“Without the burden of afflictions it is impossible to reach the height of grace. The gift of grace increases as the struggle increases.”

St. Rose of Lima
"We can therefore hope in the glory of heaven promised by God to those who love him and do his will. In every circumstance, each one of us should hope, with the grace of God, to persevere "to the end" and to obtain the joy of heaven, as God's eternal reward for the good works accomplished with the grace of "Christ. In hope, the Church prays for "all men to be saved." She longs to be united with Christ, her Bridegroom, in the glory of Heaven. (CCC #1821)

Often times we look at speaking about Christ as being enough. Just as importantly, we must share our beliefs through an encounter with others. This encounter must be based on genuine Christian love and a desire to bring others the "Good News". Being Christ to others is the very act that will bring others to Christ. If we need any more convincing of this timeless truth, we need look no further than Jesus and his reminder to the disciples, "Greater love has no one than this: than to lay down one's life for one's friends," John 15:13.

So how do we bring this truth to ourselves, and then others?

Start by being a person of PRAYER.

Here are some ways we can spend time with the Lord in prayer:

- Praying with Gratitude—count your blessings at least once a day.
- Pray for those bringing hope—especially health care personnel, priests, civic leaders, etc.
- Pray for those suffering to have hope—this could be the unemployed, the sick and dying, and those who living in fear.
- Pray that your actions always reflect the love of Christ, especially when you are feeling frustrated or angry.
- Pray for the grace to be a person of hope so that your conversations with others can be positive and uplifting.
- Pray with Sacred Scripture, especially passages that reveal messages of hope.
- Pray for the intercession of the Saints, whose examples of hope give us strength.
For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? Romans 8:24

As a person of HOPE, one must reflect on their own life. Are you who Christ wants you to be? Are you in the right job? Are you parenting in a Godly fashion? How is the state of your marriage? Are you partaking of the Sacraments? These are just a few of an endless list of questions you need to answer. These are hard-but necessary-questions to reflect upon for growth in one's authentic faith. Pray for the virtue of humility to accept that change might be needed.

In order to be a Parish of Hope, we must critically reflect upon similar questions. Does our church leadership annually reflect upon the needs and perspectives of our parishioners? Are we reaching the whole community? Would a single mom and her children feel comfortable or welcomed when attending Mass or a Parish event? What about children, youth, young adults, the newly married, single adults, single parents, young families, men’s and women’s ministries, retirees, and the homebound? What opportunities are we providing people to connect to the Church and each other in addition to the Mass? Do our parish evangelization efforts ensure that we will exist in twenty years? If answered honestly, these discussions may lead to disagreement and confrontation—and that’s ok! Confrontation can just be two people having a conversation that needs to happen. The results can be stronger relationship and resolve for you and your parish to be more vibrant, inviting and Christ-centered. A few examples:

- Strive to make Sacramental Celebrations Whole-Church events.
- Make personal contact with every registered household to invite participation.
- Personally invite each family to participate in at least one ministry within the parish as a family.
- Focus on bringing the whole family into Parish Activities. Schedule events so that both parents can be present even if it means sharing the time slot to assist or provide childcare.
- Create new member "Buddy" systems. An example would be an adopt a grandparent program.
- Create more faith-based Parish events. These could be retreats, days of recollection and feast day celebrations.
- Recognize children as a gift and provide a welcoming and safe environment for families of young parishioners.
- Establish an outreach ministry to provide services to the homebound, elderly, and parishioners in need. This includes visitation, transportation, home repairs, or other support.
- Explore supporting more community events and ecumenical ministries as a Parish. Some examples would be pro-life groups or prison ministries.
- Create small groups based on similar life experiences and circumstances. Examples would be groups for Young Families, Single Adult, Widow and Widowers etc.
- Implement social based Parish events such as potluck dinners, Doughnut Sundays etc. to promote and encourage fellowship.
One of the most beautiful things about our Catholic Faith, is that it’s never ending. Most people will have a moment where they claim it as their own, saying, "I believe". What happens after you make that commitment is just as important. We must pass on the "Good News" we've heard. We must be like the Apostles when Jesus told them:

"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20

It is a simple command that Jesus gave, and it's our duty and responsibility to live it out. Opportunities for discipleship could include:

- Helping your parishioners to develop an understanding of their Baptismal calling. This includes promoting Youth Encounter, Cursillo, Koinonia, and adult faith formation programs.
- Strengthen the quality and breadth of our music program. Actively recruit musicians, instrumentalists, cantors and singers. Actively recruit and audition cantors to ensure the quality of the music.
- Use experienced volunteers as coaches and mentors for new volunteers.
- Develop and maintain a database of the knowledge, skills, and experience that your parishioners are gifted with. Use the list to recruit those with skills needed to help your parish live out its mission.
- Provide opportunities beginning at the earliest ages for sharing of gifts and talents within the Parish and local community—increase in scope and depth as faith and age progress.
- Recognize volunteers for their contributions frequently using methods such as weekly recognition in the bulletin, telephone calls, pulpit announcements, thank you notes, etc.
- Offer options for cost-effective travel and participation for Diocesan events, performances, concerts, religious pilgrimages, etc.
Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize, that is to say, in order to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God, and to perpetuate Christ's sacrifice in the Mass, which is the memorial of His death and glorious resurrection. 

Evangelii Nuntiandi, Pope Paul VI, 1975

These words were written almost fifty years ago and they still ring true today. Being Christ to others is the very act that will bring others to Christ. As a member of the body of Christ, do you want to hear and proclaim the bold message of Christ? Are you lifting up in prayer your needs and the needs of your family, your parish, and your community? Are you being, supported by your parish? Are you yearning to reconnect with the Sacraments, especially Reconciliation and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass?

We cannot give what we do not have. We receive God's Grace from continued use of the Sacraments, which helps us to learn the Truth, and bring It to others. Through the workings of the Holy Spirit, we can fill our churches again. It is the heartfelt desire to give to others what was given to us that attracts people. From the earliest times of Christianity, it was our love for each other that made us different. It was that sacrificial attitude of AGAPE that attracted the early believers. Is today any different?

So please, with parish leadership, critically examine your parish life. Have a good discussion on elevating what you are doing well, and eliminating what is not working. Be sure to reflect- does this plan further the mission of our Church to "make disciples of all nations"? Finally, extend grace for yourself and those around you. It takes time to change a culture, and the result will be more people joined at God's table for all eternity.

Rejoice in hope, endure in affliction, persevere in prayer.

Romans 12:12