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Margaret Mary Missar
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Honorable Mention

Essays

Pilgrims of Hope: Illuminating Lives Through Primary Education

As a ray of light brightens up the darkest of rooms, it takes just a few steps to start bringing about change. Big changes come from small beginnings—a realization that grew on me upon listening to our family friend and inspirational leader Ram Tripathi's story. Ram founded Goat2School, an organization bringing elementary education to children in the poorest districts of Nepal. His humble, yet innovative approach showed me that hope is not only real, but even a small act of faith can turn things around in the most difficult circumstances. I was deeply moved by this mission and knew I needed to help share its message.

Goat2School addresses educational issues with creativity on an international scale. While many of us in the United States take education for granted, millions of children around the world are being denied this basic right. In Nepal, where so many families rely on the income generated by their children, school is a luxury they can't afford. Parents resisted Ram's offer at first, unable to see how school would help their children in the short term. To overcome this resistance, Ram came up with a clever solution: using small donations, Goat2School began rewarding families with goats—a valuable source of milk and income. This practical incentive helped parents view education as an investment rather than a burden, opening the door for their children to receive an education.

However, ensuring consistent attendance remained a challenge. Parents needed ongoing encouragement to understand the long-term value of education. Realizing this, my father and I came forward to assist Ram in his efforts. We realized that gaining deep-set awareness among the families would not be an easy task, which taught us to become even more persistent. To ensure their commitment to educating their children, we worked towards increasing donations and

arranged visits of teachers and mentors with regular frequency to speak about opportunities that education could provide to the children.

With compassion and practical solutions, Goat2School provided access not only to education but also instilled hope in families for a better future. Basic education lays the foundation of skills, liberates families from the vicious circle of poverty, and inspires young minds to dream big. Goat2School has become a sign of hope for kids who once had an uncertain and unpromising future—proof that small steps can lead to transformative change.

This reminded me of how faith, linked with simple and significant acts, changes lives. It also epitomizes how the Church can lead by example, responding to the needs of the most vulnerable with creative, compassionate solutions. Programs like Goat2School incorporate hope—hope rooted in real transformation through visible efforts, even when circumstances seem overwhelming. As Scripture reminds us: “May we who have taken refuge in him be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered” (Hebrews 6:18-20).

Pope Francis invites us to embrace hope not only through faith in God’s grace but by recognizing “the grandeur of the heavenly goal to which we have been called” (*Spes Non Confundit*, §21). He challenges us to interpret “the signs of the times” in light of the Gospel, calling us to rise above self-interest, extend mercy to those who are different, and prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable (*Spes Non Confundit*, §25). This perspective embodies what he describes as a “leaven of authentic hope,” inspiring humanity to build a world founded on justice, harmony, and dignity (*Spes Non Confundit*, §23). Hope, he teaches, is “a sure and

steadfast anchor of the soul,” providing strength to persevere through life’s storms and uncertainties (*Spes Non Confundit*, §25). Above all, Pope Francis emphasizes that the collective longing for peace, justice, and a brighter future is among the most powerful signs of hope today, reminding us of “the love that does not disappoint” (*Spes Non Confundit*, §24).

Results are transformative: Goat2School does a lot more than provide classrooms and textbooks; it brings people together, giving families a chance to dream of something more. Children who earlier had little hope for their future now can have big dreams: to be doctors, engineers, and leaders. Parents who once saw education as a luxury they could not afford now see it as a bridge to hope. This is one sure way simple actions, led by faith, can break the chains of poverty and instill confidence in better days ahead.

For me, a "pilgrim of hope" is someone who takes that on board and carries these lessons forward into action. Through my experience at Goat2School, I know how small, meaningful steps can make a big difference. I want to scale up such initiatives in the future through organizing volunteer networks and inspiring others to take up the cause. I want to be part of an environment where one's faith comes through reflection and dialogue into hope for others.

