

## MARY ICON OF HOPE

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Every age has its own conceits about itself. Throughout the pages of history people have been asserting that things are getting worse, that standards are falling, that morals are crumbling. Yet though each culture and each age speaks in this way, there are also voices that propose an opposite view, that we are better, wiser, more capable than those who have gone before us. Both are of course true. But at a particular time, one or other vision will tend to dominate.

In the Church today we tend to hear the more pessimistic voices, to be aware of darker hues. The great theologian of Vatican II, Karl Rahner began from about 1980 to speak publicly of a wintertime that had fallen on the Church of Rome (*winterliche Zeit*). The enthusiasm and vitality that had been obvious after Vatican II had faced hard realism. Hans Urs von Balthasar returned several times to the theme of anti-Romanism before he died in 1988. Last year I met a Roman theologian who spoke about the heaviness emerging from the Vatican, despite the Pope's emphasis on joy and hope for the millennium.

It is easy to see why people are more pessimistic. There are many scandals in the Church; there is a serious fall-off in liturgical practice; there is frustration and anger among many laity; the bright promises of the Council seem to have given way to apathy or disappointment; religious and priestly vocations have decreased dramatically. In his important apostolic letter for the millennium, *Tertio millennio adveniente* (1994), the Pope suggested various areas of the Church's life that we should examine in the first phase of preparations for the millennium. One could suggest that each of them could give grounds for pessimism: ecumenism, intolerance and violence, religious indifference, secularism and the breakdown of ethics, social justice, liturgical and scriptural life, communion and participation in the Church through charism and ministries, dialogue with the world and with the great world religions. None of these could be described as an area of bright prospects or even perhaps outstanding achievements (Apostolic Letter nn. 34-36). But the Pope still calls on us to be a Church of hope (n. 46).

Is this pessimism confined only to the Church, or do we experience it at personal levels also? Do we feel that we are improving with age like good cider, fine wine or a VSOP brandy, becoming more mellow and growing psychologically and spiritually, abounding in fruitfulness and good works? Or do we feel that we are like an old boat in a run-down harbour or a derelict canal, getting rusty and growing barnacles?

The present Pope has sensed a need for hope, and he has had a deep conviction that the coming millennium is to be a chance, an opportunity for the Church and the world to bring about a profound renewal and vitality. It is in this context that I want this morning to speak of hope. We rarely hear much about hope: we have teachings of love – receiving love and showing love; we often stress faith. But hope is often a forgotten virtue, a sleeper that needs awakening in our Christian consciousness.

In considering hope I wish to present it with reasonable comprehensiveness. I will take the person of Mary to ground what I wish to say in the word of God.

## Exploring Hope

The word “hope” is often loosely used; we say “I hope” quite casually. But to plumb the meaning of Christian hope we need to speak with some accuracy.

Firstly, hope is always about the future, and about something that I do not have. I can't say this morning that I hope for a good day yesterday. But I can say today that I hope for a good day tomorrow.

Secondly, hope is always about something I do not have. I would not say now, “I hope to be in Walsingham on Tuesday.” I am here. When you have something you enjoy it, act on it, you do not hope.

Thirdly, hope is about something that is reasonably possible. I would not say, “When I have given my workshop this evening at 5 p.m., I hope that somebody will slip me an envelope containing \$50,000;” nor would I say that I hope that the Pope will drop in for the Mass tomorrow. Now both are possible. There are people or firms in this corner of England that could get together \$50,000. The Pope could order a jet and be here by tomorrow. But I do not hope for either. There are absolutely no grounds for hoping for a huge gift of money; there are no grounds either for hoping that the Pope will drop by. So though both are possible, neither is at all likely, and therefore I do not hope for either. However, if I buy a lottery ticket, I may have some hope, even if weak – I am in with an equal chance along with 18,000,000 other lottery punters.

Fourthly, I do not go around telling myself to have hope about trifles; hope is about something that is difficult. I do not seriously hope that there will be coffee for breakfast tomorrow; it is almost certain that coffee will be available, and if it is not, then my world will not collapse. The word “hope” is used accurately only when there is some problem in the way of my desires: I cannot control the weather, so I can hope for a fine day; I may have an illness, and so I hope for a cure; examinations are hazardous, so I hope to pass.

