We Hope: SOT/Sem Midday Prayer Reflection - November 9, 2023

Kathleen A. Cahalan
ABSTRACT:
Every week, the faculty, staff, and students of the Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary gather together in common worship for Ecumenical Midday Prayer and Convivium, a shared meal. This reflection was given by Kathleen Cahalan—Professor of Practical Theology—in November of 2023 and explores the role of hope in the life of the Christian disciple.

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But Timothy has just now come to us from you, and has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you. For this reason, brothers and sisters, during all our distress and persecution we have been encouraged about you through your faith. For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the
joy that we feel before our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

- 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13

Do you miss someone? Do you long to see someone you have not seen in a long time? Someone who has inspired your faith, encouraged you, helped you grow in faith or perhaps helped to “restore” what may be lacking in your faith?

You may think of someone who is living—far across the globe who you don’t see regularly or just on zoom—or someone who is deceased, who you will not see until the end of time. We hope.

This longing for one we love makes sense only if we begin at the end. Our longing to be joined together points to the promise that all the living and the dead, all the saints, are joined now as Christ’s body and will one day stand together before the glory of the Father. The Church proclaims in Gaudium et spes:

“The Lord (Jesus Christ) is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings.” (GS 45)

We shouldn’t long for anything more than that. But of course we do.

Paul longs for those he misses. Those he misses long for their teacher in the faith. They are bound by this longing. Paul points to three ways to stay connected to each other across the miles of our longing for one another:

First, we can increase our love for the one we miss. This may seem strange, especially in grieving their absence. But grief is not the absence of love—it is a sign of profound attachment and love. Paul says he “abounds in love” for the Thessalonians. We can love the one we miss in and through the promise of being joined with them in Christ right now.
Second, is to remember their love for us. Take some time to remember the love this person or community has for you. Their love, rooted in Christ, may just carry you through a long day or night. You are their beloved.

And, third, Paul reminds us to “strengthen our hearts in holiness.” The path to holiness is surely love, but we must have our loves well-ordered. And this is where longing can go wrong. Have you ever longed so much for someone that you wanted to possess them? Perhaps you realized that your love was so over-the-top that you were obsessed with that person? Of course, falling in love can be like this – crazy and infinite – until we crash into the reality that our beloved is merely human and that we are too. We can get any of our loves wrong because our desires, as Augustine points out, become inordinate. We mistake loving with possessing and obsessing.

Love does involve longing for Paul, which is having the right desire and right relationship to those we love because it is rooted in Christ. And that’s the path to holiness—to renounce that which keeps us from loving God and neighbor truly.

Love is the connective tissue of the body – and it begins with a longing to be joined together to gaze upon the Holy One. With longing in our hearts for those we love, with remembering their love for us, and with renouncing false loves, we will be ready for the “coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” and joined with the ones we long for forever in his body.