TAKE HEART: CATHOLIC WRITERS ON HOPE

Fordham Center on Religion and Culture
The Church in the 21st Century Center, Boston College
Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus
11 March 2008, 6:00 p.m.

Moderator
Ben Birnbaum
Editor of “Take Heart: Catholic Writers on Hope in our Time,”
and special assistant to the president of Boston College

Panelists
Dan Barry
Prize-winning author of the “About New York” column for The

Lawrence Joseph
Poet, writer, essayist, critic, lawyer, and professor of law, St.
John’s University, New York

Nancy Mairs
Poet, essayist, and memoirist

Carol Zaleski
Columnist, co-author of “Prayer,” and professor of religion at
Smith College

MARGARET STEINFELS: Good evening. I’m delighted to see you all,
considering that it’s Daylight Savings Time and you could be all out
getting an extra game of tennis or riding your bicycles or whatever. It’s
good of you to come indoors. I am Margaret Steinfels, Co-Director of the
Fordham Center on Religion and Culture. I want to welcome you to
tonight’s discussion, “Take Heart: Catholic Writers on Hope.”

We are delighted to see you all. And, since many of you have been here
before, you know there are two very important announcements. The first
is turn off your cell phones and other noise-making devices you may have
with you. The second: the cards and the pencils at or on your chairs are
there for writing down questions. If you have one, please write it legibly.
Our students who are in the aisles will pick them up and pass them up to
the front. Toward the end of the session, the moderator and panelists
will try to answer as many as possible of these questions. If you do not
have a question, you may take the card and pencil with you, in case you
have any questions on the way home.

So, to tonight’s proceedings. Sometime last fall, maybe September, Ben
Birnbaum, whom I will introduce shortly, e-mailed us from Boston
College. That’s the one in Boston, and that’s in Massachusetts. I would
like, by the way, to welcome all the Boston College alum who are here tonight. Welcome.

In his e-mail, Ben asked if the Center on Religion and Culture would be interested in joining him and Boston College in a discussion on a subject that he found of enormous interest, and apparently of great inspiration, Catholics and hope. He had just edited a book on the subject, he said.

I said, “Ben, you’ve got to be kidding. Catholics and hope?” He said, “No, I’m not kidding,” and he sent me a copy of the book *Take Heart: Catholic Writers on Hope in Our Time.* It turns out that “Catholic and hope” is not an oxymoron, at least according to the thirty-five essays in the book and according to its editor, and perhaps according to our panelists tonight. So let me insert here briefly that this book and others by our panelists are available in the lobby outside, courtesy of Barnes & Noble.

Now, let me introduce Ben Birnbaum, who will introduce our panelists. Ben is a native of Brooklyn, New York. He holds degrees from Ner Israel Rabbinical College, Queens College (our Queens College here), and the University of Vermont. He began working at Boston College in 1978, and presently is its chief marketing and communications officer, special assistant to the president, editor of *Boston College Magazine,* and a member of the Church in the 21st Century advisory board. Given all those titles, I imagine he probably locks up at night as well.

He is a frequent writer on religious culture, and Judaism in particular. He has been anthologized in *Best American Essays,* *Best Spiritual Writing,* and *Best Catholic Writing.* He is the editor, as I said, of *Take Heart,* this book, and also of *Founding Fathers: Six Boston College Presidents and the University They Made* — it is a lengthy work, I am sure. He is currently at work on *A History of a Vermont Hill Farm.* Ben will introduce the subject and the panelists.

Please welcome Ben Birnbaum.

**Ben Birnbaum:** Thank you, Peggy, and thank you all for being here this evening. I welcome you on behalf of Boston College. And, as an assistant to Father Leahy of Boston College, I am empowered to say on occasion, and I will tonight, that I welcome you on his behalf as well.

It is great to be back in my hometown, which I left thirty-five years ago. As E.B. White described it, going to New York from his place up in Maine, I guess, was like meeting an old friend with a brain tumor. It is not that way now. You can get a ten-dollar cashmere scarf on any corner, which is wonderful. And as of last night, I think it’s the national repository of schadenfreude, and if there was a way to make money disporting it, we could be spared taxes for decades.

The last time I was on a stage in New York City, I was fronting a wedding bar and mitzvah band in Queens. The band had no name, but it was called “Joe Bananas and the Bunch” — yes, some of you will get the reference. We had our own way of referring to it, as “music with appeal
(a peel).” [Laughter] Forgive me. Though I carried a guitar on stage, I was so bad that they insisted it not be plugged into any of the amplifiers. So I was the lead talker, to put a spin on what I did. The other members of the band I ought to say went on to careers in the rabbinate and in lawyering, sometimes both combined, which is a formidable idea, and I remain all these years later a lead talker, which is my job this evening.

My introductory remarks fall under the general title of “what I know about hope” — which isn’t much, to tell you the truth. I’ve been studying it seriously for about three years, at least Christian hope. Jewish hope would take a whole other discussion. So, like any third-grader, which is about where I’m at, my mind is chock full of things that may or may not be useful but I want to talk about them at dinner. So let me tell you some things I do know about hope.

One is that if you search for “hope” under Library of Congress headings, it usually turns up between “Hopalong Cassidy,” “history of criticism” (if there is such a category), and “Hope, Bob.” Yes, I know. I will also say that in the Bible — I’m including Hebrew and Christian testaments — hope is the most modest of the three theological virtues, as Catholics refer to them. It earns 346 references. There are 821 for faith, 825 for love or charity.

Hope is also the motto of Rhode Island, which I don’t think is supposed to be funny. And it’s the name of a grotesquely large diamond, which I was very disappointed to learn was not named for the virtue but for some guy who owned it — it really takes the romance out of it. Hope is also a place in Arkansas that raises presidents and watermelons.

Hope is also, of the three virtues, the one that is hardest to grasp. I mean faith is faith, and one has faith in a higher being, one has faith in God. It’s a light, let us say. Sometimes it gutters, but it’s there, it’s something.

Love — well, love is love. You all know what it is. It’s scary and it’s wonderful, and I think it is correct to say that it is stronger than death.

Now, hope, however, is kind of this vague virtue. It is not a thing in and of itself, in that once you obtain the thing you hope for, hope disappears; you don’t need it anymore. It’s a kind of catalyst; it’s a way of doing something, of getting from point A to point B. So I think it’s much harder to comprehend than faith or love.

In Romans 8:24: “For we are saved by hope; but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why does he yet hope for?”

The Baltimore Catechism has its own take on hope similarly, though not quite as vague: “Hope is the virtue by which we firmly trust that God, who is all-powerful and faithful to His promises, will in His mercy give us eternal happiness and the means to obtain it.” Once we get there, though, hope has no reason for being.

And finally, from a fellow I just got to know from my studies, a guy by
the name of Gabriel Marcel, an existentialist, a Catholic philosopher, whom I’ve really gotten to adore, who wrote: “Hope consists in asserting that there is at the heart of being, beyond all data, beyond all inventories and all calculations, a mysterious principle which is in connivance with me.”

Hope, I’ll finish by saying, is a word that is most often used to name the human communities — the charities, the support groups, the hospital ships — that we form in the darkness that surround us. Alphabetically, these run from AIDS and ADL all the way to something called Hope of Survivors, which is about clergy sexual abuse and the people who suffered through it.

And so we will end where I began, this question about hope. Some years ago at Boston College, the center of the disaster, we had a series, through the Church of the 21st Century Project, of theologians come to speak. I had been trying to get BC crowds into a room to listen to theologians for twenty-five years, and unless they’re talking about sex, frankly, they don’t come — that is, unless the theologians are talking about sex.

We had four theologians one night, I recall. I walked into the room, expecting to sit anywhere I liked. It was packed, people sitting in the aisles. These were serious theologians with books that made shelves bow. I wrote later about this in Boston College Magazine. Here were these men and women with tape recorders, with video cameras, and many of them with legal pads, taking notes. I wrote, “Scribbling, scribbling, scribbling on legal pads and in notebooks, like students in the week before finals, worried but sure of the possibilities, taut with hope.”

I have had some trouble getting my head around a definition of hope, and so I asked a theologian friend of mine, who is also from Brooklyn, named Jim Keenan, who is up at Boston College. He told me this — I’ll express it the way he said it — he said it like a real Brooklyn guy: “Here’s how it is, Ben. You have the three theological virtues — faith, hope, and charity. Faith means you are required to believe. Charity means you are required to love. But the things that happen in this world can crush your belief in a minute. That’s why we have hope. Hope keeps us in the game.” It’s a very Brooklyn kind of phrase, or maybe a New York City kind of phrase, “it keeps us in the game.” And it does.

Now let me introduce the folks who are going to talk about what keeps us in the game. I am going to do this in alphabetical order, which is not the same order in which they are going to speak.

