

The Pope mentions in particular the example of the late Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, who spent 13 years in a Vietnamese prison, 9 of them in solitary confinement, in a situation of seemingly utter hopelessness. In those circumstances the fact that he could still listen and speak to God was a source of great hope.

But in prayer we must be sincere. We "must free ourselves from the hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves. God sees through them, and when we come before God, we too are forced to recognise them." (n. 33) In this way, prayer purifies us of our pride and other shortcomings and makes us more capable of receiving God. We "become capable of the great hope, and thus we become ministers of hope for others." (n. 34)

II. Action and suffering as settings for learning hope

Action itself is a setting for exercising hope, in the sense that through it we strive to make our hopes a reality. But because our earthly hopes are often not realised, we need "the great hope that cannot be destroyed even by small-scale failures or by a breakdown in matters of historic importance." (n. 35)

Another important setting for the exercise of hope is suffering, which will always be with us as a result of sin and of our human limitations. We should do all we can to reduce suffering, but it is not in our power to banish it altogether from the world. In the context of suffering, we find our hope in God, who has become man and who has himself endured suffering in this world. (n. 36)

The Pope goes so far as to condition the true level of humanity of a person or a society to their attitude to suffering: "The true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer. This holds true both for the individual and for society. A society unable to accept its suffering members and incapable of helping to share their suffering and to bear it inwardly through "com-passion" is a cruel and inhuman society." (n. 38)

The Pope goes on say that true love by its very nature is a source of suffering: "In the end, even the 'yes' to love is a source of suffering, because love always requires expropriations of my 'I', in which I allow myself to be pruned and wounded. Love simply cannot exist without this painful renunciation of myself, for otherwise it becomes pure selfishness and thereby ceases to be love." (n. 38)

In the end, it has been the Christian faith that has taught us how to find hope in suffering by showing us that God himself has wanted to suffer for us and with us. "Man is worth so much to God that he himself became man in order to suffer with man in an utterly real way – in flesh and blood – as is revealed to us in the account of Jesus' Passion... and so the star of hope rises." (n. 39)

A great help in bearing suffering is the age-old practice of "offering it up" to God in union with the sufferings of Christ. The idea, the Pope says,

is to "insert these little annoyances into Christ's great 'com-passion' so that they somehow become part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love." (n. 40)

III. Judgment as a setting for learning and practising hope

Christ's coming again at the end of time "to judge the living and the dead" is another source of hope and a reason to live our lives well here and now. (n. 41)

One of the phenomena of the last centuries has been the atheism which protests against the injustices of the world. A good God could not permit so much injustice and innocent suffering, the atheists reason. They then presume to say that man himself must establish justice, but this idea, the Pope says, "has led to the greatest forms of cruelty and violations of justice... A world which has to create its own justice is a world without hope." (n. 42)

It is true that there has been widespread injustice in the world, but this is not the final word. It is precisely the Last Judgment that gives us hope that in the end the justice of God will triumph, that the perpetrators of injustice will be judged, and that in the resurrection of the flesh true justice will reign. (n. 43)

The Judgment brings to light the state of each soul. Some will be condemned forever to Hell and others will go to Heaven. But "for the great majority of people" we may suppose there is a mixture of good deeds covered over by compromises with evil, that need to be purified. The Pope quotes St Paul's description of each person's life being tested by fire: "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire." (1 Cor 3:15) (n. 46)

Some modern theologians are of the opinion that this fire of Purgatory, which both burns and saves, is Christ himself. "This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves... His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation 'as through fire'. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God... The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy." (n. 47)

The Pope concludes by recalling and promoting the constant tradition in the Church of praying for the souls in Purgatory.

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"Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!" (n. 50)

Mary, Star of Hope

On our journey of life, we look at the stars that indicate the route. The stars are the people that have lived good lives and are lights of hope, in the first place Jesus Christ, the true light, and Mary, star of the sea, star of hope. (n. 49) After a brief introductory paragraph, the remainder of this final section of the encyclical is a prayer to Mary, who gave birth to the One who was the hope of Israel.

Even in the apparent defeat of Calvary, hope did not die. Mary made her way towards Easter morning in faith, bearing the certitude of hope. In the joy of the Resurrection, Mary was united in a new way to the disciples and she remained with them, praying in the Upper Room for the gift of the Holy Spirit as their Mother, the Mother of hope. The Pope concludes: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!" (n. 50)

Questions for discussion

1. What idea from the encyclical struck you most?
2. What experiences have you had which tested your hope? Which ideas of the Pope would have helped you most at that time?
3. The Pope says that faith in God and in eternal life is essential if we are to have true hope. Has there been anything in your own life or in that of someone else you know that bears out the truth of this statement?
4. The Pope says that love by its nature is a source of suffering. Do you agree?

Christian

Summary and highlights
of the encyclical **Spe Salvi**

hope

by Pope Benedict XVI

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If there is a virtue which is much tested, and therefore much needed in modern society, it is hope. Traditionally defined as "the firm expectation of a difficult good not yet possessed", hope is tested by the many trials of life. People lose hope, become discouraged and are even tempted to despair over difficulties in marriage and the family, on seeing their children abandon the practice of the faith or adopt an immoral life style, on receiving bad news from the doctor, on being told they no longer have a job, at the death of a loved one, on seeing the proliferation of evil and immorality in society... The list goes on.

