

Hope Hope

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(Hope Against All Hope)

I do not ask you, Father, to make our lives miraculous. I do not ask you to replace reality with our dreams or that our desires cause us to forget the darkness! All I ask of you, my God, is to dare to Hope!²

Introduction

(Abraham)

When Sr. Judith Ann asked me to speak to you, my first reaction was, “No, I’m incapable of offering a reflection worthy of the name to such a gathering.” And I still think so. The only star in the sky of my doubts is the subject. Indeed, Sr. Judith Ann had unwittingly asked me to go deeper into my heart’s song: “Hope”; and so after several days, in a moment of folly or heedlessness, I accepted. During the months that followed, I trembled and kept saying to myself, “After all, this talk is meant to stimulate group discussions, so it’s fine if it’s not thoroughly researched, if I don’t cover all aspects of the subject, if it stimulates disagreement. At least the group discussions will have a wide floor for debate, without my having told them everything ahead of time!” And it is in this spirit that I began freely to write. You have been forewarned!



(Mary Magdalene, by Berna)

My response to the question of hope is a spontaneous, joyous and irrepressible cry, the cry that the Easter morning liturgy puts on the lips of Mary Magdalene: “Christ my hope is arisen.”³

And this cry, ripened during the silence of Saturday, is intimately connected to the singing of the Lamentations during Holy Week: “*It is good to hope in silence for the salvation of the Lord.*”⁴

I could very well stop right here and simply send you back to the silence of your cells, to let you experience that “It is good to hope in silence for the salvation of the Lord,” that it is good to “live in hope,” in other words, to “live in Christ,” if indeed it is true that the risen Christ is my hope, that Christ is my salvation!

Can you retire for a few moments to the cell of your heart to taste and see how good it is “to hope in silence for the salvation of the Lord”?

(Song of Taizé: Prayer of St. Theresa of Avila: “Nada te turbe”).



(St. Seraphim of Sarov)

¹ All of the pictures in this text will be used as illustrations in a Powerpoint presentation during the talk.

² Adaptation of a prayer for the New Year, by Jean Debruyne, priest and poet († 2007).

³ From the sequence “Victimae Paschali Laudes”.

⁴ Lamentations 3,26; the French translation is taken from the TOB version (an ecumenical translation)

(Gethsemani, Wolffhügen)



Hope in all circumstances, no matter what.

Our modern plagues of Egypt



“Are we not facing a crisis of hope, more than a crisis of faith?” asks Adolphe Gesché⁵. “Youth everywhere are in crisis as they look toward their future and their loves; in certain countries, people are in crisis because they are at the mercy of massacres and endless exploitation; in our countries and elsewhere, there is the crisis of those who are excluded from basic human rights. ‘Could hope be more unstable than despair?’ This perspective of absence and emptiness is real; it can be seen in the eyes of those who, seated along the side of the road, watch us pass by. Next to a world of “expansion that shapes the great godlike adventure of humanity” lies the world of “dereliction, where our modern plagues of Egypt are rampant: hunger, confinement, torture, terror, exile, degradation, despair.”⁶

(Berna)



Are these words not true for our time?

Gilles BERNHEIM, chief rabbi of France, said in an interview, “The lesson of Passover is more relevant than ever, because the greatness of ancient Egypt, founded on technology and industry, is now shared by all the developed countries, the number and wealth of which grow daily before our eyes. At the same time, the troubles caused by the global economy are devastating, with effects resembling those of ancient slavery described in the Torah. It is urgent for people today to get out of Egypt.”⁷

If the question of hope is currently so important in our society, our Church and our communities, is it not because so many people in our society cruelly lack hope? I do not intend to give you a detailed picture of the society in which we live, or of the Church situation in our regions, but to give you a general idea, I shall simply cite a few facts.

What about the economic and financial crisis? It is present throughout the world. It has caused the West to lose its supremacy, which is good. Let us hope that the West doesn't get it back any time soon! But this crisis also fosters a self-serving, head-in-the-sand attitude, and that is perverse!

