

72. *And this hope will not leave us disappointed* (Rm 5:5)

The hour of despair is really the hour of hope!

You are going through the harsh experience of discovering spiritual weakness, your incapacity to serve God. Your failures overwhelm you, and your stagnation discourages you. All these things indicate to me that God is at work in your life. First of all, Christ captivated and conquered you, and you responded with enthusiasm. Now he has set out to train you. He has begun by making you discover your radical poverty. You will probably have to go still further in this discovery, and consent fully to your wretchedness, accepting it "in truth."

When you no longer revolt against this misery of yours but, like St. Paul, "*boast*" about it (cf. 2 Cor 12:5), the work of grace within you can make rapid progress. What do the weaknesses of man matter, since the grace of God suffices (cf. 2 Cor 12:9)?

As you can see, this presupposes a turnabout in your perspective, a conversion of your underlying attitude. You had set out to conquer your salvation, whereas you have to *hope* for it. Call to mind another experience, already far in the past. You had just met Nadine, and there was no doubt in your mind that she was going to be your wife. But she did not share your conviction.

I remember your impatience and tenseness. You were a young man accustomed to success, and you were fuming. There are victories that one cannot win by force of arms, but you didn't know that then. So many young people imagine that with power, intelligence, or money, one can acquire everything! You had to discover the world of free giving, which is also the world of love. You had to approach this young woman not like a conquerer, but with "sighs." This word sounds ridiculous, but it is very expressive.

The same is true of God's gifts. He withholds them from anyone who expects to earn them. On the other hand, he grants them to the one who "sighs" after them. I mean to the one who "hopes," who expects them solely from God's generosity.

So, contrary to your belief, your poverty is your great claim to the Lord's benefactions. Poverty germinates hope, and hope cannot be disappointed. It's the rich man who is sent away empty-handed, precisely because he is already satisfied and has nothing to hope for. The one who is starving, for his part, is given his fill. Reread the Beatitudes. Who are declared blessed? The poor. And why? Because, deprived of earthly goods, they are ready and willing to receive God's gifts.

It is true that poverty alone would not suffice to beget hope, if it did not rely on the Lord's promises. But these promises have been given to mankind since the day of the first sin (cf. Gn 3:15). As a result, mankind has never completely sunk into despair.

Open your Bible and follow the trail of hope. Look at Abraham, suffering from the most cruel poverty of not having any children. God promises him a posterity as innumerable as the stars on a summer night. But his hope must be pure, and rooted in God's power alone. Whence interminable delays. Abraham is called the father of believers. He could just as well be called the father of those who hope.

In the cases of the Israelites in Egypt and of the Jews deported to Babylon, God intervenes when all human hope has failed, and they finally turn to him. It's always the same pedagogy. God can grant his gifts only to those who hope. In order to arouse hope in a man, there is often no better way than to plunge him into poverty. Then, between despair and hope in God, perhaps man will choose the latter.

Another point worth noting is that Abraham hopes for a merely human posterity, and the Jews hope only for a national liberator. But God wants to give them more. To Abraham he chooses to give a spiritual posterity, and to the Jews he offers liberation from a slavery far worse

than that to the Romans, the slavery of sin. God will do the same with you. He inspires you to hope that he will give you his strength, to enable you to practice virtue. He will give you far more: his love and his close friendship. He will give himself to you. What matters to God is that man, in discovering his poverty, opens himself to hope. Then he fulfills this hope, far beyond human expectations.

So open yourself to hope!

But you must realize that hope is not passivity. It expresses itself through effort. It was hope that made Abraham give up his country, his home and his comfort. It was hope that set him in motion. It was hope that sustained the Israelites during their forty-year odyssey in the wilderness. It was hope again that inspired the columns of poor Jews, filled with song and joy, as they returned to their ruined Jerusalem. The person who hopes disengages himself. As long as he hopes, he refuses to settle down. The person who hopes goes forward. As long as he hopes, he continues to advance, because his treasure lies ahead. I invite you to set out boldly on the road of hope, without looking back.

Over the years, your hope will change. At the start, it will probably be a matter of the will—of a will founded on faith in God's promises. But as yours is a living hope, it will grow with your increasing awareness of your poverty and your love for God. Indeed, love and hope are inseparable. Can the love that has discovered a treasure, fail to aspire to its full possession? The same is true of the person who has encountered the Lord. Little by little, hope takes hold of his entire being. His intellect aspires to an ever more perfect knowledge of God. His heart is impatient to share total intimacy with him. His innermost being cries out its need to possess him, and to be possessed by him.

I am not inventing this. You have only to read the works of the great spiritual men and women. At one stage of their development, their hope always becomes an unquenchable thirst for the living God. And their hope is not mocked. Jesus Christ offers them the living water of which he said: "*Whoever drinks the water I give him will never be thirsty; no, the water I give shall become a fountain within him, leaping up to provide eternal life*" (Jn 4:14).

As your hope intensifies, it will be purified, just like the love from which it emanates. The *hope for oneself* of the early stages (one needs help of one kind or another, or perhaps one aspires to the sensible presence of God) gradually becomes *hope for what God wants*. One no longer hopes for oneself, but for God. It is for his sake, that we want to be united to him. It is for his glory, and not first of all for our own joy.

The experience of certain mystics follows along the lines of this purification. Their hope ceases to be a burning, panting, restless hunger, and becomes a peaceable surrender into the hands of God. They have discovered that God is seeking them far more than they are seeking him. Take, for instance, the Moslem who wrote: "A voice cried out to me: 'O Aboû Yazîd, what do you desire?' I answered: 'I desire not to desire, because I am the desired one and You are the One who desires!'"

I have been speaking to you of the Christian who lives by hope, as if he were an isolated being. In reality, he is immersed in the vast created universe, and he knows it. He wants to be at one with all creatures. He hears the muffled groans of those who, St. Paul tells us, aspire to share in the glorious liberty of the children of God. The Christian lends them his heart and his voice so that, within him, their groaning may become hope.

The Christian senses his union especially with his brothers and sisters. He feels that he is united to all the poor of the earth in their search for bread, for a roof over their heads, for a homeland, for a little love and respect, and (often without knowing it) for a God. He feels that he is united to all the rich, too, whose power, wealth, and pleasures bring them only disappointment. It is their nature, too, to aspire to an absolute happiness. In the midst of all who are de-

prived of authentic hope, the Christian is the brother in whom their desires, despairs, and disappointments are melded into a prayer of hope.

The Christian's strength, his fidelity in hope, stems from the his belonging to the people of hope, to the Church. He is glad to know that he is in communion with the hope of all God's children. This hope is certainly an expectation of divine help, but first and above all it is a yearning for the Day of the Lord. On that day, Christ will return in glory to raise the dead, to create a new heaven and a new earth, and to offer himself to his Father's love, with the great multitude of those who have been saved. Then God will be "all and in all," and hope will be a thing of the past. The infinite happiness of God will have become the portion of all his creatures.

It seems as though I have said very little about mental prayer. But the truth is that mental prayer has been constantly present in my thoughts, as I was writing to you. For mental prayer is the privileged moment when hope is renewed, and finds expression. During mental prayer, hope attains new intensity as it remembers the Lord's promises. In the aridity of prayer, hope becomes more fervent. When the Lord allows himself to be glimpsed, hope hastens toward him in leaps and bounds.

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