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Finding Hope in Fragile Places

I want to begin my time with you today by showing a short video of a woman whose story for me embodies the meaning of hope. Her name is Marguerite Barankitse, and this is her story. I know that it's a story that many of you could tell too, in your struggles to nurture love and bring hope amidst the ruins of violence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PWSxAA4nOg0&t=9s>

That is a story of hope flourishing against all the odds.

In preparing my reflections for today, I've been reading about the history of the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre. It is an amazing story, to such an extent that I've decided it is in itself a history of hope. Like the origins of hope itself, the origins of the Order are 'lost in the mists of the past,' to quote Sydney F. Smith, SJ – a Jesuit who wrote the Preface to a book titled *History of the New Hall Community*, published in 1899. That book was published by Manresa Press, based at Roehampton which is the University I now work for!

The foundation of the Canonesses can be traced back to the year 1300 in Spain, but like so many women's religious orders, the Canonesses have a diffuse and tangled history that doesn't follow any straight chronological order.

I'm not going to attempt to summarise that history. You probably all know it better than I do. However, I call it a history of hope because, from the aftermath of the Crusades through post-Reformation England, Revolutionary France and to the modern Democratic Republic of Congo, the story of the Canonesses is a story of survival, perseverance, migration and renewal in the face of some of history's most distressing episodes of violence, conflict and religious persecution.

In reflecting on what I might share with you on the meaning of hope, I want to offer five perspectives – hope as the story we tell about ourselves, hope as a maternal vocation, hope as 'herstory' – the history of women, hope as re-creation of the world, and hope as discernment and patience. So let me begin with story-telling.

Hope as our story about ourselves

Our lives are incarnate stories. Each of us is called to relive the story of Christ through our vocation to love in our own particular contexts and circumstances.

A good story depends upon memory, imagination and hope. We draw on our memories of the past in order to make sense of the present, and out of the present we imagine a future which holds open the horizons of hope. In weaving the meaning of our lives out of these three dimensions of past, present and future, we discover who we are – a discovery that is always unfolding, never completed. Ultimately who we are is hidden within the mystery of the God we yearn for and respond to in our daily lives.

The story of the Canonesses is the historical living out of your vocation to journey 'from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from death to life.' This journey has been repeated many times in the history of the Order, and indeed it is repeated in the history of every individual, community and nation. Each of us makes that journey many times in our personal and communal stories – from darkness to light, from despair to hope, from death to life. Whether in the great challenges and tragedies that confront us, or in the small frustrations and disappointments of daily life, we must continuously experience the renewal of hope if we are to live meaningful lives. Otherwise, we would abandon ourselves to futility and despair, to that dark spirit of nihilism which broods over secular modernity. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, 'Hope keeps the world open to God'.

Each of our personal stories and shared histories is part of creation's journey to God, a journey sustained and inspired by hope. Pope Francis reminds us how closely the story of God is interwoven with history. 'True Christian hope, which seeks the eschatological kingdom, always generates history,' he says in *Evangelii Gaudium*. In his catechesis on hope last December, he said that 'God with his love journeys with us. "I hope, because God is by my side": we can all say this. Each of us can say: "I hope, I hope, because God is walking with me."' Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* extends this to encompass the whole of creation moving towards its fulfilment. We are, says Francis, 'journeying towards the sabbath of eternity ... In union with all creatures, we journey through this land seeking God'.

To journey towards the Sabbath of eternity is to journey in hope. To see the incarnation as God walking with us through history is to seek salvation as a dynamic reality in the here and now. It is to recognise the ongoing transformation of the human story through the continuous renewing activity of the Holy Spirit, gracing creation with hope and teaching us to recognise the signs of redemption within the world around us. We seek the signs of eternity – the signs of hope – not beyond the here and now but enfolded within it, as the sustaining grace that gives life to the world.

