

**James Peck**

**Part 1: Benedict XVI on Christian Hope**

Hello everyone, it's good to be with you. Today I want to share a reflection on Christian hope. At times like these, the world needs hope, real hope, the hope that underlies our faith. In the "Joy of the Gospel" Pope Francis presents our hope in contrast to the spiritual desert of the modern world. Although at times the landscape is stark and barren, we find in this desert what is essential for living. We see signs of a thirst for God that are often expressed implicitly or negatively. It is in this desert that the Holy Spirit uses us to bring Christ's hope to lost souls. We are called to point the way to the Promised Land and by our example "keep hope alive".

But what is this hope? What is this source of faith that strengthens us to endure the challenges of life? These are good meditations for us to reflect on during these times of public crisis, when we find ourselves searching for hope. Pope Benedict XVI wrote an encyclical on hope, "*Spe Salvi*," or "by hope we are saved," which thoroughly explores Christian hope in the context of the modern world. Today I'd like to share a few of Benedict's teachings on hope.

We know what hope is from the catechism; along with faith and charity, it's one of the three theological virtues given to us in baptism. It is by hope that we desire the kingdom of God and eternal life as our happiness. With hope we place our trust in Christ's promises, relying not on our own strength but on the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is God's gift. God has placed deep in our hearts an aspiration for happiness. The virtue of hope responds to this aspiration, taking up all the lesser hopes of our lives and purifies them for the Kingdom of God. Such hope preserves us from discouragement and sustains us during times of abandonment. It opens our heart in expectation of the heavenly vision of God's goodness, God's eternal reward.

Pope Benedict begins his encyclical by reminding us of Paul's teaching to the Romans that it is in hope that we are saved. We are redeemed by hope. In granting us hope, we can face our present, however challenging, which leads us toward our goal. That is faith, and in this faith is our redemption. In a very real sense, hope redeems us.

What is the content of this hope? Benedict returns again to Paul, who explains to the believers in Ephesus that before their encounter with Christ, they were without hope because they were without God in the world. "To come to know God – the true God – means to receive hope" says Benedict. We may not know the details, but hope gives knowledge that life will not end in emptiness. This allows us to live our lives well, it is life changing. We have been granted the gift of a new life, eternal life. For all Christians, hope comes from knowing God.

Our modern, post-Christian world is not without hope, but it no longer places its hope in knowing God. Benedict sees in the thought of Francis Bacon 400 years ago the foundation of a new kind of hope. A hope placed not in faith, but in material progress driven by science. Through science man discovers nature's laws by a process of observation and practice and thereby gains mastery over nature. This progress expands the dominion of reason, which it is claimed leads toward a perfect freedom in which man becomes more fully himself. In this hope

reason and freedom guarantee, by virtue of their presumed intrinsic goodness, a new and perfect human community.

Benedict critiques this hope by looking at examples in history. History has shown that good from material progress requires another element. Given reason and freedom, man still needs to choose the good. Ultimately materialism comes up short by denying the reality of evil in the world and in the heart of man. We all know of the terrifying evils that have accompanied material progress through science, I don't need to list examples. We see that unless accompanied by progress in man's ethical formation, material progress poses and in many cases effects a real threat to man and to the world.

In light of this historical experience, Benedict challenges us to learn anew in what our hope truly consists. We as Christians need to critique not only the hope of modern materialism, but ourselves. We should ask ourselves, what does progress really mean? What does it promise and what does it not promise? We Christians also pursue reason as a gift of God, but what is its place and role in proper progress? If progress needs moral growth, then our capacity for acting needs to be integrated with the ability to differentiate between good and evil. In essence, what we need is hope, a Christian hope, the hope that comes from knowing God.

Benedict sees man's true redemption as not lying in scientific progress, but in love. A love that goes beyond the fragility of human love, an unconditional love, from which nothing can separate us. A love in which we can abide with certainty. Only in this absolute love can we be redeemed. This is what it means to say "Jesus Christ has redeemed us." In Christ we have become certain of God's love. Man's great, true hope can only be God; God who has loved us and who continues to love us to the end. Life in its true sense is not something we have in or from ourselves, it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life.

