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Pastoral Letter

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Bishop of Gozo

on the occasion of
the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
2017

FOR HOPE TO BLOSSOM

Hope and discouragement

There are some who enthrall with their capacity to hope – they have a passion to do what seems to be impossible.¹ They are people who are not discouraged by anything, in spite of high waves persistently confronting them. They have the capacity to keep rowing against the current. They hope against all hope. Hope is the motor of their lives. I am convinced that in the privacy of every home, in the hospital wards, in the prison cells, in rehabilitation centres, in the corridors of Dar Arka and Id-Dar tal-Providenza there are the persons whose life-giving oxygen is hope. Very often, these experiences are hidden from us, but they certainly provoke a smile from God who is never indifferent in these difficult situations.

People like these instil in us a strong sense of courage; but not everyone is strong. I know some who have given up hope in the face of challenges of personal, familial and social nature. I am aware of those who have lost all hope in themselves and in those around them. Because their life's motor has stalled, their life became difficult, full of uncertainties, sadness, fear and tiredness. Today, instead of fearing death, man is afraid to live,² so much so that occasionally one regrets the dawn of a new day! Since hope is becoming a very rare virtue, there are those who see only darkness around them and think that all is lost!

What I am saying regarding each one of us applies also to us as a nation. Wealth has increased, in some cases very much so. Social services for vulnerable persons have continued to spread. But poverty has increased, too, and the poor are easily discouraged. I am not referring only to material poverty, because we also have affective, intellectual, emotional poverty and the side lining of values. The present time is marked with personal, familial, economic and institutional crises. These awkward situations are causing suffering, depression, pessimism and lack of faith in the future. In fact, today one easily comes across those who are afraid to get involved in the commitment of marriage and family formation. The uncertainty and instability of employment are hitting hard our young people, affecting their willingness to accept long-term commitments. A climate of suspicion in everything and everybody seems to have been created, undermining the institutions of democracy and the economy. Our nation is in urgent need of hope.

¹ Soren Kiekegaard.

² Marc Augé, *Le nuove paure. Che cosa temiamo oggi*, Torino 2013, 9.

Lack of hope in our Christian life

The worst catastrophe that could happen to us is the loss of faith in God. It is not so difficult for us to find ourselves in the dark night of faith and suspect that God has forgotten and abandoned us, mostly when we are labouring great stress. Sometimes we get tired of waiting for an intervention from above. Apart from that, we could lose our faith in God because we fear that, faced with our weaknesses, he would turn away from us. I know individuals who, when they came face to face with their sin, pulled back from God because they thought that he was going to detest them! There are others who feel they must close their book with God because they are in an insoluble situation that does not conform with the moral law. How can our faith in Jesus not diminish if we still believe that he is severe, harvests where he has not sown, and gathers where he has not scattered seed (cfr Mt 25:26)?

Even within the Christian community there are those who give up hope. Some are deluded because they have not seen the hopes raised in the Church by the Second Vatican Council sixty years ago. One would lose hope on seeing resistance against the introduction of certain reforms in the various aspects of the Church's life. There are those who are confused in the face of a certain adjournment the Church is undertaking in its pastoral approach. Unfortunately, there exist prophets of doom who, in their religious zeal, are more prone to focus on the defect rather than the much good there is in man; they get stuck in considering the mistake rather than appreciating the efforts, however small but sincere, that a person tries to make to rise up on his feet; they are more interested in defending the letter of the law than the person. To observe the Sabbath they sideline the person; to ensure perfection, they exclude all that is not perfect; to affirm God's justice, they control his mercy. Attitudes of this type annihilate all hope in people and make the Church what it is not, and what it should never be. On the example of Christ, who "the bruised reed he will not crush; nor snuff out the smouldering wick, until justice is made victorious and in him all nations will put their hope" (Mt 12:20-21), the Church exists in order to offer true hope for humanity.