That is why I'm suggesting that the history of the Canonesses can be read as a history of hope. It isn't written in straight lines, but is rather woven into relationships which have preserved the memory, the promise and the presence of the risen Christ through the darkest nights. Today, in different ways, you are all keeping the flame of Christ's love glowing in darkness, as you gather from many different countries, bringing different struggles and challenges. For communities in northern Europe, you are keeping Christ's light alive in the darkness that comes with the setting of the sun, a slow and gentle fading of the light such as we experience in the northern hemisphere. It's the darkness of a calling that is difficult to discern, in ageing communities with few new vocations and an uncertain future. For those of you from places such as the DRC and Rwanda, the darkness comes like the African sunset – in a violent blaze of colour and sudden darkness sweeping across the face of the earth. For you, the darkness brings violence and fear, desolation, poverty and abandonment, abuse, rape and murder.

Through all this, in your different communities and contexts, in your daily work among the wounded, the displaced and the broken hearted, you are all passing Christ's light from heart to heart and person to person, keeping the light shining in the darkness. In

the Easter vigil, we perform this mystery as we light our candles from the Paschal candle, so that the light slowly passes among us, increasing all the time until the darkened church is bathed in the warmth of candlelight. That is a symbolic acting out of what each of us is called to do in our daily lives. Each candle flame is so small, too small to chase away the encroaching darkness, but passed among us from hand to hand and heart to heart, the light keeps growing and bathes our world in the light of Christ.

To nurture this light among us is to nurture the fragility of Christ among us. The great French mystic Charles Péguy says that not only do we place our hope in God, but that God places his hope in us. He says that God's eternal hope is placed 'in our hands, in our weak hands, ... God hopes in us so that we might hope in him, and surrender to him with the same gesture of confident abandon with which he created us.' I find that an amazing idea – that in living as people of hope, we are expressing not only our hope in God, but also God's hope in us.

The history of the Canonesses is the telling of God's unfinished story of hope within the world. It is a story that has incarnated hope for so many thousands of poor women and girls through time, bringing education, solidarity and friendship to those on the very margins of society, and keeping hope alive in the darkest of times.

Hope as a maternal vocation

Hope is a maternal vocation. Like the Virgin Mary and like Mary Magdalene, we are called to hear and respond to God's call to conceive Christ in our hearts, and to nurture his life within the womb-like warmth of our souls. When Mary visits Elizabeth, her elderly cousin proclaims the words of hope that are passed from woman to woman through all the generations: 'Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfil his promises to her!' (Luke 1:45)

The origins of Christian hope – like the origins of the Canonesses – are hidden within the mystery of Christ's Resurrection, when he first appeared to Mary Magdalene on Easter Sunday. That rising from the tomb brings the incarnation to its fulfilment. Just as Mary birthed the infant Christ from her womb, so mother earth birthed the risen Christ from the tomb. On both occasions it was women who were entrusted with the mystery. When the Virgin Mary said 'yes' to the Angel Gabriel, she consecrated creation and restored it to its union with God. Her 'yes', her 'fiat', brought the real presence of Christ's body into creation, restoring us to the intimacy with God that was lost when creation became estranged from its creator. When Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, she became the first preacher of the Gospel. When Mary of Magdala ran from the tomb to tell the apostles that she had seen the Lord, she became the first preacher of the Resurrection. Women, silenced, ignored and devalued throughout history and still today, are the bearers of the good news of Christ to the world. We are bearers of hope, with a maternal vocation that all Christians – men and women, old and young – are called to embrace. A maternal vocation is a vocation to hope. It is a vocation that births new life in many ways through acts of loving creativity and imagination, through care and compassion for the vulnerable, through wisdom and strength for those who are struggling.

This Chapter meeting has as its theme the fragility of hope. Hope is as fragile as the child in the womb. It is as fragile as the voices of women speaking through all the cloistered silences of history. To be a bearer of hope is to carry Christ's life within us, as Mary carried Christ in her womb and in her heart. It is to go out from the Garden of the Resurrection with a message of hope for the world that we are called to preach, even though the male disciples might laugh at us and refuse to believe us.

