

IMBUED WITH THE WORD WE TRACE OUT PATHS OF HOPE

*Bartolomeo Sorge, sj*¹



“The question of hope,” Benedict XVI wrote, “is truly central to our lives as human beings and our mission as Christians, especially in these times.”² Today, it is precisely hope that is in crisis. The Pope dedicated a beautiful encyclical to this subject (*Spes Salvi*, 2007).³ On 13 December 2007, speaking to university students in Rome, the Holy Father summed up in a single paragraph, packed with ideas, the encyclical’s analysis of the crisis of hope that humanity is experiencing today. In substance, he says, this crisis is due to the improper separation of the social/immanent dimension of human hope from its transcendent dimension. “In the 17th century,” he explained, “Europe experienced a true epochal change and from that point on the mindset has been growing that human progress is the result of science and technology alone, and that faith should concern itself only with the salvation of the soul—a purely individual salvation. Reason and freedom, the two predominant power ideas of the modern age, have been detached from God and made autonomous so as to facilitate the building of ‘the kingdom of man,’ which, in practice, is opposed to the Kingdom of God. This has led to a diffusion of a concept of materialism, nourished by the hope [an exclusively ‘social’ and immanent hope] that a change of economic and political structures will finally give rise to a just society in which peace, freedom and equality reign.

Although this process is not without value and historical motives, it is fundamentally erroneous inasmuch as the human being is not the product of specific socio-economic conditions alone and also because technical progress does not necessarily coincide with the moral growth of a person. Indeed, without ethical principles science, technology and politics can be used not

¹ Bartolomeo Sorge (b. 1929), SJ, entered the Company of Jesus in 1946 and was ordained a priest in 1958. A political expert and keen observer of societal and ecclesial situations, Fr. Sorge served as director of *La Civiltà Cattolica* from 1973-1985, the Pedro Arrupe Institute of Political Formation in Palermo, Italy from 1986-1996, *Popoli* magazine from 1999-2005, and *Aggiornamenti Sociali* from 1999-2009. A prolific writer, Fr. Sorge is also in wide demand as a lecturer. His books include: *Uscire dal tempio: Intervista autobiografica* (edited by Fr. Giuntella, 1989 and 1991), *Per una civiltà dell’Amore: La proposta sociale della Chiesa* (1999), *Introduzione alla dottrina sociale della Chiesa* (2006), and *Quale Italia vogliamo? Un vademecum per i cattolici in politica* (2006). His very interesting commentary on the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* appears in the book *Amore e Verità* published by the FSPs of Italy in 2009. His latest book, *La traversata: La Chiesa dal Concilio Vaticano II a oggi* (2010) is a passionate witness to “a season that changed forever the way we understand the Gospel message and the historico-spiritual journey of the Church.”

² Benedict XVI, *Message on the occasion of the XXIV World Youth Day*, 5 April 2009.

³ The numbers that appear in parenthesis in the text of this talk refer to the corresponding paragraphs in the encyclical *Spes Salvi*.

for the good but for the ruin of individuals and all humanity—as has been done in the past and is unfortunately still being done.”⁴

In other words, all our hopes for society, founded on our own strength, that is to say, apart from the transcendent dimension of the person and of human life, in spite of any success that might be achieved, in the end have proven that they are not enough to free the person completely and make him/her fully happy. History bears ample witness to this. The hope placed in scientific and technological progress, born with the Industrial Revolution, produced notable fruits but then shattered against the contradictions of speculative capitalism, which today has reached its culmination with the “financial bull” of 2008. *Hope in the power of reason*—the famous “goddess reason”!—has led to a better awareness of human, personal and social rights, but the Enlightenment myth that human beings can free themselves by their own efforts gave rise to the totalitarian ideologies of the 1800’s and the nationalist movements of the 1900’s, which led to two terrible world wars and dissolved into contemporary nihilism, which denies that it is even possible to know the truth. *The hope born of naturalistic liberal optimism* has disseminated a certain philanthropy in interpersonal relations, but it has blossomed into individualism and egoism, racism and xenophobia. The hope generated by Marxist-Leninist socialism was buried beneath the debris of the Berlin Wall.

