

HOPE IS NOT A STRATEGY. OR IS IT?

“**H**ope is not a strategy!” That refrain ricocheted across system leadership offices from a tough-as-nails executive, known for her grueling questioning of senior leaders. Parading into the conference room with improvement and growth plans, they often departed dejected.



**DARREN M.
HENSON**

The executive wanted solid evidence that assumptions were accurate, volumes were justified and capital requests would yield positive returns. She grilled leaders and prodded them to go two and three steps further, insisting on data and real-time facts. She rejected half-baked ideas. Anything remotely resembling the saying, “If we build it, they will come,” received the dreaded retort, “Hope is not a strategy!”

Hope may not play well in high-stakes operational meetings with tensions akin to entrepreneurs before a panel of notable venture capitalists on the TV show *Shark Tank*. Even so, it is a key strategy — or, rather, foundational to the spiritual life and a distinguishing mark of the Christian community. It is a prominent thread woven throughout the Christian tradition. It pops up across the scriptures and quite conspicuously in the writings of St. Paul’s letters to the earliest communities of believers. To the Hebrews, he posits hope in God’s promise as an anchor for the soul (1 Corinthians 6:19). To the Romans, he encourages their lives to overflow with hope (Romans 15:13). And to the Thessalonians, he inspires them not to grieve like others who do not have hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

Pope Francis pulls this thread from the tradition and hoists hope as the signature theme for the Jubilee Year 2025. Every quarter century, Roman Catholics mark the passage with a jubilee and an accompanying theme designated by the pontiff, in a practice stretching back to 1300. Against a

backdrop of a world in tumult, Francis announced the Jubilee stating, “Everyone knows what it is to hope. In the heart of each person, hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring.”¹

JUBILEE OF HOPE AND THE CATHOLIC HEALING MINISTRY

This Jubilee provides at least four points of intersection for leaders of Catholic health care. First, hope is the desire and expectation of good things to come. It is an attentiveness, even a daily practice of mindful observation, of our desires that lead us to God, the source of all good things. Every leader desires good things for our ministries. Our desire for good outcomes and our expectation of higher quality or improved results or patient satisfaction scores are all fruits of human hope.

Francis’ letter suggests we walk into strategy meetings not just with slides and spreadsheets, but with the gifts that God has given us. The gifts

Our desire for good outcomes and our expectation of higher quality or improved results or patient satisfaction scores are all fruits of human hope.

of intellect, insight, expertise and vision flow from God the Creator. Even given the challenges and obstacles of health care delivery and financing, the Spirit of God is urging us to recognize the tremendous giftedness endowed to us, especially the holistic vision Catholic health care offers.

Second, Francis writes that we “should be at the forefront in pointing out the need for a social covenant to support and foster hope, one that is

inclusive and not ideological.”² This is a signature of Catholic health care, particularly in light of our community health and benefit activities.

Our partnerships are more than just good ideas and strategies that effectively address community health needs assessments. They are, in fact, actions that witness this social covenant to foster hope, particularly among populations whose conditions and situations may cause them to find hope fleeting. The pope’s vision that the Christian community is foremost in fostering social hope gives our ministries renewed confidence in our community partnerships and health strategies.

Third, Francis specifically articulates the Christian responsibility to offer hope to the sick, whether in our facilities or in their homes. He urges special effort to extend hope to the aging, who frequently feel abandoned and lonely. He also calls us to offer “tangible signs of hope” to persons with disabilities, migrants, exiles, refugees and the young, “for they are the joy and hope of the Church and of the world!”³

For Catholic health care leaders, these ordinary activities are more than mere leading practices in public and community health. They are signs of a vibrant community acting as Christ for others today.

Fourth, Francis’ calling card has been to befriend and lift up those who are poor. CHA’s public commitment to those who are poor and vulnerable, enshrined in our Shared Statement of Identity for the Catholic Health Ministry, shares the pontiff’s heartfelt concern and love. This jubilee year offers Catholic health care the occasion to revisit this part of our identity with renewed focus.

