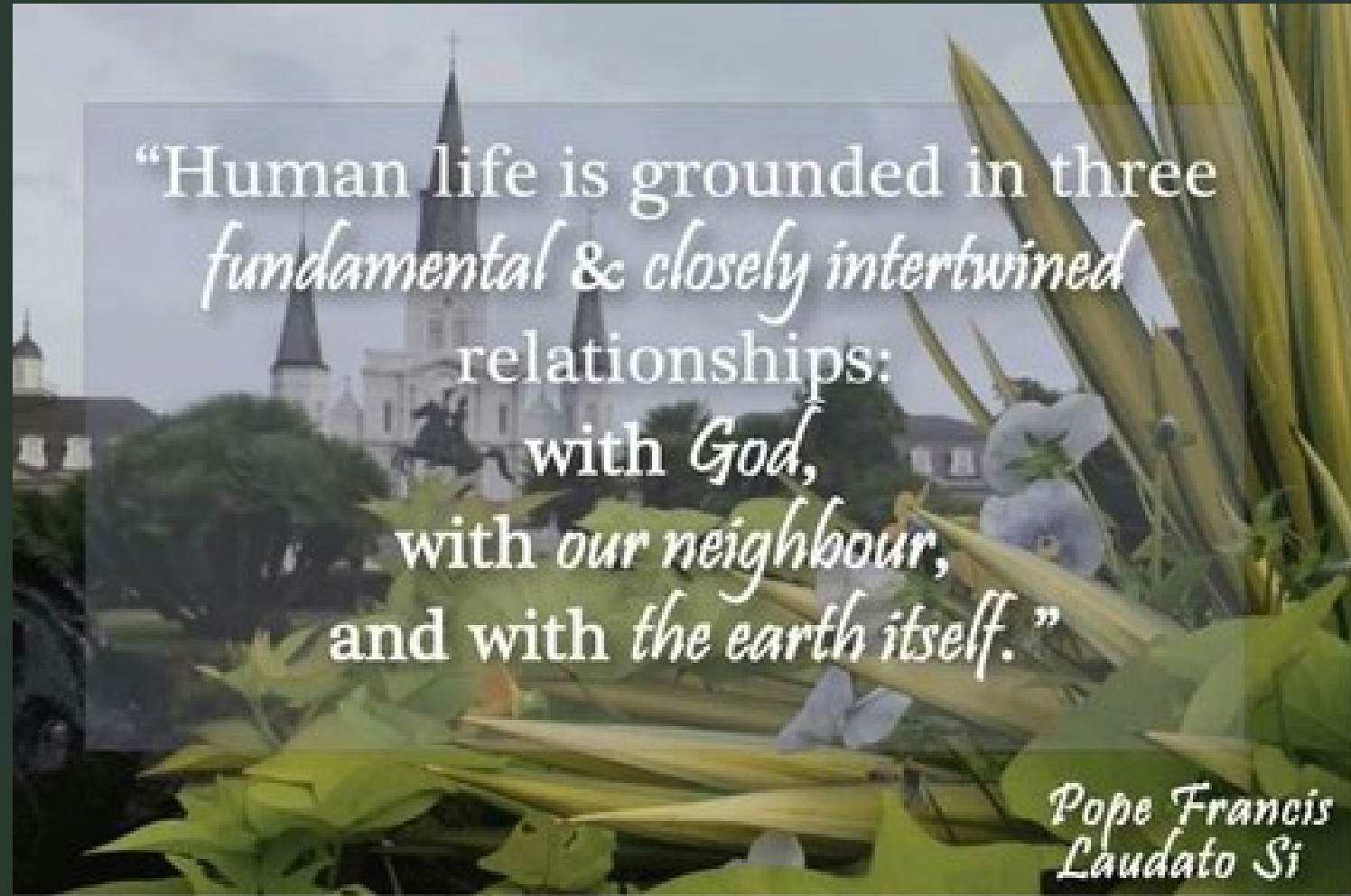


“Hope is a discipline” – Mariame Kaba

“To practice active hope, we do not need to believe that everything will work out in the end. We need only decide who we are choosing to be and how we are choosing to function in relation to the outcome we desire, and abide by what those decisions demand of us.” – Hayes & Kaba, 2023



