

## Maintaining Hope in Our Troubled Times: Christian Perspectives – November 14, 2019

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### Introduction

1. Modern technology makes us more aware of evil in the world.
  2. Throughout most of Christian history, the virtue of hope has received far less attention than the other two theological virtues, faith and charity, but received more attention in the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.
  3. Pope Benedict's encyclical *On Christian Hope (Spe Salvi)* has prompted further reflection on the kind of hope we need today in the battle against persistent evil.
  4. Some helpful readings: *Images of Hope* by William Lynch; *Theology of Hope* by Jurgen Moltmann; *Christian Hope* by John Macquarrie; *Theology of Human Hope* by Rubem Alves; *Man on His Own* by Ernst Bloch.
- I. Concern – Persistent Evil
- A. Examples
    1. World: the 18 year war in Afghanistan; continuing conflict in Syria; almost 26 million refugees, over half under the age of 18; an estimated 20 to 40 million persons in some sort of slavery today with a high percentage of women victims of sex traffickers, human rights violations and torture.
    2. U.S.: persistent racism; despite gains under the Affordable Care Act, some 27 million Americans are without health insurance; political polarization and gridlock.
    3. Personal: chronic illnesses, addictions, vices, sins.
  - B. Feelings of hopelessness (*cf Images of Hope* by Lynch)
    1. Trapped: boxed in; no exit (Sartre).
    2. Helpless: life problems too big to hurdle; my opponents are giants and I am small; problems seem endless; the problems are indeterminates, hard to identify.
    3. Futility: what is the use; feel like giving up; apathetic; no more energy for the fight; paralyzed; "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett, the end of the first act "Shall we go now, Yes let's go" but they do not move.
    4. Confusion: feeling bewildered, unable to sort things out; loss of perspective.
    5. Going to extremes: a paralyzing pessimism or a utopian, romantic, presumptive optimism.
    6. Feeling a tension between my hopes and real possibilities.
    7. Language of hope: "Do you have enough money for retirement? I hope so," which implies doubt; in difficult situations: "There is nothing left but to

hope,” which suggests it is hopeless; “I hope to win the lottery,” which suggests no chance.

## II. Theology of Hope

### A. Background

1. Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202) spoke about the third age of the spirit, suggesting that the present world order could be transformed (opposed to Augustine’s pessimism on this point). The hope for a transformed world has reappeared periodically in both religious terms (Social Gospel) and secular forms, Marxism.
2. Theology makes use of modern understanding of eschatological character of the New Testament. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, inspired by the ethical enlightenment teaching of Kant, leading liberal Protestant theologians (eg. Ritschl) thought of the kingdom of God being established on this earth by creating a properly ordered society. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, thinkers such as Weiss, Schweitzer and Barth, pointed out that the kingdom taught by Jesus had a future orientation and was discontinuous with this world and was in judgment on the world.
3. The theology of hope is in dialogue with Marxists who criticize Christianity for being an other-worldly opiate, especially with Ernst Bloch who speaks about the power of day dreaming, man as essentially constituted by hope, the need to shape and transform our world, the importance of the future.
4. A better understanding of the importance of positive images of the afterlife for leading a healthy constructive life. (*cf* Greely, *The Religious Imagination*)
5. Impact of Hegel, Feurbach, Marx, Marcuse (not just Bloch). History itself discloses a pattern which makes it revelatory. We must see the individual in social context in contrast to existentialists who concentrate on the individual and personal fulfillment.
6. Criticism of Rahner by Johann Metz and political theology.
7. Emphasis on Jesus the Liberator.

