

Community Engagement as an Expression of Easter Hope

One of the great themes at the heart of the paschal mystery is the hope that flows to humanity and to the whole of Creation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Hope is one of the three theological virtues (along with faith and charity). It is a strong, almost imperative virtue which makes it possible for men and women not only to envision and desire a different, better tomorrow, but also to commit themselves to actions which will bring that different, better tomorrow to reality.

Hope is about the recognition of potentialities and possibilities; it is the 'outcome' of changes made through grace; it is a life transformed through the experience of God's providence here and now, day by day.

Hope is built in and through respectful, mutually reciprocal relationships. This is rather beautifully expressed by Courtney Peters, an ACU student, when she reflects that

In my life, hope appears as people. I find hope in my family, my friends. I find hope in the innocence of children, the wisdom of older people, and the wisdom of younger people. I find hope in people who journey with passion. Because of hope I am called into relationship with all people, especially those who might at times might feel forgotten by the world. True justice is not achieved by crying out and raising your voice, but by caring for the crushed reed and flickering flame. (Isaiah 42:2-3)

Courtney is actively involved in Community Engagement in East Timor, and a key player in the "Future in Youth" program.

Hope hints at expanding horizons, at liberation, freedom, empowerment and growing towards the fullness of our humanity. It is about forgiveness, and beginning again, and knowing new life in Christ. Hope is confidence that Jesus' desire that we 'might have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10) will come to pass.

The liturgy of the Easter Vigil picks up some of these themes beautifully. In the Exultet, the Church rejoices in the resurrection of Christ, and its significance:

This is the night,
when Christians everywhere,
washed clean of sin and freed from all defilement,
are restored to grace and grow together in holiness.

The power of this holy night
dispels all evil, washes guilt away,
restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy;
it casts out hatred, brings us peace,
and humbles earthly pride.

The resurrection holds out to humanity the possibility of restoration, new beginnings and abundant life in and with Jesus Christ. And so in the Easter season the Church affirms:

In Christ a new age has dawned,
the long reign of sin is ended,
a broken world has been renewed,

and we are once again made whole. (adapted from Preface of Easter IV)

This hope stands at the heart of the Mission of Australian Catholic University. By equipping students with knowledge and skills, and forming them in values and wisdom, ACU opens up new possibilities for the students themselves and those they will eventually serve professionally.

It is always heartening to listen to students who are the first in their family to go to university. Their stories often allude to the lack of educational opportunity their parents experienced, and the encouragement they themselves received to study hard and get to university, so that they would have more opportunities than their parents. Clearly, education is liberating and empowering, and creates new horizons for engagement and transformation.

But beyond the personal level, students are invited and challenged to become messengers of hope and agents of transformation in their world. ACU's Mission Statement affirms that

Through fostering and advancing knowledge Australian Catholic University seeks to make a specific contribution to its local, national and international communities guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and the dignity of all human beings.

These values - justice and equity, and the dignity of all human beings – which are some of the deepest longings of the human heart, are the building blocks of hope. As students embrace these values more deeply, they are inspired to move beyond their own concerns and become men and women for others, engaging with individuals and communities to create a better tomorrow. Cyrano Menezes, another ACU student, whose community engagements have included building homes with and for the poor in the Philippines, and supporting refugees in Sydney's western suburbs, expresses it this way:

Because of hope I am moved to be the best human being that I can. And in return I hope to empower others to achieve this kind of fulfilment that can never be broken or destroyed, misused or enslaved. Something that is freely given in no thought that it will be returned, only passed on.

This is the inspiration for so many of our students in community engagement. Immediately the students involved in the Atherton Gardens Homework Support Program in Melbourne come to mind. Their work with primary school students increases the educational capacity of the children, many of whom are refugees. Their relationships assert the dignity of each of the children and the possibility that change is possible. This is hope "on the ground". Similarly, the engagement undertaken by nursing students in Vanuatu, and by exercise science students in the 'Future in Youth' program in East Timor build the health and well-being capacities of local communities, offering pathways for real change and better tomorrows.

Through works and relationships such as these, and many more besides, the Easter promise of a broken world renewed and humanity once again made whole, will come to be realised. This is our task as members of the ACU community; this is our hope; this is our destiny in Christ.

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