

THE JOHN CARROLL SOCIETY
Archdiocese of Washington

FOR OVER 65 YEARS: LAY CATHOLICS ENRICHING THEIR FAITH & SERVING THE ARCHBISHOP OF WASHINGTON

John Carroll Society
Margaret Mary Missar
High School Essay Competition

2025

1st Place

Essay

Shining with Hope: My Journey of faith and Strength

For me, as an African American boy raised by a single mother, with a father incarcerated for 12 years and later deported, hope has been my lifeline. This essay explores how my journey with faith helps me “shine with hope,” the lessons I have learned about resiliency, and how I plan to bring this spirit of hope to my community. When I read this essay prompt, I was reminded of a song we use to sing in church. It's called “There is Hope”, by the Mississippi Children’s Choir. Hope, as Pope Francis describes, is like an ever-burning lamp, kept alive by the Holy Spirit. Growing up, though, that lamp often felt dim, flickering under the weight of challenges that seemed impossible to overcome. I am reminded of those lyrics which say, “As long as Jesus is alive, yes there is hope”. My father was absent for most of my life, incarcerated for 12 years and then deported. This left my mother carrying the great responsibility of raising me alone, a burden she made look easy, I must say. Even when I knew she was struggling both financially and emotionally, she would always say, “look to the hills which cometh your help”. My mother’s faith became the foundation of my resilience. Her prayers, her trust in God’s plan even in the darkest moments, taught me to always remain hopeful. Even when there is no certainty that things will work out in my favor, to wait in expectancy for the Lord to do a good work.

One of the hardest lessons I learned came when my father was released, only to be deported. After waiting 12 long years, I thought we’d finally get the chance to be a family again, but instead, he was taken from us. I never knew what it was like to be a complete family. My father was incarcerated before I was even born but for some reason, I was still hopeful. That heartbreak shook my faith, and I found myself questioning whether the hope my mom always spoke about was even real. But through prayer and a lot of reflection, I came to understand something deeper. Hope isn’t tied to a good outcome. It’s about believing that even in our pain, God is present, working for our

good. That realization didn't just help me accept what had happened. It gave me the strength to reach out to my father and start rebuilding our relationship, even from miles apart. I look at my life as a journey of faith, growth, and transformation. One experience that stands out was a trip I took to visit my father after his deportation. Traveling to another country to reconnect with him felt very scary. I wasn't scared of seeing him, but to confront years of hurt and disappointment. During that visit, we shared stories, laughed, and prayed together, finding a connection that years of separation hadn't erased. In reconnecting with my father, I found forgiveness and experienced God's mercy in a way I never had before. It reminded me that hope is deeply tied to relationships. Whether it's our relationship with God, with our family, or with our community. And through those relationships, we can find grace, healing, and strength.

Patience is Really a Virtue

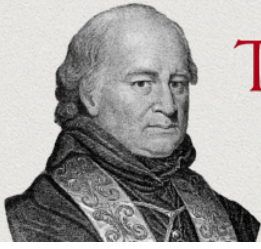
Patience is something Pope Francis connects closely to hope, and now I see why. In our world today everything is moving so fast. My mother always says we have too much access. With the speed of everything, waiting for something, or someone doesn't always feel good. I had to learn patience early. During my father's incarceration, there were so many moments when it felt like time was not moving, and I couldn't help but wonder, When will this end? It was frustrating, but my mother showed me how to be patient. She would say, "God's timing is perfect". That lesson stayed with me as I got older. In middle school, I struggled a lot socially. There were times I didn't feel like I belonged, but patience helped me push through. I learned to see small victories as signs of progress. I didn't have to have a lot of friends but if I had one or two trusted friends, that was enough. As I prepare for the Jubilee Year, I hope to share that lesson with others. Patience isn't easy, especially when life feels uncertain, but it's one of the greatest acts of hope we can practice.