At this stage it is clear that hope is about what we do not have, something that lies to the future, that is difficult, but possible.

## Hope in the Bible

We find these ideas confirmed in the Bible. The word hope is not used often in the Old Testament, only about thirty times. The New Testament usages of the word *elpis* is about double that. But when we read the Bible, we see that the idea, or the reality of hope really dominates the sacred writings. In fact one might say that the Old Testament holds out hope, and the New Testament is about the realization of hope. The words used to indicate Old Testament hope are very significant. Here are some of them: “trust,” “seek refuge in,” “expect,” “wait for.” Thus the good king, Hezekiah was said to trust in the Lord: the city was besieged by Sennacherib, but the king trusted in God and the angel of the Lord in one night struck down 185,000 soldiers of the Assyrian army. Later when he became seriously ill, Hezekiah again turned to the Lord and was healed (2 Kings 18-20). Again we read the advice of Isaiah: “Thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength (Is 30:15). In the Psalms we find: “My mighty rock, my refuge is in God. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts before him; God is a refuge for us” (Ps 62:7-8). Again the Psalmist says, “I waited, I waited on the Lord and he heard my cry” (Ps 40:1). Again, we have the prophet Micah, “As for me, I will look to the Lord, I will wait for the God of my salvation, my God will hear me.”

In the Old Testament a spirituality of the poor, the *anawim* gradually develops. The great

theme of the poor of the Lord does not principally focus on material poverty, though it is present. It is rather a group of people who were educated by the prophets and who learned both by the prophetic word and by the harsh experience of their people that one cannot trust in foreign treaties or allegiances, in riches or armies, but only in God. We find their intuition in Psalms 9-10 or in prophetic passages like Is 49:13: "Sing for joy, O heavens and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

### **Mary Icon of Hope**

Mary was born into a culture of hope, into the groups of the poor of the Lord, such as her cousins, Elizabeth and Zechariah and the elderly prophets Simeon and Anna in the Temple (see Luke 2:32,38). Zechariah's canticle the Benedictus breathes the spirituality of the *anawim* (Luke 1:68-79); Simeon is described as a man who "was religious and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25); Anna spoke to all the poor in the Temple, to "all those who were looking for the redemption Israel" (Luke 2:38). These are all prime examples of the true Israelites who hope in the Lord.

I want to speak of Mary as an icon of hope. An icon is a sacred image, which is a medium that allows us to be in contact with a holy person. The holy person gazes on us through the icon; we reach up towards the holy person through the icon. Mary is a source of hope. The Church prays in the late 11th century prayer, "Hail holy Queen. Hail our life, our sweetness and our hope." We look to Mary's life and mission to grasp the meaning of hope; we look to her in glory as our Mother, our Sister, our Friend, our Guide to be led deeply into the experience of hope.

### **Four Questions about Hope**

We need to ask four questions about hope for ourselves and for the Church, and we shall reflect on Mary as we answer them. We are now dealing with theological hope, the hope that is first rooted in us at baptism, along with faith and charity. The questions can be summed up in four words: who? what? why? how? That is: who hopes? what is hope? why do we hope? how do we hope?

Firstly then, "who hopes?" Hope is a virtue that belongs to all who have not yet achieved what they need. Hope belongs to all on earth, and in a sense to those in purgatory. We begin our reflection on Mary's hope with the Annunciation (Luke 1:26-38); all reflection on Mary begins there, and must constantly return there. God has been promising his deliverance to his people. The waiting has been long, as humanity had to learn slowly that salvation comes only from God. The Chosen People was taught by failure to hope only in God. It was only when the *anawim* were formed that humanity could be approached by God. There are two classical meditations on the Annunciation in the doctors of the Church. One is by St. Bernard who pictures all of humanity waiting for Mary to say yes to the angel; St. Bernard encourages Mary to say the great yes for us:

"You have heard that you shall conceive, not of man, but of the Holy Spirit. The angel is waiting for your answer; it is time for him to return to God who sent him. We too are waiting, O Lady, for the word of pity.. If you consent, straightaway shall we all be freed.. .Why delay? Why tremble? Believe, speak, receive! Let your humility put on boldness, and your modesty be clothed with trust.. .Open your lips to speak; Behold the Desired of all nations is outside, knocking at your door" (*Liturgy of Hours, Office of Readings,*

December 20).

