

## **St. Paul, Missionary of Hope**

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*Leading with Hope in Uncertain Times* – Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph  
March 10, 2009

Today we hear lots of talk about hope. The word “hope” is used in many different ways. I can “hope” the weather tomorrow will be nice, even though I live in Fargo and know the temperature may not get above zero. I can “hope” that I will see a close friend in short time or I can “hope” not to see someone that I don’t get along with. I can “hope” that I will never die of cancer. I can “hope” the economy will get better. And we just finished an election year in which our new president Barack Obama used his book entitled “The Audacity of Hope” to formulate his political agenda for our country. These are all examples of the use of the word “hope,” but they do not necessarily correspond with Christian hope. Meanwhile, when we look at the world around us with the growing global economic crisis, global conflicts, the disintegration of family life, and the scourge of abortion, we can see the advances of a culture of death and wonder if hope has any place or is even possible in the midst of the world in which we live. We observe in many ways a world living without hope and in despair.

As Catholics, we have observed many challenges in our Church which test our hope. We see these tests of hope in the contemporary separation of Catholic identity from living one’s life in the world, the poor catechesis of the past 30 years and the resulting lack of knowledge of the faith among many, the decline in the number of faithful actually practicing the faith through the regular celebration of Sunday Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the decline in religious orders, the scandal of Catholic politicians and scholars who support a so-called “right to abortion” and the horrific clergy sexual abuse crisis. Yet our late Holy Father John Paul the Great, in his book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, and his apostolic letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, called us to hope as we entered a new millennium. Pope Benedict XVI wrote his second encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, on Christian hope. Quoting St. Paul, our present Holy Father reminded us that “in hope we were saved” (Rom 8:24). Pope Benedict further set the tone for his first visit to the United States in 2008 with the theme of the voyage, “Christ is our Hope”. Both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI desire us to place Jesus Christ at the center of our lives, for he and he alone can give us true hope within the challenges of the Church and world.

I now turn to the body of my presentation in which I will first reflect with you briefly on the meaning of hope as a theological virtue, next I will look at St. Paul and what he teaches us about hope and what we can learn from him, then I will briefly look at two sins against hope and finally I will reflect on how Jesus Christ is our hope today and how we can be missionaries of hope.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that there are three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity which are primarily gifts given to us by God at the time of our baptism. These virtues help us to participate in the divine life of the Trinity (CCC 1812). “They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive and object” (CCC 1812). These three virtues are “the foundation of Christian moral activity” and make us “capable of acting as [God’s] children and of meriting eternal life” and are a “pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit” in our lives (CCC 1813).

The Catechism describes hope as “the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1817). Hope “responds to the

aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart” of every human being and inspires and purifies human activity so that it is ordered to the Kingdom of heaven (CCC 1818). Hope keeps us from discouragement in time of trial, sustains us in time of abandonment, and opens our hearts up to the expectation of eternal happiness with our God (CCC 1818). We can see this hope in Jesus Christ on the Cross as he acknowledges his abandonment before God and then in confident hope surrenders his spirit to the Father.

### **Paul’s conversion - Encounter with Christ**

Let us now turn to St. Paul. St. Paul’s role as a missionary of hope is a central focus of this presentation. As we celebrate this year of St. Paul, we reflect on the tremendous impact he has had on all Christianity. He personally preached Christ to many nations in his own lifetime right up to his martyrdom in Rome. And his writings have continued to encourage faith in Jesus Christ to countless generations up to our own time.

In a few moments, we will reflect on three points. The first, how St. Paul based Christian hope on the person of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit, all within the context of the Father’s loving plan; the second, the difference Christian hope makes for the believer contrasted with the non-believer, and finally how St. Paul encourages the strengthening of hope by a proper teaching and understanding of Christ. But first, we may draw hope from the fact that St. Paul did not begin as an example of hope based on Christ.

Paul began by persecuting Christians. We first read in Acts 7:58 that as St. Stephen is stoned to death, those who kill him lay their cloaks at Saul’s feet. A few verses later, Saul is “ravaging the church” (Acts 8:3). In Acts 9:1, Saul, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of our Lord,” seeks to bring his wrath against the Church in Damascus. However, on his way to Damascus he encounters the person of Christ while working against the Christian faith.

