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JEAN GALOT, S.J.

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OUR LADY, SYMBOL OF HOPE

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CHRISTIAN HOPE HAS RECEIVED A NEW SUPPORT in the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption. The presence of Our Lady in Heaven with her glorious body represents the supreme end of human destiny, which God has realized perfectly in Mary in order to give us a token of its realization in all the elect. The hope of mankind has found its first fulfillment in her, without reserve or shadow.

This role of symbol of hope, which Our Lady fulfills for all eternity in the Church, is one which she had already begun during her earthly life. But then her ways were hidden, seen only by God. We might say that her Immaculate Conception was the first reality in which the hope of salvation was embodied, for in fact, once this initial grace was given (which could only be justified by the coming redemption) the whole of the work of salvation had to follow. With Mary’s conception, God passed from the period of promise to that of realization, and hope began to be what it is in the New Testament, an aspiration which rests, not only on a project and promise, but on something accomplished.

Mary carried this reality in herself without a clear knowledge of it. But at least in her conscience, before the Annunciation, there was, as it were, a recapitulation of the whole of Israel’s hope. Made by grace extremely sensitive to the voice of God in Scripture, the girl understood better than anyone the value of messianic hope. The texts which told of it must have awakened very profound echoes in her; to await the Messiah, the Savior whom God had promised for so long, had become for her the primary form of her religious aspirations. She wished to respond with her whole soul by the fervor of her expectation to the fervor with which the Almighty had announced the coming of the Messiah. Her fervor was extraordinary, because the grace which filled her was of an extraordinary vigor.

Mary put into her hope a zeal such as never had been before her. The prophets had made use of vibrant or anguished words to
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call upon the Messiah and predict His coming, but their hope, however tense and magnificent, had never attained to the purity, ardour and confident certitude which filled the soul of the girl at Nazareth. In her a summit was reached. Mary resumed the past in herself, but by raising it to an exceptional height she prepared the passage to a definite future. If the prophets had foreseen the Messiah's intervention at a time which was drawing near, their impatience, inspired from on high, was communicated to Mary; she expected this Messiah to come soon. Had she not before her eyes, as the prophets had, the sad sight of men's sins, infidelities and shame? And had not this human misery shown sufficiently the powerlessness of human efforts and the urgency of divine help? Such a situation demanded an imminent salvation, and Mary hoped steadfastly for it. She seemed to see in the sins and moral degradation which she witnessed, not the sign of an irresistible plunge into the mire, but the near approach of a Saviour, for she felt in the depths of her being that God could no longer tolerate such clamorous distress and that His treasures of paternal goodness and mercy could not long remain unrevealed. She knew that He was the first to be impatient to show forth His sanctity, and that is why everything, even the sight of so many sins among the chosen people, served to fortify Mary's hope.

THIS HOPE WAS REMARKABLE FOR THE PURITY OF ITS OBJECT.
Mary, in her realization of the true meaning of the divine promises, understood that the messianic kingdom foretold by the prophets would be of a spiritual nature. Her religious instinct kept her apart from the conception of many of her compatriots, who longed for the Messiah in order to obtain the deliverance of the Jewish nation, victory over all enemies, and a luxurious regime of material abundance in political peace and triumph. Accustomed to certain privations due to poverty, Mary understood that those privations were not an evil and that they rather encouraged the desire for union with God, while she had noticed how the abundance of material goods could lead to pride or misconduct in those around her, and could endanger their eternal destiny. Lacking any nationalistic vanity and love of money, she was persuaded that the only good
to be desired was God Himself, that sin was the only evil, and if she expected the Messiah, it was with a view to the deliverance of mankind from the slavery of its faults and to the obtaining of divine friendship. She only aspired to the liberation of hearts. Her hope was perfectly true and noble, and admitted of no compromise with the desires of human passions. It developed on a supernatural plane.

In order to prepare for this spiritual liberation, Mary no less completely understood that in her attitude she should already fulfill the ideal of the kingdom which was to come; that of complete self-surrender to God. She wished to hasten the institution of divine sovereignty over the world and over souls by consecrating herself absolutely to the service of God; her hope inspired her to realize first in herself, with divine help, what she expected to be realized in the universe. She thus contributed, as far as she was able, to the installation of the messianic kingdom. Her consecration was total, and in order to give God the very depths of her heart, she vowed her virginity to Him. The strength of soul which this required was demonstrated by the fact that here was no other example of it in her environment, for, if other Jewish girls dreamed of the promised Messiah, they longed all the more to be married, so as perhaps to have the happiness of giving birth to Him. Mary, who hoped more than all the others, did not do so in the same manner. She wished to prepare for the coming of the Saviour by giving up all hope of posterity and offering the sacrifice to God. Her hope was not simply supernatural in its object, but also in the means which she took, an oblation which implied renunciation of maternity.