Benedict sums up his analysis of hope by considering that the hope of modernity, grounded in progress through science, may satisfy a variety of our specific needs and wants, but humanity needs a hope that goes further. We experience hope in a limited sense in our worldly loves and joys, but these are fragile and vulnerable to the ever-present reality of death. Only something infinite, beyond what we can ever attain, will fulfill our need for hope. While we must always be committed to improving the world, tomorrow's better world cannot be sufficient in itself to satisfy our need for hope. The greater hope can only be God. God is the foundation for hope. A God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity as a whole. His kingdom is not something imaginary, but is present wherever he is loved and his love reaches us. His love guarantees to us what we vaguely sense and await; that is a life that is "truly" life.

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**Part 2: Benedict XVI on Learning and Practicing Hope**

With the background in our previous broadcast distinguishing Christian hope from the modern hope in scientific progress, Benedict examines three settings for learning and practicing Christian hope. First, prayer. Second, he looks at action and suffering. And lastly, he looks to the final judgment as a setting for learning and practicing hope.

Prayer is the first essential setting for learning hope. Regardless of our circumstances, we can listen and speak to God in prayer. Prayer is ever accessible to us if we only avail ourselves of prayer. Augustine defines prayer as an exercise of desire. We have been created for greatness, to be filled with God, but our heart is too small for this destined greatness and must be stretched. Our heart must be enlarged and cleansed from impurities to receive this gift of God's greatness. This process of inner purification opens our heart to God and to others. In prayer we mature in our faith and learn what should truly be asked of God. What is worthy of God and not mundane, superficial, or comfortable things. Prayer purifies our desires and our hopes and frees us from our hidden lies with which we deceive ourselves.

To develop this power of purification, prayer must be on the one hand something very personal, an intimate encounter with God, and on the other hand guided by the great prayers of the Church and of saints, by liturgical prayer. Prayer always involves an intermingling of public and personal prayer which forms a dialogue in which we speak to God and God speaks to us. We open to God and prepare ourselves for service to others, making us ministers of hope for others. An active hope that prevents things from moving toward a perverse end and keeps the world open to God.

The second setting for learning hope is action and suffering. According to Benedict all serious and upright human conduct is hope in action. We strive to realize or lesser and greater hopes and we work toward a more humane world for the future. Such effort can tire us or turn us to fanaticism unless we are inspired by the great hope that cannot be destroyed under any circumstance. We cannot build the Kingdom of God by our own efforts, what we can build is always limited by our human nature. But the Kingdom of God is a gift, a response to our hope. On the one hand our actions generate hope for us and for others, but at the same time the great hope based upon God's promises gives us courage and directs our actions in good times and bad.

In addition to practicing hope by working for a brighter and more humane world, we grow in hope through the things we suffer. We can and should limit and fight against suffering, but we cannot eliminate it. We cannot shake off our finitude or eliminate the power of evil or sin which is plainly seen as a constant source of suffering. Our faith in the power of God to take away the sin of the world gives us hope for the healing of the world's suffering. This hope gives us courage to place ourselves on the side of good even in seemingly hopeless situations. It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, Benedict says, but rather by

our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it, and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love. Christian suffering means suffering with and for others. Benedict reminds us of an old devotion of “offering up” our minor hardships, thereby giving them meaning. This can be exaggerated, but there is merit in joining our little annoyances with the compassion of Christ, so that they somehow become part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the world. They contribute in their own way to the economy of good and of human love. Benedict encourages us to revive and implement this practice of offering up our sufferings.

Lastly, Benedict brings us to final judgment as a setting for learning hope. In looking at the final judgment, Benedict turns to the future and the expectation that the risen Christ will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. The last judgment has developed into a frightening scene, but it should remind us of our responsibility for how we conduct ourselves. The Last Judgment is not primarily an image of terror but an image of hope. The horrible injustices of history will not have the final word. There will be an undoing of past suffering, a reparation that sets things right. Faith in the Last Judgment is therefore first and foremost hope. Personally Benedict is convinced that the question of justice constitutes the strongest argument in favor of faith in eternal life. It is only because the injustice of history cannot be the final word that the necessity for Christ’s return and for new life become fully convincing. Hence he can state firmly: God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and our hope.

Benedict concludes his discourse on hope with a tribute to Our Lady under the title Stella Maris, “Star of the Sea.” In Our Lady, Star of the Sea, we find our guiding star when we are in danger on the stormy seas of life. Mary stands as a beacon of hope, guiding our path, our decisions. She remains in our midst as our Mother, the Mother of hope. 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! Amen.