The ninth Chapter of Acts contains the first of three accounts of Paul’s conversion. A light overpowers him from heaven, a voice asks “why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4) Saul asks who is speaking, and he learns that it is Jesus.

In his writings, Paul will make it clear that hope is based upon faith in Jesus Christ, and specifically incorporation into the person of Christ, including his death and resurrection. The details of Paul’s conversion show how this happened to him. As Jesus was three days and nights in the tomb, for three days Paul prays while blinded, neither eating nor drinking. In what should remind us of our own incorporation into Christ through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, after Ananias lays hands on Paul to restore his sight, he “rose and was baptized and took food and was strengthened” (Acts 9:18-19).. From there, he immediately, boldly proclaims Christ, even to the point of being threatened with death (Acts 9:29). Through the extraordinary personal call and election by Jesus Christ, Paul is radically transformed from an enemy of Christ to an apostle, who goes out into a hostile world proclaiming the Good News.

There are immediate lessons in hope here for us and our modern world. For us, Paul’s conversion demonstrates that God has plans for good, despite our weakness or even outright opposition! When Ananias is told to lay hands on Saul, he protests, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done...” (Acts 9:13). In response Jesus says, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine... for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” (Acts 9:15-16). There

is hope, and suffering, in store for each of us. There is the hope that even though we may be great sinners, even ones who persecute the Church, through a grace filled encounter with Jesus Christ we can change. Secondly, we will suffer. But this suffering is not for the sake of suffering or because God desires for us to suffer, but rather a suffering rooted in love for Jesus Christ and his name. Every believer will share in suffering as he or she carries their personal cross in union with Christ. Paul teaches us to hope that God's plan for our good in his service is greater than our weaknesses, sinfulness, or sufferings.

To the world, Paul's conversion is also a message of hope. Our culture, like Paul, is often in open opposition to the message of Christ. This opposition can come from atheism, secular humanism, materialism, hedonism, minimalism, etc. Yet, each individual and each of our cultures is never completely lost or corrupt, but can be transformed by the person of Christ in order to be fulfilled and find true happiness.

We also see that Paul was zealous, even zealous for the true God, whom he did not fully know. His sincere belief needed transformation to the full truth of Jesus Christ. This is also true for many in our world, and even those within Christianity. Zeal without conversion to Christ and his entire teaching within the Church is often opposition to Christ himself that leads to a person's suffering and inconsistency in the practice of their faith. We will return to this when we explore the sins against hope.

### **Foundation of hope in Christ**

Having looked at Paul's conversion, we now turn to Paul's letter to the Romans, which provides his fullest treatment on hope. We will look at his primary point, which is that the foundation of our hope is in Jesus Christ. We will observe that Paul sees hope in God's actions right from the first sin in Genesis and that he shows Abraham as a model of hope. Within the central chapters of Romans, from 5 through 8, Paul demonstrates that Christian hope is founded on what Christ has accomplished in his death and resurrection, and on the Christian's personal incorporation into Christ's death and resurrection, which reveals the true identity of the believer. As Paul does this, he finally explores and celebrates the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian hope.

First, Paul argues for God's gift of hope from the very beginning of creation. In Rom 8:20, Paul writes, "for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope." Father Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J., a Catholic theologian, in his *Commentary on Romans* writes, "Paul is actually the first biblical writer to introduce the note of hope apropos of the story in Genesis 3. According to him, God did not leave the frustrated creation in a hopeless situation. Creation could not free itself from the corruption and decay that beset it, but the 'hope' meant is that it will be freed by its association with the destiny of justified Christians" (Romans, 508-509).

Two elements are important to note here. First, God gives the gift of hope for fallen creation from the very beginning. There was never a time when the world was without hope. Second, in the light of our modern world's hyper-preoccupation with the environment, at the expense of human persons and faith in God, Paul's message appropriately identifies the source of creation's hope. The most important element is the proper order of what God has accomplished in Christ. The order Paul recognizes is that each human person is incorporated into Christ first, and only then is freedom for creation possible. The world is freed from corruption and decay, not independent of grace, but by believers living God's order of salvation as revealed in Jesus Christ.