Everyone has a right to hope

Is it true that whoever hopes dies in anguish? Is the loss of all hope the worst harm that can befall us? The virtues of faith and love are necessary, but hope is everything. Charles Péguy likens these three virtues to three maidens who always go out together holding hands: the two adult sisters (faith and love) holding the hands of their younger sister (hope).³ According to the French poet, it is not the adults who guide the little one, but it is the little girl who pulls the elder sisters behind her. If she (hope) stops, the other two also stop – if she ends, everything finishes! Therefore, we should not allow anyone to deny us our right to hope. It is impossible for anyone to live without hope.⁴ But in life there are many small or big hopes, so the question is, which hope does not deceive.

The advances of technology, the sciences, the economy and the politics are great achievements, and we have to be grateful for the hopes that these enkindle in many people. It is a pity that not all people can benefit from the advances that mankind

³ Charles Péguy, *Il portico del mistero della seconda virtù*, in *I misteri*, Milan 1984.

⁴ Fjodor Dostoevskij.

makes with these tools, because there are those who end up being abused in trying to benefit from their fruit, as in the case of health or when they need professional services! But, as much as these tools can help many hopes to be gratified, this “social hope” could be a factor in fostering great delusions! Even when these tools are used fairly and with responsibility, they are not entirely satisfactory. It often happens that even when life smiles at us, in spite of material satisfaction, there will also be something missing! In fact, a full pocket does not always mean that the heart is full as well. So, what hope is there that can offer peace of mind and heart?

Our hope in God

As Saint Augustine confesses, the human heart finds rest only in God. God is the foundation of every hope.⁵ This does not mean that man hopes to obtain “something” from God, but he hopes that God will be close and on his side. “Many hope to get something from God, but they do not desire him. You should desire only God”.⁶ God’s answer to your wish is the person of Jesus Christ.

That is why Saint Paul writes: “Jesus Christ is our hope” (1 Tim 1:1). There are several instances in the Gospels where we see Jesus accompanying and encouraging those who had lost hope, either in the social or in the spiritual context. When once he noticed a man who was blind from birth, his disciples asked him: “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn 9:1-2). Contrary to his disciples, Jesus does not stumble on the sin, does not get involved in discussion about the moral responsibility; instead, he tries to ignite the doused flame of hope in that person by appreciating the powerful potential in him and in disadvantaged people like him. In fact, Jesus answered: “Neither he nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s work might be revealed in him” (*ibid.*). While those around Jesus focused on moral fault, Jesus had mercy on the person without any hope; what civil society and the religious community considered to be rubbish, in Christ’s vision was an opportunity for God to reveal himself; that which in man’s judgement was a manifestation of “sin”, for Christ became a manifestation of the grace of God.

However, the best moment in the life of Jesus that fills us with firm hope is the fact of his death and resurrection. In Christ’s Pascal Mystery, “hope blossomed”.⁷ Our belief is a pilgrimage of faith originating from a historical fact: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and on the third day rose up and appeared to Peter and the Twelve (cfr 1 Cor 15:3-5). “So Jesus is alive”.⁸ This is the secret of the hope of the Christian.⁹ Christian hope is the hope of resurrection. These two terms are tied together and do not exist separately from each other. There is no hope if there is no resurrection, and we live the resurrection in hope.¹⁰ If Christ had not been raised up, our hope is false.

In the light of the resurrection from the dead, even the Crucifix is a symbol of hope. As Pope Francis continues to teach us, Jesus crucified is a fountain of hope that blossomed positively by the power of love: for love that “hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:7), love that is God’s life, renewed everything it came in contact

⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, 1.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 39, 7-8.

⁷ Francis, “Risen Christ our hope”, General Audience, 19 April 2017.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Resistenza e resa*, 1988, 451.

