Austen Ivereigh, Remarks, Belfast Jesuit Centre, 31 May 2025

‘On being Pilgrims of Hope’

The hope that does not disappoint (Rom 5:5) is not confidence in something that will happen, but in what has happened already: Jesus Christ’s dying and rising, proof of the unconditional love of God for us, from which — we now know — nothing can separate us (Rom 8:38-39).

Knowledge of this doesn’t remove suffering and struggle from life, but gives these meaning. The restless heart (cor inquietam) of which St Augustine famously spoke is a sign that we need love, and are looking for it; and what we know is that God is waiting to respond, to give it to us. The struggle, as Francis says in the prologue to First Belong to God, is “to overcome the temptation of closing in on ourselves, so that the love of the Father can make its home in us.” But it is a journey undertaken in sure hope, for that what is sought, can be found; what we search for can be discovered. The struggle is worth it. In it we find ourselves and create a future for others.

The other part of this story, of course, is our radical dependence on God. Christian hope is never individualistic or self-centred. We need others, we need prayer, we need faith and the support of our communities to “come out of ourselves”, overcoming the fear and egotism that keep us trapped and paralyzed.[1]

I’ve learned a lot from Pope Francis about hope, and I’d like to share some of his lessons, in three areas.

The first is in the attitude we need faced with rapid historical change, such as the times we are in.

The second is the practical method we can use for discernment — and here I’ll draw on Let Us Dream, and the contemplate-discern-propose method.

Finally, I’ll offer some reflections on patience, or patientia, which so characterized the early Church — the capacity to suffer in confident expectation of God’s action — and which Francis stressed as key to hope.

[1] Pope Francis, Lent message for 2025.

1. Responding to change

The attitude we need faced with times of rapid historical change, such as our own, was described by Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio in a 2000 speech to educators in Buenos Aires.[2] It was on the theme of hope at a time of what he called "epochal change". His approach would later be developed by the Latin-American bishops when they met in Aparecida, Brazil, in May 2007 to discern the signs of the times. They spoke there too of *el cambio de época*, the change of era.

Bergoglio's speech was about the stance the Gospel matrix calls us to adopt, the same matrix that Pope Francis, and now Pope Leo, are inviting us to enter 25 years later, in this Jubilee year. It is an attitude of heart and mind founded on a spirituality of Christian hope, which Bergoglio called the "way of discernment". Before explaining it, he first identified two responses that lack such spirituality of hope. They are self-sufficient ways of thinking, incapable of discernment. Both represent the "temptation of closing in on ourselves", shutting out God; and in the process they deny our own agency.

The first is **naive optimism**, or progressivism. This was to put faith in change itself, to see all development per se as progress, such that, even when it creates negative effects, this will get sorted somehow. When new technology brings problems as well as benefits, the assumption is that a technological fix will provide the solution. Naive optimism assigns moral agency to impersonal, indeterminate forces, creating an idol, a Deus ex machina, which demands of us passive acquiescence. Trust in technology, or the free market, or the state, or the messiah of the day, and all will finally work out fine.

Bergoglio notes that naive optimism starts from an untrue account of humanity, one that ignores its limits and sinfulness. (The myth of progress is above all a creature of the Enlightenment, a time, like our own, of rapid scientific advance and flourishing of reason). The optimistic view of humanity is that problems can be solved by improved technology, ever more unshackled markets, ever greater freedom and autonomy. What holds us back, in other words, are barriers to our sovereignty and agency that need to come down. Yet experience shows humanity is not on an inevitable upward curve; it has often chosen self-destructive, irrational paths. Technology and power can bring catastrophe; free markets have produced greater inequality alongside great wealth; autonomy and sovereignty can deepen misery. Just look at the ecological crisis produced

[2] 'Ser portadores de esperanza', Message to educators, in Jorge M. Bergoglio, *La esperanza nunca defrauda* (Bs As: Claretianas, 2014).

by massive consumption mostly in one part of the world, and the catastrophic impact on species of climate change induced by breakneck economic growth and industrial farming.

Bergoglio identifies the second non-discerning attitude to historical change as **apocalyptic pessimism**. If naive optimists see change as progress, the pessimists start from the assumption that is the opposite is true. Change must be resisted, for no good can come of it; better to cling to what has been, and hunker down with others who share the same view. This is the closed, defeatist, sceptical stance that relies on an untruth as great as that of optimism: that "nothing can be done to avoid the catastrophe — except to entrench oneself in the ever-shrinking nucleus of the 'pure'."

Again, what is striking is the lack of agency this attitude assigns to humanity. Like the optimists, the pessimists are passive faced with change, but rather than blind faith they prefer the beleagured stance and bunker mentality of those who everywhere see conspiracies and catastrophes.