Dan Barry is the author of Pull Me Up: A Memoir and City Lights: Stories About New York, which are drawn from the “About New York” columns that he wrote from 2003 until almost a year ago. He is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, the George Polk Award, and now writes the “This Land” column for The Times, most recently reporting from Bill, Wyoming.

I am going to quote these folks as I introduce them so you have a sense of why they in particular were invited. There is a Talmudic tradition:
When you introduce a sage, you don’t simply say, “Here is so-and-so, he has degrees from this place”; you say, “Here is so-and-so, and he says,” and then you quote some of his wisdom.

Let me quote something from Dan Barry’s memoir Pull Me Up. It’s about his mother and father. His mother, Noreen, had been diagnosed with cancer. His father, Gene, was in desperation. “Often he sat beside her, through the afternoon and into the night, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, fretting that the Gene-and-Noreen dialogue of forty-five years was at an end. ‘Please, honey, please eat,’ he would say. ‘Maybe later,’ she would say. . . . He could not bear it after a while; he had to hide. He would trudge, heavy-footed, back up to his bedroom, close the door, pull the shades, and place a pillow over his head as if to suffocate himself. You knew, you just knew, that he was striking another bargain with that God whose existence he had always questioned. ‘Curse me with another twenty years of cluster migraines, you God Almighty Bastard, only save her. Save her.’”

The next person I am going to introduce is Lawrence Joseph. Lawrence Joseph is a poet. He was first exposed to the world and Catholicism — these are not the same things — in a Detroit parish ministered by Father Charles Coughlin. A New Yorker for some time, he is now, like Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, a celebrated American poet who also does something useful. In Lawrence’s case, he is a lawyer and he teaches law at St. John’s University.

His books of poetry include: Into It, a series of physical and metaphysical meditations on 9/11, which occurred within view of his bedroom windows. From that book I am going to read a short poem, called “The Single Necessity”:

“Those days, eternities, went through everything: The extraneous, that which is not experienced and imagined, in detail. I observed a loose strand of her hair on her forehead, and loved her even more.”

Nancy Mairs was raised north of Boston and lives in Tucson with her husband George, who will be joining her on stage shortly. He is a retired high school teacher. She has been an editor, writing teacher, and the author of a memoir about love, sex, tragedy, and faith, which pretty much covers the waterfront. In her most recent book, A Dynamic God: Living an Unconventional Catholic Faith, she says the following:

“From the time I became a Girl Scout leader at fifteen, I had a sense of social responsibility, although my activism didn’t begin in earnest until a decade later. I have diligently performed the works of mercy myself, both corporeal and spiritual. Even today I use up my limited energy hurrying from board meeting to reading engagement to worship service to demonstration. I am hardly a fritter. Rather, I am confessing that I have too often rushed around heedlessly, exploiting my good works as a means of deflecting or at least deferring the arduous spiritual work of defining and then fulfilling the purpose of my crippled life.”
Carol Zaleski teaches religious studies at Smith College. She is the author of *The Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope*, and she has co-authored with her husband Philip *Considerations of Prayer and Heaven*, which I personally recommend. In a recent column she wrote in *Christian Century*, she speculated on the scholarly books that would appear if puddle hopping, which is one of her favorite pursuits in western Massachusetts, was accepted as a spiritual practice.


Carol Zaleski, if you will begin our exploration of hope.

**Carol Zaleski:** Thank you. I never thought I’d be identified with that puddle-hopping column.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** That was my hope.

**CAROL ZALESKI:** But actually this kind of connects. I think the other panelists will tell poignant stories, but I’m going to start with sort of a trivial story.

Just the other day, we found a crumpled-up piece of paper. We were going through some old papers at home. It was a note that our son Andy, who is now twelve but then was much younger, had written to the Tooth Fairy. It said: “Dear Tooth Fairy: Can I please keep my tooth? Love, Andy.”

I thought this is a lovely picture of childish hope. He was hoping that the Tooth Fairy would provide the usual tribute, which was a dollar and a pack of baseball cards, but would also let him keep the tooth, which for some reason — this particular tooth must have meant to him a symbol of his infancy, something that he cherished and wanted to hold on to.

As it turned out, the Tooth Fairy did not honor that request. Somehow, in her mid-night operations, she lost the tooth. The next morning, Andy just found the baseball cards and the dollar. He said: “Well, it’s okay. Hey, look at this rookie card.” That was an example to me of Andy’s naturally hopeful, resilient disposition.

Philosophers like to talk about two kinds of hope, intentional and dispositional hope. Intentional hope is hoping for something. Dispositional hope is just that hopeful attitude; the theological virtue of hope is very often understood in terms of that kind of dispositional hope.

So in Andy’s case, when the intentional hope was crushed, the dispositional hope kicked in instantly. That is really the resiliency of childhood.
For those of us who are grown up, and perhaps wish that we could recapture some of that natural hopefulness — which is, I suppose, perhaps not exactly the same as an infused theological virtue of hope, but that natural buoyancy and resiliency we would all like to be able to recover somehow — we may try different stratagems to do that, techniques to elicit that sense of hopefulness in us.

We might perhaps try to take on some proverbial saying that inspires hope within us, like the transcendentalist Margaret Fuller, who said: “I accept the universe”; or Leibniz saying that “All is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”

But, you know, when you hear that sort of thing or when you try to adopt that kind of attitude, I think a lot of strain comes in. A note of bravado is in both those statements. Really, who are we kidding? In fact, responding to Margaret Fuller’s remark, the famous pessimist Carlisle said, “Gad, she better.”

It is possible, I think, to lift ourselves up by our bootstraps to some extent by deliberately adopting positive ways of thinking. In fact, the American philosopher William James said that positive thinking techniques, the kind of self-help/self-improvement through reinterpreting your experience, are America’s one original contribution to world philosophy. In James’s day, Coué’s mantra, “Every day in every way I’m getting better and better,” was all the rage. I’m sure you can all think of examples of that kind of self-help auto-suggestion that people use as a means of retraining themselves, recovering that natural hopefulness.

There are historic ways of being hopeful that emphasize endurance. There are optimistic ways of being hopeful that reinterpret the world as the best of all possible worlds, that William James calls “melioristic” kinds of hopefulness. James says that the thing that impresses him most about human beings is their willingness to live on a chance. But all of the techniques that we use to induce in ourselves a state of hopefulness and positive thinking, while they may all help up to a point, at some point they all fail. As James says himself: “At some point, the skull will grin in at the banquet, and the last positive thought we have won’t outlive that final irrevocable loss.”

I think that’s when we discover that Christian hope is something altogether different from optimism, something quite in fact, I would say, supernatural, something which touches our everyday world but can’t be accounted for in purely naturalistic, psychological, sociological, or political terms; that can’t be measured on polls or surveys; and can’t be extinguished by scandal or doubt or disaffection or discord, or even despair, oddly enough.

In fact, it is on surprisingly good terms with doubt and despair, as the case of Mother Teresa recently publicized her “long, dark night,” or Saint Therese. Both are, in a sense, icons of hope within despair, despair within hope; anxiety with hope, anxiety within hope.
Christian hope is that sort of hope against hope, like Abraham. St. Paul said Abraham hoped against hope that he would be made the father of nations. It is that kind of hope that rescues the psalmist from the pit. It rushes in to fill the void that is created by despair. It is that “Magnificat” hope that overturns our expectations, both our confident and our gloomy expectations.

It is what the writer J.R.R. Tolkien called “eucatastrophe,” “eucatastrophic hope.” That is a term he coined actually in a famous essay that he wrote, “On Fairy-Stories,” in which he said the essential feature of a fairy-story is that it involves a reversal of expectations; things get as bad as they possibly can and suddenly hope rushes in, hope supervenes upon despair. “Eucatastrophe” means good catastrophe; it’s that good overturning. So Tolkien says in this essay, “On Fairy-Stories”: “It is that sudden happy turn in a story which pierces you with a joy that brings tears. . . . your whole nature chained in material cause and effect, the chain of death, feels a sudden relief as if a major limb out of joint had suddenly snapped back.”

Those of you who are fans of The Lord of the Ring know that the whole saga is about eucatastrophe, and deliberately so, which is why the Ring is destroyed on March 25th, the Feast of the Annunciation. There are many other ways that could be explored. The main point is that Tolkien wants to say — he says this in his essay “On Fairy-Stories” and also in some of his letters — that the Resurrection is the eucatastrophe that actually happened in history; it’s that great fairy-story that actually happened. It was the greatest eucatastrophe possible and the greatest fairy-story. The birth of Christ, he says, is also the eucatastrophe of man’s history, and the Resurrection is the eucatastrophe at the end of our nation.

“There is no tale ever told,” Tolkien says, “that men would rather find was true... For the Art of it has the supremely convincing tone of Primary Art that is of Creation. To reject it leads either to sadness or wrath.”

