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This school year, Holy Trinity School Division took as its theme Be Joyful in Hope, taken from Romans 12:12. To get the year started the theme was introduced at our staff retreats in late August just before the new school year began. Mark Selinger, our new Religious Education Consultant, presented a reflection on the new theme by taking a deeper look at the words joy and hope. Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit. It is often equated with happiness, which is very different. Happiness is something we experience when things go well. Joy however, is a state of being, not a feeling. It is a deep peace, which comes from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within a person and endures despite hardships. A great analogy that Mark used to illustrate this is first time parents. Their lives are changed completely. Sleep deprivation, feeds, changes, renewed financial needs, can be a huge adjustment. However, lying on the couch with your sleeping infant on your chest in a moment of quiet fills you with deep joy and contentment in spite of the sacrifices.

Hope is one of the theological virtues, the other two being faith and charity. Christian hope has its origin and model in the hope of Abraham our father in faith. God's promise to him that his descendants would number as the stars, is the source of his hope which never wavers. Jesus' teaching on the beatitudes early in his public ministry becomes the foundation for Christian hope. No one can live without hope. It is our spiritual headlamp, the soul's food, without which we cannot live. Hope does not come from us but is our response to God's promise.

As joy cannot be equated simply with happiness, neither can hope simply be equated to a wishful feeling. It is rather a rock-solid certainty, a guarantee and anchor. Christian hope is not mere optimism but a bold confidence in a future that is founded on God's promise to us. Staff groups shared what joy and hope means to them, discussing how they might incorporate the division theme in their schools. Mark shared three contemporary music videos on hope with staff to use for school assemblies or classroom discussion and reflection. These songs; Hope in Front of Me by Danny Gokey, My Lighthouse by Rend Collective and Go Light Your World by Chris Rice are a mixture of upbeat and prayerful music with beautiful and hope filled lyrics, that call all of us to proclaim and share why we can and should Be Joyful in Hope if we believe in the message of the Gospel.

In another segment of the retreat day, Holy Trinity staff experienced the opposite of joy and hope by being led through an exercise detailing with what our First Nations people felt and still often feel as a result of the legacy of European colonization. The Blanket Exercise guides the participants through the historical journey of white settlement in Canada by narration and role-play. It was ironically the First Nations that first welcomed and then assisted the newcomers to navigate the forests, rivers, mountains and plains of this vast land. It was gut wrenching to become aware of the arrogance of the colonists and the terrible things done to the first peoples. It is called The Blanket Exercise because we begin with all participants representing first nations people, standing on large blankets spread out representing the land of Canada. By the time colonization is complete few people remain and on very tiny folded up blankets. It is eye opening and mind boggling. After the exercise everyone sat down for a sharing circle that allowed participants to process and share about if they chose, their experience of the Blanket Exercise. The point is not to paralyze with shame and self-guilt as white persons, but to be aware of our national and religious history and perhaps our own latent racism. We can then become agents of hope and healing in our personal lives and especially in our classrooms.

With our theme of Be Joyful in Hope and the experience of The Blanket Exercise we reflected on joy, fruit of the Spirit and hope, theological virtue and what happens when it is stripped from the human soul. We have many souls in our care in our classrooms who are in need of hope and joy. There is a crises of meaning in our culture and the temptation to a nihilistic world view is great. As Catholic educators we have the great privilege of being agents of joy and hope, healing and reconciliation. Romans 12:12 that we began with finishes: Be joyful in hope, patient in your troubles and pray at all times. We could call it the 12:12 cycle. May Holy Trinity be led by the promises of our loving God who is always faithful and who is the foundation of our hope and joy.

Submitted by Bernadette Cey outgoing Religious Education Consultant, Holy Trinity Catholic School Division.