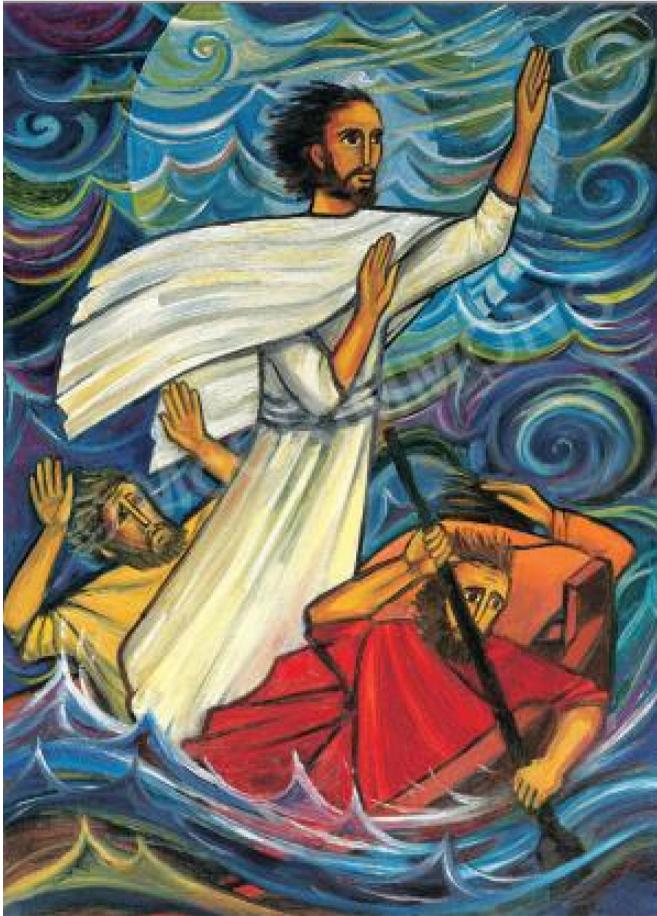


**“Nothing can separate us from the love of  
God in Christ Jesus Our Lord.”**

*(Rm 8: 39)*



**Letter # 6 to the Congregation  
on Hope**

*Cover illustration:* The calmed storm (cf. Mt 8:23-27)

## INTRODUCTION

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Do we lack hope? I believe it is legitimate to ask this question even if the answer is probably not as simple as all that. Our presence in the world requires us to look with lucidity at reality as it is. It is neither a question of embellishing nor of dramatizing. The picture is mixed. There are both lights and shadows. The myth of continuous progress that marked the collective consciousness since the Renaissance has been seriously shaken. The 20<sup>th</sup> century, a century of iron and blood\*, presented the atrocities of two world wars and mass genocides. Today, wars and conflicts remain numerous but another dramatic phenomenon has been added to this already alarming picture, that of the rapid destruction of our earth accompanied by the depletion of natural resources. No doubt, there have been remarkable advances with the increase in life expectancy, the improvement in human nutrition, the progress in providing education for all, and the search for peace. So, the reality is complex.

As for the Church, it is experiencing a profound crisis. The old Western Christianities are crumbling and secularization is taking root in those societies where the young Churches are developing. Distrust of the Church's ministers is becoming widespread after the countless revelations of abuse and other scandals for which clergy have been responsible. Victims have every right to criticize the inertia of the hierarchy, not to mention its

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\* reference to a 2017 book by Romain Ducoulombier, 'Le communisme : chronique d'un siècle de fer et de sang'

proven complicity. Perhaps, more insidiously, there is another ill that is affecting the Church: an erosion of faith and breeches of fidelity in priestly and religious life. Recently the Pope spoke of his concern in the face of the numerous departures from the consecrated life.

*“We are facing a ‘haemorrhage’ that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church. The abandonment of consecrated life worries us. It is true that some leave as an act of coherence, because they recognize, after serious discernment, that they never had this vocation. However, others, with the passage of time, have less faithfulness, very often only a few years after professing their perpetual vows. What has happened?”<sup>1</sup>*

Thank God, the Church cannot be reduced to the dark and somber portion that is tainting it, nor to the defections that are affecting it. Men and women, in fact many more in number, continue to serve the poor and excluded of our world. Numerous laymen and laywomen are involved in society trying to make it more fraternal. Religious men and women live their consecration joyfully and faithfully. New figures of Christianity and of the Church are emerging. The Gospel remains for many a light that brightens their way. In the face of this rapidly, ever-changing world, are we capable of remaining faithful and supporting the Church even in these times of change? Are we able to bear witness to our hope?

So, we Christians, and more especially, we Assumptionists, lay and religious, where do we find ourselves in all this?

