

## Mission of Hope



From what I was asked to present, our wish during the seminar is to deepen our understanding of mission in the forthcoming

year of hope, in the light of the conflict situations of war, violence, religious fundamentalism, epidemics, calamities, hunger and poverty. As missionaries, women and men of faith, bearers of Christian hope how do we engage these situations, appears to me the question that is put forward to this seminar.

The Director of SEDOS asked me to talk on Theology of Hope from a more theoretical perspective. My understanding is that I am expected to present here a reflection on the second theological virtue of the Christian faith (I Cor 13:13). As a theological virtue hope is called to be the foundation of our missionary commitment. It is called to drive this commitment and to characterise it (CEC 1813). We therefore understand that as missionaries we are called to become messengers of hope.

The question that I asked myself and that organises my presentation can be expressed as follows: what are the essential features of Christian hope and given the subject of this seminar, what can be the responsible exercise of this hope in thought and action in the world today. My presentation is fundamentally divided in two parts. The first, which is the longest captures some features of Christian hope based on the Second encyclical letter of Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*. The second part reflects on the articulation between eschatology and mission.

### Hope, within the Christian Faith.

The Christian mystery of salvation is about God the Father sharing his grace with men and women of all times. This gracious self-communication of God began with the creation of the universe and human beings. It culminated

in Christ's resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Church teaches that history is moving to its consummation, the *Parousia* or final coming of Christ that will bring through the glorified Christ, the ultimate self-gift of God to human beings and the transformation of the universe. To understand Christian hope, It is helpful to situate it in this global context of the Good news of the Christian Faith as it is expressed in the Creed. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed can essentially be divided in three parts: the first dealing with the question of God as such. The second being Christological – it examines questions related to Jesus Christ. The third part treats of the Spirit and the Church, it ends with the explicit formulation of what should be understood as the ultimate Christian hope: *and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.*

### I. Characteristics of Christian hope

In November 2007, Pope Benedict XVI published the encyclical letter *Spe Salvi* in which he saw as a distinguishing mark of Christians, the fact that they have a future. Though this does not mean that Christians know the details that await them, the Pope observed that they know in general terms that their lives will not end in emptiness. For Benedict XVI “Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well” (SpS n°2). Therefore, hope is the virtue that sustains and gives meaning to the present in the sense that it opens us to the future. In this significant encyclical letter Benedict XVI outlined essential features of Christian Hope that are useful to reflection on, for us to grow in faith and in view of a renewed commitment to our missionary vocation in today's world.

From the onset, the Pope states that “*redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present. The present, even if it is arduous can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal great enough to justify the effort*

of the journey” (SpS. n°1). Christian hope is trustworthy because its object is so important for Christian believers that it justifies the efforts of the journey.

Let us note here with the Jesuit André Cnockeart, the combination in the same sentence of two words that belong to the semantic field of dynamic action<sup>1</sup>. This combination is not without significance. By talking of ‘facing the present’ and of ‘the efforts of the journey’, the pope is reminding us that Christian hope is not just about the glorious fulfilment of the end of times as we may think often without paying much attention. It has also to do with the present world (SpS. n°15), we will come back to this later because it seems to me to be especially the point that concerns this seminar mostly. It is a perspective of Christian hope that is not often talked about. It is something Benedict XVI comes back to several times in the encyclical letter. Meditating on how the Gospel transformed the early Christians, he recalls and insists that Christianity is not just “good news”, the communication of a hitherto unknown content. The Christian message is not only “informative” but “performative.” That means: The Gospel, and indeed Christian hope is not merely a communication of things that are known – it is one that makes things happen and is life changing” (n°2).

The third thing I would like to point out is that hope directly refers to the Christian faith. I link this to the mention of redemption, of salvation, which is the domain of faith. Christians are hopeful people and the Christian faith is a hope-filled faith such that it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk of faith in God or in Christ without linking it to hope. Without hope, faith is void. Consequently, hope is actually primordial for the faith. We can understand then, that as one of the theological virtues, it accounts for a significant part in the basis that animates and gives to the Christian identity and existence their specific character.<sup>2</sup> This can be understood from the Letter to the Hebrews. In chapter 11, verse 1, the author defines faith as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things that are not seen (Hb11:1).

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<sup>1</sup> *L'Espérance chrétienne dans son vécu spirituel*, In *Revue Telema*, 4/07, pp.47-62.

<sup>2</sup> See Catechism of the Catholic Church n°1813.