Unemployment is rising. There is violence in schools and in the streets. Suicide is a reality we seldom talk about; yet in Belgium, more people die of suicide than of the car accidents that make the headlines.⁸ A young 17 year old girl, apparently full of life, put an end to her days this summer. In her farewell message she left this wish: *“I want you to resist the degradation, the*

⁵ Adolphe Gesché, a great theologian († 2003), uttered these words at the opening of a colloquium held at UCL on “Wisdom, a chance for hope”.

⁶ Adolphe GESCHÉ, Paul SCOLAS, dir., *Wisdom, a Chance for Hope*, Cerf-UCL, 1998, p.7-8.

⁷ Published in *le Figaro*, opinions gathered by Étienne de Montety 21/03/2008.

⁸ The recognized rate is 23 per 100.000 inhabitants. (The word average is 14). And how many additional, unofficial suicides are there? It is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 24! cf. <http://www.lesoir.be/actualite/belgique/societe-l-implication-des-2008-01-29-574067.shtml>.

indifference, the negativity of our time. I want you especially to be you.” Families are coming apart. Since 2007, one out of every two marriages has ended in divorce.⁹ Staggering! What about the suffering implied by this statistic?

The crisis is also cultural. We are, as it were, at the end of one world, waiting for a new one. What will it be? For many, these changes entail anxiety and fear. We are ready to pass out information, but are we ready to enter into relationships?

In a world in which communication is emphasized, are we in communion? On all levels there is a resurgence of intolerance and racism, usually met with indifference.



Last year 137 families with 270 children were held in a detention center, some for weeks or months.¹⁰ Their only crime: asking for asylum in our country! These centers are currently overcrowded, and many people who are here “illegally” live in the streets. In our countries, living in the street is hard enough in ordinary times; in winter, it is inhuman! Sometimes I am ashamed of my country!

If you look in Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, you will find that our regions of long Christian tradition are now classified among the most secularized countries. Christians are no longer the majority, no longer the decision-makers for everyone and everything. In itself, this is neither wrong, nor a catastrophe. Jesus asked us to be the leaven in the dough, not the dough itself!

In general, people aren't particularly opposed to faith; they tend rather to be indifferent, or to say, “I don't know.” Among believers, some become militant or even extremist. The future is sometimes sought in a rear-view mirror, where the “good old days” had all the virtues, and where ritualism, formalism and the institution unfortunately took precedence over personal faith.

Churches are often quite empty. A few large gatherings warm the hearts of Christians, who then discover that they are people on a journey, and not necessarily an “endangered species”, forgotten by the WWF.¹¹

Christians no longer always know what their faith is. A poll¹² revealed that 35% of Christians surveyed said they didn't believe in the resurrection! Some define God as a force, an energy, and no longer as a person. Others said they were “Catholics without God”! Within the context of this survey, a 22 year-old defined his spiritual identity as follows: “As far as I am concerned, I am emotionally an atheist. Rationally, I am an agnostic. In hope, I am a believer.”

Many active Church members are disappointed and discouraged, because our Church has become small, old and tired, subject to many misunderstandings, even within.

⁹ In 1960, there was 1 divorce for every 15 marriages. In 2007, with a rate of more than 1 divorce for every 2 marriages, Belgium has one of the highest divorce rates, along with Sweden and the Czech Republic. Source : Directorate of general statistics and economic information of the FPS Economy, published on <http://www.famiweb.be/fr/Le-pic-du-divorce-apres-3-ans>.

¹⁰ I do not have the figures for the current year as I write this, but I fear that the situation has unfortunately remained the same.

¹¹ World Wildlife Fund.

¹² Newspaper survey in which the group “l'Avenir” (“The Future”) participated, with support from the Catholic University of Louvain in 2007. See in particular: http://www.actu24.be/article/belgique/qui_est_votre_dieu_/4427.aspx.