So, in a sense, he is saying what St. Paul said: if only in this life we have hope, then we are of all men the most to be pitied, the miserable. He takes quite literally that eschatological Christian hope, the promise of Resurrection life, and it flows back into history and it flows into all the good stories, including the stories that he wrote.

I will have perhaps for the panel discussion some points that I hope will come out in our discussion, either from me or from others, about the ways in which this Christian hope, this eucatastrophic hope, may be detected in various spheres of our life.

In this day of all these atheist attacks on religion, is there a eucatastrophe for our hope that we can offer a reasoned defense of the faith? Of course, in terms of our ecclesial consciousness in the aftermath of the great hopes of Vatican Council II, and then the scandals and the suffering the Church has been through, is there a eucatastrophic dimension to that? Is there a eucatastrophic dimension to personal hope? All these things I suspect others will touch upon and I hope we
will all come back to in our discussion. Thank you.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Now Nancy Mairs.

NANCY MAIRS: I like to have George participate because he is useful, but also because he is so intrinsic to the work that I do and the work that he and I do together.

I want to start by reading an excerpt from T.S. Eliot’s “Ash Wednesday.” I am a great admirer of Eliot during the periods when he is popular and the periods when he is not popular. I don’t know where we are just now. I don’t clock the cycles.

* * *

**Thomas Stearns Eliot, “Ash Wednesday”**

Because I do not hope to turn again  
Because I do not hope  
Because I do not hope to turn  
Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope  
I no longer strive to strive towards such things  
(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)  
Why should I mourn  
The vanished power of the usual reign?

Because I do not hope to know  
The infirm glory of the positive hour  
Because I do not think  
Because I know I shall not know  
The one veritable transitory power  
Because I cannot drink  
There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again

Because I know that time is always time  
And place is always and only place  
And what is actual is actual only for one time  
And only for one place  
I rejoice that things are as they are and  
I renounce the blessed face  
And renounce the voice  
Because I cannot hope to turn again  
Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice  
* * *

When I was invited to join a panel discussing hope, I was somewhat taken aback, because I am perhaps the most hope-less woman you are likely to meet. More than thirty-five years of a chronic, incurable, degenerative disease have scoured hope as the word is conventionally understood right out of my soul. I will never be better tomorrow. If I’m lucky, I won’t be worse either. In any case, I’ll become whatever happens next, whether I wish for it or not.
Nor am I especially sanguine about humanity’s prospects. As I have written elsewhere:

“If there ever was a time when we could have turned down some less agonistic route, could have elected to balance our desires with our needs and the needs of the rest of creation, that time has passed. And maybe there never was such a time except in dreams. God only knows. At any rate, our technological capabilities have now so far outstripped our moral development that it seems likely that we really will blow ourselves up with nuclear devices or suffocate ourselves with petrol fumes or poison ourselves with chemical waste or drown ourselves in melted glaciers.

“There’s no reason, apart from our own egocentricity, to think that the human species is going to survive over the long term, or to view our extinction as an outrage. God loves us boundlessly but not best. The cosmos is infinite, and events will keep unfolding forever. One of them might be a minute flare toward the edge of a small galaxy signaling our passage.”

Clearly, I do not take an ameliorative view of the world. I don’t believe that the cosmos was created by some entity looming outside of it in awe that it would one day provide a habitable space for humanity. I don’t believe that once there was a humanity, its specimens progressed and improved over the eons until they reached the pinnacle — us. Nor do I believe, should there be further peaks beyond, we will climb higher and higher, perhaps even reaching angelhood. Nothing has been developed for us. Nothing has been developed for that at all. The mysterious process has no utilitarian end. God just is. He is now, always.

To be hope-less is not at all the same state as to be hopeless, because every definition of “hopeless” I can find sounds unrelievedly doleful. One must be pathetic, doomed to failure, despondent, irredeemable. Because I have clinical depression, I have had such feelings from time to time, but I don’t feel them now.

I feel hope-less in the sense that one might refer to a woman as childless. Such a condition might be, as it was for my ninety-five-year-old friend Elizabeth, the great tragedy of her life. For another woman it may represent a well-considered choice. What the word means depends on context or testimony.

My hope-lessness has various meanings and consequences. Not all of them are honorable. From early childhood, I have not done well with disappointment. It crushes my spirit and I can take a long time to recover even a modicum of equanimity. This experience is so disruptive that I have trained myself not to hope in the first place, even though I know that others derive enormous joy from the period of hoping, and if the hope is thwarted they wince and then go on to hope for something else. Thus, my lack of hope is in part merely a dodge.

More seriously, I relinquished hope altogether in December 1990, when my husband was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma, recovery from which
is vanishingly small. Everyone believed that he was likely to die. The only uncertainty was when and how bad that dying would be. At that point, hope seemed a distraction. I was going to lose him, perhaps soon, and I wanted to be present in every one of the minutes we had left together, not fretting about some other moments that hadn’t arrived yet. I dropped the future then and I have never entirely taken it up again.

For no ascertainable reason, George didn’t die, and the time since has been sweeter than any other I have known. Hope gone, I feel anything but downcast. I feel free to live here, now, trusting that whatever happens next will happen without taking particular account of my wishes.

“But how can you remain an activist if you remain that way?” asked a friend, a member of the community with which I worship, as though lack of hope rendered me incapable of noticing the people in need around me, as though optimism is required in order to feed the hungry, give them clean water and piles of warm clothes in the winter, comfort them when they fall ill, grieve when they die.

“Do you think you’re going to change the world?” a reporter asked when I was instigating an antiwar poetry reading at the beginning of the war in Iraq.

“Well,” I snapped, “I’m not making it any worse.”

He couldn’t believe, I suppose, that someone would act without expectation of success. But if you focus on the outcome of your efforts, you are likely to do a sloppy job of the task at hand. Attention, not anticipation, motivates careful service. I may not feel hope or have hope, but I do one small act after another.

In her piece “Tikkun Olan,” Jennifer Jones writes that: “According to Kabbalah, to bring the spark of divine light into manifestation or to unite our divine spark of light with that of God, we must engage in the spiritual journey, help the poor and needy. With each deed of goodwill we are helping to repair the broken universe. Humankind becomes co-creators with God as we work to bring the universe into its original divine form.”

This is the work of which the Talmud says: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

Without hope, I can only remain alive to the world and engage with its creatures, rejoining in the holy that embraces us all. I hope that’s enough.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Thank you, Nancy Mairs. Now Lawrence Joseph.

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: The writer Don DeLillo has said that those raised Catholic, as DeLillo was, grow up with the belief that how you live
your life will determine how you live in eternity. “For a Catholic writer,” DeLillo says, “important subjects, eternal subjects, are a part of ordinary life.”

For a Catholic, hope is part of our ordinary life. As I learned in childhood from the Baltimore Catechism, there are three theological virtues — faith, hope, and love. Faith, hope, and love are theological virtues because they relate directly to God. The origin of Catholic faith, of Catholic hope, of Catholic love, is God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, faith, hope, and love are infused by God into the souls of the faithful. For a Catholic, faith and hope and love animate and inform all human virtue. Hope is the virtue by which we desire eternal life. The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration, the happiness, which God has placed in the heart of every human being. Hope is the expectation with faith of the beatific vision of a God of eternal love.

In her book-length essay *Love and Saint Augustine*, Hannah Arendt writes: “For Augustine, hope is the hope for the God of eternal love who Catholics believe in. The Catholic Creed is constituted by this hope.”

Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, in an essay “The Catholicity of Hope,” echoes Augustine: “Perfect hope must be grounded in the aspired-to fulfillment of eternal love.”

“The center of Catholic life and the Catholic Church is,” von Balthasar writes, “the human figure of the God Christ breaking the power of death. Catholic hope is characterized by Christ’s victory over death. Hope frees the Catholic from the powers of temporal evils, from the power of death. This freedom is the source of the resolute, persistent, and sometimes stubborn forms of involvement by Catholics throughout human history in places where from a human and worldly viewpoint there is no more hope. Among the incurably sick and the dying, the mentally ill and disabled, a Catholic who believes in and hopes for eternal life does not ask whether such action makes sense or is worthwhile. The virtue of hope allows the faithful to direct themselves, even in the midst of suffering, despair, and death, toward the eternal life of eternal love which exists outside human time, beyond death.”

In his second encyclical, “Spe Salvi” (Hope), which followed his first on love, Benedict XVI writes: “Hope’s great certitude is held firm by the indestructible power of God’s Love.” Benedict writes of “a God who personally enters history, a God who becomes human and suffers within history, a God who has given us an image in Christ made human, Christ crucified. God in Christ reveals God’s true image in the figure of one who suffers, one who shares each human being’s God-forsaken condition.” “This innocent human and God sufferer,” Benedict says, “has in death and resurrection attained for us the certitude of hope.” “Yes, there is,” Benedict says, “an undoing of past human suffering, a reparation that sets things aright. For this reason, faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope.”

