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MARY MOTHER OF HOPE,
AN INSPIRATION FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION

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My joy for being here in Walsingham has also a personal reason. I did my theology studies and was ordained a priest in Loreto, the Italian shrine of the Holy House of Nazareth, which has a special connection with this ancient Marian shrine in England. Knowing that I was coming here, the Rector of Loreto asked me to convey to you their deep fellowship and their spiritual participation in the present event.

Reading the passage of the Annunciation at the Mass this morning, we had the opportunity to meditate on the role of Mary in the Incarnation. I want to continue along this line reflecting on the presence of Mary at the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ. Besides our personal edification, the purpose is to see what Mary at the foot of the Cross can say to us in view of a renewed effort of evangelization which is the main focus, I was told, of the present National Marian Pilgrimage. Let us start by reading the short account from the gospel of John.

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalen. When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home'. (Jn 19:25-27)

If Mary was "standing by the cross of Jesus" on Calvary, it means she was in Jerusalem on those days and, if she was in Jerusalem, it means that she saw all that happened. She was present at the whole of her Son's passion; at the shouting of 'Barabbas! Barabbas!', at the *Ecce homo!*

She saw her Son come out scourged and crowned with thorns, covered with spittle; she saw his naked body tremble in his death agony. She saw the soldiers divide his garments and cast lots for his tunic which she herself had lovingly woven. She also drank the bitter chalice to the end. The words of desolation of the ancient daughter of Zion are fitting for her: 'All you who pass by, look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow!' (Lam 1:12).

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A comparison with Abraham can make the significance of Mary's presence at the cross clearer. God promised Abraham that he would have a son even though he was too advanced in years and his wife was barren. And Abraham believed. God announced to Mary that she would bear a son even if she knew not man. And Mary believed.

But then God appeared again to ask Abraham to go to the mountain and to sacrifice the son he had given him and of whom he had said, 'Through Isaac shall your descendants be named' (Gen 21:12). And Abraham again obeyed. God appeared a second time in Mary's life too,

asking her to consent to the immolation of her Son of whom it had been said that he would reign forever. And Mary obeyed.

Abraham climbed Mount Moriah with Isaac and Mary accompanied Jesus up Mount Calvary. But much more was asked of Mary than of Abraham. God stopped Abraham at the last minute and restored his son to him, but not with Mary. She had to cross the final threshold of no return of death. Her Son was restored to her but only when he had been taken down from the cross.

As Mary's path was one of faith and not of vision, she hoped that the course of events would change from one minute to the next, that her Son's innocence would be recognized. In vain did she hope in front of Pilate. In vain did she hope along the way to Calvary. God went ahead. She hoped right up to the cross, before the first nail was hammered in, but it was not to be. Had she not been promised that her Son would sit on the throne of David and would reign over the house of Jacob forever? Was this cross therefore the throne of David?

Let us now highlight the implications of this comparison. If for what he did Abraham deserved to be called "the father of us all" (Rom 4:16), and "our father in faith", could we hesitate to call Mary "Mother of us all" and "our Mother in faith"? God said to Abraham, "Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only-begotten son, I will indeed bless you and I will multiply your descendants.... I have made you the father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 22:16; 17:5). And now, more strongly, he says the same thing to Mary, 'Because you have done this, and have not withheld your Son, your only Son, I will indeed bless you. I have made you the mother of a multitude of nations!'

So, like the Israelites, who in times of trial turned to God saying, 'Remember Abraham, our father!', we can now turn to him and say, 'Remember Mary, our mother!', and as they said to God, 'Do not withdraw your mercy from us, for the sake of Abraham your beloved' (Dan 3:12), we can say, 'Do not withdraw your mercy from us, for the sake of Mary your beloved!'

It is written that when the biblical Judith went back to her people after putting her life at risk for them, the men of the city hurried to meet her and the High Priest blessed her saying, 'O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth.... Your hope will never depart from the hearts of men' (Jud 13:18 ff). Today we address the same words to Mary: 'Blessed are you above all women! Your hope and courage will never depart from the heart and memory of the Church!'

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And so we come to the main focus of my message: hope and courage! On Calvary, Mary was not just the 'Mother of sorrows' but also the 'Mother of hope,' *Mater spei*, as the Church invokes her in one of its most ancient Latin hymns. St. Paul says about Abraham that 'in hope he believed against hope' (Rom 4:18). With all the more reason we must say the same about Mary beneath the cross: in hope she believed against hope.

To hope against hope means that "without having any reason whatsoever for hope, in a situation that, humanly speaking, is entirely hopeless and in total contrast with the promise made, one never ceases to hope solely in virtue of the word of hope, uttered at the time by God" (Heinrich Schlier). Just as Scripture says of Abraham (Heb 11:19), Mary too believed that God was able to raise her son 'even from the dead'.

And God didn't disappoint her. He raised her son from the dead and made him Lord of heaven and earth, and made her Queen of heaven and earth. An ancient Latin antiphon greets Mary during this Easter time with the joyful words,

Queen of Heaven, rejoice, alleluia.
The Son whom you merited to bear, alleluia,
has risen, as he said, alleluia.
Pray for us to God, alleluia.

In this, more than anywhere else, Mary is a model for the Church. The Church is called to be, like her, 'a mother of hope' for the world. Just as Mary was close to her crucified Son, so the Church is called to be close to the crucified of today: the poor, the suffering, the humiliated, the insulted, the discriminated against. How can the Church stay close to these? In hope, like Mary. It is not enough to pity their sufferings or even to try to alleviate them. This would be too little. Anyone can do this, even those who know nothing of the resurrection of Christ.