While dressed often in the clothes of religion and tradition, apocalyptic pessimists are in reality as wordly as the optimists. For just as the optimists put their faith in impersonal forces (progress, technology, the market, etc.) the pessimists idolize structures, institutions, traditions and laws. They put no faith in the possibilities of human freedom, and in practice distrust God's freedom to act in history. They deny in practice the Incarnation. Although Bergoglio does not cite him in his speech, it is worth adding that these two "non-discerning" stances correlate to St Thomas Aquinas's classification of the two sins of presumption and despair, both of which break the relationship with our Creator. Despair (pessimism) refuses the possibility of salvation which Jesus has won for us, while presumption (optimism) refuses the means of that salvation, namely repentance and union with the Holy Spirit.[3]

It is this path of salvation, the one that opens us up the action of the Spirit, that Bergoglio offers us in what he calls **"the way of discernment"**. The way of discernment departs radically from both, for it includes the reality of God's grace acting in history. Discernment is what allows us not just to see but also to receive that grace: it's not just an intellectual apprehension, but a criterion of our action.

Discernment takes into account the horizon changed by the Incarnation, the Cross and above all the Resurrection, which" has already inaugurated the Kingdom of God among us," says Bergoglio. History has an end and a meaning; there is an arc; and all developments can be measured against that meaning and that end. God's purpose, which is always at work "transforming and directing history itself towards its fulfilment in

[3] cf. Andrew Pinsent, 'Hope as a virtue in the Middle Ages', in Steven C. van den Heuvel (ed.) *Historical and Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Hope* (Springer: open access ebook, 2020), p. 51

justice, peace and communion of men among themselves and with God, in a transfigured future world." The arc of history, in short, bends towards communion – a future of fraternity, justice and peace; and what bends it is God's spirit acting in human hearts. This may be impossible to see in the moment, and it's not a facile upward curve of "progress". Like Jesus's story of the seed that grows by itself (Mk 4:26-29), the transformation is often or mostly hidden to our eyes. The seed dies, just as human life ends in the apparent failure of death; yet the truth revealed by Christ's resurrection is that what follows is fruitful life.

Discernment allows us to glimpse this "arc" and to cooperate with it. It is to see that God's loving purpose is worked out in the transfiguration of human lives, that is, wherever freedom and dignity are promoted and the poor and sick and marginalized are made welcome and healed. Such acts may appear to make little difference to the world compared with the spectacular acts of power and destruction that dominate our news, but working for the good "is not wasted time," as Bergoglio told the educators, for "everything that is in line with the Kingdom, with truth, freedom, justice and fraternity, will be taken up and fulfilled." Both the work of our hands and of our hearts "will endure in a way we could not imagine" when it is aligned with the Gospel matrix; conversely, "whatever is opposed to that Kingdom, in addition to having its days numbered, will be definitively discarded. It will not be part of the New Creation."

All of this is hard to see, of course, because it happens mostly off-radar, in humility, and so is ignored by the world's view of power. But faith practices — contemplation, prayer, liturgy, commmunity — allow us to grasp this authentic horizon against which our decisions and actions, however humdrum or everyday, take place; and, by understanding how God acts and operates — emulating what Francis calls "God's style" — we align these with God's purpose. This emulation, or response, is what gives us agency. What God asks of us, Bergoglio told the educators in conclusion, is to be" bold and creative", for "new realities demand new responses." This, he said, was "the real test of our hope".

In other words, our hope is made known and bears fruit in the new responses we give over time to the challenges history throws up, and in this way we do not just stand outside history — passively optimistic or pessimistic, or perhaps swinging between the two — but enter into it, as God's partners, acting as God does, humbly and discreetly, in ways that do not make headlines but bring about the real, lasting change that reflects God's redeeming power. That power can be recognized both by the manner it is exercised, and by the disparity between the poverty of means and the richness of its fruits. The Kingdom is established not by power or coercion. "Meekness is its means of propagation", said Pope Francis of the Kingdom, adding that it "does not love publicity" and "never

appears to have an absolute majority". Yet its effects are multiplied as if by a hidden hand, like those crops that grow from seed in ways we cannot fathom.[4]

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This "way of discernment" has guided Francis's response to whatever history has thrown in his path, whether in the Church or in humanity at large. In each case, the invitation is to discern, "to come out of ourselves"; the temptation is not to discern, to "close in on ourselves". Refusal to discern is a form of closure, of wordly self-sufficiency, in either its optimistic or pessimistic forms.