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, talk to the participants of the Plenary Session of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), January 28 2017. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170128\\_plenaria-civcsva.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/january/documents/papa-francesco_20170128_plenaria-civcsva.html)

Reflecting on hope means returning to one of the fundamental aspects of Christianity. A theological virtue together with faith and charity, hope orients us decisively toward God. Without it our way toward the Kingdom becomes an uphill struggle and we even risk missing what is essential: the message of Jesus Christ. Hope places us on a level other than optimism. It is not a question of some kind of Pollyannaish belief in the future, but a belief that the world that has been given to us is open to life. For the believer, we name this life that is given and that is called to fullness eternal life.

The teaching of Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe salvi*, remains the most recent and the richest point of reference for deepening our theological understanding of the virtue of hope. For his part Pope Francis gave a beautiful catechesis on hope which also makes an interesting contribution. I will be making ample use of their teachings in writing this letter. I will also delve into the work of our holy father, Augustine, who provides profound reflections on hope.

I have one ambition in this modest letter: to build up the virtue of hope in our concrete lives. Hope is that force that drives us to act in the world with the certitude that God is with us. The Assumption will be all the more pertinent if the men and women committed to her passionately cultivate the virtue of hope.

## **I. LOOKING AT THE WORLD AS IT IS**

The Christian is fully engaged in reality. His vocation is not one of fleeing from the world, for God put him here so that he could participate in his work of creation. This work, which God created good, can still be improved. Evil disrupted the plan of God and we can contribute to re-establishing the original plan

by getting concretely involved in transforming it. The Incarnation of the Eternal Word is the work of salvation that is the proof that God is acting on our behalf in human history. Christianity is a religion that considers human history as the privileged space where God saved humanity from evil and from death. The life received from Jesus Christ never ceases to remind us that we too are called to commit ourselves to the salvation of all. As we read in the *Rule of Life* (#23): God “has encountered us personally so as to fulfill in us and through us his plan of being present to men and in communion with them”.

The Assumptionist is a man of his time. He shares the lot of men and women and his action for the coming of the Kingdom of God is the ultimate goal of his life. The movements of Catholic Action have developed a method that allows for an effective involvement in the world in view of transforming it according to the plan of God. It is founded on three terms: Observe, Judge, Act. I believe that this method remains relevant, even if it is useful to add a fourth term: Pray. As a matter of fact, any human action must be placed under the sign of humility and the grace of God. Prayer powerfully reminds us that it is God who is the real actor in all authentic change.

So, “observe”! The world is, as I mentioned above, complex, difficult to interpret. But attempting to do so should not daunt us. We have to look at the world as it is, that is to say by seeking to free ourselves from so many biases and forms of conditioning. St. John XXIII strongly criticized “prophets of doom”, those persons in society who spend their time sounding the alarm while forgetting as well to point out what is right, good and beautiful in the world. This does not mean that we fall into angelism and see reality through rose-colored glasses. Observe...it is an exercise of lucidity and honesty. A lucid look is one that perceives contrasts. In order to observe the world, one

must be honestly informed. During my community visits I have noticed that there often lacks a real desire to know what's going on in the world. Too often our preoccupations remain limited to our own little daily world, or at most to that of the country of our origin. But our gaze rarely transcends the borders of our habitual space. Emmanuel d'Alzon had a passion for humanity that led him to keep up daily with what was happening in the world. The proof can be found in the number of newspapers, reviews, and books he read. I think that we're capable of making a serious effort to keep ourselves better informed about the world by freeing ourselves as much as possible from quick and definitive judgments. Lucidity requires that we pay sharp attention to things so as to favor a better understanding of reality and the current state of affairs. It means being able to see "far and wide" that alone allows us to understand the complexity of the times and to prepare ourselves to be actors in reforming it.

The Assumption recalls that the Lord "has favored his land" (Ps. 85). Our mission is to love this world in order to be able to transform it and to restore it to God's plan. That is why we must not give ourselves over to a never-ending critique of the times in which we live, but to reflect on the ways to remedy the ills that plague us. Already St. Augustine had strongly reacted when he encountered those who were whining about the problems of the age. The bishop of Hippo asked them to contribute rather to renewal by their action in the world:

*"The times are evil, the times are troubled, that's what people say. Let us live good lives, and the times will be good. Whatever we are like, that's what the times are like. But what are we to do? We can't convert the vast majority to a good life, can we? Let the few people who are listening live good lives; let the few who are living good lives bear with the many who are living bad ones. Those who are good are grains of wheat, they are on the threshing floor. They can have chaff with them*

*on the threshing floor, they won't have it with them in the barn. Let them put up with what they don't want, in order to come to what they do."*<sup>2</sup>

Christian faith requires us to get involved. Observe, judge, act are inseparable. Too often we limit ourselves to wailing and lamentation and refuse to participate concretely in transforming the world. It is hope that is decisive if we are to have the heart to get involved in a reality that is complicated.

