

On Christian Hope: The New Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI

James Corkery SJ

James Corkery SJ, of Dublin's Milltown Institute, analyses the message of the Pope's latest encyclical, *Spe Salvi*.

On 30 November 2007, just before the beginning of the season of Advent, Pope Benedict XVI issued his second encyclical letter, *Spe Salvi*. Appropriately for the advent season, its theme was hope. Pope Benedict treated in his letter of the specific character of Christian hope. Aware that there are many menus of 'hope' presented to us in the world of today, his desire was to express that hope upon which men and women could trustingly rely. This is the hope that has God as its foundation, for, as Saint Paul makes plain (Ephesians 2:12), without God there is no hope – no future but darkness (2).¹

Spe Salvi did not quite capture the attention of the media in the way in which Benedict's first encyclical letter, issued on 25 December 2005, did. Yet there are similarities. *Deus Caritas Est*, the first letter, was a celebration of love; but its ultimate purpose was to speak of the love that God is, a reliable and faithful love; an absolute love; a love that purifies our own imperfect loves, giving them meaning, solidity and direction. Both in the case of love and in the case of hope, Benedict XVI is choosing what is at the heart of our humanity – we are made for love, we cannot exist without hope – and he is showing the counterfeits of these in the contemporary world and opening a perspective on true love, true hope, that will save and not demean us. In this way, both encyclicals belong together. Each seeks to deal with what is truly salvific, truly redemptive for humanity.



WHAT DOES THE ENCYCLICAL LETTER SAY?

Fundamental Aspects of Christian Hope (the New Testament and Early Christianity)

In the first part of his encyclical, Pope Benedict looks to a number of New Testament and early Christian writings in order to capture the true identity of Christian hope. He points out how

'hope' is so central to biblical faith that, in several places, the terms 'hope' and 'faith' seem almost equivalent (2). The words from Saint Paul with which the encyclical begins – "in hope we were saved" (Romans 8:24) – point to the "trustworthy hope" that has been given to us, not just as information about our future but also as something that enables us to

live in our present, even if this present is arduous, and to shape our lives in a new way (1, 2, 4, 10). Thus the Christian message of hope is 'performative' as well as 'informative'. It comes to us when we encounter God – as Pope Benedict illustrates beautifully through the life-story of the recently canonized, nineteenth century African saint, Josephine Bakhita (3) – and we receive it as a gift. A trustworthy hope like this is not something that we can ever give ourselves (1).

The hope that comes from encountering God relativizes all other, limited hopes because it is "the great hope," assuring us that a definitive Love is ours and is awaiting us. This love is

made visible in Jesus, who was not a social revolutionary bringing an *external* liberation but rather, in his love ‘to the end’ on the Cross, was someone who brought a very different reality: an encounter with the living God that changed the world *from within* (4, also 27). Benedict focuses on two images from early Christianity to describe Jesus, the Christ: that of philosopher and that of shepherd (6). As the first, Jesus teaches us what it is to be truly human; as the second, he walks with us in the valleys of life – and indeed into the valley of death. The hope that he brings illustrates that death itself is no longer to be feared. In a nutshell, then, the substance of New Testament hope relativizes the habitual foundations of well-being (material security, etc.) and provides an objective certainty, not just a subjective conviction, about a future that is real and that can be relied upon (thus paragraphs 7-9, a rather professorial treatment completing the encyclical’s first main section).

What Christian Hope is Not . . .

In a move rather typical of the writings of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, the Pope now turns to an examination of what hope is *not*. Having pointed out that ‘eternal life’ is at the centre of Christian hope, he quickly shows awareness of how, on the one hand, we do not want to die and, on the other hand, we cannot countenance living indefinitely. So our attitude is paradoxical, giving rise to the deeper question of what ‘life’ and what ‘eternity’ actually are (11). He argues that the term ‘eternal life’ is an inadequate one seeking to express an ‘unknown’ of which we are aware, for which we yearn, and which yet eludes us. It is something like ‘life itself, a plunging into a sea of love with a deep satisfaction that is something entirely different from contentment in a temporally successive sense. It is relationship, immersing us in an ocean of joy. It is relationship involving unity with God and with one another, not some

private ‘satisfaction’ centred on me alone (12, 13, 27). Christian hope is social and communal in character; it is a ‘blessed life’ (Augustine) involving a ‘we’, indeed expressing a ‘we’ (14, 15).