In addition to the clinical, social and behavioral services we offer in solidarity with those who are poor, we can add hope to the top of our efforts this year. “I ask with all my heart that hope be granted to the billions of the poor, who often lack the essentials of life. ... [W]e can easily grow injured and resigned. Yet we must not close our eyes to the dramatic situations that we now encounter all around us ... Let us not forget: the poor are almost always the victims, not the ones to blame.”⁴

HOPE: A FRUIT OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

When St. Thomas Aquinas discussed hope in his extensive reflections on the virtues, he described it as a habit of the mind that is oriented toward a future good. Although it may be difficult, it is possible to obtain.⁵ This implies a degree of intention, focus and especially effort.

Our human efforts to be a wellspring of hope wane from day to day, week to week and project to project. Hope is not just a download permanently cached into our brains or being, and forevermore accessible. Hope is a gift from grace, mixed with our own exertion. We unlock and access it through our spiritual practices.

**Hope is not just a download
permanently cached into our brains
or being, and forevermore accessible.
Hope is a gift from grace, mixed with
our own exertion. We unlock and access
it through our spiritual practices.**

When Pope Benedict XVI wrote an encyclical letter on hope, he described prayer as the school of hope. Prayer is an action through which we commune with God in light of our own lives and current-day realities. Referencing Sts. Augustine and Paul, he noticed how hope entailed a straining toward things yet to come.

Cultivating hope entails preparing one’s heart to be enlarged and filled by God. Hence, prayer that fosters hope entails loosening our attachments and seeking the grace of God to soften and expand our hearts.⁶ Moreover, hope is nourished by prayer in the sense that when others no longer listen, God always awaits us in our prayer. And this, if nothing else, is the seed of hope.

A second spiritual practice is cultivating awareness of things for which we hope. Paying attention to longings and desires will lead to clarity on the things for which we hope. Routinely list the things you hope for. In this process, we will inevitably discover that some things that we hope for do not truly merit our attention. There are things of greater value to hope for.

Lastly, reading the scriptures or other sacred

texts, stories or poetry can shape our longing for what matters most. The scriptures reveal to us time and again a vision of the reign of God, where human flourishing will find its fullest expression. This becomes the fuel of human hope.

SUGGESTIONS FOR HOPE-FILLED PRAYER

This Jubilee Year 2025, I find myself wondering about things to hope for as they relate to enlivening Jesus' healing ministry today.

First, I hope that our zeal and love for our work in Catholic health care will grow, particularly as lay people are called to lead works of the Church. I pray that in time, the wider Church, and indeed all in society, will see our dedication as authentic and inspiring as it was when sisters nearly exclusively led our ministries.

Second, I hope the movement toward a synodal church will set root, first within each of us. This means genuinely seeing ourselves, individually and communally, as the living presence of the Risen Lord. This also means loosening mental attachments to portraying church primarily as something done by priests and bishops. When imagining church as a community of disciples, everyone has an integral role grounded in the image of God.

Third, I hope CHA sees the fruits of our labors in enacting the tactics enumerated in our strategic plan. This means that the building blocks of the reign of God are cemented into the structures of care and its provision of affordable and equitable access.

Fourth, I hope that every individual who seeks care from our ministries has an experience of being heard and accepted, cared for and deeply loved. I hope that every older adult living in a Catholic home for seniors shall know that he or she is cherished and invaluable, even as human

frailty and chronic conditions progress. I hope that the person burdened for years by mental health complications feels validated, seen and supported by our ministries. Ultimately, I hope that everyone who comes to a CHA ministry will find Christ welcoming them, embracing them and confidently sending them forth from an experience of healing — however simple or profound the gesture, treatment or intervention may be.

Lastly, I offer a postscript to the executive leader whose comment, "Hope is not a strategy!" sent a chill across a system's operations. Understandably, she was exasperated by strategies she found lacking. The irony is that hope is inextricably intertwined with every strategy. Everyone knows what it is to hope — even that shrewd executive leader. "[A]nd hope does not disappoint." (Romans 5:5)

DARREN M. HENSON, PhD, STL, is senior director of ministry formation at the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

NOTES

1. Pope Francis, "*Spes Non Confundit*, Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025," The Holy See, section 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_spes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html.
2. Francis, "*Spes Non Confundit*," section 9.
3. Francis, "*Spes Non Confundit*," sections 10 and 12.
4. Francis, "*Spes Non Confundit*," section 15.
5. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, question 17, article 1.
6. Pope Benedict XVI, "*Spe Salvi*, Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope," The Holy See, sections 33-34, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, Winter 2025, Vol. 106, No. 1
Copyright © 2025 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