## II. CHRISTIAN HOPE

### *How are we to understand Christian hope?*

Before Christ's coming, the hope of the Jewish people could already be seen at play in the life of Israel. The sense of expectation, the promise, and the Covenant were lived realities in the faith. Jesus was the heir of this messianic hope of all the people of the Bible. God entered into covenant with his people and the Promised Land was given to them. A Messiah was awaited who would, in a definitive fashion, seal the promise made by God.

With Jesus, hope continues to be a pillar of Divine Revelation. Even if, in the Gospels, Jesus only uses the noun 'hope' once and the verb 'to hope' once (Jn 5: 45), hope is obviously at the heart of the proclamation of the Kingdom to come. Parables, like that of the Lost Sheep or even more so that of the Prodigal Son, "infuse us with a lively and fresh breath of hope as never

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<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermon #80 on the New Testament*, translated by Edmund Hill, O.P., pp. 355-356, in the series *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, editor, Boniface Ramsey, New City Press, Hyde Park, New York, 1991.

experienced before. A first lesson emerges that brings the current matter into perspective: the one who ushers in hope is not the one who pronounces its name the most, and repeating its name is not what brings it to birth. But if it is the reality and the coming of Christ that are the basis of hope in fact; it is incumbent on Christians, and first of all on apostles, to demonstrate it and so to name it and to believe it.”<sup>3</sup>

Bruno Frappat recently, in 2017, wrote in the newspaper, *La Croix*, a chronicle for the day of Easter. It was entitled, “Hope, the current state of affairs”. He wrote shortly after the terrorist attack that led to the death of more than 50 Christian Copts in Egypt on Palm Sunday.

“How does one find hope in such a drama, in a tragedy that can inspire a desire for revenge in a believer confronted with the evil that God allows to happen to their loved ones? What note of joy can one bring to this scene of hell and of abandonment? ‘*Why have you abandoned me?*’ This is the tone of these days on our planet (...). When everything on the outside despairs, this hope has only one haven: our interiority, the intimate relationship that we can entertain with life, beyond the calamities and the sorrow (...) Have no doubt about it, the survivors, those who escaped, will gather on Easter Sunday to celebrate the Resurrection which is clearly for them the source of their hope. The certitude that there will be other dawns in their lives, other clear mornings where the light from the East slowly takes possession of the place once occupied by darkness (...) For hope is also not only a matter of will and faith but of human solidarity. One cannot hope alone. A tender regard, a hand outstretched, a bright smile, a greeting in passing, open arms, (...)

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Sous le regard de la Bible*, Bayard, 2008, p.92.

this eternal promise of resurrection, that is to say, man's rediscovery of himself and of his own loved ones, the massacred, those who have disappeared, the mourning and the dead joining hands beyond the chains stretched out along their common path."<sup>4</sup>

Christian hope fights against resignation and inertia. It bears witness to the fact that nothing is definitively lost. God is with us. This is what is at the heart of our faith. Rampant and insidious persecutions, an anti-Christianism that spreads aggressively, the sins of the Church...none of all this can put an end to the hope of the believer. We know that God himself also has trust in us and joins us with himself in his work of redemption. The task is immense.

As for Pope Francis, in his catechesis on hope, he underlines several fundamental affirmations for us today:

*"Hope never disappoints. Optimism disappoints, but hope does not!"*

*"We must not let hope abandon us, because God, with his love, walks with us. 'I hope, because God is beside me': we can all say this. Each one of us can say: 'I hope, I have hope, because God walks with me'. He walks and he holds my hand. God does not leave us to ourselves. The Lord Jesus has conquered evil and has opened the path of life for us.."*<sup>5</sup>

*"God walks with us in Jesus, and walking with him toward the fullness of life gives us the strength to dwell in the present in a new way, albeit arduous. Thus for a Christian, to hope means the certainty of being on a journey with Christ toward the Father who awaits us.*

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<sup>4</sup> Brunot Frappat, *"Espérance, état des lieux"* in *La Croix* n°40775, 15-16-17 April 2017, p.28.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, December 7, 2016.

*Hope is never still; hope is always journeying, and it makes us journey. (...) Here we can ask ourselves the question, each one of us: am I walking with hope or is my interior life static, closed? Is my heart a locked drawer or a drawer open to the hope which enables me to walk — not alone — with Jesus?”<sup>6</sup>*

For his part, Benedict XVI writes,

*“We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. (...) God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety. His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; his Kingdom is present wherever he is loved and wherever his love reaches us..”<sup>7</sup>*

### ***Christ is our hope***

Christian hope has its own name and this name is Jesus. There was the hope of the people of the Covenant before Christ’s birth, but this, and this is what we believe, was brought about in Jesus. The messianic expectation was fully in Jesus.

Let us reread St. Augustine who knows how to say with emotion what I am trying to communicate to you. It can be found in the *Confessions*, Book X, 43:

*“How great was your love for us, good Father, for you did not even spare your own son, but gave him up (Rom 8: 32) to save us sinners! How great was your love for us, when it was for us that Christ, who*

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, December 21, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, #31.