After creation and the fall of man, Paul provides Abraham as a model of hope. Paul was concerned with explaining justification and salvation in Christ as a gift from God. Paul showed that Abraham, the father of the people of Israel, was also the father of all who would believe in Christ. A key aspect of Abraham's relationship with God was Abraham's hope (Rom 4:18-25): "In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'So shall your descendants be.' He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a hundred years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was 'reckoned to him as righteousness.' But the words, 'it was reckoned to him,' were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification."

"In hope he believed against hope." Abraham and Sarah were first promised descendants when Abraham was 75 years old. Ten years after they had moved to Canaan, Sarah got impatient for the promise to be fulfilled, and used her maid to 'obtain' or more precisely to 'build' a child through her (Gen 16:2). This human attempt to obtain the 'hoped for' son violated Abraham and Sarah's marriage, and brought about suffering, as is the usual case whenever we go against God's order for humanity. Then, a full 24 years after Abraham was first called and promised to have descendants as numerous as the stars, the Lord promised a son born to Abraham and Sarah within the coming year (Gen 17-18). Finally, 25 years after the first promise, Isaac is born (Gen 21:1-2).

I think that all would agree that Paul describes the patience of Abraham very accurately as hoping against hope. When was the last time you waited for 25 years for the fulfillment of an explicit promise from God? Fr. Fitzmyer's comments are again helpful here: "Faith is not some inner sanctimoniousness in contrast to external deeds; it is an unwavering reliance on God's promise, which issues in hope. In the judgment of ordinary humans there was no hope; yet Abraham trusted God's promise, believed, and found hope. When one believes, there is no room for self-reliance" (Romans, 386-387). Abraham demonstrates this reliance upon God extended over a vast time of life. Surely we, in comparing our own hopes and needs to Abraham's time frame, can draw hope for ourselves in our own lives. God was faithful to his promises to Abraham, and he is faithful in his promises to us.

For Paul, the history of God's past action and models of faith for Israel pale in comparison to the ultimate foundation of faith, Jesus Christ. Immediately after offering Abraham as a model, Paul introduces the death of Christ and then continues (Rom 5:1-8): "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man -- though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." It is very clear that hope is founded upon the person of Jesus Christ and is obtained through the loving action of God. We hope not in our actions but we hope in the love of God given and revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Romans 5 begins with this paschal explanation of God's love, explicitly describing the role of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in Christian life. It is far beyond the scope of this presentation to explore all the ways Paul develops this fundamental fact in the following chapters of Romans. In Romans 6 through 8 he explores Christian identity as founded in each baptized person's mystical incorporation into the very death, resurrection and life of Christ. For Paul identity with Christ is pivotal throughout his letters. He is fully conscious of this truth as he writes to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). Paul knows intimately in his heart Jesus Christ and Christ's personal love for him because of the paschal mystery.

Paul concludes the section on hope in Romans 8 with yet another text concerning Christian hope. After explaining that creation was awaiting redemption he concludes that also "we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:23-26).

Here again, we see elements of St. Paul's teaching on hope. We have confidence because Christ has justified us, yet our salvation is not yet complete. We are saved in hope, we do not see all, and we wait in patience. The fact that the Holy Spirit himself is our advocate, praying within us makes this possible. St. Paul's words once again reveal the depth of the Father's love for us. The Father does not leave us alone or hopeless, but rather provides us grace in our weakness, to be in union with him. As we make our pilgrimage to God, constantly on our way to God, St. Paul reminds us in his first letter to the Thessalonians that "since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him" (1 Thess 5:8-10). The love of the Father provides us with the helmet, hope, which protects our salvation in Jesus Christ as we look forward to its fulfillment in heaven.

### **Hope for believers contrasted with those outside of Christ**

This brings us to our second point, which is how St. Paul's message of hope for believers contrasts with that of non-believers. Pope Benedict XVI, drawing from St. Paul, reminds us in *Spe Salvi* that the Christian's hope in Christ is essentially different than the life of any person, atheistic or religious, who does not know Christ. Our Holy Father states: "Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were 'without hope and without God in the world' (Eph 2:12). Of course he knew they had had gods, he knew they had had a religion, but their gods had proved questionable, and no hope emerged from their contradictory myths. Notwithstanding their gods, they were 'without God' and consequently found themselves in a dark world, facing a dark future. ...In the same vein he says to the Thessalonians: you must not 'grieve as others do who have no hope' (1 Thess 4:13). Here too we see as a distinguishing mark of Christians the fact that they have a future: it is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well. So now we can say: Christianity was not only 'good news'—the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In our language we would say: the Christian message was not only 'informative' but 'performative'. That means: the Gospel is not merely a communication of things

that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life” (*Spe Salvi* 2).