Christian practices of hope for Earth's next chapter: cultivating relationships



Sacramental life includes all three relationships



- “Through our worship of God [in the sacraments], we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colors are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise.” (LS 235)
- “. . . gathering around the table of grace for the communion meal binds us to one another in community across time and space, even as it turns us toward the dimension of transcendence and roots us in the goodness of the earth in gifts of bread and wine.” (Sanders, 2024)
- If the Eucharist is a foretaste of God’s reign, how does it help us to envision a hopeful future? How is it “practice” for the world we want to live in?

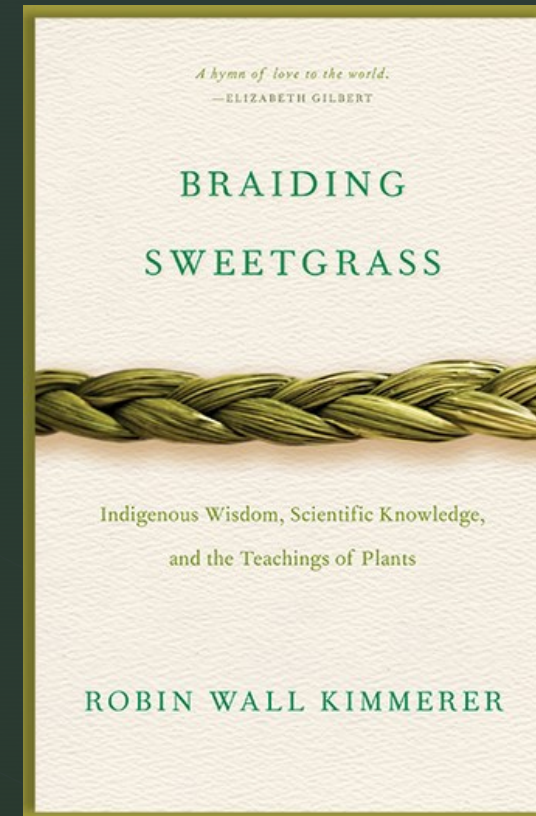
Build relationships of trust and care across diverse communities

- The word “Catholic” can be translated as “universal,” but its literal meaning is “according to the whole” (*kata + holos*)
- As the Church is one body with many members (1 Cor 12:12-27), so also is the human family
- “We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide” (LS 52)



Cultivate solidarity with creation

- "Engage the earth as a relational web rather than a cadre of resources, bespeaking a relationship of belonging. Not the earth belonging to us, but our belonging to the earth." (Sanders, 2024)
- "[A]s part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect." (LS 89)