*did not see in the rank of Godhead a prize to be coveted, accepted an obedience which brought him to death, death on a cross (Phil 2: 6-8)! He who alone was free among the dead (Ps 88: 5), for he was free to lay down his life and free to take it up again (Jn 10: 18), was for us both Victor and Victim in your sight, and it was because he was the Victim that he was also the Victor. In your sight he was for us both Priest and Sacrifice, and it was because he was the Sacrifice that he was also the Priest. By being your son, yet serving you, he freed us from servitude and made us your sons. Rightly do I place in him my firm hope that you will cure all my ills through him who sits at your right hand and pleads for us (Rom 8: 34); otherwise I should despair. For my ills are many and great, many and great indeed; but your medicine is greater still. We might have thought that your Word was far distant from union with man, and so we might have despaired of ourselves, if he had not been made flesh and come to dwell among us (Jn 1: 14)."*<sup>8</sup>

Whatever may be our unworthiness, our sin, our failures, God our Father is there to heal us, to bring us true life. Sinners, we know that salvation has been given to us.

The coming of the Word in our flesh was truly salvific. Jesus came close to us to the point of acknowledging us as his brothers and sisters, in order to free us from all evil. Augustine understood that the Christian faith restored us to the dignity of God's sons and daughters. No being, even the most condemnable, is excluded from the mercy and tenderness of God.

It is our attachment to Jesus that gives us real hope. He is eternal life ("*I am the way, the truth, and the life*" Jn 14: 6). We advance along the way by faith, hope, and charity.

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<sup>8</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*. Translation, R.S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin Books, 1961, p. 251.

Emmanuel d'Alzon loved Jesus Christ passionately. His spirituality, our spirituality, is rooted in the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ. A Christ known, loved, and imitated (cf. *Directory, Ecrits spirituels* pp. 28-31). It is urgent that we deepen our relationship with the Savior: he is the source of our hope.

When Pope Francis calls to mind the defections from religious life, it is probable that part of these are linked to a loss of an intimate relationship with Jesus. Love has been chilled by monotony and fatigue. Very often the means for growing in this relationship have been neglected or have been abandoned altogether: prayer, community sharing, spiritual reading and *lectio divina*, the annual retreat, attending to the poor and involvement in the world. Emmanuel d'Alzon insisted on the need of "knowing Jesus" in order to be able to love and imitate him. It is urgent, as the Angel says to the Church of Ephesus (Rev 2: 4), that we hear the reproach he addresses to us, "*Yet I hold this against you: you have lost the love you had at first.*" Here again hope offers us the certitude that renewal is possible if we return to God. Hope is the virtue that makes authentic conversion possible. Without hope, it is not possible to believe that we can change.

### *Hope and mercy*

God is all just. There cannot be with him judgment without mercy, for the gift that he made of himself in Jesus Christ is for our salvation and not for our condemnation. Here lies the Christian's hope: on the Day of Judgment God's justice will be infinitely merciful.

*"If you, O Lord, should mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive?"* (Ps 130):

*"Out of the depths I call to you, Lord; Lord, hear my cry!"*

*May your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.  
If you, O Lord, should mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive?  
But with you is forgiveness and so you are revered.  
I wait for the Lord, my soul waits  
and I hope for his word.  
My soul looks for the Lord more than sentinels for daybreak.  
More than sentinels for daybreak,  
let Israel hope in the Lord,  
For with the Lord is mercy, with him is plenteous redemption,  
And he will redeem Israel from all its sins."*

The *De profundis* is a psalm of hope. We can meditate on it without end in order to penetrate ourselves with the mercy of God. God offers us his infinite love however much we may have strayed in our lives or however unfaithful we may have been. Hope is greater than all our sins.

The mercy of God is the sign of his omnipotence. St. Augustine had already understood this when in the *Confessions* he expressed it in this way:

*"Our only hope, our only confidence, the only firm purpose that we have is your mercy."*<sup>9</sup>

And again:

*"My life is full of such faults, and my only hope is in your boundless mercy. (...) Can anything restore me to hope except your mercy? That you are merciful I know, for you have begun to change me?"*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine of Hippo *Confessions* X,32, 48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, X, 35 and 36.

Mercy was the theme of the extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy at the behest of Pope Francis (2015-2016). His teaching renewed the approach of this attitude profoundly rooted in the Scriptures. The Year of Mercy afforded believers an opportunity to rediscover the place of forgiveness. Forgiveness of those who have trespassed against us but forgiveness as well received in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. What place does the Sacrament of Reconciliation hold in my life? Do I have sufficient openness of heart to see my own misery and ask for God's grace?