The other reflection from St. Thomas Aquinas, is not nearly so exuberant; St. Thomas never wrote a superfluous word. But his thought is still more profound. “By the Annunciation was sought the consent of the Virgin who stood in place of the whole human race (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 30, art. 1c). The Church is in serious need at this time; each of us is weak and needing the grace and love of the Lord. Mary says a yes on behalf of the Church, on our behalf. Her “yes” becomes a model for our hope.

The second question is about what we hope for. The stakes could not be higher. We hope for what is totally beyond us, and can be given only by God. We saw earlier that hope is about some absent and future good, that is difficult but possible. We hope for salvation, for God, for divine grace, we hope for the forgiveness of sin. The Church hopes for the salvation of all. Mary hopes for the salvation of her people, as she says in the Magnificat, “according to the promise he made to our ancestors” (Luke 1:55).

The third question is about why we should hope. There must be a reason for hope. I said earlier that we do not have any real hope that the Pope will turn up here tomorrow. If what we hope for is difficult, indeed impossible for men and women to achieve, then the grounds for hope is God’s power and love, his mercy and fidelity. All of these are important. We know that God is all-powerful. We must ground our hope not only on this, but on his will and desire, which are expressions of love, mercy and fidelity. Hence we base our hope on the fact that not only can God save us, but he wants to; not only has he promised it, but he has always shown himself faithful. The poor or *anawim* in the Old Testament based their hope on the concrete experience of the people. Israelite prayer is very often a celebration of the past which leads to strong petition and ends with a thanksgiving for the expected blessing.

The finest example of this Israelite hope is surely Mary’s Magnificat. Elizabeth has been celebrating Mary being Mother of the Lord and praising her faith. Mary reflects on the basis of Israel’s hope.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,

according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever (*Luke 1:50-55*).

Already in the Annunciation story we heard that Mary’s hope was strengthened by the angel who told her that her elderly cousin was pregnant, and reminded her of the Old Testament text that “nothing will be impossible to God” (Luke 1:37; see Gen 18:14; Jer 32:17; Job 42:2).

The main ground for hope is the power and love, the mercy and fidelity of God. The other side of this confidence in God is the awareness of our weakness. Mary says that God “has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant” (Luke 1:48). The word translated as “lowliness” is a very strong one, *tapeinôsis*, which implies a state of humiliation, almost of disgrace. Mary knows that before God she is nothing. She has nothing that is not God’s gift; she can do nothing except by his power. She rejoices in this weakness. Because she is so little,

so weak, so powerless, because she has nothing, she can triumphantly assert, “from now on all generations will call me blessed” (Luke 1:48).

In the past we tended to glory in the greatness and the beauty of the Church. Thus the first Vatican Council taught in 1870:

“What is more, the Church herself by reason of her astonishing propagation, her outstanding holiness and her inexhaustible fertility in every kind of goodness, by her catholic unity and her unconquerable stability, is a kind of perpetual motive of credibility and an incontrovertible evidence of her own divine mission” (*Dei Filius*, 4, in *DS* 3013).

It is true that the Church is beautiful and holy, but that is not the whole story; the Church is also weak, sinful, a source of scandal in its members. When we look to the glory of the Church we should be led into wonder and thanksgiving. But the hope of the Church is not its strength but its weakness. So too in our lives. The truest basis of our hope is not our fragile virtue or our frail good works. Rather the surest foundation of our hope is our weakness. St. Paul expresses this in a very striking passage. In defending his ministry before the Corinthians he has cited his sufferings and the great gifts and revelations he has received. He then goes on:

“Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’”

Paul can then triumphantly assert:

“So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2 *Cor* 12:7-10).

