

Religieuses de l'Assomption
Maison Générale
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Christmas Chapter 2017



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Paris, December 19, 2017

The Hope of Christmas

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Christmas is at our doorstep. We will soon welcome Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour, whatever the name each one wants to give Him depending on your own concrete reality today.

The announcement of His coming sparked the hope of salvation renewed every year. He, first of all, when He was sent by the other Persons of the Blessed Trinity, hoped in a disoriented humanity, desiring to save it and reveal to it the mercy of God.

At this time, when we are often surprised by the quick chain of painful, confusing events, we can perhaps stop a moment to contemplate Him Who has been called *“the Hope of the nations”* in the prophecy of Isaiah: *“I am coming to gather the nations of every language. They shall come to witness my glory. I will give them a sign!”* (Is. 66:18). Let us contemplate Him so that He may teach us to be men and women of hope, bearers and awakeners of hope in our world loved by God (Jn. 3:16).

On the threshold of a new year full of promises and therefore of hopes, on the road towards the 2018 General Chapter, do we want to be counted among those who still dare to believe in the power of life and of the resurrection?

1. Jesus, Man of hope

Each year, the season of Advent sets us on the road to Bethlehem where the Saviour promised for centuries has an appointment with us – *“Behold, the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Emmanuel”* (Is. 7:13-14) – a promise fulfilled thanks to Mary’s and Joseph’s faith, who, with their people, hoped that God would be faithful: *“The Word was made flesh, He lived among us, and we saw His glory...”* (Jn. 1:14).

Christmas gives us the opportunity to reconsider the place we give to the new-born Babe of Bethlehem, so fragile and powerful at the same time, in our hearts. He makes King Herod tremble but provokes awe in the old man Simeon and in the prophetess Anne (Lk. 2:25-38). While He is the admiration of His parents and the joy of the shepherds, His fragility and His poverty confound the persons who await liberation in a manifestation of power.

Born in almost total anonymity, Jesus will grow like any other villager from Nazareth, sharing the conditions of an average family. It is there that He was ‘buried’ like the grain, that He felt the weight of the earth through the agonizing situations of His people. It is there that He began the school of life by observing Mary, His Mother, Joseph, their neighbours.

When later He goes throughout Galilee to initiate His fellow citizens to a *“new experience of God”*, He will know how to talk of the things of life in a language comprehensible to all. In solidarity with sinners, He comes to be baptized with them by John and makes effective the salvation offered to all. He opens the door to an invincible hope, sign of His faith and trust in the mercy of the Father. This hope animated Him throughout His

public life, becoming the leitmotiv of His preaching towards those who were thirsty for justice and for peace (Cf. Mt. 5) and His works of mercy in favour of the sick, the poorest and the excluded.

The coming of Jesus, in the newness of an experience that surprises and fascinates at the same time, is the manifestation of the consolation He brought and continues to bring to the world through His disciples that we are.

2. A hope that nourishes faith

If *“in Christian life, faith has the priority, hope has the primacy. Without the knowledge of Christ, by faith, hope becomes a utopia plunged in the void. But without hope, faith wilts, becoming a ‘little faith’ and finally dead faith.”*¹ With Jesus, we learn to have this gaze of faith nourished by hope that puts love to work. In fact, Jesus teaches us to contemplate in such a way so as to reach the soul of things, to look beyond what is immediately perceptible: *“His gaze is the gaze of faith. He admires the flowers of the fields and the birds of the air, but He sees, behind the appearances, the loving care of God for His creatures ... He celebrates the sun and the rain, but even more still the goodness of God towards all His children, the good as well as the bad ...”*²

Instead of waiting for what others cannot give us, why not practice recognising in the kind deeds of our loved ones, that often seem so natural and normal, the goodness of God towards us? The source of our joy is hidden in these little things of daily life, all these little things done with love, which are within our reach. By forming ourselves to discern the signs of hope in our life and in the world, we are inspired to put into action our gifts at the service of others. Our faith in Christ keeps us from being indifferent to the situations which dehumanise and cause suffering. It makes us act so that something changes in favour of a better life. It is in these unacceptable situations that paradoxically hope should emerge. This *“maintains man in the refusal to accommodate himself until the great fulfilment of all God’s promises.”*³