How can we continue to hope, when the picture looks bleak, when all the news seems to be bad? And where is God in all of this? Pope Benedict XVI addresses this question in his second encyclical *Spe salvi*, "On Christian Hope", dated the 30th November 2007. Having chosen love, the most important of the virtues, as the topic of his first encyclical "God is Love", he now turns to hope in his second encyclical.

The encyclical can be considered as divided into two main sections. The first one, comprising the first two-thirds of the document, is a theoretical consideration of hope, a sort of theology and philosophy of hope. The second, entitled "Settings for learning and practising hope", is more practical, looking at aspects of life in which hope can be learned and practised.

In a brief Introduction, the Pope points out the importance of having a goal if we are to have hope. He says that we can face life, "even if it is arduous... if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey." (n. 1) Throughout the encyclical he will elaborate on this point, showing what sort of goal leads to true hope.

Faith is Hope

The Pope shows how in the Bible hope is almost interchangeable with faith. For example, the *Letter to the Hebrews* links the "fullness of faith" (10:22) to "the confession of our hope without wavering." (10:23) Faith in God seems to be a pre-requisite for hope. Pope Benedict goes on to tell the story of a Sudanese woman who came to find God and so to find hope. It is one of the most beautiful passages in the encyclical.

St Josephine Bakhita was born around 1869



in Darfur, in the Sudan. At the age of nine she was kidnapped by slave-traders and beaten until she bled, so that she bore 144 scars throughout her life. She was sold five times in the slave-markets. In 1882 she was bought by an Italian merchant and then came to work for the Italian consul who took her to Italy. There she came to know Jesus Christ and to understand that above all the slave masters there was another master, God, who was good, goodness itself. "She came to know that this Lord even knew her, that he had created her – that he actually loved her... What is more, this master had himself accepted the destiny of being flogged and now he was waiting for her 'at the Father's right hand.' Now she had 'hope' – no longer simply the modest hope of finding masters who would be less cruel, but the great hope: 'I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me – I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good.'" (n. 3) Through this knowledge of God, the Pope says, Bakhita was "redeemed": no longer a slave, but a free child of God.

Bakhita became a Catholic in 1890 and in 1896 she took her vows as a Canossian nun, travelling around Italy to pass on to others the liberating message of her encounter with Christ. She was canonised by Pope John Paul II in 2000.

Faith-based hope in the New Testament and the early Church

What Jesus Christ brought to the world was "an encounter with the Lord of all lords, an encounter with the living God and thus an encounter with a hope stronger than the sufferings of slavery, a hope which therefore transformed life and the world from within." (n. 4)

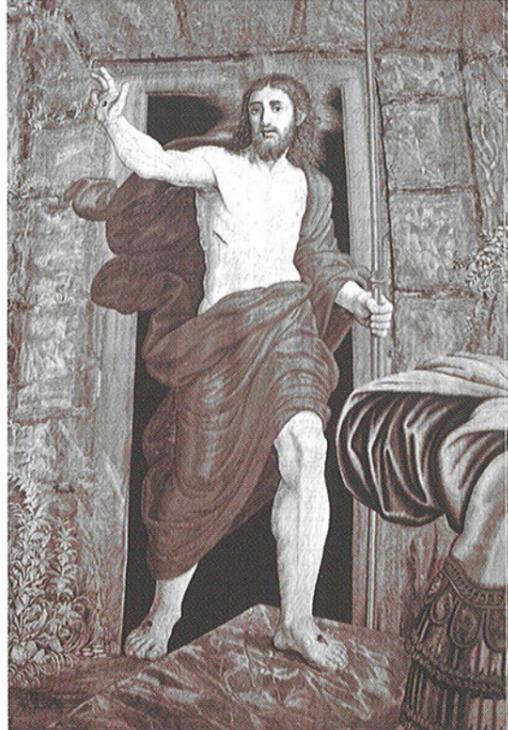
At the time of the early Church, people were coming to see that the Roman religion of gods and goddesses who were removed from reality no longer had appeal. There was no God to whom one could pray, no God with whom to establish a personal relationship. The early Christians, on the contrary, knew that it was not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, that governed the world, but rather a personal God, who revealed himself in Jesus as Love. (n. 5)

Early Christian art often depicted on tombs two images of Christ that reflect this hope-filled view of life. One is the image of the philosopher, who teaches "the art of being authentically human, the art of living and dying." The other is that of the good shepherd, who walks with us even "through the valley of the shadow of death" so that we fear no evil (Ps 23:1, 4) and can live, even in adversity, a life of true hope. (n. 6)

Another passage of the *Letter to the Hebrews* that throws light on hope is the following: "You joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one." (Heb 10:34) Whereas the world tends to see property, material wealth, as the source of security and

"Man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope." (n. 23)

"When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me." (n. 32)



happiness, the Christians referred to in this passage happily accepted the loss of their property because they had a better possession, an abiding one: their faith in God. (n. 8)

Eternal life – what is it?