Hope belongs to what we are profoundly as human beings. It relates to our vocation. As humans, we are hoping beings, we are hopeful or full of hope because it is in our nature to be so. It is something we are given from the moment we exist. It is understandable to think that without hope we lose any sense to life. Hope derives from our being created in the image of God from which we recognise that our existence is destined for communion with God. This can be substantiated by meditating, for instance, on the benevolent plan of God's love as revealed in the act of creation according to the letter to the Ephesians. Saint Paul reminds us that it was well before the foundations of the world that God the Father chose us in Christ, to be holy and blameless before him. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, to the good pleasure of his will (cf. 1:3-5).

Taking up Saint Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of the meaning of faith given in the Letter to the Hebrews 11:1 as being the *substance* (assurance) of things hoped for, where faith is understood as a stable disposition of the spirit, through which eternal life takes root in us and reason is led to consent to what it does not see, Benedict XVI observes that “through faith... or as we may say in embryo there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the whole, true life (SpS 7). This, in a sense allows us to some extent to think that though they are invisible, we already carry within us the things we hope for. It equally serves us as a proof that what we hope for really exists otherwise we would not hope for it. It takes faith to see what we do not see and hope to be sure that it can by God's grace be accomplished.

### **The content of Christian Hope**

Christian hope stems from the encounter with God. To explain in what hope consists, Benedict XVI quotes Saint Josephine Bakhita, the Soudanese religious who was once captured and sold to slave merchants as a child. After, coming to know about God through lessons of catechism, as her Creator and knowing about Jesus Christ who loved her, and who was now seated at the “Father's right hand”, she had “hope” writes the Pope (SpS n°3), she now knew that she was definitely loved and

whatever happened to her, she was awaited by this love. And so her life was good.”

There are a number of significant things involved here to take note of: first there is what we can call the unfolding consciousness of being in the project or in the plans of someone bigger than us, who is God, thanks to, and this is the second thing I want to note, the transmission of faith through catechism which we should understand as the knowledge of God. Thirdly this is followed by the feeling and conviction that someone surely loves us and that he is waiting for us. All this brings us to the understanding that our life has a purpose worth living for. That purpose is to meet in the future the God who loves us. This is the hope that sustains and gives Christians a sense to their existence. The example of the story of Bakhita illustrates what we already noted concerning Christian hope: The present, even if it is laborious can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal great enough to justify the effort of the journey.

## **II. The eschatological dimension of the Christian faith**

Christian faith is essentially a faith that brings hope. To come to know God – the true God means to receive hope as Pope Benedict XVI affirms (SpS n°3). This hope is nourished by the general expectation of the fulfilment of God’s promises that is rooted in the lived experience of the encounter with God. The Judeo-Christian tradition is marked by an experience of the God of the promise. In the religious context of ancient Judaism in particular, the promise was deliberately used for the expectation from God which was characteristic of Israel, for their persevering faithfulness to God on the basis of the certainty of the covenant in a world which contradicts God (SpS n°9). The promise can be traced from the stories of the Patriarchs through Moses to the Prophets. In the New Testament the first writings of Paul show how the first communities lived with a vivid hope of the imminent coming of Jesus. ‘The Day of the Lord’ would ‘come like a thief in the night’ (I Thess 5:2). Nevertheless it would be soon (I Thess: 4:13-5:3).

Ultimately the perspective of Christian hope is eternal life. It is the sharing in God’s life that is given to us through Jesus Christ. Christian hope

is therefore evidently centred on Christ. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end’ (Rev. 22:13) he is the origin of all things in the sense that could be understood from Jn. 1:13, he is also the ‘*Eschatos*’, the future and final one. Then as we read from Saint Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the Christian hope will be fulfilled when “all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits and then, at his coming. He will come at the end when he will hand over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (I Cor. 15: 22-26).

We can continue from here and go on to develop the many aspects of eschatology such as announced in the passage from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians. These would include for instance reflecting on what sense could be given to the idea of the resurrection of the dead, how it could be represented taking into account the dimensions of corporeity of the human being, but also the notion of time and many others. But these theoretical considerations, though useful to some extent for our intelligence of the faith, would not in my opinion directly connect with the existential situations of war, of violence of all types, of religious fundamentalism, epidemics, calamities, hunger and poverty that we see around and that we are challenged to face and confront in the name of faith and Christian hope. I am also convinced that our enumeration of those situations at this seminar is not just in view of encouraging with hope to endurance all those people touched by them. Our profound hope is to see these situations alleviated from life. It is the reason why I would like in this second part of my presentation to reflect on the eschatological hope as determination to commitment.

### **Eschatological hope a determination to commitment**

I would like to come back now to the observation made by Benedict XVI concerning the Christian message not being only “informative” but “performative.” Christian hope is not merely a communication of things



that are known – it is one that makes things happen and is life changing” (n°2).

Eschatology or the theology of Christian hope is of central significance in the Gospel message and it was in the life of the first Christians who had seen their lives transformed by the experience of the resurrection. They oriented their existence in reference to the imminent return of the risen Jesus.