I have written much about the meeting of Latin-American bishops at Aparecida in May 2007, whose leading light was then-Cardinal Bergoglio. At that meeting, the way of discernment was applied to secularization, allowing the bishops to grasp that the Church was being incarnated afresh in a post-Christendom context, and that operating without the support of law and culture, in which faith spreads through contagion and encounter, was a kind of purification — an invitation to conversion. Christianity was not in decline, but undergoing a profound transformation. In this case the major temptation was the pessimistic one, to lament and condemn secularization, and to seek to combat it, either through retreat (traditionalism) or aggression (culture-war Catholicism). Instead the bishops opted to ask themselves what the Holy Spirit was asking of the Church: what attachments did it need to abandon, and what new heart and mind was it called to embrace? How must the Church change in order to offer afresh the Gospel in this new context?

In *Wounded Shepherd* I call this the choice to "discern and reform" rather than "lament and condemn". Speaking to the Church in Quebec in 2022, Francis called for this same stance when he contrasted the "negative view" of secularization with the "discerning view", noting how the first denied the Incarnation. The discerning view, he said, allowed the Church to see that culture-war Catholicism was tantamount to a clinging to power and prestige, an unhealthy attachment that the Church in this new, apostolic age was being asked to abandon.[5]

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[4] On this, see Austen Ivereigh, *First Belong to God: On Retreat with Pope Francis* (Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2024) esp. pp 78-84.

[5] Pope Francis, Vespers in the Basilica of Notre-Dame de Québec, 28 July, 2022. On Aparecida: Austen Ivereigh, *Wounded Shepherd: Pope Francis and his struggle to convert the Catholic Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 2019), ch. 6.

A second example was Pope Francis's response to the challenge of artificial intelligence, which has been a major focus of the Vatican since 2021, a focus which Leo XIV has already indicated he will take up into the Church's social teaching. In many documents, Francis has spelled out the two major temptations — the techno-optimist, and the pessimistic — that prevent a discernment, warning both against rejecting what was new in a doomed attempt to preserve a world condemned to disappear, and against regarding AI as an impersonal, disembodied force which we should simply accept.[6]

In this case, the greater temptation is the latter, for the rapidity of AI's development and the huge economic forces invested in it are likely to produce in us a sense of powerlessness. Artificial intelligence, he said, "ought to serve our best human potential and our highest aspirations, not compete with them." Set against the horizon of history — the working out of the Kingdom over time – AI's fruits will be positive when placed at the service of the integral development of people and communities, but disastrous in so far as they unleash the lust for profit and power. The challenge is stark: will we master AI to serve our ends, or renounce our agency?

Francis observes that the test of that question of human moral agency is the fading of human faces. "It is up to us," he wrote, "whether we will become fodder for algorithms, or we will nourish our hearts with that freedom without which we cannot grow in wisdom." Eligibility for mortgages, jobs and social security will be determined by algorithms that claim to eliminate human bias, yet risk multiplying it because of the data on which they rely. "Fundamental respect for human dignity demands that we refuse to allow the uniqueness of the person to be identified with a set of data," Francis wrote.[7]

2. **The method of hope**

Working with Francis on *Let Us Dream*, his reflections on the Covid crisis, I learned a lot about how hope works in his praxis as Pope.[8] The book is constructed around the classic

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[6] His discernment is well summarized in '*Antiqua et Nova*: Note on the Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and Human Intelligence', Vatican, 14 January 2025.

[7] Francis, 'Artificial Intelligence and Peace', Message for LVII World Day of Peace 2024, issued December 8, 2023. Francis, 'Artificial Intelligence and the Wisdom of the Heart', Message for 58th World Day of Social Communications', January 24, 2024.

[8] Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future. In conversation with Austen Ivereigh* (New York: Siumon & Schuster, 2020).

triad — see, judge, act — or, as he prefers: contemplate-discern-propose. It offers a method we can always use, faced with a situation in our lives or in history, which threatens to paralyze us with fear or a sense of powerlessness. What the method requires is, of course, the horizon of faith that God acts in history, as just outlined. It is a method that allows us to use the way of discernment faced with crisis and change.