But not everything is negative. In this survey, one word emerged as a beacon: “responsibility”. *I, as a human being, am responsible for others, for all other humans. My wife, my children, my fellow citizens, the citizens of the whole world are my neighbor. The child who is dying of starvation is my neighbor.*¹³

(ruins, Abbey of Villers)



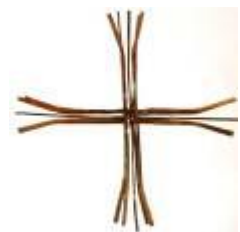
In our region we are 26 communities of Benedictine women; several of these communities have left their monasteries and gone together to rest homes for the elderly. The average age of our communities continues to climb, and there are few vocations. Between the two editions of the Catalogus, we lost ¼ of our monastic population! I understand why census-taking was a sin in the Old Testament¹⁴: it means relying on your own strength and also inviting the temptation of discouragement. Can we experience the decline of our communities as a Passover and Easter mystery? *Unless the grain dies...*¹⁵ Remember, this isn't the first time in history that monasteries have disappeared from our region. Our country has many monastic ruins. This is one! But between reading a page of history and living it, there is a paschal abyss that only Christ, our hope, can help us cross. And it is noteworthy that in the past, monasteries often disappeared because of persecution. Today we are disappearing for lack of vocations. Indifference is more fatal to us than persecution.

In the face of all this, I could now enumerate all the good and beautiful things that are happening in our regions: the effectiveness of NGO's¹⁶ in creating more solidarity in the world, an awareness of the need to preserve the environment, pastoral work to help the poorest take charge of their lives, the courage of aging communities who continue to offer hospitality, a sympathetic ear, and witness to the Risen Christ, the increasing attention given to creating communion between our communities...

Putting One's Hope in God

I suggest that we come back to several of these situations, and that each of us ask herself what Benedict proposes. How can we sustain our hope in everyday life? *(cross from Hurtebise)*

As I've already said, and I'll say it again with Benedict, hope, for me, means “putting one's hope in God.”¹⁷ As long as we anchor our hope elsewhere, we'll be terribly vulnerable. Hope in our achievements? Our plans? Our strengths? No! Our achievements, our plans, our strengths can light stars in our night, but they can't make the darkness go away. They might even increase the darkness with the night of pride and self-congratulation!



“Putting one's hope in God” requires vigilance. When hope weakens, I know where to go to find the dysfunctions. If I don't regularly strengthen hope by living in His presence, by community and personal prayer, by lectio, it unravels and withers. It is in the depth of my relationship to

¹³ Noted by Edmond Blattchen, in reading the results of this survey.

¹⁴ See, for example, 2 Sam. 24.

¹⁵ John 12:24.

¹⁶ Non-Governmental Organizations.

¹⁷ RB 4,41.

God that my hope is quickened, even if it is night, even if this relationship is one of faith rather than vision, even if it demands a trusting abandon. It is a matter of “hoping against hope”.¹⁸



“O Crux Ave Spes Unica”, carved on so many crucifixes in our countryside, is very deeply etched in my life. Engraved as a way to open the night of this world, as a way of piercing the veil of the present, allowing a glimpse of that Which Is To Come! Hope is not to be found in just any extension of the present; it is rather an openness to the One who comes! Adolphe Gesché says, “*Hope is like that space which defies the always-too-short immediacy of the present; it allows us to write our history; it opens a way to projects fostering life, it corrects the past and allows one to change course, it sustains the courage to be, and transforms us from beings of pure neediness to beings capable of giving.*”¹⁹ This space is paschal!

And Robert Scholtus, priest, writes, “*Spontaneously we see life from our own vantage point, our questions, our fears, whereas the Ascension is a call to leave, beginning with our own end, which is the eternal beginning of God. It is a call to let us be envisaged by Him who is henceforth without a visage. Feverishly, we try to shed light on our future and that of the world, as if we had forgotten that since Easter, light comes from the Future, that since the Ascension, it is the horizon towards which we are walking that lights our path, like the beams of light falling from baroque cupolas to illuminate the sanctuary. We advance into the night, lighting our paths with the torches of fortune, but if we were to lift our eyes, perhaps we would see that a hidden brightness from heaven already surrounds us. If Jesus has disappeared from our sight, it is to introduce us into the sovereignty of his presence: because God has filled him with his fullness, he is with us every day until the end of the world, and henceforth, as St. Paul says, our life is hidden with Christ in God.*”²⁰

We must live in hope, our eyes fixed on the Lord who comes from elsewhere, and yet also from here! From now on, might we not find our strength to hope in the invitation proposed by Benedict: “to live always and everywhere in the presence of God?”²¹

Can I hold on to this hope in the midst of ambient individualism?