Pope Benedict’s words and Paul’s explanation of a hopeless life without God show us the true motivation for all that we do in our work. Our motivation is Jesus Christ. To provide Christ to the world is to provide hope to all of the individuals that grieve without hope, whom the Father loves, and whom he calls us to evangelize as St. Paul did. Evangelization is just as urgent in our times as it was in Paul’s. As Christians we live our lives differently in the world, in joy, because of our hope in Christ.

### **Paul encourages the nourishment of hope**

The hope from St. Paul’s conversion, his teaching about hope rooted in Christ, and the advantage of hope in Christ over a life without Christ and therefore without hope, brings us to a final area in which the teachings of Paul can form us in hope. St. Paul towards the conclusion of Romans reminds his audience that they learn of the cause of their hope from the scriptures: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4).

This message remains important also in our day. As we saw above, Saul, prior to his conversion, was zealous for God, but in error. Our hope is founded in the fact of what Christ has done, and in the fact of our incorporation into his life. Yet it must be nourished and cherished by full knowledge of Christ. This knowledge comes from the entire teaching content of Christ’s church. First and foremost among the teaching is a love for the Word of God through the prayerful reading of Scripture and most especially the four Gospels. What St. Jerome wrote in the 5<sup>th</sup> century is still valid today, that is, “ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” The more we pray and study the sacred scriptures, the Catechism, the encyclicals of the popes, and read the lives of the saints will our hope grow and deepen into a lively, joy-filled hope. The more we come to know and receive in our hearts in a personal way the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the more our hope will flourish.

### **Sins against hope**

Let us now turn to sins against hope. Once again St. Paul and his conversion help us to understand what sin does to the human person, especially those who sin against hope. As I mentioned above there are three times in the Acts of the Apostles that St. Luke relates the story of Paul’s conversion. In the third account Jesus speaks to Paul in a unique way. Paul declares, “And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It hurts you to kick against the goads’” (Acts 26:14). What are the goads that Paul resists? Goad is not a word familiar to our ears. In the Hebrew tradition goad literally means a sharp pointed stick used to move cattle, quite literally, a cattle prod. By using it here in the Acts of the Apostles, St. Luke leads us not only to see Paul’s prior persecution not merely as a transgression of a law or something immoral, but an opposition to the loving personal desires that Jesus has for him. In opposing those loving desires, Paul is not hurting God, but only himself.

Paul is destined to be more than a Pharisee of Pharisees. He is called to be an apostle of faith, hope and love. Paul is somehow resisting God’s desires for his life and requires this sharp moment of grace to touch his heart and soul. Stunned and blinded by God’s presence, Paul now enjoys an environment

where the desires of God present in his interior life are allowed to flourish. God, too, desires us to be people of hope, but many times we kick against the goad and fail to be moved by God in our life, therefore hurting only ourselves. This especially happens when we commit sins against hope.

The Catechism cites two sins against hope, despair and presumption (CCC 2091). First, in despair a person loses hope for his or her salvation and for the forgiveness of his or her sins and doesn't trust in the goodness and mercy of God and his promises (CCC 2091). On the other hand, the sin of presumption has two types. The first type is when the person presumes "upon his own capacities" thinking he can save himself without help from God, that he is self-sufficient. The second type is when the person presumes upon God's mercy and does not think conversion is necessary and that heaven will be his no matter what he does. St. Augustine in a sermon notes that both sins against hope, despair and presumption, "kill the soul" (Sermon 87, 8).