During the past few weeks, I have been listening again and again to Aaron Neville’s version of the song “People Get Ready.” Neville, a
Catholic, has expressed a deep devotion to Saint Jude, the saint of impossible causes, or you might say the saint of hope.

“People Get Ready” was written in 1964 by Curtis Mayfield. Mayfield was born in Chicago in 1942. He wrote “People Get Ready” for his group, The Impressions, when he was twenty-two years old. One line that I await in the song is “There is hope for all among those loved the most.” In his version of the song, Neville after each stanza sings as a refrain:

“I believe, I do believe, I believe, I do believe. I do believe that there is hope for all among those loved the most. The gift of love from the God of eternal love to all that are loved the most, loved by eternal love.”

Throughout the poems in my most recent book, Into It, are references to the violence and suffering brought on the world since September 11, 2001. Into It is also expressly

“The book of a man, the book of a woman, the book of the city; Her voice in him, his voice in her. A city, the city, taking a shape and burning.”

One part of the twelve-part poem “Why Not Say What Happens?” reads:

“Have I mentioned my grandmother, my father’s mother, who died long ago but who visits me in dreams? It is to her mostly I owe the feeling that in cases of need, those transfigured in eternal love, hopeless, Certainly with eternal, and perhaps also with temporal, gifts That in eternal love all is gratis All that comes from eternal love is gratis.”

Into It concludes with the poem “Once Again,” a poem, as are all of my poems, spoken in the voice of a Catholic, a poem you might say that in Catholic hope takes heart:

“Once again, the esplanade, high summer The sea is beyond the sunset’s light, The shapes amassed, The sky a current carrying us along, Heavy with that green and that black. Fate’s precisely the wheel revolving, forces writing wheel, The stealing, the killing, accomplished by new types of half monsters. It’s what I said. The poem is the dream, a dream technique, The primary soul substance on which our attention is fixed. It’s eternal, metaphysical, in other words a representation as we have seen of mythical origins. Something felt, something needed, as much as we needed A woman, a man, love’s characters, The myth their own. We are agreed.”
The moon is low, its silent flame across the garden of roses, almost level with the harbor. We place our hands on the silence and once again repeat the vow.”

BEN BIRNBAUM: Thank you, Lawrence.

I should have mentioned earlier that Franz Wright, the poet from Massachusetts, was advertised as a person speaking tonight. He fell ill last week and was unable to make it. I want to express particular gratitude to Lawrence Joseph for filling in on short notice so wonderfully.

Now Dan Barry.

DAN BARRY: I thought this panel was on humiliation, so that’s why I readily agreed.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Another Catholic virtue.

DAN BARRY: Let me start with the opposite of hope, which is hope-less. My definition is me up here reflecting on hope.

It’s interesting, by the way, how we often use the word “hope.” It’s part of our psychic DNA. If not hope, then at least the invocation of hope: “I hope the weather clears up,” “I hope my train’s on time,” “I hope the Knicks win” — strike that. You finished with Bob Hope. I’ll do the same riff.

I started with Hope Lange, though, “The Ghost and Mrs. Muir” — Hope Lange; Hope, Arkansas; Hope, Rhode Island (by the way, there’s a beer in Rhode Island called Hope); Hope, New Jersey; “hope all is well,” “hope to see you again,” Bob Hope, hope. Or as I said to my wife when I walked out the door this morning, “Hope I don’t screw up tonight.”

I began by saying my talk might be hope-less because I know from my Catechism classes at Saints Cyril and Methodius School that hope is a grace. Faith, hope, and charity we know are the three divine virtues. I promised my wife I wouldn’t say this, but “faith, hope, and charity” always sounded like a dance act to me. I have to tell my wife I said it.

Four years later, I still struggle to define hope as I understand it and experience it. I find myself wondering whether hope is really another word for acceptance, or whether hope is the fear of or rejection of despair, or whether hope is the absence of any other option.

Hope as acceptance. A few weeks ago, my father died in a veterans’ facility on Long Island. His lungs had finally betrayed him — or, more accurately, he had betrayed his lungs. He used to smoke as many as eighty cigarettes a day. Now, you’ve really got to work at it to smoke eighty cigarettes a day. So that meant he lived his life enveloped in a bubble of bluish smoke.
My siblings and I often begged him to stop, but he would tell us to leave him alone. He’d had a hard life, he’d say, with justification; he deserved this one pleasure. Besides, he’d say, coughing was the only exercise he ever got.

In the hours before he died, I sat by his bed watching him sleep under the morphine blanket of velvet. I hoped that he would wake up. I hoped that he would ask me to see if there was a W.C. Fields movie on television. I hoped that he would complain to me about yet another misspelling, another typo, another misuse of the language that he had found in the pages of *The New York Times* — he’d delight in that. I hoped that he would ask me to wheel him outside so he could have another cigarette or two. That didn’t happen, of course.

But I can’t say that I felt my hope slipping away as my father himself slipped away. What I felt instead was a kind of calm acceptance, a strange and surprising sense that everything would be all right for me, for my three siblings, but also for him, my father. This might sound a little facile, but his many years of suffering and struggling were ending. While I knew that I would ache with the longing to see him again, I also accepted his passing as just that, a passing to something else. Was that hope? I really wonder, was that hope that I was feeling there?

Hope that is the fear or rejection of despair, hope that the absence of options. My most fervent moments of prayer have not been in a church or while kneeling beside my bed, but rather in a certain building on the Upper East Side — and I don’t mean Elaine’s. I refer of course to that forbidding monstrosity on York Avenue, that place in which just about everyone is there for the same damn reason, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital. Death and salvation occur there simultaneously all day, all night, often in the same semi-private bedroom.

When I was diagnosed with cancer eight years ago, it was a bad kind of cancer. Not that there’s really a good kind, but you know you’re in for a rocky ride when the doctors avert their eyes while talking about your case. Instead of flesh and blood, you are now made of a chart, a couple of X-rays, and a few dispassionate reports, reports you never see most of the time.

I called a friend of mine, a priest who had married my wife and me. I saw him as God’s agent, God’s rep, and of course I had some complaining to do. His response was something along the lines of “Perhaps this is all part of God’s plan.” Yeah, well it ain’t part of my plan. I was forty-one years old, I had an eighteen-month-old daughter, I had things to do.

So for the next six months, and then for another six months after a recurrence years later, I wrestled with hope. As I went through my chemotherapy and my radiation and my major surgery — I used to be a lot taller, by the way — I could not tell whether I was driven onward by hope, by the lack of any other option.

I know for certain that it wasn’t courage. People often talk about the courageous battle against cancer. But to me having courage means
having alternatives, that you can choose not to go into battle, having the option of not pressing on. But with cancer most of the time you have no choice but to fight back. You have to undergo surgery. You have to accept the injection of Drano into your veins. You have to receive radiation.

During my quote/unquote courageous battle, I found the strangest moment of peace. It came during my daily radiation treatment. I would change into a white robe, almost like a baptismal gown, and sit in a room with other people wearing white robes. It was like the waiting room to Heaven. Soon I would be led away and instructed to lay down on a gurney with my hands raised behind my head, and then I would be elevated on that gurney, almost as if I were being presented to God with this question: “And what about him?”

There would be a buzzing noise, a laser beam would shoot into my chest where I had been tattooed, marked, and all the while I would search for patterns on the ceiling that looked like a cross, and I would find relaxation, I would find comfort. Were these moments of hope? On my darkest Irish days I’d say “No.” On other days I’d say “Maybe.” Maybe this is hope. Maybe this experience of being with other people in white robes, of being raised up, of seeing nothing but ceiling tiles and still feeling comfort, maybe this is hope. I wondered then whether hope is our oxygen, sustaining us through illness, loss, hardship, and all those other fun aspects of the human condition, hope that there is something on the other side of those ceiling tiles.

The thought of looking up makes me think again of my father. Let me tell you why. He had a difficult life, and only some of that difficulty was self-created. He was a child of the Great Depression in New York City, in poverty, and he spent considerable time in an orphanage. Because his family was always one step ahead of the bill collectors, or one step behind, he attended more than a dozen schools scattered around the five boroughs here. He started working full-time at sixteen and finished high school at night. In many ways, his adulthood was even harder: cluster migraine headaches, low-paying jobs, alcohol abuse.

Anyway, this complicated man who died a few weeks ago in a vets home, this man who read voraciously, whose world view could be summed up this way, “Pete Seeger yes, Frank Sinatra no,” who in his last days expressed grave concern about the future of the United States, was of course a believer in the existence of UFOs. Let me rephrase that. He was a believer in the possibility of the existence of UFOs. So this meant that UFOs loomed over my childhood. The family library had every conspiracy book published and family discussions during dinner often focused on crop circles and Roswell, New Mexico, and ectoplasm. I like to say that we may have been the only family who actually wanted to be abducted by aliens. I could have done without the probing.