Mercy is a fundamental attitude in community life. Once again, it is not a question of "putting up with" or tolerating sin, but of having trust in God and of not losing hope in one's brother or sister, who is, in the end, capable of conversion.

Christian hope allows us to put up with the weakness and sin of the other. It is a question of waiting patiently for conversion, which is the fruit of God's grace. But it is necessary that one accept to change oneself, that is to say, to assume ownership of one's conversion. Hope leads us to believe that everyone, including ourselves, is capable of rediscovering the path of holiness.

Lanza del Vasto, an Italian founder of communities marked by Christian non-violence, used to say that once one sees a brother's sin he must ask God to heal him of it. But if things are delayed, it is also necessary to ask God to heal us of this sin.

### III. AVE CRUX SPES UNICA MEA ! I GREET YOU, CROSS, MY ONLY HOPE

This hymn sings of the Lord's cross. It reminds us that the cross is our only hope. It is paradoxical because the cross is the symbol of torture leading to death. But the Good News reverses the proposition since it is by the death of Jesus, the complete gift of his life, that we are saved and forgiven. It is good for religious to remember the meditation of Fr. d'Alzon on the crucifix that he called, "My Everyday Friend". (E.S. p. 1229-1232).

"How is it that the crucifixion, and not simply the Resurrection, is the source of hope? Because it confirms that even dereliction is no stranger to God, who assumes not only nature and human existence, but also what it signifies to be a body, including a body tortured by violence and suffering. Beyond physical violence and suffering, the event of Jesus' crucifixion confirms that even the feeling of being abandoned by God is no stranger to God."<sup>11</sup>

To live from hope always means placing trust in God, whose goodness by far surpasses our cowardice, despair, and indifference. Hope enlivens and colors the faith. "It directs the faith toward what is to come, based on what Jesus proclaimed and on what happened to him during his last Passover. It does not leave the faith in place. Like love, it gives it new life. Its horizon is above all the God who comes (Rev 1:8) and, with that coming, the advent of the kingdom of that *justice* which comes from God, that is to say, just relationships at every level. In a world

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<sup>11</sup> Christophe Chalamet, *Une voie infiniment supérieure*, Labor et Fides, 2016, p.148.

where injustice is blatant, where fear and death still reign, the hope of faith is always a hope 'against all hope' (Rm 4: 18)<sup>12</sup>.

But we must not forget the challenge that lies before us. Hope does not consist in waiting passively for a better world. "What is to come orients the way we are and act *in our present moment*. The 'new creation', the 'new being' are not simply some future realities: Paul indicates in speaking of 'a first installment' (I Cor 1: 22) or of 'the first fruits of the Spirit' (Rom 8: 23), that is to say, an anticipation of the end in the present time, of an 'already' in the heart of 'the not yet.'".

When we take a look at the countries where we live, we can take stock of the injustices and the serious violations of human dignity. The list is endless: massacres in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; assassinations of priests in Mexico; summary executions in the Philippines; the plight of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, etc. The Assumption should be able to bear witness to the possibility of a future, that is to say, of a hope that is the source of renewal and radical change. We probably put ourselves at high risk in condemning the injustices of our day, but the prophetic dimension of our vocation compels us not to remain indifferent.

#### IV. ACTING HERE AND NOW

*"Among us Christians, there can be found profound hope and firm faith; even in the midst of the ruins of a shattered century, our spirit remains alive, our virtue immovable, and our patience never lacks joy; our soul is always sure of its God (...) The Christian denies that a man of God, that a man who worships God, strengthened as he is with*

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<sup>12</sup> Ibidem, p.151.

*the certitude of hope, grounded as it is on the stable foundation of faith, can be shaken by the furious assaults of the world and his times.*"<sup>13</sup>

Hope determines the commitment of a Christian. We have no choice. If we are filled with hope, it will not be inertia that characterizes us, but decisive action in the world. In such a way we bear witness that all remains possible, whatever the actual conditions may be, even in the most dire and horizon-less situations. It is our duty to get involved *hic et nunc*, here and now. The optimist simply waits for better days; the man of hope acts to renew the world here and now.

The Lord gives us signs of hope, not so that we "stand around idle all day" (cf. Mt 20: 6), but so that we may put our hand to the plough, so that we may make of ourselves, with his grace, participants in something greater than ourselves, the fulfillment of which we must not demand to see here below. "Do business until I return!" (Lk 19: 13)

Faith in God and faith in the Good News brought by Jesus compels us to act for the Kingdom. We can't simply stand around with our arms crossed doing nothing. The optimist is a man who goes to bed every night telling himself that "Tomorrow things will be better." The man, the woman who lives from hope is aware of the harsh reality of the present time but gets resolutely involved in transforming it. As God, seeing the suffering of his people in Egypt, exclaims,

*"I have witnessed the affliction of my people. (...) Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey"* (Ex 3: 7-8),

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<sup>13</sup> St. Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter to Demetrianus* 20.

so the believer today continues to have the same solicitude for his brothers and sisters, for all of Creation. The philanthropy of God reveals itself in human fraternity.