In Conclusion, The Jubilee Year 2025 challenges us to live as “Pilgrims of Hope,” carrying the light of hope into our daily lives and our communities. For me, this journey is deeply personal. Growing up as the son of a single mother, with a father who was absent for most of my life, I’ve seen firsthand how hard life can be, but I’ve also seen how powerful hope can be. It’s not just about wishing things were different. It’s about finding the strength to keep going, even when the path ahead isn’t clear. As we prepare for the Jubilee Year, I’m committed to continue embodying this spirit of hope. Whether it’s through building connections in my community, or simply sharing my story, I want to be a source of light for others. Because in the end, hope doesn’t disappoint. It’s rooted in the love and grace of God. A truth that has guided me through every step of my own journey as a young black boy shining with hope.

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High School Essay Competition

2025

2nd Place

Essay

Living with the “Light of Hope” in the Midst of Mourning

Pope Francis, in his letter *Spes Non Confundit* ("Hope Does Not Disappoint"), talks about how the Holy Spirit gives believers a "light of hope," something that keeps us going even through tough times. For me, this idea of hope became very real during the funeral of my close friend, who was tragically killed by gun violence. Despite the heavy sadness of the moment, I experienced a powerful sense of hope through the Eucharist, which gave me peace, comfort, and closure as I grieved my friend's death.

The funeral service was emotionally overwhelming. The sadness I felt about losing my friend was so intense that it felt almost impossible to bear. As the Mass began and we moved into the Eucharistic Rite, I was still struggling to deal with the grief. But then something unexpected happened. As the priest held up the bread and wine for the consecration, I suddenly heard a voice—a deep, clear voice saying, "Roy, go and receive my body and my blood." It felt like the voice was speaking directly to me, inviting me to experience something greater than just the ritual of communion. It wasn't a random thought or feeling—it felt like a real call from God.

When I received the Eucharist, something amazing happened. A deep joy filled me—something I couldn't explain. It was joy in the midst of sorrow. The best way I can describe it is like holding a lamp in a completely dark room. The moment you turn the lamp on, the light spreads and fills the room, making it a place of warmth and safety. That's how I felt after receiving the Eucharist—it was like the light of Christ entered my heart, illuminating the sadness and filling me with peace. I suddenly knew, in a way I had never understood before, that the Eucharist wasn't just bread and wine. It was the true Body and Blood of Christ, and it brought me hope.

This experience gave me more than just comfort—it helped me cope with the pain of losing my friend. For weeks after the funeral, I couldn't stop thinking about the violence that had taken my friend's life. The grief was heavy, and I found it hard to move forward. But the Eucharist gave me something more powerful than just an emotional boost—it gave me hope. I realized that hope doesn't mean forgetting the pain or pretending it's not there. Instead, hope means believing in something greater, something that even death can't defeat. In Christ, I saw that even in loss, there is a promise of eternal life.

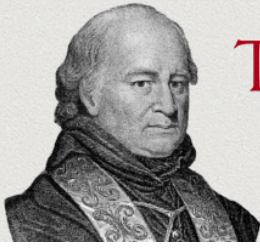
The joy I felt in that moment didn't erase my sadness, but it helped me make sense of it. The closure I received from the Eucharist wasn't just emotional—it was spiritual. I began to see that my friend's death was part of God's bigger plan, and through Christ, I could trust that my friend was now at peace. This gave me the strength to move through the grieving process in a healthier way, rather than staying stuck in sorrow.

Reflecting on this experience, I realized that hope isn't meant to be something we keep to ourselves. Once we experience it, we are meant to share it with others. Just as the Eucharist became a source of light for me in a dark moment, I now feel called to be a source of hope to others. Whether someone is grieving, struggling with loss, or facing difficult circumstances, I want to be there for them, offering the same light that helped me through my own pain.