This meant that the family often took drives in the family station wagon searching the night skies for lights twinkling with possibility. And leading us always was my father, my father who had to struggle every day just to get through the day. He had these binoculars and he would scan
the darkness for any bit of glowing movement that might represent something beyond the shackles of this world, something beyond, something next. He seemed convinced it was out there. I guess you could call that hope. Thank you.

MR. BIRNBAUM: Thank you, Dan. One hardly knows where to begin. Hope, it seems, is a many-splendored thing, according to our panelists.

I will note, Dan, something you said triggered a memory in me. Vaclav Havel, the great playwright and president of the Czech Republic, once said that hope is not the idea that things are going to turn out all right; hope is the idea that things are going to make sense sometime, something along the lines of what you were saying.

Let me begin by asking a practical question, because I think practical questions about hope are of interest. That has been my experience. How does one tend hope? How does each of you become hopeful — except for Nancy Mairs, who of course has no hope? How does one tend hope? How do you keep it burning? It’s a difficult thing. I guess people develop strategies and ways of doing it. Writing is one of those ways, I think, probably for all of you.

Anyone want to begin?

CAROL ZALESKI: It’s a little thing. I have an icon on the wall in my bedroom. It was made by Gregory Krug, who was a Russian Orthodox émigré painter of the last century living in Paris. He did these amazing icons on the walls of a monastery outside of Paris. This is one which is the Anastasias theme, the Resurrection, which in Orthodox iconography is usually depicted in terms of what we in the West think of as the Holy Saturday story, the descent of Christ into hell, the harrowing of hell, Christ breaking down the jaws of hell and grabbing Adam and Eve and the Patriarchs and pulling them out.

In this particular interpretation of this motif you see Jesus looking at Adam. Adam and Eve are next to each other. They almost look like Siamese twins. Adam is looking up at Jesus. There’s a kind of glow there. Jesus is taking Adam not by the hand but by the wrist and pulling him. By taking him by the wrist you can see that Adam’s not doing very much; he’s allowing himself to be taken up.

What this really illustrates is something that if you look in the Liturgy of the Hours for Holy Saturday, you will find his ancient Greek homily where Christ addresses Adam and says, “I didn’t create you to be a prisoner of hell. Wake up. I’m taking you out of here.” As they look at each other, you see the resemblance between Adam and Christ. Adam is made in the image and likeness of God, and God is not willing to see his image and likeness come to naught in this way.

So sometimes just an image. There are many images of hope, obviously. But I think it isn’t so much reading that does it for me. I do a lot of reading. I’ve read the wonderful encyclical of Pope Benedict on hope. But that image, when I’m really down, when I’m really scared, I look at
that and that always seems to do the trick.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** How about the others here?

**NANCY MAIRS:** Well, you accused me of having none. I have said that. I said right away that in the conventional sense of hope I really have relinquished it. On the other hand, I have three grandchildren. I remember after the first one was born looking at him and thinking, “I have seen my immortality.” And so it’s not like hope in a specific way, but it’s just more assurance, assurance of continuity that I had never felt before. There are some things of which I am simply sure, and I guess for those I don’t need hope.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** I can see that to abandon hope or to give up hope and not become hopeless is a pretty pure form of hope. So we’ll let you have hope. I’d like to get to the two of you, particularly this question about writers. Samuel Johnson, who suffered from despair all his life, said that the only sure antidote against despair is employment, by which he meant writing. Does that work for you? I’m talking to Lawrence Joseph and to Dan. Is writing important?

**LAWRENCE JOSEPH:** Well, it’s more than important. It’s integral to who I am. I think the negative side of your question of tending to hope is to think of when we’re in despair, when we feel that deep suffering which every human being feels when you feel no hope. Then what happens to hope at that point? I mean you don’t then sit down and say, “I’m going to write a poem now and then I’m not going to be in despair.” That doesn’t always help. It’s much more human than that. At that point, I see a change in my life. I think when I was younger that it weighed heavily on me in a way that I didn’t understand. But as I’ve gotten older, it’s hard to talk about this — not that I have any problems talking about certain things, but there are certain things I actually feel are very interior and private. One of them is the feeling of hope when there’s really no reason to feel it.

To me I’ve always thought about hope and faith and love as the same thing. I’ve been doing this for a very long time actually, rather strangely. I see the theological virtues as representative of God and as gifts and mysteries and all basically the same thing. So usually what happens when I’m in moments of despair is I move into faith, I move into love, and that brings me into hope. When I move into love, that will bring me into faith.

The older I get, I have become — and I consider this a gift — more and more aware, if that’s the word, of the God that I believe is the God that I believe in, which I don’t know why I believe in this God, but sometimes I think — and I’ve said it to people — that maybe it’s because I was baptized in the Catholic faith. Sometimes I think I’m totally crazy, or maybe I’m just made this way. But I believe in a god of eternal love, and that’s consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church back to its very beginning.

I believe that love is eternal and I believe that that is what ultimately
draws hope and draws faith. It’s a mystery. There are points where we all feel the absence of it, but at the same time I think we all, if we have the gift of love, then I think we feel it’s the deepest blessing that we can have.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Thank you. Dan?

DAN BARRY: You said earlier that oftentimes hope is considered the most modest of the three virtues. I was talking with Peter Quinn, against my will. He’s actually here; he’s nodding off over there. He made an interesting point. He said that without hope you can’t have faith and you can’t have love. He found hope being integral to the other two virtues in a way.

In terms of writing, it’s interesting. I think the act of writing is in fact an act of hope. First of all, that any of what you are writing down matters; that’s an act of hope right there, that anyone will read it, that it will be preserved or in the future it will be reflected upon or used to wrap fish or whatever. And so the act of writing is often an act of hope to me. I feel as though when I write I’m chronicling something to another end, that I’m saying "this is what it’s like now, let us learn from it" or "this is the moment, let’s learn from it." I’ve described sometimes chasing these stories that I write like chasing the fireflies in summer, getting them into a mayonnaise jar and looking at them for a little bit, and then letting them go and reflecting on them. I think of my job in that way oftentimes, of writing. I think that’s an act of hope.

Related to that, oftentimes when I write about people, I tend to write about — I was going to say ordinary people, but for me they’re extraordinary people; they’re just not famous people. So I wrote a story about a fifteen-year-old girl in the ghettos of St. Louis. What I wanted to do was write about her taking a walk from her dumpy apartment to school — that’s all it was — and describe what she passes and what her hopes are in that school and what she dreams of being, and just write the journey. After the story ran, of course people just wanted to give money to her.

I wrote another journey of a young woman, who was five feet tall, did not know how to drive, she was eighteen, and she was going off to war, her journey from the Mojave Valley in Arizona to Las Vegas, where she was going to get a plane to Fort Hood, and who knows what she was going to go through there. So I wrote about that journey.

Alec Baldwin, of all people, read the story and called up the family. They lived in very modest circumstances. He said, “Look, we can do this a couple of ways. We can do it quiet and I’ll pay for your daughter’s college education. We can blow it out and get a lot of press coverage and I’ll pay for your daughter’s education. You just decide how you want to handle it.” In other words, Alec Baldwin, who is often referred to in the New York Post as “the Bloviator” and all this kind of nonsense — here’s an act of hope.

Nancy was referring to co-creators, that we are co-creators. I think
sometimes in situations like that, when someone is going to help that sophomore in St. Louis or help that woman about to go off to war — you know, she can hold a gun but she doesn’t know how to drive yet, and she can’t drink legally, but she’s going to go over to Iraq — that there’s that co-creation going on there. Therein I find hope.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Thank you. I’d like to turn to another aspect of hope. I’m going to draw this from something Carol Zaleski said in an interview. She was talking about her book, *Prayer*. I’m sure that’s not why she said it. But she talked about prayer as an engine of hope for her. In fact, I thought you might answer that last question that way.

I recall Dan including, in addition to your father’s prayer that I cited, your book or your memoir is full of tossed-off prayers, let us say, prayers that aren’t formal prayers, but they are real prayers, they are heartfelt prayers. Let me ask you how prayer enters into your lives as Catholics, how it connects to hope.

Carol, if you’ll start.

CAROL ZALESKI: Certainly the Lord’s Prayer is an engine of hope and is all about hope. I find actually rote prayer extremely helpful. It’s almost like these Tibetan prayer wheels — you just set it spinning and it goes and goes. I feel like the whole liturgy of the church is like one giant prayer wheel, and I can climb onto it, fall off it, climb back on, and fall off it again. I know it’s going on all over the world. I don’t need to summon up pious feelings and then express them in a prayer. I can just get on that prayer wheel and graces flow from it, gifts come from it.

They’re certainly not the result of my having a very disciplined interior life, but they are the gift that the prayer of the church gives us. That prayer of the church, of course, is always asking for handouts from God in a way that should teach us that it’s okay to ask for things and to experience that dependency and that expectation that good things will come.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Anybody else want to talk about prayer and its relationship to hope?