Individualism is increasing in our society, and it is a source of despair. Does not the attitude of “every man for himself” disfigure our humanity at its deepest level? Is it not simply death-dealing, suicidal? Do not the numerous and growing forms of sectarianism proceed from the same stance, which refuses otherness, the face of the other, and looks in a mirror for what is identical to itself?

What can counteract this tendency, this self-serving individualism? Does our faith not lead us to follow a path resolutely open to otherness?

Constant concern for another is not an abandonment or a crushing of oneself, as certain currents of thought would have us fear. Concern for one's neighbor, in provoking openness within oneself, a breach that can cost us, is a veritable path of growth and discovery.

No Man is an Island, title of a work by Thomas Merton, is a quote from a meditation by the

¹⁸ Romans 4:18.

¹⁹ Adolphe GESCHE & Paul SCOLAS, *op.cit.* p. 7.

²⁰ Robert SCHOLTUS, *La traversée des apparences*, (Crossing Appearances) Paris, Cerf, 1997, p.17-18.

²¹ RB 4,49 ; 7,10 ; 19,1.6.

poet, John Donne²². Is not wanting to live for oneself a path toward self-disfigurement? Choosing oneself as the center of the universe may well lead to a sad and stunted existence; at the same time, we recognize that humans are beings of communion, relationship and sharing.

In the light of these observations, an exhortation of St. Benedict encourages us: “*Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he lead us all together to everlasting life.*”²³ This is the opposite of an individualistic religion. Is not the life of fraternal love in community that Benedict proposes a path of hope, a rebuttal of the slogan, “Every man for himself”? The Christian faith that opens up a space for relationship with the Completely Other, different from fusion, the Christian faith that invites us to build communion, could it not open a path of hope for you? It is together, in communion, that we are called to Life!”

When I entered the monastery, I wanted to give my life to Christ. I wanted to love him with all my being. I believe that my desire was sincere. But God's response was equally sincere: he gave me sisters to love day by day, and now, in my pastoral mission, he gives them to me again in a more specific sense. I am increasingly challenged in our daily life by the necessity of living in communion, not only in (our monastic) community, but also with other communities, in the Church and in society.



We are members of the Body of Christ. Benedict, in wanting to establish the very strong race of cenobites, asks us to live this communion as reality. Is not our community life an offer of hope?

Holding fast to hope, in the face of sectarianism and fanaticism



If individualism is a modern plague of our Egypt, it is clear that sectarianism is a direct corollary of individualism. Is not sectarianism the form that individualism takes when it is lived by a group?

In fact, there is a risk involved when we create a group: that of wanting our group to be a reassuring place, and of building a wall, a protective and secure barrier between our group and the rest of humanity. A perverted enclosure! Does not fear of confrontation, of conflict lead to an unwillingness to think for ourselves, to an abandonment of all responsibility into the hands of a guru? He'll think for us, take on all our responsibilities. Dare we say it...Does this not sometimes suit certain superiors?

Look at our monastic life: the community circle cannot be closed in on itself. It can only be an anchorage point for an opening to the universal: a universal composed of an infinity of very unique individuals, deeply bound together by their common humanity. If the community is turned in on itself, it can enclose itself in a practice, a religion, a sectarian life that will quickly exude stuffiness, exclusion, rejection, dogmatism, and the arrogance of knowing better than everyone else.

Saint Benedict asks us to provide for openness even in the way we organize the community.

²² No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." John Donne (d. 1624)

²³ RB 72,11-12.

May a brother always be there, ready to open to whoever knocks at the door.²⁴ Guests should never be lacking.²⁵ This welcome should not be limited to the offer of a space for retreat, reflection or hospitality for whoever asks. A welcoming community is necessarily marked by the passage of her guests; it is challenged and called to conversion.

