

Pilgrims of Hope

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It is important for us physicians to question ourselves about hope in our profession and mission of care. It is important for us who deal with illness and suffering every day to understand the therapeutic scope, the healing value of hope. Bringing and giving hope to the sick person makes the difference in medical care. For this reason, we must be physicians of hope. Hence the importance of learning hope, growing in virtue, to transmit its medicinal efficacy in care relationships. This commitment is intended to be the primary task that each of us takes on when crossing the Holy Door in this Jubilee of Hope. A task that this meditation is intended to help illuminate, motivate and cultivate.

The passion of the possible

Hope is an open door to the future. Hope opens up the future: a promising future. Hope is the perspective, the horizon of light, meaning, beauty and the state of mind of openness, trust, encouragement aroused by a good promise. The promise of a possibility, the promise that something good, beautiful, true, despite everything, is possible: it is possible to win, heal, overcome a difficulty, a test, a danger, reach a goal, achieve a finish line. Hope – said S. Kierkegaard – is “the passion of the possible”.

We say this about great hope: the hope opened to us by the Gospel, the hope of life. But it is also valid and we learn it from small hopes. We need these too. We need them to give meaning and purpose to what we are and do, especially when the journey becomes burdensome, calls us to face and overcome, when the wind blows against us, when it gets dark around us. We need them to not give up and become discouraged in the temptations and trials of life.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote a beautiful Encyclical on hope. It is called *Spe Salvi* (*Saved in Hope*). In it he writes:

«We need hopes – smaller or larger – that, day by day, keep us on the path. But without the great hope, which must surpass everything else, they are not enough. This great hope can only be God, who embraces the universe and who can propose and give us what, by ourselves, we cannot achieve... Not just any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end» (n. 31)

Man is a being of hope

Man is a being of hope: to be is to be beyond. Beyond every limit and contingency, beyond every lack and insufficiency. Man is transcendence of being. With his spirit (intelligence and will) man opens himself to the infinite. "To think [and to want] is to go beyond" (E. Bloch): it is to go beyond, on the coordinates of the whole and forever. The human being understands himself much less as a being, than as a being-towards, a being-beyond.

«Man experiences himself - writes Karl Rhaner - as the being with unlimited demands, and at the same time as the impotent, as the man of death, of the ever fragmentary, as the unhappy conscience. This distance is covered only by absolute hope, by the anticipation of a fullness that is no longer one's own work ... A fullness that we call God and that we know originally and properly only in this hope. As Pope Benedict told us, "This great hope can only be God, who embraces the universe and who can propose and give us what, by ourselves, we cannot achieve ... Not just any god, but that God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end» (*Spe salvi* 31).

This God exists: He is the *Deus pro nobis* of the Bible. He – as St. Paul tells us – is the «God of hope» (Rm 15:13) who, in his Son given for us, became our hope: «Christ our hope» (1Tm 1:1), St. Paul calls him.

The great hope, hope of life

What hope? “Absolute hope” Karl Rhaner told us, “Great hope” Pope Benedict told us. It is the hope of life, of life in its fullness, which man cannot give himself, but can only invoke and receive. It is the *raison d'être* of

Christ's mission: "I came that you may have life," life "in abundance" (Jn 10:10): an expression of life in its fullness, life beyond all limits, "eternal life" (Jn 10:28). "God so loved the world - Jesus tells us -that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him ... may have eternal life" (Jn 3:15).

This is the great Christian announcement. Saint Paul in his letter to Titus: "Christian hope is the hope of eternal life" (Titus 1:29; cf. 3:7); in the letter to the Romans: "You have eternal life as your destiny ... The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 22:23). Saint John in his first letter: "This is the promise he made to us: eternal life" (1 John 2:25); "Jesus Christ: he is the true God and eternal life" (1 John 5:20). In the "God of hope" the third of Kant's three great questions is answered: "What can I hope for?"¹ That fullness of life - "eternal life" - which is in the aspirations and expectations of every man, and which in Christ, in the event of Christ, has become "our hope".

Jesus Master teaches us hope

Christian hope therefore has a Christological meaning and value. This meaning and value is twofold. The first: Jesus teaches us hope. Jesus is the son of God, who became the son of man. In this kenosis (lowering), he assumes the human condition in all that it has of precariousness, suffering, bitterness, fragility, trial and therefore temptation. To which Jesus does not succumb because he is supported by hope in God. He lives hope as total abandonment in the hands of the Father. His whole life reflects this hope, bears witness to this hope.