The historical failure, one after the other, of all these “hopes for society” is the source of the disillusionment and lack of hope that characterize our generation, the victim of a profound crisis of meaning and a form of depression and psychological exhaustion that is reflected in the cultural, societal and political fields: Why continue to hope in the possibility of self-liberation when all the attempts made by human beings to save themselves through their own efforts have failed?

In *Spes Salvi*, the Pope says, in essence, that the present crisis of hope springs from the fact that hope is considered only as a social—that is, a merely immanent—virtue, detached from the transcendent (theological) dimension of the human being and human history. Thus, in order to dispel the exhaustion and depression caused by the crisis of hope in our society, it is necessary that human/immanent hope be open to the “great transcendent hope” brought to the world by the Gospel. This is the mission of the Church and of the Daughters of St. Paul. Obviously, I will limit myself here to a basic and general discussion of the topic. It will then be up to your Interchapter to pinpoint working guidelines on the apostolic plane, according to the charisma of Fr. Alberione.

So let us take a look at: 1) what this “great hope” is that the Word of God has brought to the world; 2) the need for dialogue and for a meeting between humanity’s “social hopes” and the “great hope of Christians”; 3) how to trace out paths of hope today.

1. The “Great Hope” that the Word Brings to the World

What is the “great hope” that urges the Church and Christians to courageously overcome their fears and witness to it? The Word of God, Pope Benedict XVI explains in *Spes Salvi*, reveals that our life does not end in emptiness but that the human being is destined to meet God; the person was created “to be filled with God” (n. 33). This certitude, which springs from faith in the Word of God, gives rise in the heart of the believer to a “great hope,” that is able to give meaning to one’s life and sustain individuals even in the most difficult and crushing circumstances, overcoming every fear.

⁴ Id., Talk to university students in Rome, in *Osservatore Romano*, 15 December 2007.

In fact, we live and act very differently depending on if we believe that everything ends with death or if we believe that the human being and his/her activities are not destined to end in nothingness but rather to dwell in a renewed and transfigured world.

Thus, the Christian proclamation of salvation is not only “good news” in the sense of information. Instead, it involves a true transformation: it changes the lives of people and also the course of history. In other words, Christian hope always includes a historical dimension. “Faith,” the Pope says, “is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a ‘proof’ of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a ‘not yet.’ The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future” (n. 7).

What was true in apostolic times, when the proclamation of the Word opened the eyes of people to understand that it is a personal God, not cosmic forces (false gods), who rules the world, remains true today: namely, the Word of God makes us aware that “it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love—a Person. And if we know this Person and he knows us, then [...] we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws; we are free” (n. 5). Every true Christian must be imbued by the Word, making that individual a person who is transformed and at the same time able to transform others; one who is liberated and who is at the same time a liberator.

After having reminded everyone of the transforming power of Christian hope at the beginning of the Church, Benedict XVI asks himself if this continues to be true today—if our hope is as effective as it was at the time of the first Christians: “Is it performative’ for us—is it a message which shapes our life in a new way, or is it just ‘information’ which, in the meantime, we have set aside and which now seems to us to have been superseded by more recent information?” (n. 10)

In responding to this question, the encyclical takes as its starting point the profound contradiction we all notice in ourselves: on the one hand, we don’t want to die, while on the other hand, we don’t want to live interminably because that would be unbearable. So then, what do we want? The Pope offers us St. Augustine’s reply: “Ultimately we want only one thing—the ‘blessed life,’ the life which is simply life, simply ‘happiness.’ [...] We do not know this ‘true life,’ and yet we know that there must be something we do not know towards which we feel driven” (n. 11). Earthly existence is the beginning, here and now, of this ‘true life,’ which, thanks to faith, the Christian is already sure of although he/she does not have complete knowledge of it. “The term ‘eternal life’ is intended to give a name to this known ‘unknown,’ which is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists” (n. 12). In a word, our “great hope” is the Kingdom of the Father; it is Christ himself: “I shall see you again, and your hearts will be full of joy, and that joy no one shall take from you” (Jn. 16:22).

It concerns a salvation (and a hope) that is not only personal and individual but also communitarian. Just as sin destroyed the unity of the human race, so the Redemption—the Kingdom of God—reestablished this unity: “This real life, towards which we try to reach out again and again, is linked to a lived union with a ‘people,’ and for each individual it can only be attained within this ‘we’” (n. 14). Christian hope, therefore, is essentially personal and communitarian. Rooted in this “great hope,” Christians have the courage to overcome their fears. It is this hope that gives meaning to life.