3. Act as women and men of hope

At the age of maturity, Jesus sought God as *“a force of salvation”* for His people. He went to the broken places of society and let Himself be touched by the sufferings of the weakest. He did not need to seek very far. They were already there, suffering from material and spiritual poverty, diseases of all sorts, rejection... Like Him, we can note the broken areas of our peoples with a compassionate heart, a heart one with that of God, being sensitive to the deep crises that our societies are going through... We cannot regret the social dysfunctions without questioning ourselves: are we happy with our secure life-style or do we accept our need to be saved? Do we dare to call our sin and our incoherence by name so that the desire for conversion and salvation awaken in us? In fact, conversion is a point of departure for hope, a door open to Divine Mercy. We must believe in the transformative action of God here and now and cooperate actively with it.

It is now that God manifests His mercy in the new-born Babe in the crib. Concretely, who are the poor that we will welcome or visit at Christmas, in response to the call of the Pope during the First World Day of the Poor? How can we keep in line with all those who commit themselves so that the situations of distress of the poorest may change?

Jesus tells us: *“You have the poor with you always...”* (Jn. 12:8) So how can we avoid giving in to despair in the face of the evils of our world (war, injustices, slavery, migrations...) or to anesthetising our consciences in thinking of what we have already done? How can we encourage each other to persevere so as to respond in deed, without tiring, since *“love never says it is enough!”*? Let us be motivated and led by compassion. Let us not calculate nor limit the scope of poverty and especially let us not forget those who are close to us, our families and our communities, those whom we meet in our apostolic missions and our parishes. Very often, it is when we ourselves have touched the bottom of our being that we become more sensitive to those in despair around us. Pope Francis rightly said that *“only those who have experienced their poverty and their*

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Théologie de l’espérance*, Cerf-Mame, Paris, 1970, p 17

² José Antonio Pagola, *Jésus, approche historique*, Cerf, Paris, 2012, p.54

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Théologie de l’espérance*, Cerf-Mame, Paris, 1970, p 18

limitations and remain confident in the Lord are the ones who truly hope. It is they who give the strongest evidence that beyond sadness and death the Lord will have the last word"⁴. Thus it is in giving hope that we receive it from the poorest.

Our days are filled with hopes and small expectations for which we await their fulfilment. We hope for a lot of things and we desire others but what do we do to make them come true?

All through Advent, he strongly reminded us that the hope of salvation announced and fulfilled in Jesus Christ puts us on a path of constant conversion so as to welcome Him into our lives. The call to keep watch and be vigilant rang out regularly. These attitudes must accompany us each day so that the fire of hope may not be extinguished, this beautiful virtue which *"makes us tend towards wisdom and involves a progression in the quality of the spiritual life. But it demands real investment on our part and, in fact, a decision to commit ourselves through time. Hope brings about an ever deeper rootedness in a relationship with Christ, source of Life and of Light... Hope is built day after day, founded on our intimate conviction that Christ died and rose. It is the foundation of Christian life."*⁵

In these times when security is not assured anywhere, where certain events sometimes plunge us into an apocalyptic atmosphere, it seems wise to have as companion the "small hope", as the great poet Peguy calls it. We must nourish it in ourselves, take care of it while we journey awaiting salvation. Because Hope is this *"insignificant little girl...come into the world Christmas of last year... It is she, this little one that brings about everything."*⁶

Hope makes us act today. It is not a blissful and passive waiting for a gift that will fall on our head but the conscious commitment in the present for the fulfilment of a desire that is in us and already makes us live. Together let us be this body that hopes and in which the members support one another, this body that radiates a testimony of hope, this body that bears the responsibility of an active hope.

May we throughout the year 2018, "set our hope on God's goodness and, advance even more ... put our hand into the pierced hand of our Lord, asking Him to lead us, to expect all from Him"⁷.

I wish you all, in the name of the General Council, a joyful Christmas Season in the joy of journeying towards the General Chapter.

With my prayer and fraternal affection,

Sister Martine Tapsoba
Superior General

⁴ Pape François, *Audience générale du 8 Février 2017* (catéchèse en français)

⁵ Père Tommy Scholtes, *Prions en Eglise n°371*, commentaire des textes du 32^{ème} dimanche du Temps Ordinaire

⁶ Charles Péguy, *Le Porche du Mystère de la deuxième vertu*, 1912

⁷ Sainte Marie Eugénie, *Instruction de chapitre sur l'abandon*, 22 décembre 1872