(a) **CONTEMPLATE**. Francis quotes the German poet Hölderlin: "Where the danger is, there grows the saving power." To discern where God is acting in a crisis, we must enter the crisis, looking closely at the reality of what is happening: informing ourselves, becoming aware, opening our eyes. The temptation here is to avoid reality; we suffer from an "existential myopia that allows us defensively to select what we see", says Francis. The cause of this not-seeing, this myopia, is something we are holding onto, which we fear to surrender, which might be our own reluctance to act, or our own need of repentance. If indifference is the greatest enemy of hope, distraction is the devil's chief weapon to prevent us seeing where God is acting. It succeeds whenever we avert our gaze from pain, avoid suffering, and flee poverty. How do we combat that temptation? St Ignatius would tell us to *agere contra*, to go purposefully in the opposite direction, by focussing on what we prefer not to see. Francis calls this" going to the margins" or "seeing from the peripheries". It is what Jesus did, both physically — he went among the ordinary, poor folk in the villages of Galilee, avoiding the places and palaces of power — but also in his heart, attentive to the cry of the poor, to those who yearn and grieve. Francis insists that the peripheries are the place from where we see more clearly and fully, where we notice "the things that happen, the feeling of the people, especially the poor." You get a fuller picture with a better lens. This is the "Gospel hermeneutic". It is to look at the world with the heart of the Good Shepherd, with God's own gaze, to see as He sees: a hermeneutic that does not screen out what is weak and poor, but embraces and includes these.

(b) **DISCERN**. When we take in the reality of pain and suffering, the questions arise: what is going on here? Discernment is the ability to distinguish between God's action and what seeks to frustrate that action, that is, the bad spirit. The good and bad spirits are not equal forces. The only authentic power is God's. The divine is the true power because it creates and sustains life, generates hope, builds people up, forges bonds of belonging. The bad spirit's power can do none of these, but it can distract us away from God's power by causing us to doubt it, usually in naive optimism (assuming someone somewhere will sort it) or apocalyptic pessimism. An unprocessed diet of daily bad news, for example, can lead us to despair, to believe that the only true

power in this world is that which dominates and crushes. So we counter that illusion by getting perspective; we make space, in silence and prayer, for receiving what the good spirit wants to reveal to us — the deeper truth ahout what is happening around us, beyond the headlines. In *Let Us Dream* Francis describes God's action in the midst of crisis and conflict in terms of a surprising gift, such that "the solution to an intractable problem comes in ways that are unexpected or unforeseen, the result of a new and greater creativity released, as it were, from the outside." It is the gift that follows when we lay down our weapons, and choose to dialogue, to negotiate; when we choose to listen to the other; when we hear the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth. Francis uses the metaphor of *el desborde*, "the overflow", because it is like a swollen river bursting its banks, allowing us to transcend the narrow channels of our thinking and to see the bigger reality at stake. Such "overflows of love," said Francis, happen above all in moments of vulnerability and fragility, "when the ocean of His love bursts the dams of our self-sufficiency, and so allows for a new imagination of the possible."

(c) **PROPOSE**. Discernment brings clarity, and reveals what has been hidden. It brings energy and clarity. It shows us a new horizon of possibility, and gives us the zeal to get there. Francis is emphatic about discernment flowing into practical proposals, else it remains an intellectual exercise, and fruitless. The test of our hope, as Bergoglio told the educators, is in our creative responses to new challenges. What are we called to do? How can we act specifically to enable what the Spirit is inviting us to do? "Discerning what is and what is not of God, we begin to see where and how to act," Francis writes in Let Us Dream. "When we find where God's mercy is waiting to overflow, we can open the gates, and work with all people of goodwill to bring about the necessary changes."

3. **Rediscovering patience**

The Church now seems to be entering very rapdily into the new era foreseen by Aparecida: a new "apostolic age" — Halik calls it the "afternoon of Christianity" — in which the Church evangelizes not from a place of prestige and power, but from below, in humility, just as in the first centuries of Christianity.[9] Key to this humility is a confident expectation in God's action in spite of the apparent evidence that the powers of this earth

[9] Tomás Halík, *The Afternoon of Christianity: the Courage to Change* (Univ Notre Dame Press, 2024)

have triumphed. The main inspiration of this attitude, is, of the course the Passion of Christ, through whose suffering and apparent failure God created a new horizon for humanity. From *passio* and *patior* we get *patientia*. In a prologue to a recent book in Spanish reflecting on hope, Francis notes that "patience is not (simply) endurance or perseverance; it is knowing how to suffer well".[10]

In his Jubilee message *Spes Non Confundit* ("Hope does not Disappoint"), Francis describes patience as a fruit of the Holy Spirit and a grace to pray for: it is "both the daughter of hope and at the same time its firm foundation". Our modern understanding of patience makes this difficult to understand: we think of it as uncomplaining resignation — waiting for a bus without stamping our feet. But *patientia* has a much deeper meaning according to an interesting book by Alan Kreider.[11] Patience was a virtue so distinctive and compelling that the first Christian apologetic texts by Tertullian, Origen and Cyprian were dedicated to it. They saw patience as the mindset or culture of the Christian, their habitus, one that intrigued, captivated and scandalised the wider pagan society. *Patientia* was the principal reason for the remarkable expansion-by-contagion of the church in the second and third centuries.