When parents bring their child to be baptised, they ask for faith for their child, and when asked what faith gives them, they answer "eternal life". Baptism is not just a welcoming into the community, but a promise and beginning of eternal life. But do we really desire this eternal life? The Pope goes on to consider a common way of thinking with respect to this question. "Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive." (n. 10) On the one hand, they want to prolong this present life as much as possible, but on the other they realise that living indefinitely here on earth is not attractive either. What do they really want, then?

Quoting St Augustine, the Pope answers that ultimately we want only one thing: "the blessed life", the life that is simply "happiness". Our journey has no other goal than happiness, but we are not sure exactly what it is or how to attain it. (n. 11; cf St Augustine, *Ep. 130 Ad Probam* 14, 25-15, 28)

We do know that what we can experience or accomplish here on earth is not what we yearn for, that there is something beyond that will give us the happiness we seek. This "unknown" thing is what we call "eternal life". The Pope describes it as "like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time – the before and after – no longer exists." It is "life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy." (n. 12) This is the ultimate object of Christian hope, what the Pope calls repeatedly the "great hope", as distinct from the "greater or lesser hopes"

"Anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life." (n. 27)

"God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety." (n. 31)

related to our earthly goals.

Is Christian hope individualistic?

The Pope now addresses an important question, raised by critics of the Faith: Is this search for eternal happiness not something selfish, individualistic, since it forgets about others while seeking one's own happiness?

The Pope quotes the theologian Henri de Lubac, who shows that, on the contrary, salvation has always been considered a "social" reality. Indeed, the *Letter to the Hebrews* speaks of a "city" and therefore of communal salvation. (cf Heb 11:10, 16; 12:22) By contrast, sin brings about division, fragmentation of the community, as seen at Babel in the Old Testament, where languages were confused and people were divided from one another. Redemption is precisely the re-establishment of unity in the communion of believers.

Psalm 144 says: "Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord." (Ps 144:15) Thus, the Pope says, the object of our hope, eternal life, "is linked to a lived union with a 'people', and for each individual it can only be attained within this 'we'." (n. 14)

The transformation of Christian faith – hope in the modern age

In the next section of the encyclical, Pope Benedict asks the question of how the idea could have developed that salvation involved a flight from responsibility for the welfare of others. He finds the answer in the philosophical currents

of the modern era, beginning with Francis Bacon in the 17th century.

With the discovery of America and the technical achievements that made it possible came a new confidence in science and human reason as the means of regaining the dominion over creation that had been lost by original sin. According to these new philosophical currents, "redemption" comes not from faith in Jesus Christ but from science. Faith is not denied but it is pushed aside into the realm of private life. Hope too acquires a new form in this new world-vision. For Bacon, hope is now faith in progress, which will lead to a totally new world of dominion of man over nature: the kingdom of man.

In this new secular vision, two concepts are central: reason and freedom. Progress is primarily associated with the dominion of reason which, it is thought, will lead to a greater freedom from all forms of dependency. Reason and freedom seem to guarantee by themselves a new and perfect human community. But they are interpreted as being in conflict with the faith and the Church, as well as with the political structures of the time, thus containing, the Pope says, a "revolutionary potential of enormous explosive force." (n. 18)

This explosive force would be unleashed in the French Revolution in 1789 and later in the Marxist Russian Revolution of 1917. But neither of these resulted in the hoped-for earthly paradise, bringing rather a trail of destruction. Marx, as the Pope puts it, had forgotten that man is always man and he remains free not only for good but also for evil. (n. 21)

This experience must lead to a true questioning of modernity and of what it has to offer. Technological progress, or reason on its own



detached from God and from the truth about good and evil, is incapable of bringing about true happiness. "Man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope." (n. 23)

The true shape of Christian hope

The Pope points out that while there can be continuous progress in the technological sphere, in the field of ethics and morals this is not possible for the simple reason that man remains free to decide for good or evil in each choice. This has two consequences:

- The moral well-being of the world can never be guaranteed simply through structures alone, however good they are, because man is free to use these structures for good or for evil.
- "Since man always remains free and since his freedom is always fragile, the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world." (n. 24)

What gives man the happiness he seeks is love, not science, technology or structures. When someone experiences love in a deep way, it is a moment of "redemption", giving a new meaning to life. But human love will always remain fragile. "The human being needs unconditional love" and this can come only from God." (n. 26)

This leads to perhaps the central idea of the whole encyclical. "Anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life." (n. 27)

"This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain... God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety." (n. 31)

"Settings" for learning and practising hope

In this second major section of the encyclical Pope Benedict looks at settings, or aspects of life, in which we can learn in practice how to live hope. He considers three: prayer, action and suffering, and God's judgment of human beings.

I. Prayer as a school of hope

"A first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God. When there is no longer anyone to help me deal with a need or expectation that goes beyond the human capacity for hope, he can help me." (n. 32)