The Beatitudes give us our game plan. We can reread them and let ourselves be guided by them. Blessed are the poor, blessed those who mourn, blessed the meek, blessed those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed the merciful, blessed the pure of heart, blessed the peacemakers, blessed those persecuted for the sake of righteousness (cf. Mt 5: 3-10)... now this would be a fine community exercise in view of entering into the renewal of hope.

## V. THE TEMPTATION OF DESPAIR

Confronted by harsh reality, there is a temptation that threatens us, that of despair. It seems to me appropriate to call this a "temptation" because we can allow ourselves to slip into this trap that has been set out before us by the forces of evil. Resignation is a capitulation, a betrayal, a copout. Contemporary literature abounds with characters who are disillusioned, marked by a fierce and limitless nihilism. Cinema will not be outdone in its suppression of "*happy endings*". The film world today reveals a passion for the "apocalyptic", a genre where all hope is banished. The Christian himself, too, is often tempted to abandon hope. Yet, without hope, there is no longer faith.

Pope Francis has called attention to this "loss of hope". He has invited us to a healthy jolt in order to get us back on track:

*"We are called to become men and women of hope, cooperating in the coming of this Kingdom made of light and destined for all, men and women of hope. How bad is it when we find a Christian who has lost hope! 'But, I don't hope in anything; everything is finished for me': thus says a Christian who is incapable of looking to the horizons*

*of hope, and before whose heart there is only a wall. However, God destroys such walls with forgiveness!”<sup>14</sup>*

I really enjoy delving into literature in order to understand our world. Among my favorite authors is Georges Bernanos. He was a man who at times went overboard in the positions he took but does not God spit the lukewarm from his mouth (Rev 3: 16)? In his last novel, *Monsieur Ouine*, a priest says this: “*The hour will come, however, when, in a world organized for despair, preaching hope will be just like throwing hot coals into a powder keg.*”. Christians today can become suspect because of their hope. In fact, they bear a “dangerous memory” as the German theologian, Johannes Baptist Metz, likes to say, that of the Resurrection, of the power of life brought by Jesus Christ. The dangerous memory is that the virtue of hope sets us to work in spite of all the obstacles that would impede us. This memory recognizes that things can be changed in the world order to improve things for the excluded, the poor, and the least among us. It has a subversive aspect that frightens the powerful.

Even at the Assumption, temptation can threaten us. The rapid evolution that we are experiencing in the physiognomy of our congregation can cause a level of anguish and fear. The paucity of vocations in the West, the fragility of certain vocations, the recurring and widespread financial difficulties, the criticism made of believers by our secularized societies...all of this contributes to a climate that is noxious and depressing. But it is exactly in these conditions that we have to bear witness to Christian hope. The Assumption, unlike the Church, has not received promises of eternal life. But this is not the risk which our religious family runs. Our vocation is to work for the coming of the Kingdom of God; it is not up to us to establish the conditions

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, December 14, 2016.

beforehand for getting involved. Our religious consecration is a solemn commitment whereby we are sent into the Lord's vineyard. We have to work with all our might and all our heart to renew the face of the Earth.

We were founded by a man, Emmanuel d'Alzon, who was passionate for God, for Christ, and for the Church. We have to get to know the life of our founder better so as to discover how in his life he lived from hope day to day:

*"Hope will be the reason why we place complete trust in Jesus amid all our difficulties. Before his Passion, he said to his Apostles, 'Non turbetur cor vestrum, neque formidet: creditis in Deum, et in me credite/Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me' (Jn 14: 1). No matter how great our trials might be, we know that he will never desert us if we remain loyal to him..." (Ecrits spirituels, p. 56).*

## **VI. HOPE AND COMMUNITY**

Christian hope is not individualistic. It is not a question only of "saving oneself" in some kind of self-centered search that refuses to be at the service of others. This perversion of the word 'hope' has taken possession of many, in parallel with the progress of the sciences and technology. Salvation seems to be reserved to scientific progress. It falls to hope to take care of souls when science can no longer do anything for them. From this one can understand the Marxist reaction that attempted to bring a materialist salvation to help all those left on the sidelines of progress.

Pope Francis in his catecheses on hope recalls the role of joy in bearing witness to hope. In community, do we have this joy that transforms each one's heart? Let us listen to Francis:

*“One of the first things that happens to people who distance themselves from God is that they are people who do not smile. Perhaps they can break into a loud laugh, one after another, a joke, a chuckle ... but their smile is missing! Only hope brings a smile: it is the hopeful smile in the expectation of finding God..”<sup>15</sup>*

Community life, with the practice of fraternity that characterizes it, is a school of hope. We live together in order to advance together toward the Kingdom. The quest for God is personal but it is not solitary. It relies on the community of believers— the Church— but, for a religious, it concretely plays out in the context of living with the brothers one is given.