‘Eternal life’, then, is not individual, private self-satisfaction in endless time; that is what our hope is *not*. And a notion that has emerged in modern times – not least to counter such a distorted view – is not what Christian hope is either, for it leaves God out of the picture and seeks to base hope on humanly-created realities. Here Benedict has in mind ‘faith in progress’, encompassing an unbridled trust in the power of autonomous reason and its possibilities: freedom from all dependency, the self-realization of humanity (17, 18). In the period of modernity, Christian hope became transformed into this idea (16-23), which promised a future it could not deliver, will never deliver because fragile human freedom is ever-capable of placing it in jeopardy. To rely on the creation of structures that will usher in such a self-realized future for humanity is mistaken. Karl Marx’s error, for example, was not a failure to uncover what was unjust and needed changing; nor did it consist in his not knowing how to overthrow the existing order (quite the contrary, in fact); rather it consisted in forgetting that human beings are human beings, always therefore free, and always therefore capable of choosing evil too, no matter how well the economic environment has been shaped (21). His error, in short, was materialism. And so we are still faced with the question: what may we hope? (22f.).

What Christian Hope Is . . .

To answer the question of what we may truly hope, a self-critique of modernity and, indeed, of modern Christianity is needed. This will quickly show the ambiguity of ‘faith in progress’ when progress is confined to the

scientific dimension of life. For, thus confined, it is detached from God, as also are the concepts of 'reason' and 'freedom' accompanying it; and without God there is no hope (22, 23). Despite the good that science can achieve in making the world a better place, it can also destroy the world if it is not guided by what is outside itself, namely, recourse to God and to "the moral treasury of the whole of humanity" (23-25). Appeal to this treasury is a must for ever-fragile human freedom; ethical reflection must keep pace with technical advances; otherwise our reason, which we think will 'save' us, will in fact do the opposite. Reason needs to be connected to faith if it is to direct us to what is truly good. Science alone cannot save; only love can save. 'Life' is ultimately guaranteed only by the God of life (25-27).

Human beings need unconditional love and we can never give that to ourselves. Absolute love is received – received from God in Jesus Christ, through whom "we have become certain of God" (26). In him our true hope is found; his 'love to the end' expresses what truly gives us 'life'. So, 'life', true life, fullness of life, is a gift to us; it is relationship, and we cannot give it to ourselves. Here Pope Benedict is returning to the positive meaning of 'eternal life' already hinted at earlier; and it is this that is our lasting hope. It is this that constitutes 'the great hope' that transcends all our particular searches for hope, announcing at the same time both their meaningfulness and relativity (30-31). But how is it possible to re-connect with this hope? To show us, Benedict identifies what he calls three 'settings' that will help us to learn and practise Christian hope (32-48).

'Settings' within Christian Life that Offer a Pathway towards, a Pedagogy into, Hope

Prayer is the first. Quite simply, it offers the assurance that, when no one seems to be there for me, there is someone to whom I can always

talk, and who will always listen to me. In prayer, God opens us up; opens us up for God and opens us up towards others. In prayer, God purifies and strengthens our desires, enlarging our hope and developing in us hope for others as well. In prayer, we speak to God communally, liturgically, as well as personally. Prayer makes us hopeful and enables us to give hope to others (32-34).

Action and suffering are the pair of 'settings' that Benedict mentions second. Because there exists that 'great hope' against the background of which all our actions and efforts take place, we can persist in those actions, no matter how futile they may seem at times. For we know that our own lives, as well as history in general, "are held firm by the indestructible power of Love" (35). With suffering, something similar is the case. Rooted in our finitude and our sinfulness, suffering will always be part of human existence. However, a God who personally enters history as a human being and suffers within it shows us that what we cannot do will be done by God. Thus there is a justice to be looked forward to that we cannot be expected to achieve but that, because we can hope in God who, in suffering with us, has overcome evil for us, enables us to continue in our own efforts to overcome evil and reduce misery. Far from losing the capacity to suffer for others because God, in Christ, has suffered for all, we gain the capacity to suffer with him for their sake – because we have hope from what he has done (36, 39-40).

Finally, the *Judgment* is the third 'setting' in which we can learn and practise suffering. This is because the judgment promises a justice that this world cannot give. If the latter depended on itself for ultimate justice, we would be without hope. The strongest argument for faith in eternal life, the Pope writes, is that – deprived of the image of the last judgment, an

image of hope, not terror – the world would be abandoned to the injustice of history as the final word, without redress. But there is redress because God is just and creates justice, a justice that is also grace. The former assures us that the final outcome will not be some fudge covering the evil that has been done; but the latter offers us hope, for the Judge is our advocate as well (42-44, 47).

SOME REFLECTIONS ON *SPE SALVI*

This encyclical is not as ‘fresh’ and eye-catching as *Deus Caritas Est* was. It reads more like a typical essay in theology by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, incorporating many of his key ideas and his tried-and-tested theological method: starting with the biblical material for the *specifics* of Christian hope, then outlining what hope is not (in a critique of this-worldly approaches) and following that with a presentation of the true shape of Christian hope. The ‘settings’ for learning and practising hope that constitute the last part of the encyclical are somewhat of a novelty, not so much in content as in style.