Patience for the early Christian was a way of being: not violent, or vengeful, or anxious, or controlling, but humble, peaceful, forgiving, generous, calm in adversity, confident in God's loving care. It meant turning the other cheek, going the extra mile for others in charity, loving those who persecute you. And all of this in imitation of God himself, the exemplar of patience: God endures selfish, greedy people; shares the goods and wonders of creation with just and unjust alike; attracts not through coercion or persuasion but by means of self-giving, in the Incarnation and then the death and rising of Christ. Jesus is the emblem of God's patience — "patience itself", according to the second-century theologian, Tertullian — who performs God's love and mercy and power but within the little, the local, and the everyday, among the poor and forgotten. Jesus lived patiently, because of his confidence in God's action and care for us, and finally goes to the Cross scorned and spat upon, showing that, says Tertullian, "patience is the very nature of God". St. Paul, too, refers to the "God of all patience and encouragement" (see Romans 15:5). Those who live this way offer their lives to God as a response to his gracious gift of patience with them.

Tertullian says the key to the hope of Christians' patient way of living was precisely the death and resurrection of Christ. Whereas patience is the work of God — the

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[10] Pope Francis, *La Esperanza No Defrauda Nunca*, Hernan Reyes Alcaide (ed.), Mensajero, 2024, p. 16

[11] Alan Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church: the Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Baker Academic, 2016).

"inseparable companion" of the Holy Spirit — impatient actions are hopeless, for they cannot produce what they promise. Back in the 1990s, Bergoglio wrote of Jesus "entering into patience" on the Cross." God makes Himself present in the radical impotence of human means", says Bergoglio. Only when all is lost, his followers have fled, and Jesus has died his cruel death does God intervene with the astonishing power of the Resurrection. The Resurrection is "God's intervention at the point of total impossibility of human hope", by means of which, writes Bergoglio, God "proclaims as Lord the one who accepted the path of failure in order that the power of the Father be revealed and glorified."[12]

Patience is the key to hope, then, for it purifies us of the illusion that all depends on us, and shows us how to depend on God. It teaches us not to lean on success. "Failure is often God's deliverance from the illusion of self-sufficiency, believing more in ourselves than in God," the theologian John Navone SJ writes in a postscript to his *Triumph through Failure*: *A Theology of the Cross*, a book that deeply impacted Bergoglio in his "dark night" in Córdoba in the early 1990s. Those who fear failure and avoid it, trusting in the illusion of self-sufficiency — the drive to legalize assisted suicide is a contemporary example — is the path of mediocrity: for, paradoxically, fear of failure is often succumbing to failure itself. Meanwhile, those with the freedom and vitality to embrace failure, trusting that God will act through it, bringing it to fruition, are the truly fruitful ones. They are willing to work patiently, within limits, without dominating, in partnership with others and with creation, confident that such actions are the seedbed in which God will sow the future.

In prayer and in contemplation we catch glimpses of that force at work in the world. One mark of our growth in spirituality is the deepening of this awareness. We learn, too, that there is no self-transcendence, no exodus, no fruitfulness, unless we can live in hope, meaning a willingness to suffer the pain of failure in expectation of God's action. And that brings us back to the beginning. The good news is that hope is sewed into the DNA of every Christian, and that not even failure can take away that hope: rather, failure, endured patiently, teaches us hope. For our hope is not in us, but in God, who acted in the death and resurrection of Jesus and continues to act today, achieving His goals through our failures and false starts.

The paradox of hope, then, is this. Those who depend on themselves and exclude God — the naive optimists and the apocalyptic pessimists — prove themselves powerless, devoid of agency; whereas those who are willing to embrace failure and spend themselves

[12] Austen Ivereigh, 'Entering into the patience of God: Pope Francis on the failure of Jesus and the pathway to hope', ABC Religion and Ethics, 17 April 2025: https://www.abc.net.au/religion/austen-ivereigh-pope-francis-easter-patience-failure-of-jesus/105189602

for others, the humble and the patient, turn out to be the real agents of history, for their confidence in God's action is what allows God to act.

Our hope is in God's agency, not our own; yet that hope allows us to be co-creators, with God, of the future His love has planned for us and for our world. Our trust in God's power, rather than our own, is what gives us agency faced with the challenges of our time, allowing us to contemplate, discern and propose. In the Church, it allows us to gather in assemblies such as this, to act synodally, prayerfully, patiently, and so everywhere to rise up to meet the challenges of our time, with Francis's map of hope to guide us, past the storms, to the better place that awaits us.