

11. Hope is relation and vocation

In Psalm 22 the psalmist says at a certain point: “Be not far from me, for trouble is near, and there is none to help!” (Ps 22:12).

Abandonment is the distancing of a presence in which we have trust, in which we hope. Abandonment is an absence that permits anguish to fill our heart. It is an experience that every child has from birth, and so is an experience that is constitutive for us, existentially and psychologically: there is a presence that, when it distances itself, is not replaced by another presence, but by anguish, by a mysterious feeling that makes the heart sink into the space of desperation, into the space of not being able to trust in anyone, of not being able to hope in anyone: “Trouble is near, and there is none to help.”

One could document this experience in a thousand passages of Scripture, in the Psalms, in the patriarchs and prophets, in Job, and then also in the New Testament, in the experience of St. Paul, of the other apostles. Then also in the lives of all the saints. Everything, however, is summarized and concentrated in the anguish of the Son of God who feels abandoned by the Father.

Even when Jesus cries out: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit” (Lk 23:46), we cannot but think that this cry too, apparently full of peace, was expressed by Jesus to put into the Father’s hands his spirit that was prey to human despondency. What spirit, what soul, what heart could the crucified Jesus put into the Father’s hands, a few moments from death, if not one full of the sense of abandonment?

But this is exactly what expresses the perfect hope of Christ crucified, the hope that becomes for us redemption from every anguish and fear, from our every desperation, like those described in Psalm 69: “Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God.” (Ps 69:2–4)

Psalm 69 is just one example of this hope that rises up from the depth of mortal anguish like a cry to God, to a God who is “my God,” that is, a God in personal relationship with us. Hope is a cry that has only God as salvation.

This means that hope is not an abstract entity, to virtue to exercise alone. *Hope is a relationship*, it is a reaching toward an embrace, and for this reason hope for us is a path.

I was telling you that, for me, one of the best artistic illustrations of hope is the painting “First Steps” by Van Gogh, in which we see a baby held on its feet by its mother, which reaches its arms, full of joy, toward the father who awaits it a few meters away with outstretched arms. This reaching out between the baby and the father is exactly the stretching out with which hope should fill our personal and communal life. We are not asked to already know how to walk, but to stretch ourselves toward someone who awaits us with love, even if we have to fall over, even if we have to pass through a dark valley or a sea in storm.

It's like when Jesus tells Peter: "Come!" to draw him to make his "first steps" walking on the sea, some steps on water that are the symbol of the journey of "hoping against hope," of impossible hope to which Jesus Christ always calls his apostles and the whole Church anew (cf. Mt 14:29).

Hope seems imperceptible, it seems that it does not have a big role in life. Often we think of it as a longing for what is beyond which, however, skips over the life we live, the circumstances we pass through. Rather, it is actually by crossing like an electric current through the daily reality that hope illuminates our path and helps us journey toward the ultimate and completed Destiny of our life and of the world.

This hope, for us, for all the baptized, but especially for the consecrated, is not only necessary for our vocation, is not only necessary for living out our vocation: *hope is our vocation*. As St. Paul writes to the Ephesians: "One body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call" (Eph 4:4).

It is as if we were doubly called to hope: we are called to the hope of our vocation, called to the hope of our calling. What does this mean but that hope, for us, is exactly that invisible but powerful reaching out between God who calls us and us who respond, as in the painting of Van Gogh. We respond to the calling to hope if in our life and in the life of our communities what becomes ever more dominant is this reaching out between God who calls us and us who respond.

In the painting of Van Gogh, it is as if between the father who widens his arms and the child who wants to reach him there did not exist anything but this reaching out between them, full of trust, of love, of desire, of joy. The child does not desire to walk, does not yet know what it means to walk: it desires the father's embrace, and this brings it to walk. But precisely on account of this reaching out toward each other that dominates their hearts, also the whole reality around them, the earth, the blooming plants, the house, the bed sheets stretched over the fence, the wheelbarrow and the hoe that the father has abandoned to concentrate on his child, the sky, and obviously the mother who still holds the baby up, but who also lets it go..., all has a meaning, all is beauty, all is full of significance, because all of reality exists for our relationship with God, all of reality exists so that we may live out our reaching to embrace the Father, for our being made for God, for our going toward Him.