In the case of the sin of despair a person loses all possibility of hope. There is a sense in the person that all is wrong and there is nothing that he or she can do about it. Despair means that I deny the very desire for happiness that God has placed in my heart. Despair leads us away from Jesus Christ, the source of true happiness. For a person of faith it means not trusting in the promises and the means to obtain those promises that God has given to us. Josef Pieper in his book on *Faith, Hope and Love*, declares: "For the Christian, despair is a decision against Christ. It is a denial of the redemption" (p. 115). St. Paul has great confidence in the promises that Jesus has given to us. He is keenly aware of his own sinfulness, weaknesses, hardships, yet he is confident that Christ is with him. One can taste this confidence in Christ when Paul cries in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Paul relies not on himself, but on Christ! We too, in the midst of our world today and the culture of death embraced by many, are called to the same confident hope in Jesus Christ.

Another type of despair present today is one that views the world as so bad that there is no hope for change and only for God's wrath. Many times today the fascination with the end of times is not so much an indication of biblical faith, but a sign that one believes that God has removed his blessing from the world and the world is not worth saving. This too diminishes one's hope in Jesus Christ and leads to discouragement and eventually to despair.

The sin of presumption is the far more common sin against hope today. The first sin of presumption is rooted in a self-sufficiency that denies the need for help, for grace and even Christ. It is best expressed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century heresy of Pelagianism which taught that human beings can achieve salvation by their own efforts. Our society reinforces this today, especially with the idea that "If you have hope, you can do anything." The emphasis is on *you*, not on *hope*. Self-autonomy and self-sufficiency are mere masquerades for hope and especially for the person of faith because they remove him or her from their relationship with Jesus Christ. Every human person is going to sooner or later discover that he or she is not self-sufficient. All of us are limited, finite, and need the help of others, and most especially of a loving and merciful God. Jesus in the Gospel will remind his followers, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Jesus Christ and he alone is the one who will give us true rest, and true hope, when we turn to him in all our needs.

The second form of the sin of presumption is when one presumes on the mercy and love of God and does not seriously look at the necessary conversion of one's heart and mind. We observe two types of this sin today. The first type is the loss of the sense of sin. Here a person says to themselves, "I

personally will decide what a sin is and I may ignore the laws of God and his Church.” Tolerance is seen as a good even when it allows and supports intrinsic evils such as abortion, same sex unions, and promiscuity. In this view the teachings of Jesus concerning marriage and divorce, the dignity of human life and helping those in need just do not matter. There is a presumption that God loves me and will forgive me as I actively oppose or ignore his words. While the first fact of God’s love is always true, even for the most hardened sinner, Jesus clearly teaches us in the Gospels that we are to live in obedience to his commandments. He further warns us that there is a hell and the possibility of going there if we are not obedient. We have only to call to mind two of his parables, the story of the rich man and Lazarus and the final judgment with the separation of the sheep and goats, to see this truth.

The first words we hear Jesus speak in Mark’s Gospel are, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk 1:15). When Christians presume the mercy of God, they fail to repent. They deny the hope of becoming like Jesus Christ and they easily abandon the conversion of their hearts and minds. If we abandon conversion, we choose through an act of our will not to become like Christ and we fail to live a life in perfect obedience to the will of the Father.

This second type of the sin of presumption is universalism, the idea that everyone is going to be saved, go to heaven, regardless of what the person has done during his or her lifetime. At times listening to homilies at funerals of persons I have known, I scratch my head because of this presumption. If we are all going to go to heaven automatically there is no need for Jesus Christ or for living the Gospel. Only an arrogant heart filled with pride would presume upon the guarantee of going to heaven. This presumption denies hope, for it assures us already of something, heaven, which is unseen.

### **Practical ways to be missionaries of hope in the world today**

In my concluding comments I would like to provide some practical ways we can become missionaries of hope in our world today. First, we must have a correct understanding of the theological virtue of hope. We must remember that hope is a gift given to us by God, one that we must desire and cultivate through prayer and humility. Hope leads us to true happiness with the expectation of communion with God in heaven. I encourage you my sisters and brothers to study the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, especially on the theological virtues, in order to understand hope.

Hope nourishes both faith and love, while faith and love increase our hope. The more we place our hope in Jesus Christ, who has died for each one of us; our faith in him grows with the recognition that he indeed is our Lord and Redeemer. He and he alone is the only Savior of the world. With this recognition of Jesus as Lord, our love and intimacy with Christ increases and deepens. Hence the theological virtues relate to one another and the better we understand this truth, the more will they flourish in our hearts and souls.

