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Celebration of Hope

St. James Church

Johnson City, New York

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“Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trial or distress, or persecution or hunger or nakedness or danger or the sword?” Those familiar words from the Letter to the Romans popped into my head a few days ago as I was reading what you just heard Bob proclaim. They fall in the hiatus between verses 29 and 39 of Chapter 8 and set me to thinking about our purpose here tonight: where the idea came from and why it has gathered us, each of us for this prayer, to listen to the Spirit who groans within us with just the right words that lie somewhere deeper than words, inside hearts that long to be touched again and again by the power of the Easter Mystery.

Let me explain why I was drawn to that particular segment of Chapter 8. The question is one that bears reflection. *WHO can separate us from the love of Christ?* This is a challenge to the strength of our faith, certainly. And Paul, ever the orator, does not leave it there but pricks the consciences of his listeners with examples of what might be called “deal-breakers” of faith. But, interestingly, the list is not a list of “who” answers. It’s all about the “what’s” of our lives. Trial, distress, persecution, hunger, nakedness, danger, the sword...All **things** that might happen to shake our faith – not *people* – not *perpetrators* of the deal-breakers.

We sit in the neighborhood of many present distresses. We have an economy that has been devastated since the first IBMers were sent to the Carolinas in the 1980s, and we have seen the demise or defection of Endicott-Johnson, the company that built some of your family homes and all of the parks and carousels as well as your parents’ and grandparents’ bank accounts. We have watched companies morph into other entities like Link to Singer Link to Hughes Aircraft, which promised to be faithful to us but then went trotting off to Texas after six months. We know in our area the depression – economic, to be sure, but also of the spirit, the same depression that the entire world is now experiencing.

On April 3rd, we joined the national and world community in an experience that we thought unthinkable in our towns. Mass murder is not something that happens here! And yet, we now mourn 14, yes – 14 lives cut short in one brief, senseless act that brought us all up short and sent us groaning and grieving to God.

And what of our Church, for some the only comfort – the place we have always called home? We have seen the institution wracked with scandal and pain and loss and diminishment. And over the past two years we have become quite familiar with the words “linkage” and “merger” in all their grammatical forms. We find those words difficult at the least, sometimes contentious, and, at their worst, abhorrent.

So what are we to do, the Sisters of St. Joseph asked early in this year of Our Lord 2009? How can we help ease all this pain? The only answer that came was: “Pray. As we have always done and will always do, we can pray.” But in our efforts toward communion, we wanted to make conscious our need and desire to pray WITH YOU in hope, because we are “convinced that nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths – nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. “

And that leads me back to a distinction in the reading from Romans that is instructive – and, I believe, the only way out for us in this difficult time, in which, if we are willing, can also be the way in to freedom in the Paschal Mystery, where we can find ourselves in communion with the Risen Lord. It takes real reflection on that shift that I mentioned earlier from the personal pronoun WHO in the question (“Who can separate us?”) to an answer that is all about the WHAT of our distresses.

I am not asking you to believe that there is no one at the helm of IBM or the other corporations that have left our area virtually bereft of any industry, or that there was only a gun and no shooter at the American Civic Association on April 3rd. I am quite well aware that the Church is also full of sinners and saints and that we have reason to mourn the actions of so many – including ourselves, perhaps. But healing never comes from blame. Hope is not an angry virtue. As difficult as it is, we will never move forward unless we can stare life in the face and forgive it for what has disappointed, what has devastated, what has blocked us from believing in the goodness and beauty around us & within us – and that includes all the WHOs.

And in that moment of honesty, if we stand with the mind of Christ before all that binds us to hopelessness, we may hear the groaning of the Spirit of God who stands with us and pleads for us to reach out for communion.

We have seen the effects of that pleading. We have experienced the constant prayer of our community as a whole and in parishes and service groups mindful of those most affected by the April 3rd shootings. We have witnessed courageous willingness in those who remain faithful to Church, after seeing the building they have loved and called home all their lives close its doors. And our charity for the increasing numbers of poor in our community has kept pace and in many cases outrun our expectations. We have proven ourselves to be an Easter people, a people who

understand the supreme love of God, made incarnate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. We have been shaped in His likeness, and therein lies our hope.

It is *this* truth that brings us here, *this* truth of which we remind you and ourselves, this *truth* that will cause us to live in the Spirit of the Paschal Mystery which is with us today and throughout our lives with the joy of the Risen Christ in the deepest center of our hearts enabling us to walk into the future with hope and the assurance of faith. May it be so! Amen. Amen.