Advent and Hope in the Midst of a Fallen and Sinful World

Marist School Board of Trustees Prayer Service

I want to acknowledge all the problems our nation and the world are facing but from the perspective of the Season of Advent which encourages us to have hope. I also am anticipating the Third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is the Latin word that means rejoice. We cannot rejoice in this fallen world without hope.

So, what is hope? Let me begin by telling you what it is not. Hope is not the same as optimism. The optimist says, "Don't worry. Everything will be fine. All will be well." It is a kind of upbeat assessment of a situation, no matter how dire things may be.

However, here is the grim truth. From a purely worldly or natural perspective, the right attitude is not optimism. It is pessimism. Why? Because everyone will die. Our projects and accomplishments will come to naught. In the end, nothing can bring us ultimate happiness.

What protects hope from sounding naïve, foolish, or unrealistic in light of that stark reality? Well, hope, faith, and love are called theological virtues. That is a fancy way of saying they don't come to us naturally. They are not from this earthy realm. Instead, they are gifts from God we receive at Baptism. They are signs that God's grace is at work in the world through his Church.

Jean-Paul Sartre, the founder of existentialism and one of the most pessimistic philosophers of the modern era, was also a prophet of doom. His gospel was not good news but bad news. He proclaimed, "There is no exit," meaning no way out of the hopelessness that hovers over this life because there is nothing beyond death. We live. We die—the end.

If God has imbued us with hope, what do we hope for? The Prophet Isaiah answers that question this way. "Here is your God. He comes with vindication; with divine recompense, he comes to save you. The desert and the parched land will exult. The steppe will rejoice and bloom. The eyes of the blind will be opened, the ears of the deaf will be cleared, and the tongues of the mute shall sing. The ransomed of the Lord will enter Zion and be crowned with lasting joy."

That vision is undoubtedly beautiful, but is it realistic? What difference does it make if a person goes to their grave with their sight, hearing, and speech restored? What is Isaiah talking about? The blooming of the desert is not something we should hope for in the context of this fallen, sinful world. Instead, it will occur through the power of God in a transfigured world to come. Isaiah is not speaking of the earthly Zion, the earthly city of Jerusalem. He is talking about the heavenly Jerusalem, where the power of God's grace has definitively ransomed us from evil and the hopelessness that clouded Jean-Paul Sartre's vision of the future and prevented him from seeing beyond death's iron curtain.

Some may say that understanding of hope is a form of escapism. It encourages us to focus on heaven and no longer care about the needs of this world. Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and Mao were all men without the theological virtue of hope. They thought the desert could bloom in this fallen world. They believed we could be definitively ransomed from the evil in this world. They believed all would be well in this world. That makes them optimists. Yet they caused the deaths of millions to create their vision of heaven here on earth, which looked more like hell.

The great saints were gifted with the theological virtue of hope. Ironically, they were the ones who effected the most potent social changes for the better here on earth. They were followers of Christ whose suffering, death, and resurrection broke the chains of sin and death and proclaimed our destiny lies beyond this fallen earthly realm. His transfigured or resurrected body points to the future when this world

will be transfigured, transformed, or resurrected and the values of the kingdom of God will reign supreme. The saints were people of hope. Through Baptism, we, too, are called to be saints and in turn, people of hope. That makes us agents or "co-creators" of the divine transformation of this world that Christ will bring to completion when he comes again in power and majesty.

I will conclude with this thought. Mary is called Our Lady of Hope. Why? Because she gave birth to Jesus, who is our only hope. At the foot of the cross, she stood steadfast in the hope that he would be true to his word, defeat the forces of sin and death, and rise again. Along with the Prophet Isaiah, she believed that the fallen, sinful, and earthly Zion would one day give way to a transformed, transfigured, heavenly Jerusalem. Then, the vision of Isaiah will be fulfilled with the ransomed of the Lord entering the new and eternal Jerusalem to be crowned with lasting joy.

It is only within the context of theological virtue of hope that Julian of Norwich, the 14th-century English mystic, who knew war, a papal schism, and suffered from a serious illness, could still say, "All will be well. All will be well. And every manner of being shall be well."