The Church, universally and locally, has much to learn from initiatives such as Goat2School. Universally, the Church can expand such work through collaboration, the promotion of systemic change, and continuing similar initiatives. People can get involved by praying, educating, and raising money in their communities. The Jubilee Year shows us that hope grows when we come together. Stories like Goat2School prove that faith can make a real difference and change lives in meaningful ways. These shared efforts can inspire Catholics and others to believe that faith has the power to create positive change.

The Jubilee Year is about sharing hope—not just keeping it to ourselves but passing it on to others. It's a reminder to show God's grace through our actions and help guide those who may have lost their way or forgotten their faith. One of my big dreams is to connect my community with other initiatives like Goat2School. Just imagine children all around the world gathering and sharing experiences, teaching each other about faith. These kinds of stories can tear down walls and show that hope has no bounds. Small acts of kindness inspired by our faith can bring about a much larger impact than we might realize.

In this Year of Jubilee, each one of us is called to bear hope—not just for ourselves, but for others. It enables us to show God's love in everything that we do, and help those that are struggling. My experience with Goat2School has shown me that even small, faith-driven actions can bring about amazing change. Heeding Pope Francis' call and looking for hope around us can help us build a world where every person gets a chance to succeed.

With service, unity, and a common mission, we can be that light of hope Pope Francis has spoken about in this Jubilee Year and beyond. As Pope St. John XXIII said, “The unity of the Church today is presented in a shining light, as a faithful and perfect image of its divine founder.” (*Mystici Corporis Christi*, §13) Goat2School exemplifies this unity in action, showing how even the smallest act, when done in faith, can become a powerful force for change. Hope is not just something we feel; it’s something we actively bring to life through our shared commitment to making a difference.

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Why...Why is hope so hard to hold onto in times of need? Why...Why is faith so difficult to have in troubling times? Why...Why is patience a virtue our modern world lacks? It can sometimes be really difficult for us to wrap our heads around the fact that the world can be so turbulent nowadays. We often ask, "Why God?...Why are you doing this to us?...Why are you doing this to me?" While failing to ask God, "grant me the virtues of patience and hope that I need to get through these troubling times." When we are in the eye of a hurricane, such as in the days we are living in today, it can often be difficult for us to surround ourselves with virtues such as hope and patience as we are encircled by a variety of tribulations, nevertheless, it is key to maintain these virtues, and help others to maintain them as well, because we never know what God is planning for us.

In modern-day society, God can often be overlooked because people don't have the patience to appreciate and rejoice in being in God's presence. Everyone is always busy, minding their own business, and putting things off for the next day. But as the next day continues to come, the pile of things being put off, such as daily living of a spiritual life, continues to grow. This message often reminds me of the lesson Jesus taught through The Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matthew 25, New International Version) in which ten virgins, five learned and five senseless, took their lamps to wait for the bridegroom, the learned bringing with them oil while the senseless brought just their lamps. The bridegroom was taking so long that the women fell asleep, they woke up after a while and the virgins with oil continued to feed lamps meanwhile the senseless ones realized their lamps were going to burn out so they had to go buy some more since there would not have been enough oil if the learned ones had shared with them. Nonetheless, as the senseless virgins bought oil for their lamps, the bridegroom finally arrived and he, with the five learned virgins, entered the wedding banquet, shutting the door behind them

with no one else to be left inside. Although the primary lesson of this parable is to not grow weary in faith or be unprepared in faith for we do not know when our Lord will come again, I see another lesson in the parable though, that is, of the importance of patience. To explain, even though the bridegroom was late to arrive at the wedding banquet, the virgins waited with anticipation, faith, patience, and ultimately hope! They waited, no matter how long, because they TRUSTED in the bridegroom and KNEW that he would arrive. This should ultimately be a lesson to us that, even though it might seem like we are lonely and without hope, we should have faith, patience, and hope in the Lord's plan for he will never abandon us.