## VII. AN ANCHOR IN HEAVEN

*“So when God wanted to give the heirs of his promise an even clearer demonstration of the immutability of his purpose, he inter-vened with an oath, so that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, **we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to hold fast to the hope that lies before us.** This we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm, which reaches into the interior behind the veil, where Jesus has entered on our behalf as forerunner, becoming high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” (Hb 6: 17-20)*

This passage from the Letter to the Hebrews offers us a powerful image of Christian hope. It is like an anchor that moors us solidly to the sanctuary of heaven, that is, in the Kingdom of God. Such a boat, battered by strong headwinds, shaken by storms, the Church, the People of God, humanity does not yield to the temptation of despair. We know that we are already saved in Jesus Christ. Hope is that virtue that moors us to the

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<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, General Audience, December 7, 2016.

realities of heaven. Even if the world suffers myriad misfortunes, the believer knows that God will not abandon him. The anchor (hope) is that which moors us solidly to the love of God that never fails us.

I like this image of the boat whose anchor is moored in heaven. It is the reality of the “boat of St. Peter” of which Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger spoke at the 9<sup>th</sup> Station of the Way of the Cross at the Coliseum on March 25, 2005 :

*“Lord, your Church often seems like a boat about to sink, a boat taking in water on every side. In your field we see more weeds than wheat. The soiled garments and face of your Church throw us into confusion. Yet it is we ourselves who have soiled them! It is we who betray you time and time again, after all our lofty words and grand gestures. Have mercy on your Church; within her too, Adam continues to fall. When we fall, we drag you down to earth, and Satan laughs, for he hopes that you will not be able to rise from that fall; he hopes that being dragged down in the fall of your Church, you will remain prostrate and overpowered. But you will rise again. You stood up, you arose and you can also raise us up. Save and sanctify your Church. Save and sanctify us all.”*

The Church is attacked from all sides; Catholics may have the impression that a shipwreck is imminent, but hope—the anchor that solidly moors us in heavenly realities— makes us strong in the faith. It is good for us to reread St. Augustine who comments on the calming of the storm because it gives us the key to facing the various storms we experience. For Augustine, it is because our faith in Jesus is asleep that we are tossed about by every wind that comes our way:

*“Let each one of you question Christ, through his faith. But you can’t, can you, because your faith is asleep? No wonder you are tossed*

*about, if Christ is asleep in your boat. The gospel describes such a situation: Jesus was asleep in the boat, and the boat was being tossed about by waves and high winds (see Mk 4: 37-40). So too is the heart battered when Christ is asleep. But surely Christ is always awake, so what can it mean to say that he is asleep? I mean that your faith has gone to sleep. Why are you still flung about by the storm of doubt? Wake Christ up; arouse your faith. Fix the eye of your faith on the future life, for love of which you came to believe, and for love of which you are sealed with Christ's sign. He led this life of yours in order to show you how contemptible was the kind of life you earlier made your own, and how worthy of hope is that other life in which you had not until then believed. So, arouse your faith, direct its gaze toward what will come at the end, on the world of the future where we shall rejoice after the second coming of the Lord, after his judgment has been accomplished and the kingdom of heaven has been delivered to the saints."*<sup>16</sup>

The theme of "Christ asleep", a figure of the faith of the man who sleeps, is a central reflection in the work of Augustine who develops it on many occasions. It is an invitation for us today to wake from our slumber and to stir our faith in Jesus Christ into action.

We are called to dwell in hope. *"To abide in hope means to abide as one makes one's way, even staggering at times, continually falling down and always picking oneself up, ever fragile, in the midst of a light that one does not have and that one is not, but a light to which one now belongs by the thread, at once fine and firm, of our spiritual stance, which 'anchors' us in heaven (Hb 6: 19)."*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> St. Augustine, commentary on Psalm 147, #3, p. 444. *Expositions of the Psalms 121-150*, translated by Maria Boulding, O.S.B., in the series *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, editor, Boniface Ramsey, New City Press, Hyde Park, New York, 2004

<sup>17</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Fragilité*, Editions de Minuit, 2017, p.194.

As St. Augustine said many times, we are pilgrims of the Kingdom and our Fatherland is in heaven. The often bumpy way on which we travel is at times darkened by harsh realities, but if we hold firmly to the anchor of hope we will not lose our way.

## VIII. HOPE AND PRAYER

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, developed a powerful reflection on the ways to make our hope grow. He mentions three principal ones: prayer, action, and judgment. I think it would be interesting to quote several passages in order to renew our commitment to prayer. For Pope Benedict, prayer is “a school of hope” (§ 32-34):

*“When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me. When I have been plunged into complete solitude ...; if I pray I am never totally alone.”*

So the Pope Emeritus cites the wonderful figure of Cardinal Nguyễn Văn Thuan, a Vietnamese, who spent thirteen years in prison. How can we fail to remember all those who are still suffering today from political persecution in the name of their faith?