There is a good deal of continuity with Benedict’s previous writings, both as theologian and as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, since, as with them, so with this letter he has an ‘enemy’ in view, namely: false ideas of hope that conceive it as something that we can make rather than as a gift we must receive. Once we think of hope for the future as that which results from scientific and technical progress, or from social revolutions and the states-of-affairs that they usher in, then we abandon ourselves to a salvation of our own making; and this is no salvation at all. Echoes of Cardinal Ratzinger’s legendary opposition to liberation and political theologies are audible here. Everyone will readily agree, of course, that a salvation that depends *only* on human social activity is hopeless – is no

salvation at all. Nonetheless it might not be necessary to conclude from this that all projects for social transformation are thereby necessarily non-runners. An astute reader of the encyclical has observed that, in the promises for the renewal of creation, for a new heaven and a new earth, and for the summing up of all things in Christ that are found in the New Testament, there still remains a basis for conceiving salvation in decidedly *collective* as well as in individual terms: as a world renewed, as the kingdom coming (“on earth as it is in heaven”).ⁱⁱ

Pope Benedict’s analysis of the period of modernity and of its characteristic mind-set constitutes a robust naming of the limitations of Western European (and, to an extent, North American) culture and life. For many years he has been concerned about how Christian faith is losing all voice in the shaping of public life in Europe at present, despite the fact that the roots of Europe are Christian. Thus he is on a mission to gain a hearing again for the Christian voice in the public sphere in Europe. This might explain why, in the encyclical, more of the things that have been threatening humanity in Europe are to the fore than are the threats – indeed the phenomena of ‘unsalvation’ – that frighten, actually beget terror, in the minds of many of the world’s peoples outside of Europe as they contemplate the earth’s rising temperatures and recall the disasters that in recent memory have blighted countless lives in Asia, Africa and other places. From elsewhere there is evidence that the Pope’s concern about environmental and ecological matters is growing rapidly, but these things do not loom especially large in this encyclical on hope.

All encyclicals are serious Church teaching – not *ex cathedra* statements, to be sure, but a very high level of ordinary papal teaching – and this one is no different. This means that, while

offered for believers' reflection and careful consideration (it is addressed to them), it is not at all presented with the kind of open invitation to criticism as was, for example, Pope Benedict's recently-published, *personal-theological* book, *Jesus of Nazareth*. I remember a theologian – Thomas Söding, writing in June of last year in the periodical *Herder Korrespondenz* – saying that *that* book would present the canon lawyers with an unenviable challenge because of the kind of *genre* that it represents: at once personal *and* papal.ⁱⁱⁱ This encyclical brings with it an even more daunting challenge for them, so close is it to the rich, personal intellectual achievement of this theologian-Pope that it is difficult *not* to be inclined to engage with it in a theologically argumentative way, even though it cannot come equipped with an open invitation to do so.

Spe Salvi definitely represents a novel kind of papal teaching, with its very personal style and its quoting, even, of particular philosophers from the Pope's own homeland and intellectual background, such as Immanuel Kant and Theodor Adorno. It invites its readers to ponder and consider, as it follows an almost conversational style of raising a question here, suggesting an understanding there, illustrating by an example somewhere else. Its tone is reflective and invitatory. For some remarks that I penned, on 3 February 2006, in *The Catholic Herald* on Benedict XVI's first encyclical, that newspaper chose the heading: "a professor with an eye for precision and a pastoral touch". The same would really be appropriate for this encyclical, in which the practised teacher is gently and persuasively plying his trade.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The encyclical is speckled with gems of observation and insight: stories or examples

illustrating lives lived in hope or new 'takes' on old ideas that bring lost hope back into the picture. What Benedict says about the traditional practice of 'offering up' life's annoyances and hardships will make practised readers of Christian texts think again (40), as will his remarks concerning the long-standing doctrine of purgatory (45-48). His concern in all these matters – and indeed in the text overall – is anthropological: it is to present a correct understanding of genuine *human* hope. We human beings need hope in order to live; and the Pope wishes to spell out the true hope that will sustain us, preventing it from being whittled away by the false hopes that are on offer everywhere. He seeks to present a hope that is the salvation, not the destruction, of humanity. This hope is a gift, an offer of relationship, an invitation to life. And it has a face, the face of absolute love, the face of God revealed in the love-to-the-end of his beloved Son, Jesus.

James Corkery SJ lectures in Systematic Theology at the Milltown Institute, Dublin. He has recently completed, in the Irish Dominican Journal Doctrine & Life, a series of seven articles on the theology of Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI.

ⁱ Wherever numbers appear in brackets, they refer to specific paragraphs of the Encyclical letter.

ⁱⁱ See Tom Wright, "And what of this world?" in: *The Tablet* (8 December 2007): 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Thomas Söding, "Aufklärung über Jesus. Das Jesus-Buch des Papstes und das Programm seines Pontifikates" in: *Herder Korrespondenz* 61 (6/2007): 281-285.