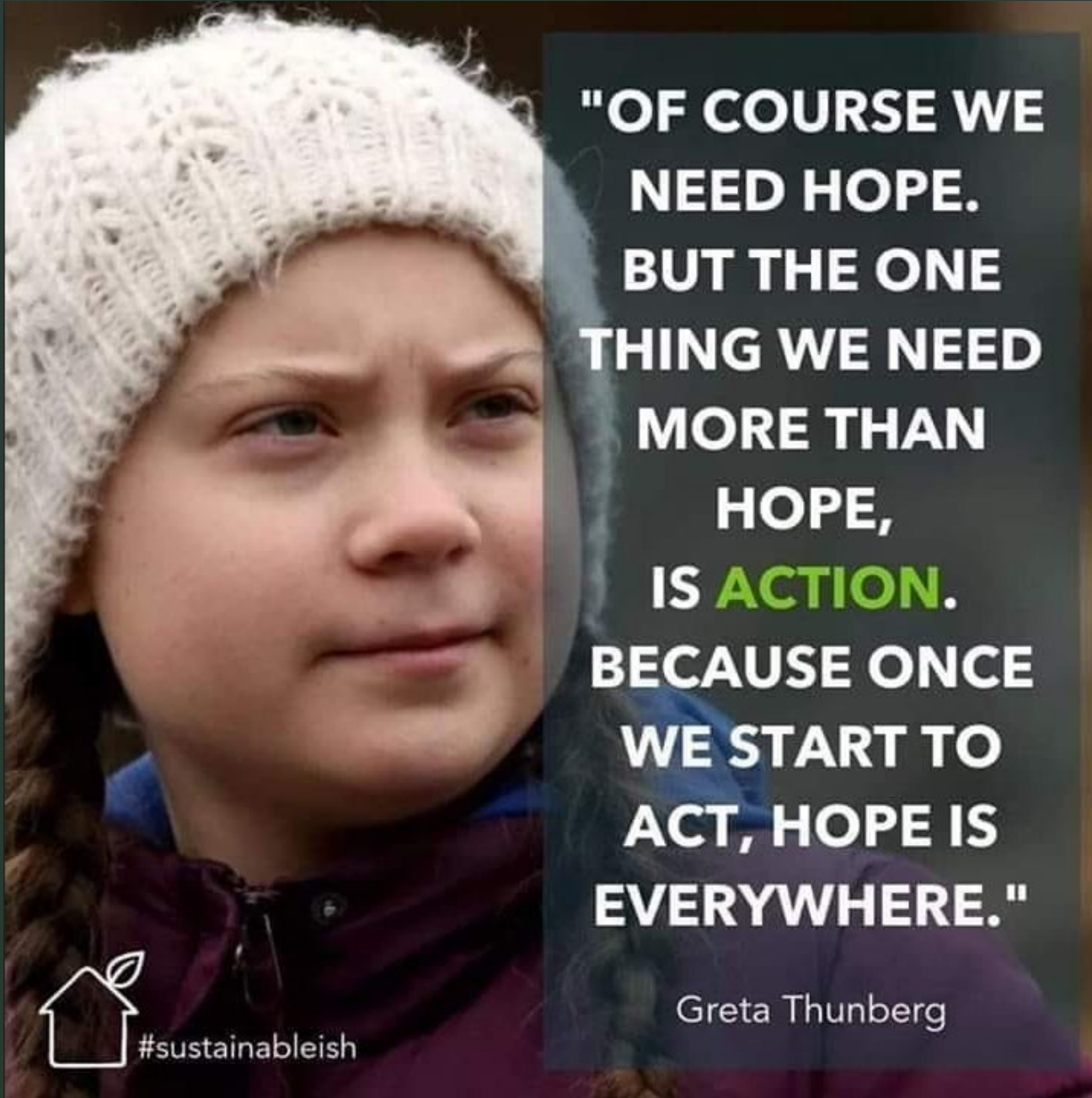
Learn at the feet of indigenous neighbors and support indigenous-led efforts

- “[Indigenous communities] are not merely one minority among others, but should be the principal dialogue partners, especially when large projects affecting their land are proposed. For them, land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God and from their ancestors who rest there, a sacred space with which they need to interact if they are to maintain their identity and values.” (LS, 146)



Help parishes & diocese integrate care for the poor & for creation

- Does the Minnesota Conference of Catholic Bishops regularly make its voice heard on environmental issues before the state legislature?
- Can parishioners help each other stay informed and engaged in political advocacy?
- Do diocesan and parish websites help Catholics find and engage in issues related to creation care, together with the option for the poor?
- Are homilists encouraged to integrate creation care into preaching? Do they help the congregation see connections between ecological and social justice?



**"OF COURSE WE
NEED HOPE.
BUT THE ONE
THING WE NEED
MORE THAN
HOPE,
IS ACTION.
BECAUSE ONCE
WE START TO
ACT, HOPE IS
EVERYWHERE."**

Greta Thunberg



#sustainableish



Discussion

- What ideas has this presentation sparked for you?
- What can this community commit to – immediately, and in the near future?
What efforts are already underway – can you support them?
- Try to form a commitment to a specific action, big or small. Tell each other what you plan to do. Fun fact: telling someone of my intention makes it much more likely I will do it!

Works consulted and cited

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