In this attitude, which she adopted long before the Annunciation, Our Lady seems to us to be the authentic image of hope. We must keep this image before our eyes if we wish to hope with purity and truth. In the world of today as of old in the milieu of Galilee, powerful currents are at work which seek to direct human hopes to the exaltation of a national destiny, towards the well-being of a social class, or towards mankind's satiety in the goods of this world. All the forms of terrestrial paradises continue to solicit the hopes of men. In face of these illusory hopes founded on mirages, Christian hope stands, supported by the reality established
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by God. It boldly raises itself to a higher sphere, that of the good of souls and eternal life. It refuses to concentrate on passing and relative goods as the supreme object of its desires, and it dares to affirm that bread, peace and liberty, while they have to be sought, do not constitute the end of man's existence and are incapable of procuring him essential happiness. It proclaims that the true liberation is that which frees the soul from the slavery of sin and the passions, and, following the example of the Blessed Virgin, mindful of the hereafter, it expects a salvation in an eternity which begins here and now.

MARY'S EXAMPLE SHOWS AT THE SAME TIME THE SACRIFICES to which hope leads the Christian. It is certainly true that the partakers of an earthly hope also know how to impose hard labor on themselves and often go to very painful lengths to arrive at their end and ensure the triumph of their cause. But Our Lady's behavior shows what is unique in supernatural hope; for the achievement of that hope, she sacrificed all the human means which would normally ensure it; while those who pursue earthly aims rely on the value of their own efforts and consistently employ all the means which are at their disposal, she renounced motherhood and a natural contribution to the Messiah's coming into the world, and laid all her trust in God, to Whom she vowed her oblation. It is this exclusive trust in God which is the characteristic of Christian hope; and it requires the most intimate sacrifice, that which consists in not relying on one's own strength, nor counting on one's own worth, and expecting everything from the divine power.

Our Lady's example shows clearly that expectation such as this is infallibly fulfilled. The message of the Annunciation signified for Mary the triumph of her hope, as well as of that of Israel and of mankind, which she carried in her. Catholic theologians often express the opinion that the ardor of Mary's prayers hastened the descent of the Word and the moment of the Incarnation. And it is clear that the angel's words revealed to the Blessed Virgin exactly the divine message which she longed to hear, the sending of the Saviour for which she had longed with her whole being and for which she had
consecrated herself. She was surprised only at being chosen as the mother of the Messiah when God had inspired her to remain a Virgin. But the Lord willed to thus solemnly ratify the sacrifice accompanied and inspired by hope; according her a maternity by divine means, He justified the trust placed exclusively in Him and the renunciation of purely human means. The aspirations of Mary, consummated in a total oblation for God, had been magnificently fulfilled.

AFTER THE ANNUNCIATION, MARY’S HOPE TOOK a more concrete form and was directed to the person of her Son. Taking this child in her arms, she was aware that she held the future of the world. If she had been impatient for the arrival of the Messiah, her impatience to see Him accomplish His work now grew. More than ever, the tragedy of the sinner’s lot touched her soul and the urgency of salvation seized hold of her. The livelier hope became also a more joyful one, because she could contemplate its objective as coming closer. The departure of Jesus for His public life was a sacrifice for Mary, who had to give up the sweet companionship of her Son; but it was above all a rebound of hope, for a heart which dwelt chiefly on the misery of others. And if Our Lady intervened at Cana to request a first miracle, it was because she wanted a manifestation on the part of the Savior as early as possible. In her request there was not only a profession of faith, but an effusion of hope; let the Messiah show at last what He is and let His power of aiding mankind’s distress be shown forth to all eyes! In Mary’s very humble request, directed only to obtaining wine, was expressed all the ardor of a hope which had been accumulating for thirty years, dreaming of the first public act by which Jesus would inaugurate His work of salvation.

It was at the death of Christ that Our Blessed Lady proved the invincibility of her hope. The last months of the Saviour’s ministry had been a period of struggle for Mary’s hopes. Everything seemed to go wrong; resistance against Jesus was becoming both more sinister and more relentless, threats to put Him to death more openly expressed and more often followed by an effort to carry them out. Far from accepting the sweet yoke of the Master, the majority of
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the Jewish people seemed to rebel more and more at the new message. A tragic end seemed possible and presentiments of it increasingly strong. But nothing could shake Mary's trust. She knew by experience that she had been completely right in renouncing human methods in her messianic hopes, and now that she saw the human means of Jesus' triumph vanish away, she did not lose her hope, but directed it with the greater confidence towards the divine power.

Therefore the prospect of Christ's death, so terrible for her heart, had not shaken her vision of the imminence of salvation. And in the supreme struggle which her hope had to sustain at the foot of the cross, she did not cease for a moment to expect the universal liberation to happen soon.