### B. Scriptural Themes

1. In the Hebrew Scriptures, emphasis on the promises of God and their fulfillment rather than on the revelatory manifestations of God eg. promises to Noah, Abraham, Moses, David; Messianism and its hope for an ideal ruler and this worldly justice and freedom. Israel saw time and history differently as a linear process which was guided by God toward an end which would be judgment and fulfillment.
2. In the New Testament, Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of promises. There is great emphasis on the resurrection as fulfilling all previous promises of God and offering a new promise of a final consummation of all people and the whole cosmos. But Christ fulfilled the hopes in a surprising way – not a

political ruler or messianic king but a suffering servant who showed that God stands with suffering people and has the power to overcome evil. If Christ had not been raised, then our hope is illusory. Moltmann and Pannenburg insist on the real historical character of the resurrection and the empty tomb and the appearances while Marquarrie chides them for not explaining this or giving analogues for it. Paul speaks of being raised not a physical body but a spiritual body, i.e. a new mode of existence in which Jesus is incorporated fully into the life of God by a striking leap of self-transcendence (on the analogy of the emergence of personal life from animal life). The second coming is a vital doctrine but points to the final triumph of good over evil and the completion of the work of Christ. At times, the failure of our most comprehensive and significant dreams lead us to the religious question of a final fulfillment in the next life.

C. Theological Tradition according to Aquinas (d. 1274)

1. Aquinas treats hope as a theological virtue.
2. Our fundamental hope is for eternal life as a gift from God.
3. We hope for other things as a means to this end.
4. We should not expect others to give us what we most desire, that is, union with God.
5. We should avoid the extremes of despairing of achieving what is appropriate and presuming to achieve what is not.

D. Themes in Contemporary Theology

1. Anthropology
  - a. All of our constructive actions manifest an implicit expectation that something will be accomplished or some goal achieved or that the action is in itself worthwhile. Hope is not the same as an optimism which expects automatic progress and easy answers. We take the next step because we trust we can make progress.
  - b. We are the people who can dream of a better future, who can imagine new possibilities, who indulge in wishful thinking about our lives. Ernst Bloch saw fantasy and day dreaming as positive and necessary elements in creating a better future for ourselves and our world. Rollo May speaks of imagining alternatives and better modes of existence as being crucial to overcoming depression. Our dreams reveal the unfinished character of our lives (that we have the task of shaping our existence); the disordered character of our lives (that we can sin and fail to move toward a universal love); the evil in our hearts (someday dreams contradict our stated values); the possibilities of human existence for improvement and creative activity. Thus our projections should become our projects, our grand visions should move us to constructive tactics, our dreams should be embodied.

- c. Our hope is an attitude or disposition of the whole person with an emotional facet (an open, adventuresome, positive attitude toward one's environment which overcomes fear); volitional aspect (it organizes our actions into consistent patterns for attaining goals and provides us with an open future into which we can freely project ourselves through constructive activity); and an intellectual aspect (combines a realistic assessment of the world's evils with the ability to imagine a better state of affairs and to plan flexibly to achieve it).
  - d. Isolated individual hopes tend to coalesce into a total hope or to be based on "an original confidence in the meaning and worth of life" (Ogden) in spite of the total threat of nuclear holocaust, death, etc.
  - e. Hope must keep a proper tension or balance among past, present and future. It is directed to the future but must be made realistic and avoid utopianism by learning from the past and respecting the hard facts and the moral demands of the present. It is possible to err by living in a dream world or by being imprisoned in the patterns of the past or by being absorbed by pleasure of the moment or swayed by current fads. Total hope raises the religious question of God who can provide total meaning and an all-encompassing context.
3. God is the absolute future, the One ahead of us who provides us with ever new and surprising opportunities, who is faithful to his promises, who is present in promise but is experienced as absent because the promises are not completely fulfilled yet, who gives life and victory over evil, who is creating the future, who calls us forward as pilgrims who have no lasting city here.
  4. Christ is the fulfillment of the promises in the Hebrew Scriptures and through his resurrection the guarantee and herald of the eventual cosmic triumph of good over evil. The incarnation is the high point of a gradually greater presence of God. Christ makes all things new. Jesus is a model of hope in confronting obstacles.
  5. The church must live in tension with the culture, proclaim the resurrection of Jesus as the basis for hope, live under the judgment of the Gospel, move the world toward the kingdom.
  6. The Christians in the world must be involved in transforming unjust structures but must avoid utopian illusions and be ready to critique all idol-making in the new situation. No structure or system is final or complete and must always be criticized from the viewpoint of the future orientation of the Gospel. The fact that Christians lost hope in transforming this world led to this impulse emerging in Marxism and secular humanism and now Christians must assume responsibility for the personal, political and social problems of the present.