Honestly, having patience and living your daily life with hope is difficult. In reality, it is extremely challenging, especially when you are trying to overcome an obstacle put in front of you that challenges both your spiritual and social life; trust me, I have come to know this because I have experienced it firsthand. I was going into my sophomore year of high school when my anxiety, especially concerning school, started to get the best of me. I was too anxious to go to my classes, let alone even get out of my house to go to school. My anxiety was at an all time high. Little by little I got better at staying in my classes and in school without having an anxiety attack, but this did not make what I was going through better. I felt alone, misunderstood, and pitied. No one truly understood the anxiety I felt from school, as it is not a very common thing to be continuously and never-endlessly anxious about. People always told me to have patience because it takes time to get better and to be able to control your anxiety, but no one ever told me to have HOPE, to have FAITH! Now before all of this had occurred, I believe that I had a good relationship with God. I went to Church every Sunday, I read the Bible daily, and I said my morning and night prayers. Nevertheless, when I went through my Sophomore year of high school, it was almost impossible for me to have patience, let alone have a sliver of trust in God's

purpose for me undergoing that type of anguish. It was during this time in which my Abuela taught me a Bible verse and told me to memorize it: “El SEÑOR es mi pastor, nada me falta” (Salmos 23:1), which translates to, “The LORD is my shepherd, there is nothing I lack” (Psalm 23:1). This Bible verse showed me to have trust, have faith, and ultimately have hope that the Lord would not leave me alone, for He has a plan for me. In fact, one of my favorite Bible verses comes from the Book of Jeremiah: “For I know well the plans I have in mind for you...plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). God ultimately has a plan in store for us because wants to give us “a future of hope” not of “woe,” we just have to have faith and patience in His plan. Personally, I learned this after I went through my Sophomore year of high school. I realized that, although I had a good relationship with God, I needed a deeper one, God WANTED a deeper relationship with me. Even though it was hard for me to hold onto that hope of a better future with the LORD while I went through a challenging obstacle in my life, it ultimately paid off because I became a “pilgrim of hope” since there was a spiritual purpose to my anguish, leading me closer to God.

Now that I have faced my own personal experience with holding onto hope when it was hardest for me to do so, I want to become a beacon of hope for those undergoing what I have gone through because I want to show them how rewarding it will be in the end. Through my “pilgrimage of hope” I was able to deepen my relationship with God. For example, I went from just simply reading the Bible, to reading the Bible with purpose and actually analyzing it. Now, I know that my relationship with God is not perfect, because nothing is perfect except for Him, but I am still proud of the progress I have made. I want to help people strengthen their faith, deepen their relationship with God, ask with faith for the virtue of patience, and feel a sense of hope whenever they feel hopeless. Ultimately, I want to do all of these things because I know how it

feels like to be stuck in a typhoon with a sense of hopelessness. I want to help others find hope within themselves and in God's plan for them so that they can get up and realize that their challenging journey to God is a "pilgrimage of hope."

God is our hope and we should never cease in having hope because God has a promise and plan for each and every one of us to complete. Even when we are faced with what seems like the impossible we can never put an end to faith and hope in the LORD. Someday, maybe it already happened or maybe it is bound to happen soon or in the near future, our hope in God and our patience with God will be challenged but we should not and shall not lose it because, just as Pope Francis said, "Hope Does Not Disappoint" because our hope is ultimately God.

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Psalm 60:22 says, "At the right time, I, the Lord, will make it happen." Patience is a characteristic we all wish to obtain, yet the problems, stress, and resilient issues in our life make this seem impossible to achieve. Stress is caused by the uncontrollable pressure that threatens our being, but having faith in God is ultimately all we can do. Living in patience allows us to live in Christ. In the Vatican News article, "The Pope [Francis] stressed that patience is not only a "necessity," but "a calling" (Vatican News "Let us be honest"). By trying to imitate Christ's patience we are able to testify our love to Him. While this can be shown in many ways, they are unique to each person in how they demonstrate patience.