NANCY MAIRS: I write a lot about prayer. I remember when I was first beginning to write these kinds of essays, I was giving a reading in a community college, and I read an essay from what became *Ordinary Time*. The first question from the audience was from a woman who said, “How do you pray?” I just went “Ahhhh.” You know, I was reared a Congregationalist. We didn’t talk about things like that. I sort of sputtered and I said, “Well, I don’t — or rather I don’t think I ever stop.” It was not like a separate act from other acts.

When I try to pray formally, I like your sense that rote maybe takes care of a lot of preoccupations that aren’t really prayer-worthy and provides a way to focus. I think of myself as working very hard not to pray; that is, to deconstruct what I was taught prayer was, to learn silence, use a lot of the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn and sit with a Zen Buddhist group and
just try to be quiet, try to learn stillness. My prayer has always been too chattery.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** You were about to move to the microphone. Do you have a connection between prayer and hope?

**LAWRENCE JOSEPH:** Yes. I think you used the phrase, “It’s the engine.” I think that’s right, or at least for me. I think part of the problem with prayer is there are certain people in our society who have given it a very bad name. In a certain way, if you are asked about if you pray, if you are asked about what prayer, you end up having to define it in some kind of way. We all pray differently.

There are certain rote prayers. For me there is a Prayer of Saint Ignatius of Loyola that at the Jesuit high school I went to in Detroit, in my freshman history class there was a Jesuit scholastic who would start every class with the Prayer of Saint Ignatius. I had to memorize that prayer. I say that often.

But usually it’s interior and it’s contemplative. I think that’s a link actually with poetry. I did a reading with Marie Ponsot, who’s a Catholic, a poet, and we were both asked about the Catholic dimension of writing poems. Marie said, “They are prayers.” I agree with that.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** Dan, is there anything you want to add to that?

**DAN BARRY:** What the heck?

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** Dan writes his own prayers.

**DAN BARRY:** I've improved upon the Our Father. [Laughter]

I appreciate the rote as well. But after my illness, let’s say I was reacquainted with prayer. What I tried to do was actually focus on the words, whereas before I wouldn’t focus on the words. I think when I was about in the third grade, I was at Saint Cyril’s, in the basement, 11:45 — I was missing the Abbott and Costello movie on Channel 11; I was not a happy guy — and at one point during the Our Father I yawned. I don’t know why, but I yawned. I wasn’t struck down. But for years and years afterwards, when I would say the Our Father at church I would yawn. There was some kind of problem in my mechanism.

After the illness, I started to focus on the words more. I was shocked to be blown away by — I just wrote it down again because I don’t want to blow it, because I’ve rewritten the Our Father — “Give us this day our daily bread.” Right there is hope, “Give us this day our daily bread.” I found myself focusing on that term.

What Ben was referring to perhaps is in my book I talked about after the diagnosis I looked like Uncle Fester, after all the chemo I had gone through. I would continue to go to work. I would walk up Eighth Avenue from Penn Station to 43rd Street, when The Times was there, and I would pray. I found myself praying up Eighth Avenue, walking past all those
garment shops and all that kind of stuff. I would say, “Our Father who
art in Heaven.” I’d be crossing 35th Street and a cab would try to cut in
front of me — “You son of a bitch” — and then I’d get right back into the
rhythm and the rote, “Our Father, give us this day our daily bread.”
What do you call that?

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** That is what I was referring to. I think I saw you
there, by the way. I crossed the street.

Let me ask you something that tends to come up in conversations about
hope. This is, one might say — and I don’t know; I’ve only lived in this
time — a particularly tough time for hope. I think many of us find it so.
We find irony — not that there’s anything wrong with irony; we just
heard a good example of it — rampant in the culture. We find many
things in the culture that seem to indicate that there isn’t a lot of hope.
Is this a particularly hard time for hope? What do you think? I know
we’re not all social scientists, but I’m not asking you to comment as
social scientists. I’m asking you to comment as parents and writers and
all that kind of thing. Lawrence?

**LAWRENCE JOSEPH:** I think that the topic gets back to Catholic
hope, as opposed to whatever. I don’t know why that is. But let’s say
you take God out of human history. Then hope is a very different kind of
thing. I don’t think that we are in a time of any greater despair or
feeling of suffering and the hopelessness of existence than we have been
in other times, although I agree that we may be in a time when now we
can really see where the species will become extinct, which just lifts the
issues of the other type of hope — for lack of a better term, Catholic hope
— up to another kind of dimension.

But I am no longer interested in terms like “optimism” or “pessimism” or
anything like that. I find them very much a part of the mass culture and
very much influenced by the mass culture and by the various things in
the mass culture. I think hope and despair are things so deeply in us and
so deeply human and so tied to something transcendent — obviously,
none of us would be up here if we didn’t believe in something
transcendent. I think that’s what drives it.

Just one other comment on prayer. I pray for hope. It isn’t there
naturally for me. I don’t think it’s there for anybody naturally. I pray
for hope the way, when in doubt, I pray for faith, and when I don’t love
enough, I pray for love. Maybe that’s where prayer goes back to. Maybe
the Catechism is correct on this. Maybe it’s 2000 years of accumulated
thinking and feeling about God is right. These are the theological
virtues, these are the virtues that God gives us, which are central to us.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** Carol, do you want to say something?

**CAROL ZALESKI:** You mentioned sociology in terms of hope. I’m not
a sociologist, but I think I can spot some bad sociology when I see it.
That would be projecting from current trends the idea that they’re just
going to keep increasing and increasing and increasing, that is the trends
we don’t like, the trends that worry us. It seems to me that’s got to be
bad sociology.

It seems to me also that if we are thinking in terms of trends within the Church in an ecclesial way, I have a fancy that we may still be in the early Church. I feel that we have no way of knowing where we are heading and that there is, as I suggested earlier, a eucatastrophic dimension to be looked for in the life of the Church. So to project from current demographic trends — for instance, the decline in vocations, the aging of clergy religious, and all of those things — is I think to do bad sociology.

I mean it works for a certain period. You know, we can project a certain period. Parish closures are the sensible result of that consolidation, and a lot of suffering comes from that. But to lose hope in the Church on that count, I just don’t get it.

BEN BIRNBAUM: This is a great opportunity for me to change the subject. Before I go to the questions from the audience, I wanted to see that each of you had a chance to talk about your hopes for the Church, or your hope in the Church.

This book [Take Heart: Catholic Writers on Hope], as I mentioned, came out of the [clerical sexual abuse] crisis. What surprised me is of the forty Catholic writers we wrote to originally — we had to expand the outreach because some people were just too busy to do it and some people thought $250 was a bit cheap to ask, particularly from an institution like Boston College that has a famous $1.5 billion endowment. But only one person responded, out of probably over fifty people all told, that they did not have hope for the Church and they could not write. Now, that’s a sample of writers, which is a very skewed sample in all kinds of ways. But a very interesting response, at least to my mind.

So let me ask you: What are your hopes — I’m sure you have them, I guess is what I’m saying — what are your hopes for the Church? I think Carol got us off to a very good start, this notion of the Church as being made as we speak, as we sit here, being developed. Who knows, this may be the early years of the Church. As perhaps we look back at the early Church fathers, someday someone may look back at this time in this way. What are your thoughts on this? What are your hopes for the Church?

NANCY MAIRS: I just said I started out as a Congregationalist, so I probably have a different relationship to the church. I mean it has never been Holy Mother Church to me. I converted in 1977, so I converted to a post-Vatican II Catholicism that I very strongly feel is seeping away from me.

My first full essay in A Dynamic God is called “Left at the Altar,” because I feel as though I didn’t leave the Church, not the Church I had converted to; the Church left me. I am still firmly committed to the values of liberation theology, for instance, which is now anathema. The consequence has been — and George and I have been in this process together — that we no longer worship within a church building. We have a house church. We are a group of forty people or so. We worship in one
another's homes on Saturday nights, sort of along the model of the really, really early days after the Crucifixion, when people gathered in upper rooms, often with the doors locked, and shared bread and wine and maybe a little fish and told stories about this remarkable man they had known, this remarkable teacher.

That is not our objective — we don’t have an objective exactly — but simply where we are comfortable. We are not comfortable in the institutional church. In fact, we call ourselves Community of Christ of the Desert. It started out being Catholic — we are all Catholics. But it turns out that people of other denominations are suffering great pain in their denominations also, pain and alienation. For instance, the Presbyterian Church is still denying homosexuality as a valid state of being. So if you are a Presbyterian and a lesbian, your faith requires you to believe that you are living a sin. Many people don’t feel that in their experience. They come to us. We work through that. We are a peace-and-justice community and we are very involved socially. So the institutional church means less and less to me as it reverts more and more to what I would consider medievalism.