This dramatic text gives us a totally new way of looking at the Church and at ourselves. Mary has alerted us to the key source of our hope: it is God’s power, it is her own state of humility. Already the story of Gideon in the seventh chapter of the book of Judges shows us that when we have resources, God will leave us to try and manage. We will, of course, fail. It is only when we do not have resources, when we are genuinely weak, when we admit our weakness, that we can rely on God. So we are invited to look at the Church in a new way. Instead of trying to cover over its weakness, we should rather boast of its weakness. Every new sign of powerlessness, every fresh scandal, every discovery of another failure, every evidence of weakness is not something that we should ignore, but what we should make the grounds for hope. Our confidence in the future of the Church is based on the fact that it is built on a rock, that the gates of the underworld will never prevail (Matt 16:18), that Jesus promised to be with the Church (Matt 28:20). Because the Church is weak, we can rejoice and claim the power of the Lord to overshadow it.

Likewise in our lives, it is when we finally admit our helplessness that our hope is secure. This is, of course, the great insight that is at the basis of the Life in the Spirit Seminars: “God Loves,” “God Saves” and “God Gives New Life.” This truth is also found in the first steps of the Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve-Step Programme. The first two steps of this last is a sound basis for any problem – one just substitutes the problem, addiction, sin or weakness for the

word “alcohol:”

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (*Steps 1-2*).

This third question about why we should hope is quite crucial: we rely on God and trust that our weakness will call down his power upon us, on the Church. A consideration of weakness sharpens our hope. If we look only at our weakness we can be tempted to despair, to give up. Hence we must focus on God, the source of all hope. Again, if we do not look at our weakness, we may not realize just how profoundly we have to resign and hand over all to God. Looking at God protects from despair, looking at our weakness protects us from the opposite failure of presumption. The issue then is quite plain: have we failed enough to learn that we must truly surrender all to God, or as the Alcoholics Anonymous programmes states it: “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understand him” (Step 3).

The fourth question is, how we should hope? Again we look to Mary at the Annunciation. There she is given a promise, an invitation to trust and believe. She says a “yes” to enter into God’s saving plan; she also says a “yes” on behalf of humanity, a “yes” that welcomes the Second Person of the Trinity to come among us as man. Mary then begins to walk according to that hope. She undertakes a dangerous journey to visit her cousin, Elizabeth; she travels to Bethlehem with Joseph for the birth of her child; she presents her child in the Temple. All the time she is learning. She does not understand, and she has to ponder God’s word in her heart (Luke 2:19, 33, 48, 50-51; cf. 1:29).

Her hope was to be profoundly tested on Calvary. We touch upon the profound nature of her testing only when we bring together the Annunciation and Calvary and we keep in the background the story of Abraham. The testing of Abraham was one of the best loved stories of the Hebrew people (Gen ch. 22). Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son, Isaac. He is prepared to do so, but God spares Isaac at the last moment. Surely Mary would have had some thought along the way of the Cross that perhaps her Son might be spared after all – just as Jesus himself prayed in the Garden, “Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me (Mark 14:36).

The Annunciation was a promise of splendour and glory: Mary is told that her Son will be the eternal, splendid Messianic king. Let us hear again the word of the angel:

“He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (*Luke 1:32-33*).

A magnificent king? But look at the reality with her crucified Son dying in terrible agony with the mocking sign, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews” (John 19:19). Mary can see no way in which the prophecy of an eternal kingship can be fulfilled; but she stands firm. From Jesus as he dies she receives the Beloved Disciple as her son (John 19:25-28a), but there is no way in which she can see how these parting words fit in with the bright promise of the angel. There is no other word of comfort. Mary’s hope is horribly tested on Calvary. She can do nothing except hope against hope (see Rom 4:18).

Our hope too is tested in these days of trial for the Church. We know that the Church will survive, but why has it slipped so much? Why is it not attracting enthusiastic millions of

committed members eager to evangelize the world? Why are there so few vocations? What can shake the torpor of so many of its priests, religious and laity? We know the promises, but the reality is in many ways depressing. It is not a matter of trying to whistle a merry tune like Pinocchio. It is rather more a time to deepen our conviction that all will be well, and to open our hearts to what big or small thing the Lord is inviting us to undertake for the Kingdom.