During the Jubilee Year of 2025, I want to live out this hope in my own life and in my community. I know that many people in my circle are dealing with their own hardships—whether it's the death of a loved one, personal struggles, or just the challenges of life. I want to be a "pilgrim of hope," someone who brings Christ's light into the world, especially during times of suffering. Whether through small acts of kindness, offering support, or simply being present for someone in need, I want to be a sign of hope to others, just as I found hope in the Eucharist.

Pope Francis often reminds the Church that it is called to bring hope to a world that is hurting, and I feel that this is something I am now called to do. The Church isn't just a place to worship—it's a community meant to help heal, bring peace, and offer support to people who are suffering. Just as I encountered Christ in the Eucharist and experienced hope, I believe the Church can offer that same hope to others who are struggling. By showing love and compassion in our actions, whether it's through serving others, offering emotional support, or helping to bring about social change, we can be a source of hope to those in need.

In conclusion, my experience of receiving the Eucharist at my friend's funeral helped me understand hope in a much deeper way. Hope isn't about pretending things aren't difficult—it's about believing that, even in the darkest times, Christ's light is with us. That moment gave me peace, joy, and closure, and it allowed me to move forward in my grieving process with a renewed sense of strength. As I move into the Jubilee Year of 2025, I am committed to sharing that hope with others, offering the light of Christ in a world that often feels dark. As Pope Francis says, hope does not disappoint—and it is this hope that we are all called to share with the world, especially in times of sorrow.



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2025

3rd Place

Essays

3 January 2025

Living with the "Light of Hope"

In Pope Francis' encyclical *Spes Non Confundit*, he talks about how the Holy Spirit brings us the "light of hope." He says, "The Holy Spirit illuminates all believers with the light of hope. He keeps that light burning, like an ever-burning lamp, to sustain and invigorate our lives." This idea really stuck with me. Hope isn't just something we feel for a short time—it's something that keeps us going even when things are tough. For me, one of the best examples of what it means to live with hope came when I decided to pick up trash along the roads around my school. It wasn't a huge thing, but it was a small act that showed how hope can grow when people take action to care for their community and the world around them.

The idea to clean up the roads around my school came to me one day when I was walking to class. I noticed the trash scattered all over the streets—plastic bottles, wrappers, and other litter that had clearly been left behind by people who didn't care about their surroundings. It wasn't just the mess that bothered me; it was the feeling that no one was taking care of the place where we spent so much of our time. I felt a sense of responsibility, not only because it was part of my school, but because I believe we should all try to make the world better in whatever way we can.

So, I decided to do something about it. I talked to a few of my friends about the idea of picking up the trash around the school, and they agreed to help. What started as a small idea turned into a bigger project when more students and even some teachers volunteered to help. We gathered trash bags, gloves, and other supplies, and every weekend, we worked together to pick up the litter that lined the streets around the school. It wasn't glamorous work, and it took a lot of time and effort, but we were determined to make a difference.

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As we spent our weekends cleaning up, I began to notice something important. The work was tiring, but there was a sense of unity among all of us. We weren't just picking up trash; we were coming together to make our school and community look better and feel more cared for. And in doing so, we were also building a sense of hope—not just for the environment, but for each other. It was a reminder that even small acts of kindness and care can have a big impact.

One moment that really stuck with me was when we finished the clean-up and looked around at how much better the area looked. One of my friends, who had been a little unsure about the project at first, turned to me and said, “I didn't realize how much of a difference this would make. It feels good to know we did something that actually helped.” Hearing her say that made me realize that hope isn't always about huge things; sometimes, it's about doing what you can with what you have. By picking up trash, we weren't just cleaning up our surroundings—we were showing that we cared and that we were willing to do something about it.

Reflecting on this experience, I realize that there are many ways we can spread hope in our communities, especially during the Jubilee Year. Pope Francis calls us to look beyond ourselves and serve those around us. For me, this means continuing to take part in projects that care for the environment and for people in need. Just like cleaning up the streets around our school, there are always small ways we can make a big difference.