**BEN BIRNBAUM**: How about Lawrence or Dan on this question of the Church. Be honest with us, Dan.

**DAN BARRY**: I haven’t been all night!

What Nancy was referring to reminds me of course of 19th century Ireland. That’s what the Irish did, they huddled, trying to worship.

I guess what I would wish for the Church is to lose its tone deafness. I don’t know if that is something that it can be cured of. I am arguably in a dying business, newspapers, pen and paper, and the word is now spread virtually. And so, too, do I wonder whether the institutionalization of the Church will develop similar to what your experience is now, that we won’t need that institution the way it is, with its tone deafness, and that something else will grow out of it.

**NANCY MAIRS**: If I am hopeful, that would be a good statement. In the short term, I have no idea. I am agnostic in many ways, and that certainly would be one of them. In the long term, it doesn’t matter. It will happen. It will. Something always does. Something always has, as long as we’ve been around at least — and what’s 10,000 years of evolution now? — and many thousands, and even millions, of years before that working in this direction, and something has always happened. Something has always happened next.

I just assume that it will and that I will find out — if I happen to be around, or whoever is left will find out — what it is. So our job is to take care of where we are now and who we are with now, because I believe that’s the central command of the Gospel: Take care of each other.

**BEN BIRNBAUM**: Lawrence, do you want to say anything on this?

**LAWRENCE JOSEPH**: It’s interesting. I think this has been over the
last couple of decades actually. I grew up in a very fervent Catholic environment. I was baptized an Eastern Catholic. I’m from a Lebanese and Syrian background. My grandparents were from Lebanon and Syria and I was baptized in an Eastern rite as a Catholic, but I went to Roman Catholic schools and parochial schools.

The whole notion of the term that we all use now, the “institutional church,” as opposed to “the Church,” is an interesting development. I don’t think there has ever been a time in history when Catholics haven’t had difficulty with the institutional side of the Church. The Church is another thing, the Church, and the way the Church relates to faith. I these days prefer to think about the Church that way. I agree with Carol. I have no trouble with the thought that we are still in the early Church.

On this whole problem, I have a kind of anecdote. This theologian that I like a great deal, Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of his central insights that the end of the last Gospel, the Gospel of John, literally ends — and I’m paraphrasing this and retelling it or restating it — when Christ is about to ascend into Heaven. John is writing this. Peter says to Christ, “What am I going to do when you’re gone? What am I going to do?” He has been told that he has to be the one that is to be the rock, he’s the authority. Christ says to him, “You’ll figure it out.” And this is, of course, the person who denied Christ three times, a very weak man. Then Peter says, “How about the one you love, John?” Christ says to him, “None of your business.” Von Bathasar’s vision is both sides are Catholic. One is the institutional side, the history, which is flawed and sinful. Dorothy Day would always refer to the institutional side of the Church as a whore. She was once asked if she meant that figuratively, and she didn’t answer the question.

The other side is love. Both are necessary and both operate. But the last statement of Christ in the last Gospel, at least the way that we have structured the Gospels and the way the Church has structured the Gospels, is love prevails. That is the God of the Gospel of John. There is no mention of hell in the Gospel of John.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Thank you all.

That reminds me of something a 20th century Jewish philosopher by the name of Emil Fackenheim said. He said, “God in his love did not create religion. He created the world.”

Let me turn to some questions I have been handed up from Peter. I know many of you believe that your questions are read by Peter, edited by him, then passed along to the moderator. In fact, he writes all of these himself. He doesn’t read a single thing you wrote. He wrote these last week, I assure you.

The title of this one is “Beyond personal prayer. We haven’t spoken about hope in our world in the midst of war, failing economy, the environment, beyond personal hope.”

Would anyone comment? I take it this is a comment about communal
hope, or hope within the institution as it were, hope within the
Eucharist, within the celebration of Catholicism. Would anybody like to
comment on that?

CAROL ZALESKI: Actually, I think what we have just been saying
about the nature of the Church, what I hear people favoring is this
communion ecclesiology, which means that —

BEN BIRNBAUM: Excuse me. I’ve had that question reinterpreted for
me by Peter, who wrote it, so he knows what it’s about. He says the
question is really about the work to redeem the world; that is to say
you’ve talked about personal hope. Nancy Mairs has addressed this
somewhat.

NANCY MAIRS: Tikkun Olan.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Tikkun Olan, exactly.

NANCY MAIRS: Repair the world.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Where are your hopes? Where do you find hope?
How does hope play in your communal work or your work to redeem the
world, practical work? Go ahead. I’m sorry I interrupted.

CAROL ZALESKI: It’s another question.

BEN BIRNBAUM: It is another question. Lawrence, you’re leaning
toward the microphone.

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: I hope for the mercy of God. With the level of
where the species is at this point, one has to have just hope at that level,
beyond the communal level, of my faith, or what we’ve been talking
about. I am not hopeful. I am not hopeful in secular hope, if you like.

I think the last seven years have actually moved this despair over the
species to another level. I think it’s a level that maybe we haven’t seen
before. There have been other areas, but in particular the ecologies,
moral and physical and spiritual, that have been absolutely crushed and
destroyed in the last seven years are horrifying. My hopes in those areas
— I have hopes, but I see things moving in certain levels. I don’t give up
hope, but the kind of hope I have is in the order.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Nancy Mairs, it strikes me that your hope comes
with a plan, a work plan as it were; that is to say part of the way you
attach yourself to hope is through work.

NANCY MAIRS: That’s why I said I don’t feel hope. But I do hope,
because I don’t see how you lack hope — if you make sure that the old
people in the apartments in Tucson who are extremely low income and
who get Meals on Wheels during the week but they don’t have any on the
weekend, so somebody’s got to take them food. We have a program in the
neighborhood, called Food for Life. And George delivers meals a couple
of times a week.
I don’t know how you define that, but isn’t that in some way intrinsically hopeful, that you will get them through the weekend anyway, and that they will feel better if they are fed, and valued in that way? So in that sense, yes, hope is my work rather than my prayer. Or it’s my prayer because my prayer is my work.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Yes, labor is work, as the Benedictines say.

NANCY MAIRS: I really do feel that work and prayer are very closely yoked in Benedictines, and I like that a lot.

BEN BIRNBAUM: This again is a question from the audience: “What is the place of Jesus, the person of Jesus as it were? What role does he play in your notion of hope — personal relationship, personal understanding — whether it’s through reading the Bible or through whatever?” Is there such a thing for any of you? How does it work?

NANCY MAIRS: Ask it again.

BEN BIRNBAUM: How does the person of Jesus enter into your notion of hope?

NANCY MAIRS: That’s sort of what you asked me last night, isn’t it, George? George said, “What do you say to Jesus?” I said, “Thank you.” That kind of sums it up. Do you know the Dorothy Day quotation where she says there are only five forms of prayer? I’m sure I can’t remember the all. One is “Help.” Another is “Goddammit.” What are some others, George?

GEORGE MAIRS: “Wow!”

NANCY MAIRS: That’s the ultimate one, “Wow!” Those are the essence of the prayers that we say. I am not certain at all about an historical Jesus, so I’m not thinking that I’m praying to a person. But I am certainly praying to a way of life that is transcendent, believing in that presence of Jesus in the world. He said He would be with us, He said He would be with us always.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Anyone else on this? Lawrence?

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: I think very much that Jesus as a person inside of the religion of Christianity is something that I have really never focused on a great deal. I am very taken by the belief that God becomes human, entirely human, and remains entirely God, which is the central theological issue of the nature of Christ, which goes all the way back to the beginnings of the Church theologically, and to all Christians. If you contemplate that, the human side, that God was entirely human, God became entirely human, and then you have God also as being part of the divine scheme, if you like.

But the thing that in thinking about hope that came back to me was on the cross when Christ did not believe, thought God had forsaken him.
That was the human feeling of total despair. He felt that — and I'm not sure it matters if it was a he or not in the divine, and I don't like using terms "he" and "she"; it could be either one. In other words, a human being who was God felt total absence, as all human beings feel at one point or another, total absence from God. That is the second person of the Trinity that I think of probably the most, the human side, that's also completely the divine side.

The greatest depiction artistically I have ever seen is Martin Scorsese's "The Last Temptation of Christ," which is a remarkable movie if you haven't seen it, which takes the Nikos Kazantzakis novel, and literally Scorsese goes into both the divine and human nature at the same time, from the time his person is born.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** I've got another question from the audience here for any one of you: "Hope and creativity. How does hope pervade creativity?" In parentheses the writer has written "focusing on the hope for a piece of writing, for example, can be a distraction." "So where is hope's place? How does it affect the act of creativity?" Does hope play a role when you're sitting at your desk? Do you try to tamp it down as you begin a creative act, such as writing an essay or a poem?