It is the same with our lives. We have been baptized, and have been drawn into the family life of God as Father, Son and Spirit. Many of us have experienced the great blessing of Baptism in the Holy Spirit or some other conversion moment. Then it seemed that all was transformed, that profound holiness was within our grasp, all we had to do was to say “yes,” reach out to the Lord, and all sin and failure would be set aside, all weakness would be healed. But months, years later what is the reality? Weakness and failure, sin and scarring still remain. Was it a hallucination, a false dawn, a mirage or cracked cisterns (Jer 2:13)? We need to hold firm, or in the words of Paul, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (Rom 12:12).

I find the child’s game of “Snakes and Ladders” a valuable analogy for the spiritual journey. In the game there is one big ladder that takes us up from the bottom to the very top row. There is also a big snake on the top row that throws us down to the very bottom row. There are also many small ladders that raise us up just one or two rows, and small snakes that drop us back just one or two rows. Now it is my experience that people very rarely find a big ladder that brings them in a very short time from ordinary life to high holiness, or even profound healing. Making a saint is a slow process, so too is deep healing. We do not get a big spiritual ladder that brings us to the very top. Likewise it is rare for a person to fall back to where they began in one disastrous fall. It is much more common for a person to have small slips, that in fact feel like being back to square one, but are not in fact so desperate. Realistic hope is that we are being gradually healed, step-by-step purified and gently made holy. In this process we must like Mary stand firm. This last question of how to hope is therefore a question of fidelity. Our hope may not be tested in the stark awfulness of Calvary, but it will be tried by what the Letter to the Hebrews calls, “the sin that clings so closely” (Heb 12:1). This text also tells us how we are to behave; “looking to Jesus, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb 12:2). We need to keep our eyes fixed on the Lord in our experience of frailty; if we concentrate on ourselves, we shall surely become depressed and dismayed.

Similarly with the Church. The Church is God’s plan for the salvation of all. It cannot fail. We would do best to look to its Eucharistic centre, to allow ourselves to be formed by what the Mass is for the world, to go forth to live out the implications of the Word we hear at Mass and the sacrifice we offer. In this way we will be serving the Church and the world, and be challenged but not disgruntled or cast down by the weakness of the Church.

Mary the icon of hope can thus show us the way to hope. She enshrines in her person and mission the four questions who? what? why? and how? Who? – she is the great model of hope. What? – confident perseverance in the face of difficulties. Why? – because God is powerful and loving, merciful and faithful, and because he looks on her state of humiliation and weakness. How? – she stands firm even in the awful darkness of Calvary. As we look at the Church, as we look at our own lives, we need to be patterned on her hope.

## **Problems about Hope**

If the difficulties appear too great, then we despair – we lose hope. We look to ourselves, rather than to God, and we abandon hope. Therefore though we look to our own weakness, it is only to decide that the answer does not lie with ourselves, but with God.

The opposite offence occurs when I take for granted that God will do all; if I take something for granted and do not acknowledge the difficulty, there can be presumption. Mary said “yes” at the Annunciation; but she did not sit back and wait for God to fulfil his plans, she actively cooperated with God’s purposes. She visited her cousin; she travelled to Bethlehem; she offered her Son at the Temple; she approached Jesus with the difficulty of the wine shortage at Cana; she ascended the Hill of Calvary; she gathered with the early Church for prayer at the first Pentecost. Sometimes we come across people who want to surrender all to God, as if it were a magical formula. We must indeed surrender to God, to allow the lordship of Jesus to take over our lives, but then we must cooperate and follow God’s way. Again, we get people who hope for healing, but will not let go of the past, or will not obey their doctors, but would prefer that a healing prayer would do everything. These are false hopes. God does expect that we place all our confidence in him, but his response is very often to work powerfully through a variety of agents to bring us out of weakness into healing and integrity.

