

Archbishop Smith: We Have Hope that is Real

On Sunday evening, GrACE (Grateful Advocates for Catholic Education) hosted a wonderful evening for members of the Catholic education community via videoconference. The aim was to remind everyone, in the midst of extraordinarily difficult pandemic challenges, of the reason we do not lose hope, even when circumstances mitigate against it. The evening involved music, reflections, and interventions by four Alberta Bishops, including yours truly.

I shared with everyone an image that, in my estimation, is among the most beautiful I have come across to demonstrate the grounding of Christian hope. For years I have linked the image with this blog, entitled Reason for Hope, and I am happy to include it with this particular post.

The image is found on one of the many panels of the Holy Door at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Each one depicts an aspect of the sweep of salvation history, centered upon Christ. When I was a student in Rome years ago, I would take some time to visit the door and ponder each of its panels. The one that consistently drew my attention the most was that depicting Jesus the Good Shepherd. Pondering this image cannot fail to awaken hope.



The actual title of the panel is The Lost Sheep. The small animal is depicted as not only lost but also trapped and ensnared. For this lost sheep there is absolutely no hope of returning to the place of peace and security by its own efforts.

I have heard it said, and perhaps you have, too, that the only thing worse than being lost or left behind is the feeling that no one is coming to look for you. What the panel shows is that Jesus will always come looking for us, he will never leave us lost, especially at those moments when we are absolutely helpless, unable to do anything for ourselves. The panel illustrates the Good Shepherd placing himself at enormous risk as he stretches out toward the little sheep. Clearly, that sheep is of great worth in his eyes, so precious that he would risk even his own life to save it. Well, that is precisely what Jesus did for us, when he accepted to come from the Father as our Good Shepherd. He did, in fact, surrender his life, by dying on the cross, and by rising, saved us and

brought us back to that place of peace and security we call the loving embrace of our Heavenly Father.

And Jesus continues to stretch out his arm to us in rescue. The pandemic has left many people experiencing a sense of helplessness, of being ensnared by circumstances too powerful to control. The feeling of isolation is widespread, or of being caught with no way out. This circumstance brings us to the realization that the reason for hope lies not within ourselves. It is found in the One in whose view each of us is precious, who will always come looking, and who has the power to rescue. The reason for hope is Our Lord and the love he holds for each and every one of us, without exception and without condition. If we choose daily to trust not in ourselves but in the love of the Lord, we shall soon find welling within our hearts a hope that we know is real and that cannot be shaken.