The Savior Himself had, besides, stimulated the hope of His disciples by predicting His passion, death and resurrection on several occasions. Our Lady had kept this prediction in her heart, and when she found herself before the corpse of her Son, she did not abandon herself to her sorrow without silently formulating her hope in a forthcoming resurrection. Contemplating that rigid and immobile body, she did not only think of its past vitality, but already, in the anticipation of her hope, saw it take on a new, more glorious life. She believed that the stone rolled against the entrance to the tomb could not prevail against the divine power possessed by her Son. That is why a streak of dawn persisted in her overwhelming grief, and the Easter morning began in her soul on the evening of Good Friday. Around her, all those who loved Jesus were in confusion, tempted to despair. The disciples were thrown off their balance, but the mother of the crucified remained absolutely firm in her hope. She personified in that moment the Church's hope, faithful when all fails, and by that hope she formed on earth the bond which united death to the resurrection of Jesus.

THE BLESSED VIRGIN OF HOLY SATURDAY IS THEREFORE rightly looked upon as a symbol of hope—a precious symbol for the Church, which, in the steps of Christ, has continually to pass from the passion to the glorified life. In this sorrowful passage, it is the
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bond of hope, first created by Our Lady, which remains and serves as an example. This is a precious symbol for every Christian; when he is in the midst of what seems to him a catastrophe and when all seems lost, he should remember Mary, who had to face the greatest catastrophe of history, and who did not cease to believe in the final triumph. More simply, in periods of discouragement, when difficulties and trials seem sometimes to accumulate in an impressive way, and in times of weariness, melancholy or interior aridity, when Christ seems far off or dead, the Christian is still invited to gaze at Our Lady on that sad day of Holy Saturday, when Jesus was absent, and when the silence of the tomb seemed to suggest that all was finished; in that atmosphere of mourning, she who suffered the most was also she who maintained the flame of hope and caused it to shine forth. She takes away all excuses from those who find in their trials a reason for losing hope.

IN THE ASSUMPTION, IT IS CHRISTIAN HOPE WHICH RECEIVES the divine sanction. This hope is certainly founded essentially on Christ and His glorious resurrection; but by benefiting from the same resurrection, Our Lady is at the head of those who hope in Christ, and shows them that they are on the right road, and that the day of Resurrection in complete happiness will come for them as well. The sentiments of hope which Mary kept and developed in the whole course of her life, and especially during the passion, animated her last moments on earth. When she realized that death was approaching, she gave herself up to the great and unique aspiration of her heart, that of finding herself at last united to her Son in a perfect way, which should be unaltered throughout eternity. If other Saints have since told the Lord that they want only Him as their reward, Our Lady did not need to express the desire, for her whole being yearned for it. Her last breath was one of hope, ending in possession. By taking His mother into Heaven, Christ gave her in infinite superabundance everything which she had hoped for: His most intimate companionship and the joy of living in God in vision unveiled and complete union.

This crowning point of Mary's existence contrasts with the ap-
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parent lowliness of her earthly condition. She always lived in shadow and was so well hidden that those who knew her well were far from suspecting her greatness. Her exterior had in it nothing of the extraordinary, and Jesus' disciples did not guess the exceptional value of her soul. She did not display her gifts and only sought to pass unnoticed, for she did not place her hope in herself nor in the vanities of the world. It is the humility of her hope which is exalted by God in the glory of the Assumption. In the invisible world, God takes His revenge on the abasement and obscurity of Mary's life, by granting her a splendor all the more wonderful, as He takes His "revenge" on so many Christian lives enfolded in shadow and secrecy, and makes known in the hereafter their unsuspected worth.

As He has glorified Our Lady in body and soul, it is the whole corporeal world which in her receives a prelude of its glorious life. For, according to St. Paul's remark, the whole universe participates in men's hopes and aspires to a liberation which will be extended to it. Sin has also bowed it in servitude and that is why all beings, tortured by this position which constrains their nature, thirst for a salvation which does not directly concern them, but in the fruits of which they will share (Rom., VIII, 19 et seq.). Matter and flesh will be assumed into the glorified world. Mary is there to witness that this hope will be realized, but she warns us at the same time that this glorious flesh is one that is absolutely pure, and that hope must not be mingled here with any complacency nor indulgence for human passions and the pleasures of the earthly world. Indeed, if the body of Jesus' mother is present in heaven, it is because it was exclusively the temple of the Holy Spirit, and had always preserved intact its holy virginity. Thus it is in the hope of purity and holiness that the Christian, at the hour of death, can look at his own flesh and the world around him and have the certitude that he will one day find them gloriously transformed; a certitude of which Our Lady is the sign, already bending over him to welcome him into her perfect splendor.
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