Prior to entering St. Mary's Ryken, I was confirmed, but I entirely lost sight of my faith and didn't know what to expect freshman year. I had immense expectations about what I was going to do in the classroom and on the football field. Quite honestly, God and academics were unrelated in my life due to how passionate I was about football. It has been a fulfilling happiness for years until my first year of highschool football. Realizing there were several other quarterbacks competing for the starting position, I just figured everything was going to be in my favor. As long as I worked hard, and executed, I was sure I would earn the spot. However, I noticed it was far from that. My heart shattered when I was last on the depth chart. I was so emotional because I tried so hard, yet I didn't get what I wanted. Humbly, I can say that up to this point I was somewhat spoiled, shielded from the adversities of the real world. I was depressed for a while feeling that my life had no value anymore. Eventually I grew out of it as school went on, but I just wanted to forget freshman year.

Usually when someone is struggling in life, they depend on God to help them. Though I was depressed, I never reached out to God. I was too ashamed to pray because I neglected Him before. I continued soaking all of my sadness and anger, and I couldn't talk to anyone other than my mother and father who genuinely cared about what was going on in my life. Honestly, I didn't want anyone sympathizing with me. It wasn't until the next year of school and a new season that I was ready for a fresh start in my life. Inwardly, I observed my flaws and improved

them and took more accountability, but the greatest change I made to my life was striving to grow with God again. I started praying everyday, reading my Bible consistently, and talking to God in my daily life. As if he was following me all the time, I knew he was always there to catch me from falling and console me. He is the most genuine, everlasting essence of love that is unreplicable. Confession became an important part of my life, as well. Being able to recognize where we fail as his children, unfortunately to our sinful nature and repenting for it, is one huge step when walking with God.

Entering the next football season, I brought everything with me into this year. A new confidence and motivation to improve in not just football, but academics, and my relationship with God. Everyday of training camp leading up to the very first game of the season, I was more determined than ever to make varsity and get playing time. I kept God close to my life and I was doing great. At the end of training camp, I made varsity and there was such a joy in me. I felt like my prayers had been answered and finally allowed the patience that I struggled with so much to fall into God's hands. Though it was done there, God continued to remain active in my life and bless me. The first game of the season was upon me, and I was more than ready. I prayed to God before this game that if he allows me to have an opportunity today then I know I am more than ready. Throughout the game, I continued to pray and be thankful for the chance to be playing that day. Then, I had my opportunity. I was very nervous, but as I walked on the field, I soaked everything that I felt and praised God before the first snap. Within the two plays I was in I scored, and I was elated. I was so thankful to have finally earned a moment that I could shine. I vividly remember saying, "Lord, thank you again for the time I have here, I give all of my glory to you O'Lord. I love you." I was so excited and happy that I had tears in my eyes. I continued to have a good game and made the most of my opportunities. Something we began doing before games as a team was going to mass. Loving this so much, I read the Scripture to my team. Hopefully by seeing me trying to devote my life to God, they could be inspired. Mass gets me in the right mindset and prepares me for the game. By doing this, I know I have nothing

else that I can do other than execute. I have done the practice, mentally prepared, and now that I went to mass, I am nourished with the Lord. He is by my side protecting and strengthening me.

Growing with God has continually been a learning experience for me as I become more educated about my faith in theology class. God has done things in my life that I am forever grateful for like blessing me with amazing parents, financial stability, and many opportunities that other kids, who are less fortunate, dream of. Through this, I want to contribute to others. I want all of my brothers and sisters to grow in God's love and exhibit patience. I also strongly believe in empathy and emotional support. Slowing down your life, reducing stress, and putting God first and nurturing a relationship with him is a great way to know you are improving your patience. I always want to be available for others. We all go through tough times in our life and should seek help. So, I pride myself on being empathetic and feeling sympathy for people. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another (John 13:34)." So when a person opens up to me about what they are going through, I make sure to give all of myself to them just as Jesus would.