The Church still does not fully recognise that the vocation to nurture life is not primarily a vocation to biological motherhood, important though that is. It is first and foremost a vocation to be bearers of the Word of God, like Mary of Nazareth and Mary of Magdala. When a woman in the crowd called out to Christ, 'Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts you sucked', (Luke 11:27), Jesus replied 'Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!' Saint Augustine wrote of the Virgin Mary conceiving first in her heart, and then in her womb. On Easter morning, when the earth birthed the risen Christ, it was Mary of Magdala who birthed that life in her heart, who became the first to tell the story of the resurrection. In the ancient Church, Mary Magdalene was associated with Mary the mother of Christ, because they were both responsible for bringing the life of Christ to the world. Last year, Pope Francis elevated the Memorial of Mary Magdalene to a feast day, equal to the feasts of the other apostles. For the first time, the liturgy for that day recognises Mary Magdalene by her ancient title of 'the apostle to the apostles'.

So I'm suggesting that the hope which Christ brings to the world is a story that God entrusts first and foremost to women, as the first witnesses to the conception and resurrection of Jesus. The history of the Canonesses is a history of hope, and it is also a history of women – a women's history – a herstory.

Hope as 'Herstory'

Feminist philosophers such as Belgian Luce Irigaray analyse the construction of masculinity and femininity around ancient associations of masculinity with divinity, mind, order and rationality, and of femininity with humanity, body and matter, passion, disorder and chaos. Irigaray suggests that we are all deeply conditioned by these associations. Of course, they vary from culture to culture, and we must be careful not to project modern western concepts onto all histories and cultures. Every culture might have a different rationale and justification for preserving gendered social hierarchies in which men rule and women obey, men are authoritative and women are subordinate. The justifications and cultural explanations might vary, but the hierarchies remain the same. The full equality and dignity of all humankind, male and female, made in the image of God, is still a distant dream for the vast majority of women and girls in the world. Sadly these sexual hierarchies are underpinned and justified by the divisive hierarchies that still prevail in the Church.

However, Irigaray suggests that rather than simply dismissing or rejecting these sexual stereotypes, we should ask what they conceal, what revelations might be hidden within them. Do they reveal the hidden and rejected dimension of women's wisdom, the incarnational significance of female embodiment, and the feminised divine who has been lurking in the shadows of Christian consciousness and theology?

When I read the history of the Canonesses, I read a story that suggests these feminised patterns of what it means to be a community of hope. Masculine thinking – which of course is not confined to men! – is linear, progressive and orderly. Modernity's faith in science, secular reason and progress is driven by this masculine quest for order, and that entails a very high degree of control and repression. As an academic discipline, history – like science – seeks to give an account of the past in terms of causes and consequences, objectivising, rationalising and explaining the wayward vagaries of the human heart.

But the history of hope is elsewhere. It is not the kind of history that can be written down in the language of university professors. If hope has a language, it is the language of music and poetry and literature, of oral traditions and popular devotions, of love silently tending the wounds of humanity and healing the broken bodies and hearts of our sisters and brothers, far from the gaze of the media and the scholars. The history of hope is a history told in the margins, an unwritten history that we must discover by listening to silences and interpreting absences. It is a fragile history. It is a history of those who are vulnerable and threatened with destruction, and yet who have risen again and again to tell their stories and raise their voices. It is the history of those who have no history of their own, for their stories have always been controlled and interpreted by others. It is the history of women, of colonised peoples, of racial, sexual and religious minorities. It is the history of so many non-human creatures hunted or exploited to extinction by humanity's lust for domination over nature.

The poet Maya Angelou articulates what these hidden, neglected histories of hope mean in her poem, *Still I Rise*:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5lgxayzy_k

Johann Baptist Metz, a German theologian writing out of the context of the Holocaust, speaks of the 'dangerous memories' which interrupt progressive accounts of history by calling attention to the silenced voices and unheeded cries of suffering that constitute the human story. The history of the Canonesses is a history of those dangerous memories, which cannot be controlled by the powers of those who write the master narratives.