¹⁰ Gabriel Marcel, *Dialogo sulla speranza*.

with. Thus, at Easter, Jesus changed our sin into forgiveness, our death into resurrection, our fear into trust. That is why our hope was born and continues to be reborn on the cross; that is why with Jesus every darkness can be changed into light, every defeat into victory, every despair into hope.¹¹

When one hopes, one is awaiting something to happen or to appear that is not currently present. Our hope in God is not the same, because God is already in front of our door: “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in” (Rev 3:20). The knocker is in his hand, but he cannot enter unless we open for him. Since we hesitate in spiritual matters, our hope is that God remains hoping that we open for him so that he can enter. God continues to wait for us even when we betray him. If man were not free with regard to God, what need would God have to hope for? God keeps hoping because he knows us well – he knows that we are weak and easily make faulty choices. That is why, while he never stops waiting “at our door”, he will be generous and gives us the gift of hope.

Therefore, it is a scandal when we Christians see everything through dark glasses. I feel that the scolding one of the Fathers of the Church made applies to us: “Christians, where is your hope?”.¹² And, in the words of Saint John Chrysostom, “it is not so much sin that plunges us into disaster, as rather despair”.¹³ There is no circumstance, however negative, that should hold us back because, as Pope Francis said some days ago, Christians do not believe in darkness, but in the dim light of day; they do not succumb to the night, but hope in the dawn; they are not defeated by death, but yearn to rise up again; they are not cowered by evil, because they always trust in the infinite possibilities of good. And this is our Christian hope.¹⁴

Therefore, I want to encourage you. However great the difficulties we meet, including spiritual ones, as long as God is offering to be our companion on our journey, we must never surrender. The “ethics of fear”¹⁵ sees only the crises, but the “ethics of hope”¹⁶ seeks the hidden possibilities in the crises. Let us remember that where there is danger, there may also be the development of what can save us;¹⁷ you may be in the throes of winter and realise that summer is already inside you.¹⁸

Discernment

Hoping does not mean waiting passively for things to solve themselves. Hope is the fruit of wise discernment that one makes to find the way. By the word “crisis” we do not mean only something that we need to overcome; it also indicates a need to investigate, to sift and judge. Therefore, hoping during a crisis means that one delves down to the essential and builds on that.¹⁹

¹¹ Francis, “The Hopes of the World and the Hope of the Cross”, General Audience, 12 April 2017.

¹² Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 118, 15,7.

¹³ Cfr Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of hope*, 1967, 29.

¹⁴ Francis, “Baptism Door of Hope”, General Audience, 2 August 2017.

¹⁵ Hans Jonas.

¹⁶ Moltmann, *Ethics of hope*, 2012.

¹⁷ Friedrich Hölderlin, “But where there is danger, a rescuing element grows as well”, in *Patmos*.

¹⁸ Albert Camus, “Ho compreso, infine, che nel bel mezzo dell’inverno, ho scoperto che vi era in me un’invincibile estate”, in *Invincibile estate*.

¹⁹ Francis, *Speech on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Europe*, 24 March 2017.

Discernment, an exercise that takes time, is necessary because reality is not always what appears initially. There is more to the human being than meets the eye and what we observe through our senses. Apart from the visible person there is also the interior being that may possess a hidden precious quality. The person who hopes is capable of bringing out and exposing that treasure; but to succeed, he has to commit himself to do that. Saint Augustine says that hope has two sweet daughters, anger and courage: anger towards the current situation and courage to endeavour to change it. These two emotions drive us to discernment that “must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties”.²⁰

False hopes

For the Christian community, the gift of hope becomes a responsibility, in the sense that it is our duty to help widening the horizons and promoting projects of hope for others in our society. Although Christian hope is not based on some system of thought or ideology, but on God, it is a human hope just the same. Therefore, we should try to integrate the theological aspect of hope with that of social hope.²¹ But to satisfy human hopes, we must not offer hopes cheaply. This is the case when we offer legalised drugs for recreation. We would not be satisfying a person by simply giving him what he wants, but by providing for him what suits his dignity. It is good for one to give hope to the immigrants by providing work for them, but employment under bad conditions and underpayment are a new form of slavery.

