

**CHAPTERS of the ABBOT GENERAL OCist
at the MFC 2024
HOPING in CHRIST**

1. Survival or eternal life?

This year I would like to look more deeply with you at the topic of **Christian hope**, a topic that greatly calls to our attention in the current situation of the world, of the Church, of our Orders, and of our communities.

Why do we feel the need to rediscover hope?

In the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee, *Spes Non Confundit*, Pope Francis recalls that “All of us, however, need to recover the joy of living, since men and women, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26), cannot rest content with getting along one day at a time, settling for the here and now and seeking fulfilment in material realities alone. This leads to a narrow individualism and the loss of hope; it gives rise to a sadness that lodges in the heart and brings forth fruits of discontent and intolerance” (§ 9).

This is a striking observation that the human being “cannot rest content with getting along one day at a time, [...] seeking fulfilment in material realities alone.” It is a judgement that describes so much of the sadness one breathes in in our societies, that we and our communities too breathe in. It is a sadness masked as false joy, which is constantly announced to us, promised and assured by the media, by advertising, by politicians’ propaganda, by so many false prophets of well-being. Contenting ourselves with well-being keeps us from opening ourselves to a good that is much greater, much more true, much more eternal: what Jesus and the Apostles call “the salvation of the soul, the salvation of life”; a good for which Jesus invites us not to fear losing our life, our material goods, the false securities that often collapse in an instant.

I recently found myself at Termini station very early in the morning. I had arrived early to avoid the city traffic, so that I had time, and after praying matins and lauds, there on foot by my baggage, I started looking at the people. When one really looks at people, when one observes their faces, in everybody there emerges something like a request for compassion, a poverty masked in a thousand ways, but ultimately unmistakable. It is like the inevitable emergence from gaze of a universal wound of the human heart.

The holy Orthodox monk Silouan of Mt. Athos meditated deeply on the lament of Adam that each of us bears in ourself. He wrote: “Adam wept, because on account of his sin all had lost peace and love. Great was the pain of Adam when he was driven from paradise, but when he saw his son Abel slain by his brother Cain, his suffering grew even more; his soul was tormented, he sobbed and thought: ‘From me will come peoples who multiply themselves: all will suffer, will live in enmity and will kill each other.’ His pain was as great as the sea, and the only soul that can understand it is the one that has known the Lord and how much he loves us.”

And then I asked myself: what do I desire for all these people, for all these faces that pass before me for a few moments, as if without origin or destination? What reality comprehending all would I like to ask of God for all these people? What could give fulfillment to each life, whatever it is and in whatever state it finds itself?

A reality imposed itself on my mind and my prayer: *eternal life*. Eternal life is what everyone is longing for and what I know I can desire and ask for for myself and for all without being mistaken, without asking for something that does not correspond to their need or above all to God's design for each and every person. Not so much and not only eternal life as a sublime state that we can reach after death, but the eternal life possible here and now, eternal life as Jesus defines it: "This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn 17:3), that is, a life defined and illuminated by communion with Christ and, through Him, with the Father.

Only this allows man to live truly and not just to "survive or get by." (cf. *Spes Non Confundit*, §9, Italian version). We must admit, all of us, that too often we find ourselves just getting by, contenting ourselves with survival. What does it mean to "get by" (*vivacchiare*)? We understand it if we think of verbs constructed in the same form, like "sing under your breath" (*canticchiare*) or "pick at some food" (*mangiucchiare*). They mean to express that, instead of singing or eating like one ought, like we are capable of doing, we did it just, so to say, halfway, superficially, not fully. Instead of singing a song strong and clearly, tasting its beauty, expressing well the words and the music the composer wanted, we do it with half pronounced words, with the melody just barely hinted at, almost instinctively, as if we were not fully aware that we were singing.

We often do this with life too. God, the composer of our life, thought it up and created it to be lived in fulness, to be, as it is said, "sung out at the top of your lungs." And instead, from original sin onward, man has the tendency to get by more than to live; to live, that is, halfway, superficially, without thinking of the beauty and intensity that the Creator wanted to express with this unique and absolutely original creature of his. No human creature is a "copy-and-paste" of another. Each life is made absolutely to be unique, original, special. Instead, we accommodate ourselves to living as if we were made in a series, all equal and uniform. It is enough to look at how every imitates the fashions and attitudes of the false models of fulfilled life proposed by the media.

There is in us something like a laziness to live fully. We accommodate ourselves to getting by because we fear that truly living might be too laborious. The problem, however, as the Pope writes, is that getting by "leads to a narrow individualism and the loss of hope; it gives rise to a sadness that lodges in the heart and brings forth fruits of discontent and intolerance."

Getting by means fearing death without loving life; fearing to lose the life that we think we possess without loving the life that has been granted to us by God, or as it has been granted to us by God.

But in fact, eternal life, that is, the fulness of life that makes us truly happy, is a reality that we do not possess, that we do not manage to give to ourselves, a reality that we must receive from the Lord, a reality that we must hope for from God.