For your last general chapter, on the theme of 'Solidarity', your concluding declaration included the words: 'As women religious we want to claim our liminal place within a church that is also fragile.' That is a beautiful description of where we find the history of hope – within the liminal places, the marginal places, within the fragility of the church where Christ is sacramentally conceived and born anew, even as the institutional Church so often seeks to crush and destroy that fragile, newborn life of hope and hope of life.

The anthropologist Victor Turner describes liminality as a space in which rules are suspended and hierarchies are disrupted. To be liminal is to occupy a position that Richard Rohr describes as being 'on the edge of the inside'. Now at the height of summer, we know how beautiful those spaces of liminality are in nature. On the edges of the fields and on the outskirts of our urban environments – in those liminal spaces – the wild flowers grow and the insects, birds and tiny mammals come to feed. In those

liminal spaces our human domination of nature relinquishes its grip. Ploughed fields melt into meadows and marshes, and the ordered rows of crops surrender to what poet Gerard Manley Hopkins so eloquently celebrates in his poem, 'God's Grandeur', when he says 'long lives the weeds and the wilderness yet'.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzO3Kh3Jf9E>

The historian Caroline Walker Bynum argues that women have always been identified with liminality in the Church. Men have been able to move between positions of masculine authority and feminine desire in their relationships with God – church teaching assures us that men can be both bridegroom and bride, priest and church – while women have never been permitted to move beyond the liminality of the feminine. 'The Church is a woman', Pope Francis assures us, but we can never be the bridegroom, the priest. The Church is a very strange woman indeed, given how many bodies of every age and gender that seems to encompass! Still today, Pope Francis speaks of 'feminine genius,' borrowing an expression much favoured by Pope John Paul II. I don't know about you, but I have no idea what that term 'feminine genius' means. But I am going to claim it for us today. Feminine genius is what we do when we celebrate our liminality as the place where hope seeds itself like the wild flowers growing on the edge of the field. It is where we have the possibility to grow and to flourish in ways that disrupt the order of things. It is where imagination and creativity daily re-create the world.

Hope as Re-creation

To understand liminality as hope is to recognise that, where order and control are beginning to weaken and yield to wilder and more chaotic influences, we are confronted with crisis but also with opportunity. I'm very aware that some of you today come from the DRC, where anarchy has brought terrible suffering and fear to so many lives. Here in the West, we are also seeing the disintegration of the old order of liberal modernity, and we face new and terrifying possibilities in the rise of racist, nationalist and violent ideologies. So I don't want to romanticise what it means to live in times of disorder and anarchy. We should always give thanks for what Saint Augustine described as the peace that is to be found in 'the tranquillity of order', for when order disintegrates women and children become even more vulnerable to poverty, displacement, violence and sexual abuse.

Yet it is also true that sometimes, the breaking down of old orders becomes a time of opportunity and creativity. Here in the West, our modern economic policies have condemned too many of the world's people to lives of poverty and exploitation. They have widened the gap between rich and poor until they have torn apart nations, communities and families. They have fuelled campaigns of war and violence to secure the West's economic and military power. Ultimately, an unjust order has to collapse in order for new life to emerge, and that is why the word 'crisis' in Greek – *krisis* – can also be viewed as a time when hope breaks through and we can imagine different worlds. Scripture refers to *kairos* time, which is different from the predictable order of chronological time. *Kairos* is a time when we experience with particular intensity a sense of revelation and possibility. It is a time of opportunity when we must discern the first signs of life pushing through the ashes of destruction, the first flutterings of the future that we nurture within the womb of hope.

Liminality, *krisis* and *kairos* can be woven together into a narrative of hope, into an open-ended story of endings and new beginnings, of sorrow, dying and letting go, but also of turning from the darkness of night towards the horizon of the rising sun, which we know will rise because the Son has risen.

The declaration from your last chapter says that, 'Made in the image of God we feel called to re-create the world as "holy ground", weaving threads of solidarity in order to give the world a new face, partners with God in this work of re-creation.'