**NANCY MAIRS:** Gee, no. I'd really like some hope at that time. I'm always certain when I set out that this is the one I can't do. Whatever it is, this is the one. Obviously, I have been able to do things before, because I have books, but this is the piece of writing that I can't do, including the piece of writing that I did for this. That's just the way it is. So I would say that, if anything, I write against hope in a way, in spite of its lack.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** The paper is always blank when you sit down. That's the thing about writing. You're never convinced it's going to happen the next time as it happened last time, or this time as it happened last time.

**LAWRENCE JOSEPH:** I think what Dan said earlier struck me as correct, at least in terms of myself, that when you engage in the act of writing you at some point imagine somebody reading it and being affected by it in some kind of way. So it really comes out of — I think people do this because they need to do it. I don't think people do it because they want to have hope, or whatever, because they do it.

But I think once you need to do it and you do it, you are in a very, very intricate relationship with hope in terms of people reading it and being affected by it. I think that's also a belief. You really believe at some point that that will happen. You know it may not, and you know the despair and futility of it. Virtually every artist feels that just intrinsically.

But at the same time there is this sense that you are going to continue to do it because someone might see it, one person might see it, and one person might be affected by it. It really has nothing to do with you, but
it has to do with this gift that you have, that you feel that you have, the need that you have to do it.

BEN BARRY: A blank piece of paper is despair. But in my business deadlines bring hope. With a deadline, hope comes, and you go from there.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Deadlines have a way of doing that.

This next question is specifically for Nancy Mairs and Dan Barry, both of you. You can guess what it is, I imagine. “How did and does your illness impact on your vocation? You both have vocations as of this moment as writers.”

NANCY MAIRS: I guess it must be a vocation. I mean why else would you go through this?

DAN BARRY: There’s better-paying vocations.

NANCY MAIRS: I started out a poet when I was eight. I wasn’t ill at that time. I have multiple sclerosis, and that showed up when I was twenty-nine. It is progressive, so it has just been worse and worse and worse.

I was a good poet but, I think, quite a conventional one. I think what MS gave me was a voice that nobody else had. At the time I was first writing, I wrote an essay called “On Being a Cripple” in my first book of essays. It’s like kind of the initial essay of disability studies now, because people just weren’t writing about that stuff. So I suppose that it is in many ways intrinsic to the writer I have become, even though I would have been a writer of some sort. So that’s the sense in which I feel this is a vocation — or, even more, is a gift.

BEN BIRNBAUM: I should say about Dan’s book that probably 75-to-80 percent of it is not about his illness. Go ahead, Dan.

DAN BARRY: I wouldn’t recommend cancer as a writing tool. I do think, though, before my experiences, which continue, there was a little hardness in my writing and in the interaction with the people I would write about. You know, when you’re a reporter and you join a newspaper, you can’t wait to write and talk like cops. It’s something that you have to prove to yourself. So you can’t wait to be having a cup of coffee and talking to a colleague or a cop and using the term “floater,” which is a body found in a river. There’s something that you want to say it.

I find after my experiences with cancer I don’t have patience for that. I tell young reporters, “That’s not getting you anywhere.” I think I have a finer appreciation for what’s at stake in this human condition. When I write about a person going through some kind of struggle, I have a keener sense — perhaps not exactly the same sense, but a keener sense — of that struggle and what is at stake.
I think that my cancer informed how I reported during the aftermath of 9/11 in this city, and it informed how I wrote about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. You can flatter yourself and think you’re more empathetic. I don’t know if that’s what was going on. But I think I would take a deeper breath when I would hear these people’s stories.

And as I said earlier about the Our Father, focusing on the words, now too do I focus on what people are saying. I think that’s how it has changed at least my writing.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** I see Peter approaching the podium. I’m not sure what that means.

I have a question, which I have to look for. There is a sense — and this is something Jim Keenan said to me — that hope is only found near the tomb, as it were, and that what is necessary for hope — and I’m looking for a quotation from the New Testament that I took down. I am far from an expert. It has to do with suffering forming character and leading to hope. There are probably a hundred people in this audience who could supply me with the citation.

Is that not a lot to ask, that hope should be tied to this awful thing called despair, this awful thing called suffering? Is it not a conundrum in a way?

**NANCY MAIRS:** I don’t know about that. But I am suffering from thirst and I really hope somebody will come and pour me a glass of water. Is that the sort of thing you have in mind? [Lawrence Joseph leans over to pour a glass of water.]

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** At his usual hourly rate, I presume.

Dan, do you find that odd in some ways, that is, the connection between suffering and hope, that a virtue should be connected?

**DAN BARRY:** That’s just so Catholic, though.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** Maybe that’s why it puzzles me.

**DAN BARRY:** You have to earn it. It’s part of my DNA now. It drives people whom I know who are not Catholic crazy, this idea that suffering is connected to the hope, that there is redemption through that. I think that’s just the life experience anyway. If you go through that fire, whether the fire is a loss or an illness or something, you come out stronger and there is a redemptive process in that. Again, I don’t recommend going through those fires, but that is my experience.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** I would say you are more of a theologian than you claim to be.

**DAN BARRY:** Oh, no.

**BEN BIRNBAUM:** I have one final question, if I might, Peter. That is
the question of hope in community. Gabriel Marcel, whom I quoted earlier, said there could be no hope that does not constitute itself as we and for we. As Catholics, you are in communion with each other and with God and with the Church. Do you feel hope as a core enterprise, as a community enterprise, or do you feel it as Congregationalists might, singly and alone?

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: Completely communal ultimately.

NANCY MAIRS: Which is probably why I am no longer a Congregationalist, because there is that element.

BEN BIRNBAUM: Carol?

CAROL ZALESKI: I would also add to that the whole concept of the communion of saints; that is to say the communion that joins the living and the dead as well as the communion of all of us who happen to be walking around earth. It is said that you don’t have hope anymore in Heaven and you abandon hope at the doorway to hell, but hope still obtains in Purgatory and in earth. This is obviously a specifically Catholic way of understanding the communal nature of our hope, that it crosses the boundary between the living and the dead, and that there is this union of prayer, which means the living and the holy souls in Purgatory, and that the fire of suffering is also the fire of love and it joins those of us who are in the Church.

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: That’s the Church, in my opinion.

CAROL ZALESKI: That’s my idea of the Church.

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: That’s my idea of the Church also. And catholic in the sense of universal, the hope of all of us and the belief that we have is universal, in the sense that, as you say, it is communal, and it’s in the communion of saints, and we all draw from one another’s hope and praying for one another’s hope. That is not only among the living but it is the faithful on earth and in Heaven and it’s the communion of saints.

NANCY MAIRS: Right. “Saint” doesn’t necessarily mean canonized.

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: It means holy.

NANCY MAIRS: Yes.

LAWRENCE JOSEPH: It means those that are in touch with the holiness of hope. What you said, in the hope of everyday work of going and helping people, which is very rooted in Catholicism and has been in Catholicism from the very beginning, the works of mercy, the beatitudes.

DAN BARRY: I like the idea of Mass where each one of us comes in and we’re all inward and we all have our own private hells that we’re going through. You can see it sometimes on people’s faces. You almost sense it when the person next to you is being his or her self. I love the moment when either there is the prayer that everyone shares or a hymn —
NANCY MAIRS: Yes. Music does it for me.

DAN BARRY: I feel that. We haven’t talked about music. That’s not peculiar to the Catholic faith. That’s when I feel it. You know, you can feel transported by that. That’s when I am reminded of the communion that we’ve been speaking about.

BEN BIRNCAUM: Thank you.

I have been at Boston College for almost thirty years, so I know we haven’t had enough reading from Scriptures. So I am going to close with a very brief sentence from 1 Peter 3:15: “Always be ready with a reply for anyone who demands an explanation for the hope you have within you, but do it humbly and respectfully.”

We’ve had that tonight. I want to thank the four panelists.

PETER STEINFELS: I knew that when that image of the hopeless, of the blank sheet of paper and how to overcome it, came up that Dan Barry was going to mention deadline. I’m Peter Steinfels. As a fellow perpetrator of journalism from time to time, I represent deadline. We have come to the end — not of our hope, but of our forum talking about hope.

Before thanking again everyone involved in the evening, including Patricia Bellucci, the amazing program manager of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, and our student assistants, I would like to remind those of you who are not on our announcement list to please leave your email or your snail-mail addresses at the table in front. By doing that you will get full information, for example, on our next major event, which will be a conference organized with the Museum of Biblical Art on May 30 and 31. It will be looking at the religious art of an age of violence, clashing cultures, economic change, and dramatic breakthroughs in thought and imagination — namely, the Middle Ages. We will be exploring the significance of that art for another age of violence, clashing cultures, and dramatic economic and cultural change — namely, our own 21st century.

I also remind you that a number of books by this evening’s panelists are on sale outside the auditorium.

Finally, to close the evening, for our guests, alumni and alumnae from Boston College, for our moderator Ben Birnbaum, and for our panelists Carol Zaleski, Lawrence Joseph, Nancy Mairs, and Dan Barry, we’d like to express again our warmest thanks.