7. Eschatology involves the larger hope of the consummation of the whole universe, a new creation which merges out of the potentiality of the world as a result of human cooperation with God's creative activity. This can be symbolized by the resurrection of the dead, the completion of the kingdom, the return of Christ.
  - a. It is not a detailed revealed picture of end time (vs millenarianism) but a projection out of current graced experience. Eschatological statements are Christian anthropology put in terms of fulfillment (Rahner).
  - b. The one eschatology is both collective and individual. It involves the larger hope that individuals find their ultimate happiness in the afterlife. This has been discussed in terms of immortality of the soul which has certain weaknesses: it implies a dualism of body and soul; thinks of the soul as a self-contained, ready-made unit; ignores the relational and evolving character of the self; another way of describing the afterlife is in the traditional terms of the resurrection of the body, which suggest a full mode of existence beyond but after death. This could not be a reassembling of our physical body as Paul reminded us when he spoke of the resurrected body as being spiritual. A third way is suggested by Macquarrie in which we think of the whole person as participating in the life of God in which the history of the person is present, summed up and healed by being brought into "an ever wider reconciling context." We get some sense of this possibility by realizing that modern science shows that past events can be present directly and not just in memory as when we see a star which no longer exists. Our hope is not finally based on any of these theories but on faith in a God who assures us by the resurrection of Jesus that death cannot destroy the bonds of love.
  - c. Death is our freest moment, an active self-transcendence, a passage into new dimensions of existence. A helpful analogue is the breakthrough from animal to human life. Death sets a boundary prompting authentic existence.
  - d. Heaven is the experience of our transcendence in its mode of fulfillment. Eternity is the definitive validity of spiritual freedom. There are clues of immortality in our experience; moral decisions are perceived as obedience to a higher power; love uses the language of forever; eternity appears in time.
  - e. The doctrine of hell means that we remain free to frustrate the grand plan of God to bring all people back to Himself. Purgatory helps us to deal with two factors: that at death, we are not perfect and that we enter into a full and happy life with God. It thus teaches us that healing and transformation must occur. It says nothing about the "how" of the process. Moving into the afterlife can be seen as another critical state in

the self-transcendence of the person in which there is emergence into a new dimension of existence. It seems possible to hold that this process of growth continues in the afterlife as St. Gregory of Nyssa taught.

- f. Contemporary theologians thus stress the collective and cosmic aspects of the final fulfillment rather than the salvation of the individual soul; this worldly hope for an improved world through constructive cooperation with God rather than a totally other worldly hope; the future rather than the present; the absence of the kingdom now rather than its presence.

### III. Spirituality of Hope

#### A. Perspectives

1. Hope is a gift from God which should elicit prayers of gratitude, but it requires our cooperation to cultivate the virtue which becomes like a second nature, a habit we can draw on in various difficult situations.
2. Hope is rooted in the promise of the ever-faithful God to save us.
3. Paul says we live by hope which enables us to take the next step forward in all situations.

