

6th Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020
Hope Springs Eternal

Saint Peter says in the Second Reading to “*always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.*”

To make a “defense,” to explain what we hope in, demands a competent knowledge of our faith. This is why studying what we believe as Catholics is so important.

But St. Peter’s advice assumes that we are a people of hope. Are we a people of hope? St. Peter evidently thought that hope was a signature mark of Christians that was noticeable to nonbelievers; not least to those who maligned and slandered them.

Now, the word “hope” is not being used here as in ordinary speech. It does not simply indicate we wish something to happen or to be true. When we use “hope” like that we are expressing uncertainty.

Christian hope has a moral certainty about it. If God has promised something, it will happen – for God has the power to make it happen, and He is true to His word. Christian hope, therefore, is a confident expectation that God’s promises will be fulfilled. So, when Psalm 43 says “*Hope in God*” it does not mean, “Cross your fingers!” It means you can trust in God.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines 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 is the virtue whereby we strive for heaven as something to be desired and made possible to attain by the Spirit of God acting in us.

So Christian hope is not based on our talents, our cheery personality, or our comfortable and safe surroundings. Instead it is based entirely on God, not on ourselves or on anything in the present world.

It springs from a profound conviction that God will bring to fulfilment what He intends for us – *unless* we exclude ourselves by our own deliberate fault.

As St. Paul reassured the Philippians: *“I am confident of this, that the One who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ”* (1:6).

Neither does Christian hope have anything to do with optimism. Optimism is a temperament. Some people are naturally optimistic; others always expecting the worst. Optimistic desires and predictions may or may not pan out. But our hope is in God, whose love and goodness are His very essence.

After all, God created us for communion with Him in this life and the next. So, we can have an unshakable trust in His loving purpose for us. As St. Paul reassured the Romans: *“He who did not withhold His own Son, but gave Him up for all of us, will He not with Him also give us everything else?”* (Rom 8:32).

Another reason for our hope is the Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells the apostles that when He goes the Father will give *"another Advocate, to be with you forever."* "Advocate" means defender. It is law-court language. God is our defense attorney. He pleads our cause. And if God is for us, who can be against us?

There is an irony in all this. Not being of human origin or based upon personal temperament or rooted in worldly goals, the theological virtue of hope can persist in us alongside almost unimaginable suffering, disappointment and disaster. We see this in the martyrs, who often came to horrible ends but kept the faith and bore their sufferings with great hope.

Perhaps few of us are called to heroic levels of suffering. But sickness, disappointment, bereavement, and the gradual weakening that comes with old age are trials enough. So is this pandemic. At such times we all need the virtue of hope.

A Scottish professor and Presbyterian preacher by the name of James S. Stewart (d. 1990) used to make a distinction between what he called the "foreground" and the "background" of life.

He used a painting as a metaphor, and spoke of how the foreground in the picture are the elements of life that are right in front of us, that loom largest and immediately catch our attention. If these elements are difficult or chaotic, they can easily overwhelm us and cause significant levels of stress.

But there is also the background of the painting, that can go unnoticed or unrecognized but give depth and context to the picture, to life. Stewart called these the invisible spiritual realities.

Just as the foreground and background are two parts of the very same painting, so the seen and the unseen, the physical and the spiritual, make up the portrait of our lives and our world.

But our trouble is too often all that we see, all that we focus on, is the foreground of our immediate problems, and we lose sight of the divine background that's meant to put everything into proper perspective and give us hope.

Our foreground right now is dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on our day-to-day lives; with its lockdown, social distancing, economic uncertainties, and the daily news reports of further outbreaks and deaths.

This is the foreground. But we must remember, it's only the foreground! There is a background! There is the spiritual reality of God and His promises that are meant to help us see the bigger picture.

When we only focus on the foreground, we can get anxious and afraid. The background is the reality of God's presence, peace and power even in the seeming chaos.

So, don't be too fearful. God is still God. His promises are still true. That background will anchor you when the foreground seems unbearable.

And this brings us back to my original question: Are we a people of supernatural hope?

If we are, then we must not place our hope in earthly things. Instead, we must place our hope in Christ, who has conquered sin

and death, and gone to prepare a place for us in heaven, and whose love sustains and comforts us in our daily lives.

Hope is a gift freely given through the Holy Spirit. Let us ask the Lord to strengthen our hope in these challenging times and to help us to be a source of hope for others.

God bless.