As sinners too we recognize with St. Paul that Jesus Christ is our hope (1Tim 1:1) the very foundation of hope. Paul proclaims this truth to Timothy. He states: “...though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; ...I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 1:13-14). Through our faith and love in Christ Jesus our hope in him is strengthened and we receive mercy and forgiveness for our sins. As Catholics we celebrate this truth in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Secondly, we must spend time in prayer. Pope Benedict XVI in *Spe Salvi* reminded us, “A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. 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” (*Spe Salvi* 32). Prayer both leads us to a deeper intimacy with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and purifies our desires and hopes so that they are truly grounded in Christ (*Spe Salvi* 33). In prayer we can examine our lives to see if we are guilty of sins against hope, most especially those sins of presumption and false hope that are so prevailing in our world today.

Concretely I encourage you to read Paul’s letter to the Romans slowly and prayerfully and pray for the virtue of hope. Examine your conscience in the light of the Holy Spirit to see how the sins against hope may possibly be present in your lives and then celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, not just once or twice a year but on a regular basis, at least monthly, in order to grow in faith, hope and charity. Take to heart Paul’s words, “Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (Rom 12:11-12). Be constant in your prayer, most especially to have a greater capacity to receive the virtues of faith, hope and charity. Pray for these virtues in your daily prayers! Cry out to God, “Lord grant me a deeper faith and hope in you!” “Grant me the grace to love as you love!” Remember too that every time you pray the Our Father, it is a prayer of hope. We have hope as we pray each petition that it will be fulfilled.

Finally, we need to work in hope to bring about good in the world. The Second Vatican Council taught that the laity “are called [into the secular world] by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity” (Lumen Gentium 31). Note the words of the council fathers on the testimony of our lives, “resplendent in faith, hope and charity”! Let those words penetrate your hearts! By our witness of life and works of charity we bring others to Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI reminds us too that “Certainly we cannot ‘build’ the Kingdom of God by our own efforts—what we build will always be the kingdom of man with all the limitations proper to our human nature. The Kingdom of God is a gift, and precisely because of this, it is great and beautiful, and constitutes the response to our hope. ... it will always be true that our behavior is not indifferent before God and therefore is not indifferent for the unfolding of history “ (*Spe Salvi* 35). Hope in Jesus Christ makes us open to receive the culture of life as a gift, not merely as our own achievement. Through our behavior, our words and actions, we can either contribute to a culture of life or to a culture of death. The only way a culture of life—a culture of hope – will be built is if we keep our hearts on Jesus Christ and keep his ways before the world’s ways.

The place we must begin is with our own hearts and having them set on Christ, who is our hope. The more firmly our hope has its origin in Christ, the more zealous will we be for good deeds. St. Paul in his letter to Titus reminded him and reminds us today, “For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world, awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all iniquity and to purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds” (Tit 2:11-14). Once hope in Christ is firmly established in our hearts, it will naturally overflow to our families, workplace and society.

Through our hope we will have the ability to transform society and not have society transform us. We will be free to constantly seek the truth in all things, in season and out of season, no matter what the cost. This means concretely that we will seek the common good, feed the hungry, cloth the naked,

visit those sick or imprisoned. This means that we will always stand for the dignity of human life from the time of conception to natural death. We will make certain that all that we do, say, and yes, even the way we act in the workplace and vote, will also promote a culture of life. With true hope we will never embrace a standard, which is grounded in deception by the father of lies, that I can be personally opposed to an intrinsic evil and at the same time give support to others to choose it. Whenever this standard is practiced we do not operate from hearts of hope. We fail to listen to Jesus and his Church and we place our own souls in jeopardy of salvation. As a people who belong to Jesus Christ, who is our hope, we will be continually strengthened and inspired to be zealous in our good deeds and sanctify the world by them.

In conclusion there is much more that could be said about hope. The beauty of the theological virtues—faith, hope and charity—is the more we desire them and practice them, the deeper will we know and understand them, and the more will we become like Christ who is their origin and goal. My prayer for you as I close my reflection comes from Saint Paul and his letter to the Romans. My dearest sisters and brothers I pray “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13). Thank you.