That too is a beautiful image. The metaphor of weaving is a metaphor of women's lives. It suggests an order that is not linear and progressive, but that makes patterns out of repetition, creativity and imagination. The Virgin Mary is often associated with weaving. In some legends she is depicted as weaving the veil of the temple. Some theologians speak of the weaving together of the divine and human in her womb. Sometimes, the web-like pattern of women's thinking is compared or even contrasted with the linear pattern of masculine thought. My husband once joked that he didn't mind my thinking being web-like, but he wished I didn't follow the same web-like patterns when driving around roundabouts.

A spider's web is a fragile and beautiful work of art, easily broken, yet every thread of that web is made of one of the strongest fibres in nature. Weight for weight, the silk of a spider's web is five times as strong as steel.

The history of hope then, is a history of individual lives strengthened and empowered by Christ, and woven together into webs of meaning that are sometimes torn apart, but that will always be rewoven out of those strong fibres of women's faith. Like the silk of a spider's web, we women might appear fragile and delicate when compared to men of steel. But when we are woven together, we are stronger than steel, and we rise again and again to bring new life to the world, to re-create the world, because we never abandon hope. Maybe that is what feminine genius means, and those who think it makes us delicate and obedient should be very careful, for it makes us stronger than steel when we stand together in hope.

That is what it means to weave 'threads of 'solidarity in order to give the world a new face', to be 'partners with God in this work of re-creation.'

But let's note that the work of re-creation also implies recreation, for re-creation comes out of rest. The Sabbath is woven into God's creation, calling us to rest in the beauty and wonder of this world, and to draw hope from it as Job did. To say that is not to domesticate nature, to pretend that nature is always gentle and loving. There is an awesome power to nature that can seem violent and destructive to human minds. Surely, that is what Job discovered. In the midst of his anguish, his theologian friends offered no comfort with their clever answers. When God spoke, there was no answer. There was only a vocation to contemplate creation, and to discover within it the mystery of God's presence. Time and again Pope Francis calls us to stop being so busy, to slow down, to take time to immerse ourselves in the wonder of God's creation. In *Laudato Si'* he calls us 'to be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be,' for this 'opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment.'

He also says that 'Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances?'

In western culture, our capacity to rest in the silence and mystery of nature has been sacrificed to consumerism and competition. We have become afraid of silence, afraid of emptiness, afraid of inactivity. From my own experience of life in Africa I know that there is still a different rhythm of time, that many African cultures still retain a sense of being together and being with one another, even as that is threatened by the influence of western values and lifestyles. We in the West need to rediscover the relationship between recreation and rest, and re-creation and renewal. Maybe in some of your ageing communities, that becomes easier to do.

As we grow older, we find ourselves slowing down. We become more aware of our bodies as they change with the ageing process. We feel the horizons of death drawing closer, and we may find ourselves dwelling more deeply on questions of meaning and hope. In other words, this is a time of life when perhaps God is inviting us to change our pace. There's a freedom in growing older, particularly today when many of us in the West enjoy high levels of nutrition and health care. I was recently at a talk by Sister Sandra Schneiders when she said that 'sixty is the new thirty'. It is indeed true that many of us have the energy and vitality in our sixties that our grandmothers would have felt draining away much earlier. But this can also bring with it the pressure to keep going, to drive ourselves harder and harder, especially if we have a sense that we have unfinished business in our lives and time is running out.

It takes time to discern the vocation to the wisdom of ageing, yet this can also be a time of great beauty, serenity and grace. There is a lovely poem by Mary Lou Sleeve about the prophet Anna who welcomed the infant Christ into the temple with Simeon. Here is an extract from that poem:

The old woman is truly Beautiful
and beautifully True.

Anna of the free Spirit
is no solemn ascetic.

she had spent her Vitality
on an extravagance of prayer,
and discovered she was strong.

And her fasting produced
a Gluttony of hope.

Anna is Anticipation.
She is an Image
of constancy and change...
the progression of peace and purpose
at any stage of life.

Hers is the Holy City.