The Church must transmit hope, proclaiming that suffering is not absurd, that it is meaningful, because there will be a resurrection of the body in the last day and there can be a resurrection of the heart every day. People need hope to live just as they need oxygen to breathe.

We must become 'accomplices of the child hope', as the French poet Charles Péguy says in his poem on the second theological virtue. Perhaps there's something you've ardently hoped for, and nothing happened? The next time you hoped again and nothing happened? Things were just as before despite all your supplications and tears, maybe despite some indications that this time God would listen to you? You go on hoping again and again, you never cease to hope, right to the end. You have become an accomplice of hope. God has granted you a much greater grace than the one you asked for: the grace to hope in him, which will have an eternal reward.

However, we must remember that hope is not just a beautiful and poetic interior disposition, that doesn't call for activity or specific tasks. On the contrary, to hope means precisely that there is still something we can do, a duty to be done, and that we are not, therefore, at the mercy of crippling inactivity.

When in vain we have done our utmost to change a difficult situation, we still have something great to do that will keep us occupied and keep desperation far from us, and that is to patiently endure to the end. This was the great thing Mary did as she hoped beneath the cross, and she is now ready to help us do the same.

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In addition to one's personal life of faith, hope also has a very important role to play in view of the evangelization. Reading the Gospel reports following Easter, one has the impression that the Church is born from a movement of hope. The sudden transformation of the disciples and the enthusiasm that appears in their writings cannot be explained otherwise than by this virtue.

The resurrection of Christ had caused the disciples, as St. Peter says, to be 'born anew to a

living hope' (1 Pet 1:3). With this hope they moved to conquer the world. There are questions that people have been asking ever since the world began: "Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?" Christian faith offered a clear answer to these questions.

Hope was the door through which Christianity arrived even to this part of the world where we are. In the "Ecclesiastical history of the English people", the Venerable Bede recounts how the Gospel came to the north of England at the beginning of the 7th century. No doubt you know already the story, but it deserves being remembered in this occasion.

When the missionaries coming from Rome arrived in Northumberland, king Edwin convoked a council of dignitaries to decide whether they would allow them, or not, to spread the new message. One of them stood up and said:

"The present life of man, O king, seems to me, in comparison to that time which is unknown to us, like to the swift flight of a sparrow through the room wherein you sit at supper in winter, with your commanders and ministers, and a good fire in the midst, whilst the storms of rain and snow prevail abroad; the sparrow, I say, flying in at one door, and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry storm; but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, into the dark winter from which he had emerged. So this life of man appears for a short space, but of what went before, or what is to follow, we are utterly ignorant. If, therefore, this new doctrine contains something more certain, it seems justly to deserve to be followed." (*The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, II, 13)

Perhaps the Christian faith will have a revival in England and in our secularised western world for the same reason for which it made its entry: because it is the only doctrine that has an answer to give to the great questions about life and death.

The most important thing is to understand how we can proclaim hope today to the world in which we live. The failure of the great alternative ideologies, like Marxism, has led people to live from day to day without any great enthusiasm or excitement about the future. Hope is transmitted by contagion. The best way to infect someone with hope is through the fruits of the Spirit which are, love, joy and peace. St. Paul says, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope' (Rom 15:13).

"Love hopes all things", says the Apostle (1 Cor 13:7). We Christians cannot limit ourselves to denouncing the evil present in our society. Experience demonstrates that we gain much more by emphasizing the presence and the possibilities for good present in our society. We catch more flies with a spoonful of honey than with a barrel of vinegar, as St. Francis de Sales used to say. We catch more people with a spoonful of hope than with a ton of reproaches.

After a doctor has examined someone who is seriously ill, the best comfort he or she can offer is to say, 'I have good hope for you!' Society needs to hear, 'The Church has good hope for you.' Hope is based on the fact that 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (Jn 3:16).

Christian hope has eternal life as its ultimate object, but it does not exclude the lesser human hopes for oneself and one's children, as finding a job, overcoming an illness, meeting the right person to love and be loved by. In fact theological hope nourishes and sustains these human hopes. It gives people the strength not to be discouraged; it ensures that even if all of one's earthly hopes are disappointed, life would not have thereby lost its meaning. The fundamental hope remains intact.

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We must acknowledge however that this task of giving hope to the world is beyond our human power. We need the Holy Spirit not only to impart hope to others but also to help us not to despair or be discouraged. It was the experience of Pentecost that gave the early Christian community the power to go out into the streets and proclaim Christ with such powerful conviction that 3,000 people were 'cut to the heart' (Acts 2:37).

Almost always in the New Testament hope is associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit. We have already heard St. Paul's words, 'May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope' (Rom 15:13). He also writes, "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5).

In the Bible we find the description of a great collective crisis that is resolved thanks to a rebirth of hope operated by Spirit of God. Let us conclude with it. It is a prophecy for us in this moment of history. The people of Israel are in exile and seeing no way of escape keep repeating, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off" (Ezek 37:11). God commands the prophet Ezekiel to cry out:

O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.... So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host. (Ezek 37:4b-6, 10)

I sense addressed to me, poor and old "son of man" as I am, the same command that God gave Ezekiel: 'Prophesy to the Spirit, prophesy, son of man, and say to the Spirit: Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live' (Ezek 37:9). As we prepare for celebrating the great feast of Pentecost, let us therefore pray together,

Spirit of God, breathe on the dry bones that are our Christian communities, breathe on our poverty and our impotence in the face of today's world, so sure of itself and intoxicated with its own accomplishments. And you, our risen Lord, repeat to the disciples of this nation and of Europe what you said on Easter evening. Breathe again on us, saying, "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.... Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:21-22).