#### B. Practical Advice

1. Develop fundamental trust in family life by consistent loving behavior; importance of stable family life.
2. Through prayer and reflection nourish our sense of total dependency on God and our belief that God will never abandon us. Prayer as a form of truth telling.
3. Cultivate and employ our powers of imagination in various ways. Maintain perspective in difficult situations; keep looking for alternative ways out; remember the boundaries of the present are wider than they seem; do not get imprisoned in the present moment but draw on positive experiences from the past and envision future possibilities; try to recall when things went badly as a means of putting it in a larger context (Harry Stack Sullivan).
4. Avoid brainwashing ourselves by concentrating on our virtues, successes, blessings and seeing our sins and failures in this larger context.
5. Develop or keep alive passion, desire, eros, wishing. Our Christian faith calls us to be passionate about the concerns of the world (Vatican II); to embrace the human wholeheartedly; to expand our interests; to be concerned about others; to fight against injustice; to celebrate human growth; the glory of God is the human person fully alive (Irenaeus); do not live halfheartedly, caught in the middle between hope and hopelessness.
6. Embrace the dark side of our existence; admit emotions like anger and jealousy; do not rush to forgiveness without facing the hurt, resentment, etc.; befriend death; accept the limitations of life without falling into

passivity; reject the fantasy and utopian dream that we are omnipotent or totally self-reliant in any part of our lives.

7. Participate in the Church and small groups; share with others who know the struggles of life; seek help from others; find strength and guidance in the liturgy and in faith sharing groups; learn to keep hope alive from the example of others.
8. Learn how to wait constructively; live as Advent people all year around; hope has to do with what is not yet, so we must wait for it; mature Christians can wish for something passionately and work to make it happen but wait without bitterness or despair; stay focused on the desired good and cope with obstacles while waiting.
9. Put on the mind of Christ; see the world through his eyes; let his wisdom structure our imagination and his example guide our efforts for good. Reflect on the Agony in the Garden.

#### IV. Pope Benedict on Hope and Suffering

##### A. Background

1. He published his encyclical *On Christian Hope (Spe Salvi)* in 2007.
2. It reads like a scholarly article by a professional theologian but has helpful advice.

##### B. Content

1. Reacting against all utopian ideologies, including Marxism, Benedict insists that "suffering is a part of our human existence." We must do all we can to reduce physical pain and mental anguish, but it is "not in our power" to banish all suffering from the world.
2. We cannot find healing for ourselves by "sidestepping or fleeing from suffering," but by "accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love."
3. Benedict illustrates the power of hope rooted in faith to transform suffering by quoting from a remarkable letter of the Vietnamese martyr Paul Le-Bao-Tinh (d. 1857). The letter describes his life in prison as "an everlasting Hell" full of "cruel tortures of every kind," a world dominated by hatred, vengeance, anguish and grief. And yet he adds: "I am by the grace of God, full of joy and gladness because I am not alone -- Christ is with me."
4. Society has the responsibility of accepting its suffering members and supporting them in their trials.
5. Reflecting on the Passion of Jesus reminds us that in all of our suffering "we are joined by one who experiences and carries that suffering with us." When we take this truth to heart, "the star of hope arises."

6. In our "lesser trials," hope can be enkindled in simple ways, such as an encouraging word from a friend. In the more severe trials of life, however, we need the certitude of the "great hope," the kind of hope demonstrated by the martyrs, who followed the example of Christ in taking up the cross.
7. The pope presents the prospect of judgment in a positive light as a criterion for ordering our lives, a summons to follow our conscience, and a hope that divine justice will prevail.
8. Benedict is convinced that the quest for justice is "the strongest argument in favor of faith in eternal life." The most compelling argument is "the impossibility that the injustice of history should be the final word." Only God's establishment of true justice can ground our great hope.
9. Our great hope is that we can escape from the prison of our own egocentricity and enjoy with all the saints "the blessed life" of everlasting union with God.
10. The pope insists that the authentic tradition of a communal fulfillment of our deepest longings motivates and frees us to do all we can to humanize the world, while avoiding the destructive utopian illusion of eliminating all suffering.
11. On an optimistic note, the pope supposes that the majority of people appear before the Judge with a fundamental openness to God, even though marred by "compromises with evil."

**Join us for Father Bacik's next lecture, "Advent Reflection: The Eucharist as a Memorial Meal," Thursday, December 12, 2019, at 5:30 p.m. in the Franciscan Center**