Therefore everyone, according to his competence, is called to help the nation discern the ways of hope. I feel that it is pertinent to contemplate the speech Pope Francis made to the leaders of member states of the European Union, in which he indicated certain venues that could re-establish Europe as a “spring of hope”. Society would re-discover hope: (1) when the human person is the centre and heart of its institutions; (2) when solidarity is strengthened and brings with it the recognition that we are all part of one body, while every citizen sympathises with others and in everything; (3) when it does not close itself in the fear of false certainties; (4) when it invests in development and in peace; (5) when it opens up to youth, offers them serious perspectives of education, possibilities of insertion in the world of work; (6) when it invests in the family; (7) when it respects the conscience and the ideals of its citizens; (8) when it defends life in all its sacredness²² and debars abortion and euthanasia.

The Assumption: a symbol of hope

In a few days we shall celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, an important event in the narrative of Christian hope. In fact, the Easter of the Assumption is understandable only in the light of the Great Easter of Christ. In

²⁰ Francis, Apostolic exhortation *The Joy of Love*, 305.

²¹ Bartolomeo Sorge, *Abitate dalla Parola tracciamo sentieri di speranza*.

²² Francis, *Speech on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaties of Europe*, 24 March 2017.

Mary, through her Assumption into Heaven, the Paschal Mystery of Christ is completely fulfilled in her.²³ If Christ's Easter is the foundation of Christian hope, the Assumption of Mary is a confirmation of the positive destiny that there is for us and for history – it is a confirmation that the love of God wins over all that is evil and over death.

What we call “*il-Kwindicina ta' Santa Marija*”, in the Byzantine Church is called “*the short lent of the Holy Virgin*”.²⁴ In the same way that in Lent, we prepare ourselves for Christ's Easter, during these fourteen days they await with prayers and sacrifice the Easter of Mary, the “feast of feasts” in honour of the Mother of God and Our Mother. In order to demonstrate the significant connection between the Easter of Christ and the Easter of the Church, anticipated in the person of Mary, in the same way that the Church has the Easter Vigil, they celebrate the Vigil of the Assumption: as on the eve between Saturday and Easter Sunday the Church does not sleep to await Christ's resurrection from the dead, so on the eve of the Solemnity of Our Lady's Assumption, the Christian community, with prayers and song, keeps vigil until the dawn of the 15th August when it becomes filled with the hope that the Assumption of the Virgin Mary brings.

For the past twenty years, the Church in Gozo has been celebrating this Vigil of the Assumption of Our Lady in front of the National Sanctuary of Our Lady of Ta' Pinu. It is my desire that this Marian night continues to be a special liturgical celebration on the calendar of the life of the Christian community. This vigil helps us keep our eyes on the Assumption of Our Lady, a “shining sign of hope and consolation for the people of God on their journey to heaven”.²⁵ In life there is time for everything, but we need to make certain choices to reduce the mundane spirituality that has developed over the years. Therefore, I urge you, families, youth groups, parishes, communities of consecrated life and dear brethren in the priesthood, to keep the yearly appointment of this *summer Easter*.

My heartfelt entreaty to all: Have courage! “At the moment our hope is our life, in the future it will be in eternity”.²⁶ In the same way that we are “the Easter people and Alleluia is our song”,²⁷ so are we “the people of the Assumption and Alleluia is our song”!

“May God of hope fill all of you with joy and peace through your faith, so that your hope will increase through the power of the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:13).

Friday 11 August 2017, Memorial of Saint Clare of Assisi.

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²³ Benedict XVI, Angelus on the Feast of the Assumption, 15 August 2012.

²⁴ E.M. Toniolo, *La veglia dell'Assunta con salmodia e tropari della liturgia Russa*, Roma 2001.

²⁵ Second Vatican II, Dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 68.

²⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, 103, 4,7.

²⁷ Words attributed to St Augustine; cfr John Paul II, *Angelus*, Adelaide (Australia), 30 November 1986.