Pope Benedict continues by elaborating on the link between prayer and hope in St. Augustine. He develops his reflection around the notion of desire. Prayer is an exercise of desire:

*“Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched.”* (§ 33)

God makes us wait in order to increase our desire. Waiting is the time of hope and desire implies this waiting. The more we desire, the more we become capable of receiving. But the ultimate goal is welcoming God within us.

With Emmanuel d'Alzon, let us make our hope grow by taking our life of prayer seriously:

*“For this hope to be unshakable, one must seek more and more of it by begging for the help necessary for salvation. So the second condition imposed by hope is prayer, ardent prayer that leaps up from the fire of meditation. (...) Oh yes, I must be a man of prayer if I wish to be a man of hope.”* (Ecrits spirituels, p. 409)

## IX. HOPE AND ETERNAL LIFE

Our hope is placed in God. He alone is our hope. God desires that we be with him for all eternity. But what is our faith today in eternal life? I do not say “future life” because I sincerely believe that eternity begins already here below once our life takes its direction from God's plan. In our lives, what is the visible expression of our hope, if everything we do is governed by the satisfaction of our immediate desires? Take our vow of poverty, for example. If I allow myself to get trapped in a frenzy of consumerism, I thus bear witness that I hardly care about eternal goods. With the vow of chastity, it is the same. The thirst for immediate gratification clearly shows that we prefer to satisfy our urges at the expense of eternal happiness...

Hope in the Resurrection situates us in the world as witnesses of a reality that reaches beyond the present time. The Christian is involved in time and space with the certitude that his activity manifests the coming of the Kingdom. Faith in eternal life is not ‘an opium for the people’, but a dynamic force for changing the world.

We believe in eternal life. I believe in the resurrection of the body. The Virgin Mary is the image of hope. Daughter of Israel, “humble handmaid of the Lord”, she incarnates the hope of believers. She believed; she knew how to await the fruit of the promise without fear and in hope. Faced with the harsh reality of her son’s mission, she kept all these things that were to happen to him in her heart and pondered them. We can draw upon her motherly example.

*¡Salve Regina, Mater misericordiae!*

*Vita, dulcedo et spes nostra, salve!*

Hail, holy Queen, Mother of mercy,

Our life, our sweetness and our hope!

We bear the name of the Assumption of the Virgin. This patronage reminds us in the most striking manner that we are destined for eternal realities and that the life we lead here below does not end with the grave. The Assumption of Mary is also our personal assumption. The more we live as sons and daughters of God, the more we will participate in divine life.

## CONCLUSION

“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18: 8)

For many years this question of Jesus has not stopped haunting me. And the more time goes by, the more urgent it becomes. This question is first of all for me: do I have sufficient faith or am I a “little believer”, a ὀλιγόπιστος, as the Greek texts puts it, a man of little faith? Obviously the question arises for all believers today. It has the merit of motivating us and encouraging us

to reflect, but also of making us assess the quality of our commitment to the Kingdom. In the Gospels, Jesus heals, he performs miracles, but at times he departs from towns and villages for he cannot act because of the lack of faith of the crowds. Is Jesus Christ present at the Assumption? Do we have sufficient faith that he may work through us and by us? In my eyes this question is fundamental. Reflecting on the faith also means speaking of hope. Every time I hear the question of Jesus, I can only respond "Yes". There will be faith on the earth at Jesus' return. That is my hope. Hope that the Spirit of God will not abandon us and that he will continue to kindle the interior flame of our hearts. Hope that Jesus will come again and that he will find men and women who continue to follow him through the maze of human history.

Faith cannot measure itself, one of my seminary professors used to say. But, he continued, there are faith and charity that are inextricably linked to it and allow one to gauge, to assess, the intensity of our relationship with God by its concrete results in our lives.

In this letter, it has been my desire to enliven the hope of Assumption's religious and laity. We have a mission to accomplish, and the witness of our hope belongs to that mission.

"The world is going to hell in a handbasket," they claim. And everyone keeps saying, "The Church is following suit...is in bad shape". But doesn't the Christian have anything to oppose this observation?

Hope, "this little nothing of a daughter" (*"cette petite fille de rien"*), as Charles Péguy would say, is always there to strengthen us in our path toward the Kingdom.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God: this is my deepest conviction. In spite of all the unrest, in spite of all the

turmoil, in spite of all the wrongdoing that punctuate the history of the Church, in spite of it all, I can simply say: God will never abandon us.

*“And remember, I am with you always to the end of the age”*, Jesus told us (Mt 28: 20).

Rome, September 14, 2018  
Feast of the Glorious Cross

Very Rev. Benoît GRIÈRE, A.A.  
Superior general

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