

Signs of the times Signos de los tiempos

Sue Rakoczy, IHM

What is happening around us? What is our world saying? Who is in the headlines? These are the “signs of the times.”

In his conversations with the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus chided them for being able to comment on the weather—fair or stormy—but told them, “you cannot judge the signs of the times” (Mt 16:3).

At Vatican II, the bishops found that phrase an apt way for people to engage with their world. In *Gaudium et Spes*—the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World—they wrote:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics. (*Gaudium et Spes* §4)

Lamentably the signs of the early 1960s continue today:

Never has the human race enjoyed such an abundance of wealth, resources and economic power, and yet a huge proportion of the world’s citizens are still tormented by hunger and poverty while countless numbers suffer from total illiteracy. Never before has man [*sic*] had so keen an understanding of freedom, yet at the same time, new forms of social and psychological slavery make their appearance. Although the world of today has a very vivid awareness of its unity and of how one man depends on another in needful solidarity, it is most grievously torn into opposing camps by conflicting forces. For political, social, economic, racial and ideological disputes still continue bitterly, and with them the peril of a war which would reduce everything to ashes.” (*Gaudium et Spes* §4)

Inclusive language began to be used in the early 1970s—this is why this male language sounds strange to our ears.

We can add the climate crisis and the increasing number of climate tragedies—severe drought, stronger and more devastating hurricanes and typhoons, rising sea levels and loss of biodiversity as species die. Millions of refugees have fled their homes due to war, political ideologies and climate change.

COVID-19 has impacted everyone everywhere and the world has dramatically changed since early 2020. There is increasing political polarization in the United States and the rise of autocracy in some countries. The war in Ukraine has devastated that country and led to rising international tensions. The overturning of Roe v. Wade on June 24, 2022, by the US Supreme Court, has magnified the level of disagreement on abortion.

On the other hand, there is some global awareness that we are one human family and must act together so that life for all can flourish. Ecological awareness and action are growing at all levels—but of course, not quickly enough. The James Webb Space Telescope images fill us with awe at the immensity of the universe. In the United States issues such as engaging with the effects of systemic racism and the affirmation of the dignity of LGBTQIA persons are seen by many (but not all) as a Christian response.

For Personal Reflection:

What signs of the times can you add?

In the light of the Gospel, how might we as individuals and community actively respond?

Hoping Esperando

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Think about the different ways you might use the word “hope.”

I hope that it will rain soon.

I hope that my friend will recover from her operation.

I hope that countries will address the climate crisis more urgently.

I hope that there will be fewer incidents of gun violence.

I hope that COVID-19 will disappear.

These are all valid ways to “hope,” but they assume that “hope” is an object we can see, grasp and experience. We are outside of “hope” and its appearance in our lives and the world is not something we can make happen.

However, the South African feminist theologian Selina Palm offers a radically different perspective. She speaks not about “hope” as a noun but “hope” as a verb—*hoping*. (Selina Palm, *Hoping, in A Time Like No Other: Covid-19 in Women’s Voices*. Edited by Nontando Hadebe, Daniela Gennrich, Susan Rakoczy and Nobesuthu Tom. South Africa: Circle of Concerned African Theologians, 2021, 216.)

We create hope, increase hope, expand hope. God is not the object of our hope, but a “life-giving spirit present in our hopeful acts no matter how small they may seem.” (Palm, 201)

Palm describes five ways to engage in *hoping*:

Lament

Recognize limits

Understand time differently

Imagine creatively

Seek right relationships

What might this mean for us?

Lament

- Lament of what is painful and causes suffering

Recognize limits

- We cannot do it “all”—we need others to build and create communities of hope

Understand time differently

- Respond to the present as God’s time.
- We travel together as a human community and need to respond to the present—not project into the future that we do not know.

Imagine creatively

- Embrace awe and wonder that we are alive—the universe is alive.
- How shall we respond?

Seek right relationships

- Hoping is a communal experience and no one can be excluded.

We may think we know how to desire hope, live hope. But the late feminist theologian Dorothee Soelle “suggests that the character of hope is like a baby beginning to walk.” (Palm, 201) Each step gives more confidence. Each practice of hoping builds communities of hoping. Each experience helps us to “give a reason for the hope that is within you.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Think about experiences of hoping in your life. What were they? How did they change you? How do they remain with you now?

For personal reflection:

How do you recognize hoping in your life? In the lives of others?

How do you express hoping?