"Being Optimistic is not the Same as Being Hopeful."

Carl Jung

That there is a notable increase in mental and emotional health issues among youth is an accepted fact. The recent pandemic is often seen as the tipping point that ushered in the current crisis. Why this is occurring, and its solution, are mysteries. In an article written by Daniel Payne on April 4, 2024, entitled *"Anxiety and Depression is Spiking Among Young People No One Knows Why,"* he writes, "…more than one in five high school students considered suicide in 2021, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention."[1]

However, many theories attempt to explain the present crisis. Payne lists the following as possible culprits, "loneliness, social media, the opioid-fueled destruction of families, social isolation from smartphones, climate change's existential threat, political rancor, overactive parenting, phone-induced sleep deprivation, long Covid, the decline of churches and other social institutions, bad diets or environmental toxins."[2]

Regarding the use of social media, "…mental health officials say kids are taking in more content, often by themselves, than perhaps any previous generation." Erickson-Schroth comments, "That's driving young people's distress – and is causing them to have real fears about the future and the world."[3]

Bishop Robert Barron of *Word on Fire* fame notes that social media can create unrealistic expectations of happiness and success. He points out that those who post selfies on the various platforms present themselves at their best. Of the many selfies they take, they post only the ones that show themselves being happy and surrounded by beautiful and joyful friends having a good time. Teens who struggle with self-esteem and acceptance see those posts and ask, "What's the matter with me?" leading them down the path of anxiety and depression.[4]

Similarly, people today feel free to speak without any social constraints. Nowhere is this more prevalent than on social media and in the political arena. Regarding the latter, Payne writes, "There may be a hint of guilt among some lawmakers for their roles — if not personally, then as part of an institution — in creating an America that many see as cruel, less hopeful, and ripe for despair."[5]

Regarding behavior on social media, people are under no constraints to express their baser instincts, including language that is hateful, vulgar, insulting, cruel, racist, violent, and the like. Unfortunately, that behavior is also on full display in political discourse. Being on the receiving end of such nastiness can do considerable damage to young people, who are ill-equipped to withstand such onslaughts on their self-esteem, which is very fragile at this stage of their development.[6]

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[1] Payne, Daniel, *Anxiety and Depression is Spiking Among Young People No One Knows Why. Politico, 94/10/2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/04/10/mental-health-crisis-kids-experiment-00151369.*
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] https://youtu.be/6CKkC74jWjQ.

[5] Payne, Daniel, *Anxiety and Depression is Spiking Among Young People No One Knows Why. Politico, 94/10/2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/04/10/mental-health-crisis-kids-experiment-00151369.*

[6] That is why the school will respond vigorously when it receives reports of bullying. That includes the use of racial and homophobic slurs.

I found this point in the article, "*Anxiety and Depression is Spiking Among Young People No One Knows Why,"* worthy of further consideration, "Hope is very powerful because it implies that your personal decisions can make a difference — and that your future can look bright even if this moment of despair feels very real," she said. "That's partly what the 'health' in mental health is all about. It is giving people a purpose and a reason to keep going."[7] That is a secular understanding of hope. From my perspective, that is being optimistic, which is not the same as being hopeful.

If you take God out of the equation, the belief that life has meaning and purpose, that good will triumph over evil, that we are made to be with God in heaven, that there is an afterlife, and that accountability for how we have lived our lives will follow suit. We are left then with a secular interpretation of life. That interpretation leads to only one conclusion: life is meaningless and hopeless. The French Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre reached that conclusion in his book, *"No Exit."* In other words, no off-ramp would take the secular person to where it is reasonable to have hope there is more beyond death.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes hope as the theological (gift from God) 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 strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (#1817). Note that the secular understanding of hope only concerns living well in this world. Also, a secular version of hope depends on us human beings, giving people a reason to keep going. It leaves open what our ultimate destination is and whether all this effort is worth it in the long run. It also rules out divine intervention (help) through the Holy Spirit. That's where the Catholic faith comes in to fill that void.

Let me anticipate the criticism that any talk about heaven comes at the expense of being concerned about the quality of life on Earth. That criticism is unfair. The great saints were filled with the theological virtue of hope and were very much committed to making this world better by working to conform its values to those of the Kingdom of Heaven, also known as the Reign of God. Some were martyred for their efforts.

The following reflection will examine faith's constructive role in promoting mental and emotional health.

[7] Ibid.