Benedict makes an interesting observation on this subject: if a monk from another community is visiting the community, and if, *with the humility born of charity, draws attention to a certain point and makes a reasonable criticism, the abbot shall ask himself clearly whether the Lord has not sent him specifically for this reason.*²⁶ I like this statement. It is an invitation to allow oneself to be challenged by a stranger, by another.

Should we not cultivate everything that comes to make a breach in our “self-sufficiency,” in our “individualism,” in our sectarian temptations? In this sense, every path of dialogue should be for us a source of hope, of good news!

In this way we can welcome with great joy the work of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and the encounters at Assisi initiated by John-Paul II.²⁷ Gabriel Ringlet, for a long time vice-rector of the University of Louvain, writes: *The rapprochement between religions is indispensable, vital, not only for religions, but for the future of peace in the world. I dare to go this far. I'm convinced of it: peace between religions can play a very constructive role in the general level of peace. The more religions can talk to one another, respect one another and welcome one another's elements of truth, the more positive the effect on their relationships for today's men and women. I suggest that each religion find its rare pearl, its “seed of fire,” as an orthodox friend puts it. Each religion – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. - has a specificity. The question is: how can we offer one another the best of ourselves?*²⁸ Do we think about these things? Are we ready to share our “seeds of fire”? Sharing is giving and receiving!

Another form of openness can be experienced during the liturgy itself. Can one, even for a moment, praise the God of the Universe, Father of all people, if one is turned in on oneself? The celebration of the liturgy opens our hearts to the dimensions of the world. Its community dimension is of primary importance. What a marvel, this dialogue between the priest and the people gathered together:

- *Let us pray together, as we offer the sacrifice of the whole Church*
 - ***For the glory of God and the salvation of the world!***²⁹



As long as we can express this wish with all our hearts, we can hope that a universal communion will win out over excessive individualism. We can cultivate this hope and expel sectarianism and all of its temptations.

²⁴ RB 66.

²⁵ RB 53.

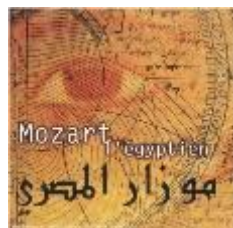
²⁶ RB 61,4.

²⁷ The first of these encounters took place on October 27, 1986.

²⁸ Gabriel RINGLET, *La foi de grand papa a disparu (Grandpa's faith has disappeared)*, in *Actu.be* December 20, 2008.

²⁹ Translation from the French edition of the Roman Missal. The English translation reproduces the Latin “for our good and the good of all his Church.”: - Orate, fratres : ut meum ac vestrum sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud Deum Patrem omnipotentem. - Suscipiat Dominus sacrificium de manibus tuis ad laudem et gloriam nominis sui, ad utilitatem quoque nostram totiusque Ecclesiae suae sanctae.

(Music : Mozart l'Egyptien, "Al maghfera")³⁰



Another dialogue that nourishes our hope is that between cultures. I shall take only one example, but a fabulous one! After the attacks of September 11, 2001, certain people tried to spread hate between peoples, religions and cultures. A message of hope emerged through music. Two orchestras, one from the East and the other from the West, build a bridge between Mozart and the world of Egypt. Listen to "Mozart the Egyptian," especially in the piece "Al maghfera" or "Forgiveness": It combines the "Qui tollis" from the Mass in C by Mozart with a Sufi incantation, a Coptic prayer, and a Greek prayer. This passage is a wonderful source of hope. In the ostinato rhythm, played by all the instruments, listen to the heartbeat of our God!

³⁰ Hughes of Courson (1949-) also created an oratorio (Yam) played by 150 musicians, Jews and Palestinians. He released the first volume of Mozart the Egyptian in 1998; the second, even more explicit, is extracted from this piece and is dated 2005. For these two volumes of Mozart the Egyptian, he worked in collaboration with Ahmed el Maghraby and collected 202 singers and musicians, Arab and Conventual, East and West