I plan to continue to express this spirit of hope by getting involved in other community projects—whether it's cleaning up more areas in our town, helping out at food banks, or supporting other local efforts that aim to make our world a better place. The more people who come together to help, the stronger the sense of hope becomes in the community. It's not about doing everything yourself; it's about working together for the common good. Pope Francis

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encourages us to be “missionaries of hope,” and I want to share that hope by helping others, whether it’s through organizing projects or simply showing up when someone needs help.

I also think that sharing hope with others doesn’t always require grand gestures. Sometimes, it’s the small things that matter most. For example, when people are feeling discouraged or going through hard times, we can offer our support, even in simple ways. Maybe that means helping someone with their schoolwork, offering to hang out with someone who’s lonely, or participating in a volunteer project. These small acts can show people that they aren’t alone—that there are others who care about them and want to make things better. Just like picking up trash showed that we care about the environment, helping others shows that we care about them as people.

The trash pick-up project made me realize that we can create hope through action. It’s not just about making the world around us look better—it’s about showing others that we’re willing to work together and do what we can to make life a little easier for them. Whether it’s in our school, neighborhood, or even with our friends and family, I think everyone can help spread hope by doing something positive and sharing that hope with others.

Looking back at my experience of picking up trash around my school, I see it as more than just a service project—it was a way to spread hope through action. The simple act of cleaning up a mess wasn’t just about making our environment look nicer; it was about showing that we care, that we’re willing to work together to make things better. It reminded me that hope doesn’t always have to be about big, dramatic changes. Sometimes, it’s the small things—the moments of kindness and effort—that create a lasting impact.

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During the Jubilee Year, I plan to keep living out this “light of hope” by continuing to serve my community, whether through environmental projects, helping those in need, or simply being there for the people around me. If we all take small steps to care for each other and our world, we can create a brighter, more hopeful future for everyone.

Careers/ Digital and Social Media

Pope Francis's words in *Spes Non Confundit* about the Holy Spirit illuminating believers with the light of hope resonate deeply, especially in times of personal or collective hardship. The "light of hope" can often feel like a subtle yet powerful presence, something that quietly sustains and strengthens us when we are at our lowest, giving us the strength to continue and the courage to look toward a better future.

A few years ago I went through a time of confusion which is one personal experience that shows this idea. When a close relative received a devastating diagnosis. Life seemed to come to a complete standstill. I was terrified and powerless for a while not knowing what would happen next. However, I can recall times when I would sit in silence or say a silent prayer seeking calm and understanding in the middle of this confusion. Over time, I experienced an inner calm and power that I can only describe as the hope-filled light of the Holy Spirit. It was a constant and graceful assurance rather than a quick adjustment or a solution to the problem.

Hope is the trust in the journey and not necessarily a guarantee that things will become obvious or easy. It won't be in vain regardless of how difficult it is. It allows you to stay faithful while you wait and to persevere even when your route is not obvious.

I consider ways to be there for those who are also struggling. Whether it is by doing small acts of kindness or saying encouraging things as I consider how I could represent this spirit of hope during the Jubilee Year. In my opinion, hope is something I actively share by my actions rather than just an emotion. I want to be an inspiration for people, especially those who feel burdened or alone, letting them know that there is hope for better things in the future.

A stronger example of how a pilgrimage might result in significant change and rejuvenation is the story of the disciples traveling to Emmaus. When they meet Christ, who opens their minds to understanding the Scriptures and reveals the actual significance of the events they have experienced their path from one of uncertainty and sorrow to one of revelation and hope is transformed. Even though it might not be your first idea this narrative connects with me because I have also gone on a pilgrimage. It was a life changing spiritual and personal journey.

A few years ago, I lost someone important to me, my dad. Going to school everyday and trying to live normally just wasn't working for me at the time. I took a trip to a small retreat center, a place I had often heard about but had never visited before. I wasn't exactly looking for a pilgrimage, but I had a deep desire to reconnect with God and reflect on where my life was headed. An isolated part of the mountains, far from the hustle of everyday life. As soon as I arrived, I could feel the peace of the place. The stillness was almost unreal. The first day was spent in quiet solitude, meditating on Scripture, taking walks through the woods, and sitting in the chapel, just being present to the environment and to myself.