Solitude
as Anna lived it
lessens fear of the death-moment.
With God, one never stops saying
“Hello!”

I love that expression that Anna’s fasting produced ‘a gluttony of hope’.

Hope as Patience and Discernment

To rest in creation, to be healers of creation, is to acquire the gifts of patience and discernment. We need to wait patiently for the future to reveal itself, and we need to discern how to follow the paths that open up before us. Patience and discernment mean resting in the present, not in idleness but in attentiveness. They mean being fully conscious and awake, and yet not rushing to act prematurely or to take control of things.

That’s why hope is different from optimism. Optimism is a way of avoiding reality by hoping that tomorrow will be better. Sometimes, of course, it’s true that things get better, but what happens when they don’t get better? The sisters from the DRC know that sometimes the raped woman dies in childbirth, and the wounds of war do not heal. Broken families do not reunite, and enemies are never reconciled. In such situations, as Saint Paul says, ‘If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.’ (1 Corinthians 15:19). Eventually, this life must be relinquished. For some that relinquishment comes too soon and in agonizing pain, for others it comes gently in its natural time. But hope sees through the barrier of death and knows that there is a future beyond what we can possibly know or understand, and that future is the love and peace we long for. The hope that we seed in this life bears fruit in the next, and it takes patience to wait for the final fulfilment of our hope, in the face of futility, failure and death.

So hope is not optimism. Hope is being fully alive and knowing that beyond the darkest night, the sun will rise because the Son has risen. Optimism involves fantasy and escapism. It allows us to absent ourselves from the difficulties of the present, by fantasising about how good the future might be. Hope involves imagination and immersion in reality. It calls us to engage with the materials of creation – with life in all its forms and nature in all its variety just as an artist engages with her materials. Hope is that imaginative ability to take those raw materials of life and to weave them into a beautiful picture, to make poetry and music and dance out of sorrow. Fantasy is abstract and disconnected from reality. That’s why so much about the internet creates a world of fantasy and escapism.

In his catechesis on hope last December, Pope Francis contrasted hope and optimism. He said, ‘Optimism disappoints, but hope does not!’ Visiting victims of the earthquake in Italy in August last year, he said ‘Rebuilding the heart is not the rosy idea that tomorrow will be better, it isn’t optimism – there’s no room for optimism here.’ I think the point he is making is that hope can accommodate pain and suffering and devastation. Optimism

anaesthetizes us to reality and prevents us from acting effectively to rebuild broken hearts and ruined lives.

Hope can also be expressed in anger as well as suffering. Child psychologists suggest that a traumatised child who is behaving badly, who is showing anger and aggression, is actually expressing hope that he or she will receive the love they yearn for. It's the passive child, the child who has given up even on anger, who is truly in despair. For us too, there are ways of being angry that are expressions of hope. We can cry out in hopeful anger that this is not what the world should be like. We can rage against injustice, and that rage is rooted in hope for the future.

With that in mind, I want to end this session by listening to one of my favourite songs, Leonard Cohen's Anthem. This is a song about hope, but it's also a song about rising up to change the world.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48AJBXs5dNc>

It's the crack that lets the light get in. Hope enables us to live in that cracked and broken reality, and still to see the light of God's love that shines on our path through life.

I was once giving a talk to some sisters, rather like this group here today, when I received news that a young family friend had died in a violent and terrible way. The sisters arranged a display in the centre of the room, and they put a candle into a cracked jar. We sat in silence and reflected on how that crack refracted the candlelight and made it dance with beauty. Hope sees the beauty in the cracks. It recognises God in the brokenness, in the silences of history, in the liminal places where the wild flowers grow, in the maternal vocation to birth new life into spaces of violence, despair and death.

And we should remember that the wildflowers are expressions of joy and celebration. We sing and dance, we celebrate hope with colour and joy and solidarity.

Hope is what has enabled the Canonesses of the Holy Sepulchre to rise again and again, in fragile new formations of life that emerge from times of failure and loss. That is still your story today, as you wait in patient hope for the future to be revealed.