There is another kind of false hope that does a lot of damage to us. It is when we hope for change in other people. We pray for healing, for conversion and nothing seems to happen. But God can have deep plans for the person, in answer indeed to our prayers, and we are disappointed when we do not see our prayers being answered in the way we would like or expect. Another kind of false hope is found when we are in a difficult situation with another, perhaps looking after a difficult relative, in a strained marriage, in a tense community situation. We can set up a false hope very easily. We wonder that perhaps the other person will change because it is Christmas, or because it is Summer, or because it is an anniversary, through a visit to Walsingham or some other reason. But we are disappointed. This kind of false hope does a lot of damage. Not only are we in a difficult situation, but we feel let down as well. What is wrong, of course, is that we decide how or why the other person will change. And what right have we to demand that they change? There is a great piece of wisdom, again from Alcoholics Anonymous, which is: “We may not be able to change our situation, but we can always change our attitude.” Instead of building up some false hope, we should pray for the strength and courage to endure. In the end, hope involves trying to fit into God’s plan for ourselves and others. People can be so damaged physically, psychologically or spiritually that change is unlikely, and even if it does occur, it may be over a very long time indeed. Miracles can happen, but God chooses to work miracles rather seldom, and that too is a manifestation of his love, even though we may not see it as such.

## **A Final Text**

All that we have been saying can be summed up in a passage of remarkable depth of St. Paul in opening of the fifth chapter of the Letter to the Romans:

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast of our hope of sharing in the glory of God. And not only that, but we boast 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 out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (*Rom 5:1-5*).

Paul has been speaking of the problem of sin and alienation from God. He now states that all is in harmony, the biblical word "peace" (*shalom*). It means that between us and God there is friendship; we are brought to live in the divine presence by Jesus Christ. Therefore we can boast of our hope of sharing in the glory of God. We are then sure of glory, but because of God's power, rather than our efforts. Then Paul moves on to state a progression: suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, a hope that will not be disappointed.

We look at this progression in the life of Mary. The word "suffering" (*thlipsis*) here is not pains and aches, but it is the affliction that comes from serving the kingdom. We all suffer, but we may not always suffer for the kingdom. In the Temple when Jesus was forty days old Mary was told by Simeon that a mysterious sword would pierce her soul (*Luke 2:35*). She experienced pain in Jesus' departure, in her having no role in the public ministry of her Son (*Mark 3:31-35*), even though other women accompanied him and looked after his needs (*Luke 8:1-3*). Above all she experienced terrible tribulation on Calvary. But this affliction led to endurance (*hypomonē*). On Calvary she remained firm, and suffered in patience. She does not show any crazed flamboyant grief, but with the Beloved Disciple, "she stood by the Cross" (*John 19:25*). From endurance comes character (*dokimē*). This word indicates the proven character, the strength that people get so that they are able to resist evil and stand firm. Mary stood firm. From standing firm, she came into still deeper hope, and because God's love was poured into her heart, that hope was not in vain. We must walk the same path as Mary: we will have trials, we must endure; our endurance will produce constancy and character; these will deepen hope. If you think of it, it is only when things get particularly bad, that we really come into strong hope.

Similarly, the Church is called to walk the way of suffering and trial to learn endurance, be moulded with divine strength and filled with hope, a hope that will not be disappointed.

"We boast of our hope of sharing in the glory of God. And not only that, but we boast 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 out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (*Rom 5:3-5*).

### **A Prayer for Hope**

Can we sum up this long talk with a prayer? Those of you who will admit to being as old as I am, will surely remember the long Acts of Faith, Hope and Charity that were read before Mass on Sunday. It would be nice if there was an act of hope that we could make, a prayer of hope. Would you like to learn an act of hope? There is an ancient and easy way to learn a prayer of hope; it was actually taught by Jesus. It is, of course, the Our Father.

This prayer answers the four key words. The "who" is not "I," but "we." Christian hope is not something selfish, but is part of the community. The "what" of hope is our material needs, "daily bread," and the still more important spiritual needs summed up as forgiveness of sins, freedom from dangerous temptation, and deliverance from all evil or protection from the Evil One. The "why" of hope lies in the fact that God is Father, powerful and loving, merciful and faithful. The "how" of hope is to walk along kingdom paths, blessing the name

of God, that is serving him, doing his will and being committed to the kingdom.

So every time we say the Our Father we are making an act of hope. The Our Father is a prayer that looks towards the future, it is a prayer of hope, it is surely the millennium prayer.