

A little hope: In the promises of God

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 27, 2004](#) issue

Now and then I take off the shelf Charles Péguy's *Mystery of the Holy Innocents*, a book-length poem I first read as a newly minted Ph.D. in 1956, the year it was published. There is a peculiarity in capitalization in the book, as the translator notes: "I cannot explain [Péguy's] use of capitals for Faith and Charity, while hope is generally without one." The poem begins: "I AM, God says, Master of the Three Virtues. / Faith is a loyal wife. / Charity is a fervent mother. / But hope is a very little girl."

The poet wrote in an incantatory style, as in the following lines, in which God is speaking: "my little hope . . . gets up every morning . . . my little hope. . . . Says good-day to us . . ." While "Faith is a great tree" and "Charity shelters all the distress of the world," "my little hope is only that little promise of a bud." Poor, bright, young, innocent, lower-case hope. What do we make of her?

In the past year we needed hope with a capital "H." Someone once quoted Pascal to me to the effect that the church lives best when it has nothing in the empirical situation, nothing in the sociological data, on which to rely, but has only the promises of God. Of course, since Pascal was an elegant stylist he would not have used barbarisms such as "empirical situation" or "sociological data."

Part of my job is to keep an eye both on what is coming to be called "denominational church bodies" and on what should be called "market-driven churches." Reasons for optimism about either were hard to come by in 2003.

At our house we wracked our brains looking for a single action or expression of the current administration that we could regard as good news. We found no reasons for hope in "the empirical situation." (To be fair, we have not found such reasons from the party out of power, either.) One of the newspapers we read is the *Wall Street Journal*. Find us an issue from any day last year in which there was not some story of a major, almost cosmic, ethical lapse.

One of the few absolutes at our house (alongside “Hold the railing!” as advice for people entering their late 70s) is “No whining.” So I won’t whine about the public world.

Which leaves us with God’s “little hope” in lower case. Where can we find it?

A month has passed since I read the Christmas letters we received from friends. It is from these chronicles of ups and downs that we draw cheer. Alongside stories of death, depression and debilitation there were newsy comments about college kids who are not binge drinkers but binge volunteers. About missionaries who have spent years quietly caring for AIDS orphans in Africa. About pastors being of real service to God’s children in out-of-the-way places.

As I read these letters, I found no reasons for optimism, but I did find reason for hope. In the promises of God, on which the church and the people rely, there is reason for hope—a little, innocent, lowercase hope, but still hope.