One evening I went for a walk on a trail that went up to a hill with a view of the area. I was looking at the colors of the sky. They were beautiful as the sun was setting. I started thinking about my life as I stood there in the silence my doubts, my challenges, and my desire for a deeper spiritual purpose. I thought about how, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, I had often walked through life not fully recognizing God's presence with me. The busyness of life had blurred my vision, and I was struggling to make sense of certain things, wondering if God had abandoned me in moments of pain or confusion.

I had a deep sense of peace as I stood there. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked to us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" Emmaus's words seemed to impact in my heart. In that immediate I became aware of how many times I had overlooked Christ walking behind me. I missed the silent ways God had been there leading me, comforting me, and giving me hope because I had been so preoccupied with my own journey and difficulties.

Through this experience I realized that pilgrimage can sometimes involve staying away from the distractions of daily life in order to create room for God's presence rather than simply traveling far away to another location. It served as a reminder that change frequently occurs in calm times and sensitivity to God's direction rather than in massive amounts of acts. I also came to appreciate how God often speaks to us in the quietest of ways whether through nature, through conversation, or through the Scriptures inviting us to be more attentive to his presence in our daily lives.

Since then, I've tried to carry this sense of awareness with me in my everyday life. The pilgrimage didn't end when I left the retreat center—it was an invitation to make every moment a journey of faith, one where I seek out Christ, even in the ordinary, and recognize His presence with me. In this sense, the pilgrimage taught me that I don't have to go far to encounter God—sometimes, He's already walking beside me, waiting for me to notice. It was a lesson in trust, in recognizing that every step, no matter how uncertain, is part of God's unfolding plan, and that He is with us every step of the way.

Pope Francis's lesson on patience in *Spes Non Confundit* is especially relevant in today's fast paced society when we are continuously encouraged to pursue immediate happiness and results. His quote says that "space and time yield to an ever present now" speaks to the things we frequently face to follow the fast paced pace of expectations, communication, and information. It appears that patience is becoming more and more recognized as an uncommon virtue that must be developed with purpose and a strong sense of trust.

Patience doesn't mean being inactive, rather it means maintaining trust in God's providence while continuing to put in the effort without forcing things to happen. I also learned that patience

is deeply tied to faith. It's the belief that God is present in the waiting, that He's guiding everything even when it feels like nothing is happening.

Pope Francis's reflection on patience challenges us to slow down and find deeper meaning in the waiting. In a world that demands instant results, we are invited to trust in the rhythm of God's time, knowing that patience is not just about waiting, but about growing in faith and character as we wait.

Pope Francis's call to discover hope in the "signs of the times" is both a challenge and a gift. Yet Pope Francis reminds us that even in the midst of hardship, we are called to find signs of hope in the present moment not just in the distant future or in some perfect vision of the world. Hope is not just about waiting for things to get better, but about recognizing the ways in which God's grace is already at work in the world around us.

The Jubilee Year was a time for renewal and reflection providing an opportunity for the Church to shine a light on these signs of hope and encourage the faithful to actively participate in God's work in the world. In light of the issues facing our complex world today, the Church can play an essential role in spreading a message of hope, one that is rooted in faith, but also deeply connected to the realities of human suffering and the ongoing need for justice, peace, and care for creation.

Pope Francis's invitation to discover hope in the signs of the times challenges us to look beyond the chaos of the world and recognize the small yet significant ways in which God's love and grace are still present. The Church, both globally and locally, can spread this message of hope through concrete actions that address the pressing issues of our time, poverty, injustice, environmental destruction, and division while empowering individuals and communities to live as beacons of mercy, compassion, and renewal. By being pilgrims of hope in our own communities, we can join in this mission, making God's hope tangible for those who need it most.