

CHRISTIAN HOPE: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR LIVES



IN HIS LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS, Saint Paul characterizes the lives of the Ephesians before they came to faith in Christ as “**having no hope** and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). I think it could be helpful to respectfully question St. Paul on this point. Is it really true that the Ephesians had no hope before they came to the Faith? Could they not hope to improve their lot in life? Could they not hope for better employment or to find a good spouse or hope to improve their relationships with their friends or neighbors? It is not possible to go through life, to find the motivation to get up in the morning, without **some** form of hope.

In fact, St. Paul, in speaking of hope here, though using a familiar word, must be referring to a **different** reality than the human passion or emotion of hope.

He is referring to a spiritual and supernatural reality; he is referring to a virtue that surpasses the capacity of human nature and is infused in the soul by God, the theological virtue of hope. It is important to realize that there is no such thing as a *natural* virtue of hope.

“[O]ur hope in God does not have as its foundation our own goodness but rather the goodness of God.”

On the level of nature, hope is not a virtue. Hope is only a virtue when it is theological which means that it unites us immediately to God and has God as its object.

The virtue of hope has God as its object in a two-fold manner. Not only does hope give us a desire for an intimate union with God in the next life, but it also unites us to God as the very means of attaining this goal. We cannot attain God without God and so the virtue of hope unites us to God as to the one who will help us grow in an ever-deeper union with Him. This means that our hope in God does not have as its

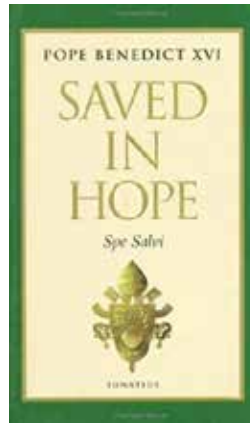
foundation our own goodness but rather the goodness of God. This is why we can always have hope in God no matter what our circumstances may be. No matter how greatly we have sinned, no matter what terrible things we may have done in the past, we can always have great confidence and hope in God because our hope is not founded on our own goodness but on the infinite and unchanging goodness of God towards us.

Christian hope, because it is something divine, has the power to utterly transform our lives. It has the power to make us see our lives in a totally new light. We tend to think of our lives in terms of a story. And there may very well be chapters of our story that don't seem to make a whole lot of sense to us. If we were given the opportunity, we would probably like to re-write certain chapters of our story. Most of us might think that, if we were given the chance to go back, we could write a much **better** story for ourselves. We could clean our story up a bit, tidy it up. That notion needs to be seriously challenged. Could we really write a better story of our lives than the one God has written together with us? Would our changes in our stories really be an improvement? My guess is that we would tend to re-write our stories in a way that would make them into nice, pious, sentimental drivel. Stories where everything is neat and pleasant. Stories where there is no serious conflict in need of resolution, are not good stories. God is the co-author of our stories and He knows what He is doing. If we would like to erase and re-write a part of our story, that may be a manifestation that we need to grow in genuine Christian hope. It may mean that we don't really believe in God's ability to bring a greater good out of the evil in our lives. Do we really have a deep hope and trust in God, in His power and goodness?

Christian hope is also very important in giving us the ability to face and deal with the sufferings and injustices in our lives. We can see that the secular world, which has abandoned Christian hope, does not have the ability to deal adequately with the great tragedies and sufferings of life. The modern world tends to deal with suffering by either trying to eliminate it or flee from it. In

this perspective, to be willing to bear and endure suffering for the sake of what is right and just does not make sense. If we do not have a deep and firm hope, we will not have the strength to endure suffering for the sake of the truth; we will not have the capacity to fight for what is right and good. Pope Benedict XVI made this point well in his encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*:

“Let us say it once again: the capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth is the measure of humanity. Yet this capacity to suffer depends on the type and extent of the hope that we bear within us and build upon. The saints were able to make the great journey of human existence the way that Christ had done before them, because they were brimming with great hope” (n.39).



Along similar lines, Pope Benedict XVI also speaks in a very striking way about how the Last Judgment of God at the end of time should be a source for strengthening our hope. At first, this may seem a bit counterintuitive. We normally think of the Last Judgment as an object of fear, not of hope. But we all have a very deep desire, a desire that cannot be rooted out, to see justice done. We want to see full and perfect justice accomplished and realized in a permanent way. We want the world to be set right in such a way that all are satisfied and so that all can see that justice has been done. That is what our belief in the Last Judgment is about and this is why the Last Judgment should be something that nourishes our hope.

Pope Benedict XVI goes on to make the point that the loss of this faith in the final judgment of God has been one of the factors that has fueled the modern atheistic revolutionary movements. If we cannot count on God to establish justice, then we must take matters into our own hands. Many people are drawn to the various forms of Marxism precisely because of its appeal to man's sense of justice and because it holds out the promise to correct the injustices of history. Just how monstrous and destructive it is when man usurps the place of God should be apparent for all to see. However, without Christian hope we can anticipate that these errors will continue to gain new disciples.

As we look out at our present historical situation, it may be that we are not full of strong sentiments of hope on the human level for the world or for our country. But it is the very nature of Christian hope that, no matter what the particular historical circumstances of

our lives, no matter what we may have to endure, no matter what we may have to suffer, we can be confident that, as expressed in the words of our Lord to St. Julian of Norwich, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” ❖

Cana Sunday and Great Lent

Usually we tend to think of Great Lent as a time of extra penance and mortification. Certainly the ceremony of the reception of ashes on Ash Monday is in perfect agreement; with the ashes comes the reminder that we “are dust and unto dust shall we return.” These words, taken from Genesis after the fall of Adam and Eve from their friendship with God, calls to mind our sinful tendencies and the inevitability of death and judgment. Yet, while Ash Monday is the first penitential day of Lent, the season actually begins not by sadness but by joy; not by ashes but by a wedding feast. So why would the Maronite Church begin the journey through 40 days of Lent with the commemoration of the wedding feast at Cana? Several reasons come to mind.

First, most of the Sundays of Great Lent in the Maronite tradition focus on our Lord’s signs. The miracle at Cana, we are told, was “the first of His signs.” (Jn 2:11) So it makes sense that the first Sunday of Lent should begin with the first of Jesus’ signs. However, these signs or miracles are not simply interesting events meant to bolster our faith in His divinity, they have profound importance to His mission on earth.

Jesus came to save us from our sins. We know that the effects of sin include sickness and death. So, as

we reflect on the various signs that our Lord did, we should keep in mind that, in healing the sick and delivering the possessed, He is pointing to His ultimate power to destroy sin and death. Of course, the greatest sign of this is our Lord’s resurrection from the dead, which we celebrate on Easter.

A second reason to begin with the feast at Cana is that the sign that our Lord performs—changing water into wine—highlights the transformation that, as Christians, we are called to; a transformation that these 40 days should help bring about. It also points to another miracle that is closely related in which our Lord would change bread and wine into His Body and Blood.

Lastly, as Mary was so instrumental in bringing about the miracle at the wedding at Cana, so she is our constant companion during this journey towards the Cross and the resurrection. It is a good reminder to us that, while all graces were won for us by Christ, yet they are directed by Mary. As St. Bernard put it, Christ is the head of the Church and Mary is like the neck. All graces pass to the body through her.

So, as we begin this Season of Great Lent, may the Virgin Mary be with us to help us in our journey of transformation as we make our way to the harbor of Easter. ❖