Introducing his book *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann remarks that eschatology was long called the ‘doctrine of the last things’ or the ‘doctrine of the end’. He goes on to say that “These end events were to break into the world from somewhere beyond history, and to put an end to the history in which all things here live and move. He then rightly observes that the relegation of these events to the ‘last day’ robbed them of their directive, uplifting and critical significance for all the days which are spent here, this side of the end in history”<sup>3</sup>

eschatology which has obscured the idea of early Christian eschatology and that does not seem to motivate us.

For Moltmann eschatology must become the medium and the starting point for all theological thinking as well as the paradigm for understanding and orienting Christian existence. Failure to do so will always create the condition that makes possible the adaptation of Christianity to its environment, resulting in the surrender of faith<sup>4</sup> that finally becomes complacent to the (an-evangelical) cultures of the places where it goes – the salt ceases to be salt or loses its taste – when the Church loses or distances itself from the eschatological message of Jesus, of the faith or hope in the promised things, it simply does not commit itself to the transformation of the world nor to evangelisation. It is no longer missionary. For our purposes, mission is engaging in evangelisation by drinking from the well of



Indeed, we may ask whether for many among us, the eschatological message of Jesus isn't taken to refer to somewhere beyond our 'history', a kind of supra-worldly reality that stands in exclusive contrast to this world. We represent ourselves the Kingdom of God in Jesus as something that will replace our own material world. We are accustomed to think of it as the moment that will bring all 'ordinary history' to a close. We have in this way, inherited a rather transcendentalist view of

eschatological hope! For Moltmann, eschatological hope is “powered with disquieting and critical power” and this is where

<sup>3</sup> See, Jürgen Moltmann, *op.cit.* p.15.

<sup>4</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *op.cit.* discusses in pp. 37-45 the theological method that borrow a lot from categories of the Greek mind and advocates a theological construction based on the Word of God. He holds for instance that: “just as in the theological thought the blending of Christianity with the Greek mind made it no longer clear which God was really being spoken of, so Christianity in its social form took over the heritage of the ancient state religion. It installed itself as the crown society and its saving centre and lost the disquieting, critical power of its eschatological hope”.

we are called to apply concretely the theme of eschatological hope to the mission of the Church in order to remain faithful to the context of the world situation described that is put before us for this seminar.

Benedict XVI reminds us to consider the Christ event; the Incarnation, the Passion and Resurrection in the perspective of the accomplishment and therefore eschatological. Reflecting on God's promise in the New Testament where the expectation of God takes a new significance he puts forward the view that "in Christ God has revealed himself, he has already communicated to us the substance of things to come, and therefore the expectation of God acquires a new certainty. It is the expectation of things to come, from the perspective of a present that is already given. It is a looking forward in Christ's present, with Christ who is present, to the perfecting of his

with resignation and with escapism. In this hope, the soul does not soar above our vale of tears to some imagined heavenly bliss, nor does it sever itself from the earth (...) It sees in the resurrection not the eternity of heaven, but the future of the very humanity for which he died".<sup>5</sup> Between Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the end as described by Saint Paul in I Cor. 15: 20-28 lies a provisional period where the risen Christ is overcoming hostile forces and will abolish death, 'the last enemy'. The Holy Spirit is at work in and for humanity and the created universe while everyone and everything waits to be freed for the glory to come, as we read in the Letter to the Romans (8:18-25). That provisional period is the historical present governed by memory and hope. It is the time of the Church, our time, the time of mission.

For Moltmann, "All this must inevitably mean that the man who thus hopes will never be able



body, to his definitive coming" (SpS. 9). What that means for our lives and for the mission is a perspective of life as manifested in Jesus, the new Adam. The resurrection of Jesus in this sense did inaugurate newness in the life of humanity and of the missionary disciples of Jesus that we are.

The believing hope, in as far as the resurrection is concerned has communicated to us, the substance of things to come and the expectation of victory over death acquires a new certainty. Then we can understand mission from the perspective of the resurrection of Christ in the way Moltmann understands: "To believe means to cross in hope and anticipation the bounds that have been penetrated by the raising of the crucified. If we bear that in mind, then this faith can have nothing to do with fleeing the world,

to reconcile himself with the laws and constraints of the earth, neither with the inevitability of death (and all that it represents) nor with the evil that constantly bears further evil. The raising of Jesus is not merely a consolation to him in a life that is full of distress and doomed to die but it is also a contradiction of suffering and death, of humiliation and offence and of the wickedness of evil".<sup>6</sup>

Certain men and women, most of whom are our founders discovered Christ and entered in communion with him, they were able to welcome the power that God reveals to us. They allowed it to enter into play and were exceptionally able to become bearers of the hope capable of transforming the world.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.20-21.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem.*