"Ave crux spes unica": the cross, the highest testimony of hope

It is above all the limit-experience of passion and death that is the highest testimony of hope. A hope is truly and credibly such in the presence of the negative that disturbs life. No problem when everything is going well and life is favorable and propitious. The challenge is brought by trials and adversities, when darkness falls around and the wind blows against us: it is the moment of crisis, of pain, of misunderstanding, of solitude, of failure, of fear, of death. This is where hope is decisive and proves itself and its reliability. It is here – in the ability to penetrate the pain of man and of the world and open up a horizon of redemption and life – that vague optimisms are differentiated from true hope. It is here that hopes are shattered and hope is affirmed. The hope of Jesus did not elude or bypass any adversity. He faced them all, even the most dramatic and painful: the cross. The supreme testimony of hope is the cross, an expression of the *mysterium iniquitatis* (*mystery of iniquity*), of the most abysmal absurdity. The cross is the darkest page of pain in the world, and therefore the strongest provocation and challenge to hope. [Jesus did not invent the cross; the Romans invented it as the most atrocious instrument of torture. Jesus transformed it]. In fact, on the cross all the evils that a man can suffer fell, and in the most atrocious way: the physical evil of the most excruciating torments and pains; the psychological evil of outrage, betrayal, denial, desolation, solitude: Jesus dies abandoned by all; the moral evil of the condemnation to death of the innocent and to the most infamous death; the spiritual evil of the silence of God, of his distance.

This ocean of evil with its lacerating power has poured down on Jesus, tested as a temptation to distrust: to distrust good, to distrust justice, to distrust God. Where is the good in this immense absurdity? Justice in this abyss of iniquity? Where is God in this empire of evil? Jesus has come to the brink of non-hope, of anguish, of desperation: his hope tempted to the utmost. Temptation of oblivion, of absence, of abandonment of God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27,46). These are the last words of Jesus on the cross. They are the extreme expression of temptation. To which, however, Jesus does not give in: Jesus does not despair.

Taking on death in all its drama, Jesus lives it as the supreme expression of his being for God, of his unconditional trust in the Father: he abandons himself totally to the Father in the act of the greatest love-faithfulness-obedience, in a word, of absolute hope: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Lk 23:46). (Lc 23,46).

"Surrexit Christus spes mea"

¹ The other two big questions are: "What can I know?", "What must I do?"

The Resurrection, the Father's response to the hope of Jesus on the cross

Jesus lives, experiences death as abandonment of love in the hands of the Father. And this trusting abandonment defines the hope of the Crucified (Jesus on the cross): the offering of himself, "with loud cries and tears, to God - we read in the Letter to the Hebrews - who was able to deliver him from death" (Heb 5:7): "the God - St. Paul tells us - who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that are not" (Rom 4:17). In this radical abandonment to the God who creates from nothing and resurrects the dead, Jesus professes and attests hope as the highest challenge to every fatality, resignation and anguish. Death, lived in the hope of the God of life, blossoms for Jesus in the very life of God. The Father is not insensitive to the hopeful pain of the Son. He fulfills it, not freeing him from the cross, but through the cross, with the transfiguration of the cross. The resurrection is the other face of the cross, the Father's response to the hope of the Crucified. The resurrection is the fulfillment of hope, its ratification, the confirmation that comes from the Father. For this reason the Church sings on Good Friday: *Ave crux spes unica*» And on Easter Sunday: *Surrexit Christus spes mea*.

From the testimony of Jesus, the Christian learns hope. To hope is to entrust oneself to the love of God that is stronger than any evil. It is the greatest hope: the hope of life, professed in the presence of evil, pain and death. It is faith that "believes in hope against all hope" (Rm 4,18): where every human hope no longer finds reasons and certainties and gives up, giving in to anguish, the hope of faith is strong, it has the strength of the unfailing love of God in Christ Jesus.

Christ Jesus, our hope

But Jesus is more than a Teacher, from whom we learn hope: he is hope. Through the Spirit, Christ is present and working in us, principle and source of hope. "Christ Jesus, our hope" (1 Tim 1: 1), "Christ in us, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27) - St. Paul professes him.

The expression – Christ our hope – has both a subjective and objective meaning. Subjective meaning: the Christian does not hope with his own hope but with the very hope of Christ. So as to say: Christ hopes in me. Christ is the subject, co-subject of hope in me. Through baptism – the apostle Peter tells us – we are "regenerated, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to a living hope" (1Pt 1:3). Baptized in the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Col 2:12; Rm 6:3-5), his Easter passes into our life: the Risen One becomes the source and inspiring principle of hope, our living hope.

"Christ our hope" also has an objective meaning: Jesus, the Risen One, is the object of hope. So as to say: I hope Christ, the paschal destiny of Christ. The Christian lives the hope of the glory of Christ, of the full fulfillment of the paschal life, which began in him with baptism. To say with St. Paul that "we have set our hope in Christ" (1 Cor 15:19) is to say that what was accomplished with the Passover in the humanity of Jesus is an anticipatory prefiguration of what began to be accomplished in us with baptism.

Certainty of Hope

To be credible, hope must be certain. Certainty is given by its foundation. We distinguish a double foundation of Christian hope: one objective, the other subjective.

"We have placed our hope in Christ, risen from the dead"

The objective foundation is given by the resurrection of Christ. What Paul says about faith applies to hope: "If Christ has not been raised, our faith would be vain". The same and even more so must be said of hope. At the beginning and foundation of Christian hope, of the great hope, there is the event of the resurrection. St. Paul: "We have placed our hope in Christ [...] raised from the dead" (1 Cor 15:19-20). St. Peter: "Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, God has made us be born again to a living hope» (1 Pt 1:3). It is the greatest hope: the victory of life over death.

"Hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured into our hearts"

The subjective foundation is love, the *vinculum amoris*, the bond of love which unites us to God, as children to the Father. The same that ties the Crucified to the Father and which no evil, not even the extreme test of the cross, has been able to break. The apostle declares it expressly: "Hope does not disappoint, because the

love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). Hope does not disappoint; in positive term: hope is certain because the communion of love with God in Christ Jesus, tied by the Holy Spirit in us, is stronger than any divisive power, than any motive or force of disappointment.

This is not a matter of human optimism, of the superficial conviction that things will "work out" anyway. Because Christian hope is hope of salvation: it concerns life not according to partial aspects or particular moments, but in its depth and wholeness. It is professed in the presence of the greatest evil: perdition and death. Among the trials of life, hope is the firm and encouraging awareness of being "loved by God" (1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13; Heb 6:18) and that – as St. Paul tells us – "everything contributes to the good of those who love God" (Rom. 8:39), even if this good does not have the immediate and visible feedback that is expected.

To hope is to rely on God's love stronger than all evil. It is the greatest hope: the hope of life, professed in the presence of evil, pain and death. It is faith that "believes hoping against all hope" (Rom 4:18): where every human hope no longer finds reasons and certainties and gives up, yielding to anguish and tedium, the hope of faith has the strength of the indefectible love of God in Christ Jesus. It is this love that establishes and sustains the hope of the Christian.

At its base there is the *vinculum amoris* that unites man to God, the same one that ties the Crucified to the Father and which no one and nothing has been able to break. St. Paul celebrated the strength of hope, against every threat, power or evil, in a highly expressive text: "If God is for us, who will be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will not give us everything together with him? Who will bring charges against the elect of God? God is he who justifies? Who will condemn? Christ Jesus died, or rather he rose again, stands at the right hand of God and intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? »

He then reviews all the possible divisive adversities: "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...". Then follows the profession of hope: "But in all these things we are more than winners, thanks to him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, can ever separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:31-39).

"We toil and struggle because we hope in the living God"

"Strengthened by this hope, we behave with great parrhesia" – Saint Paul makes us say (2 Cor 3:12).

Parrhesia: the courage to face, to dare, to love despite everything. Christian hope, the great hope, is not a *fuga mundi*, an escape from the world that projects us into heaven, it is not the waiting room of paradise. On the contrary, it sets us on the road and at work on earth: it is an inexhaustible source of action.

On this the Second Vatican Council pronounced warning and decisive words: "Wrong are those who, knowing that here we have no stable citizenship but that we seek the future one, think that because of this they can neglect their duties" (*Gaudium et spes* n.43). In fact, "eschatological [final and greatest] hope does not diminish the importance of earthly commitments, but rather provides new reasons for their fulfillment" (*Gaudium et spes* n.20).

Hope – as Kierkegaard defined it – is the passion of the possible, which moves freedom to dare justice, goodness and love towards all that is possible. Hope is the driving force of evangelical morality. It is the great force that moves the saints, like all the righteous, to the audacity of good, of truth, of beauty. Eschatological hope, by disclosing the future to man - the future of God and of his Kingdom, the future of Life - becomes the reason for the most gratuitous commitment, for the most oblation (selfless) love, up to toil and struggle: "We toil and strive - St. Paul makes us say - because we hope in the living God" (1 Tim 4:10). A hope that does not close the Christian in an exclusive and autistic relationship with God: "I hope in God for me and my salvation". But it incentivizes an inclusive and open relationship: hope for humanity, for the world (for all creatures), for history. "I hope in You for us" is the authentic and proper expression of hope.

With this industriousness and openness, which becomes a voice of hope for everyone and everything, the Christian – as the apostle Peter exhorts – “answers everyone who asks the reason for the hope that is in him” (1P7 3,15).

Physicians of Hope

There are two definitions of hope that I consider particularly meaningful and effective.

The first is Kierkegaard's already reported: “Hope is the passion of the possible”.

The second one is from a girl. In a training meeting for young people, to the question “What is hope for you,” a girl answered: “Hope is knowing that there is someone waiting for you.” Very true: knowing that there is someone waiting for you ignites hope, keeps hope alive and, with hope, the joy of living, of working, of facing, the joy of giving, of loving.

Christian hope is the awareness that – despite everything – there is a Father who is waiting for you. The thought goes here to the parable of the prodigal son: Who, what saves that young man who has squandered everything and is abandoned to solitude? The memory of the Father. The awareness that there is someone, the father, waiting for him. The memory of the Father who waits for him kindles hope in him. He says to himself: “I will arise and go to my father”. “While he was still far away, his father saw him and was filled with compassion, and ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him” (Lc 15:18-20)

The Holy Door of the Jubilee, that open door that we passed through, is a sign of the open arms of the Father, the arms of mercy, arms of forgiveness and indulgence, which open our faith to hope. Welcomed and reconciled by the Father's mercy, we too are, we too must be Physicians of Hope for our sick, who expect the comfort of care from us. Comfort marked by the virtues of proximity: empathy, compassion, consolation, in which hope takes operative and healing form. Aware that no pain, no suffering is without hope.

Theological Meditation by Mons. Mauro Cozzoli

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