

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

By Bishop Joseph L. Hogan

# Hope, Crossing Thresholds to Future Promises

In his *Inferno* Dante arrives at a sealed door inscribed with a warning of despair: "Forsake all hope here, you who enter!" Whatever one's specific theology of hell, a door forever bolted and an invitation to hopelessness uniquely suit a place where no promise is possible. Or a condition where frustration is forever. Or a state where "No" remains the unvarying answer to life's ultimate question.

Some readers, I suspect, have not made it to this second paragraph. Hell, even in the small dosage of a passing reference, is a terrifying prospect. Nor has mainstream Christianity eased the dilemma that hell is as easy to preach as it has been difficult to understand — and there may hang a moral. In any case, if a topic can occasionally be broached by contrast, hell — or at least its vestibule — is an excellent place to begin an Advent meditation on hope.

Crossing thresholds is an image I happen to favor. It recalls significant choices that have shaped my personal life. It evokes crucial days that have tested my dual role as servant and leader in the diocese. It suggests bold and exciting possibilities beyond our present range of vision. It speaks of moments of arrival and opportunities for fresh beginnings. But most of all, the image appeals because it is buoyant with hope.

What, for example, does the image of crossing thresholds add to our meditations on the Incarnation? Or to our attempts to understand our resurrection in Christ? Or to our understanding of a Child lost in wonderment at the age of twelve in his Father's house? Or to focus within the context of Advent, what does crossing thresholds add to our prayerful reflections on what the Lord's coming will mean, rather than when or how it will occur? Or to the forms of conversions in our life to which the Lord continually keeps calling us? Or, to shift perspective somewhat, to the directions which American Catholicism will be taking as a result of our recent Detroit conference?

Hope calls us to make an investment in the future — our own, that of those with whom we interrelate. At the very least, hope demands that we make faith-illuminated decisions that affect life at nearly every turn. Crossing thresholds is one way of highlighting that truth.

As Advent 1976 turns our attention to the future, hope recalls first of all that we are not locked into the "now" generation. So many of us try to keep up with the relevancies of the present that we hardly realize how narrow an isthmus of time the present is between the two oceans of the past and the future.

By its very nature hope views the present not so much as the epilogue of the past, as the prologue to the future. All too often we have seen hope as a "resigned waiting" or a passive spectatorship as the structure of the future begins to take shape. It is a sad commentary that most Christians have not graphically realized that the future is the most characteristic arena to which we have been called to witness to our commitment to Christ. Many of us are like the Emmaus disciples — we tend to lament the lost security of the past, even as God provides the new breakthrough of the Resurrection experience. We bemoan our narrow sense of loss. We had hoped that he (Jesus) would have been the one to restore Israel, when in fact God's future has already dawned with the entry of Jesus into glory. (Lk. 24:21ff)

Hope is the most effective form of anticipating the future. It is more creative than fear and anxiety. It is more flexible than calculation and provision. Hope sees the future not as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery to be encountered.

The power to intermix newness, freedom, action, potency and grace is at the very heart of hope. Hannah Arendt describes this situation with rare perception:

"The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty which is inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin."

"The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal natural ruin is ultimately the fact of natality in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow on human affairs faith and

hope." (*The Human Condition*, 1958, p. 222).

In brief, Advent is the season in which new possibilities and hopes are born. And as we construct the future in hope, we inevitably contribute to the ultimate future which is His Coming.

We referred earlier to the Emmaus event. The way to Emmaus is more than a retreat from Jerusalem's harsh realities, it is a journey to promises unfolding. The disciples left behind landmarks of disillusionment, only to discover what one writer has termed "a new geography of faith." The Emmaus-bound travelers tried to sweep away the shattered dreams of recent memory, only to find an endless landscape of promise opening before them.

Briefly stated, the Emmaus story has at least one Advent dimension. The bewildering recollections of the Jesus now gone had prompted the two pilgrims to transplant the roots of belief and to review the reasons for hope. Their backward glances needed to be redirected so that they could recognize the Stranger walking at their side, ready to shatter their shallow expectations. They agonized over the pressures of the present, while He came upon them embodying a promise and a power beyond their fondest hope.

Advent ideally is a process of soul that makes possible the adventures to which God calls us. Advent should reassure us that the only limit to God's promises is His power, not our weakness, His love, not our fear. Let our Advent prayers and reflections sweep away disillusionment and climax in recognition. Promises — God's promises — can once again turn gloomy faces into burning hearts. And the road of despair can just as easily lead to a table of hope.

Dante never gave us a reverse parallel of hell's bolted door and its welcoming message of despair. His restless genius fantasized a heaven in the shape of an inverted rose of cosmic proportions. In the midst of that breath-taking scene, the poet surrendered to the theologian in Dante and he exclaims: "In His will lies our peace." We might translate roughly — very roughly: Our hopes are best realized when God's promises become our processes.

It is my fervent prayer that during Advent 1976 hope will teach us to cross the thresholds that lead to God's radiant promises.

## Intensify Efforts for the Union of Christians

Pope Paul VI gave the following address to the plenary assembly of the Secretariat for the Union of Christians on Nov. 12.

You are gathered, in fact, to promote the unity of Christians. "The restoration of unity among all Christians" was one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. That is why there was set up, right from its preparatory period, a secretariat whose very name indicated that it was intended to serve this primary task of the Church. It was to do so within the Catholic Church by preparing a conciliar decree and directives to apply it, while developing relations of brotherly collaboration with the ecumenical commissions of the Episcopal Conferences. It was to do so also by establishing and developing relations with the other Churches and ecclesial communities. Through the presence of observers during the Council, future dialogues were outlined and our meetings with the pastors of their Churches were prepared. How could we fail to recall here what the Christian people

called the holy meeting, the one with the venerated Patriarch Athenagoras on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem? Our secretariat has been pursuing this service of unity for years with indefatigable activity.

Some of you have come for the first time to take part in the work of this plenary session. You come at a moment when, in this field of ecumenism as in so many other things, it is fashionable to speak of a crisis. As a matter of fact, the Council and the years that followed it were marked by deep and rapid changes in the relations between the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches.

Mutual lack of appreciation rapidly melted away with the rediscovery of the bonds of communion that united us in spite of our divergences. We have rediscovered one another as brothers, brothers still disunited, it is true, but really brothers who "justified by faith in baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians."

The joy of meeting again in this way made many people think, perhaps, that we were on the eve of reaching the goal of refound full communion. Hence their disappointment, their impression of marking time when the theological dialogue was started and developed.

Wishing to cure ourselves of the disease of our divisions, it was necessary for us, in a common effort of brotherly lucidity, to discern its real causes and discover its roots.

Convergences assert themselves; agreements are outlined on the fundamental realities of baptism, the Eucharist, the ministry of unity in the Church. Studies begin or are continued on the authority of the Church in her teaching. The Catholic Church is determined to continue and intensify her contribution to this common effort of all Christians. It is furthermore "a requirement of the work of preaching and of the witness to be borne to the Gospel", as we stated in our recent exhortation on Evangelization in the modern world, taking up again the wish expressed by the Fathers at the third general Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. And we must all collaborate in promoting this "civilization of love", which seems to us to be more and more a necessity of the action of Christians in the world.

We would also like to recall emphatically the fundamental importance of spiritual ecumenism. Change of heart, renewal of the spirit, renunciation of self, the free outpouring of charity, that is the soul of the ecumenical movement for which, under this aspect, one and all of the faithful are responsible.