2. Dialogue and Meeting with Other Human Hopes

At this point, the Church and Christians confront all the other human hopes of our time (hopes of liberation, progress, happiness, etc.), which are often weak but never extinct. These are all good hopes but they are destined to remain partial, fragile and insufficient if they are only external: “The human being can never be redeemed simply from the outside” (n. 25). “It is not science that redeems human beings: they are redeemed by love. This applies even in terms of this present world.” To better explain the fragility of purely immanent hopes, the Pope uses an example that everyone can understand: “When someone has the experience of a great love in his life, this is a moment of ‘redemption’ which gives a new meaning to his life. But soon he will also realize that the love bestowed upon him cannot by itself resolve the question of his life. It is a love that remains fragile. It can be destroyed by death. The human being needs unconditional love. [...] If this absolute love exists, with its absolute certainty, then—only then—is man ‘redeemed,’ whatever should happen to him in his particular circumstances. This is what it means to say: Jesus Christ has ‘redeemed’ us” (n. 26). This is why so many human hopes, even though good and beautiful in themselves, fail and disillusion people when they are detached from the transcendent dimension of the person. Only a meeting with the “great, transcending hope” of human life can guarantee the complete freedom of the person and his/her true happiness. But how can we integrate this great, transcending hope and our merely immanent hopes?

The only way to do this is through dialogue and meeting. Christian hope does not prevent—indeed, it insistently demands—a confrontation with all the other hopes of humanity. Human hopes and Christian hope; the modern world and Christianity—these are not opposed to each other; they are meant to be integrated. Such a meeting is possible because Christian hope is also a human hope, even though it stands out from the other hopes because it is not founded on a philosophy or ideology, nor on human effort alone. Instead, it rests on God and his Word. That is to say, it springs from faith in the revelation and in the promise of salvation that was historically concretized in “Christ, our hope” (1 Tm. 1:1).

Therefore, it is necessary to integrate the social and theological dimensions of hope. In fact, when “social” hope (for freedom, progress, happiness) is deprived of its theological dimension, it remains external and partial, fragile and insufficient.

How can we integrate these two dimensions of hope?

3. Tracing Out Paths of Hope

In his encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI points out how human hopes and Christian hope can meet. It means that everyone (“laity” and “Catholics”) must question themselves through sincere self-criticism and an honest examination of conscience. Christians should give others the example in this regard. In fact, the Pope remarks, “We must also acknowledge that modern Christianity, faced with the successes of science in progressively structuring the world, has to a large extent restricted its attention to the individual and his salvation. In so doing it has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize sufficiently the greatness of its task—even if it has continued to achieve great things in the formation of the person and in care for the weak and the suffering” (n. 25).

An honest examination of conscience makes it easy to see the errors that prevent believers from tracing out paths of hope today.

A *first mistake* is the dichotomy many believers establish between faith and history. This improper split prompts them to flee the world, to take refuge in a disincarnated and intemistic faith, confining every hope for justice, peace and fraternity exclusively to the world of

the future, to the next world, to the end times. These Christians do not realize that by doing this they paradoxically contribute to nourishing secularism and the atheistic hopes that exclude God from history. “From the beginning of the modern era,” J. Moltmann noted with keen insight back in 1972, “believers and non-believers have divided up the world, with one group hoping for a ‘heavenly’ future and the other for an ‘earthly’ one. One group cultivates hope for the soul/heart, while the other cultivates hope for a just society. Having divided things up in this way, Christians and atheists have in actual fact made a pact with one another: an alliance to bring about the death of God in the world.”⁵ Consequently, the first way to proclaim and witness to our “great hope” to the people of the Third Millennium is to bring about in ourselves first of all a coherent synthesis between Word and life, in the awareness that we are not dealing with two different stories—one secular and one sacred—but a single story that is both human and divine, just as the destiny of the person called to live it is both human and divine. In this sense, the Daughters of St. Paul are called to “dwell in the Word,” to have a heart imbued with the Word—a heart that safeguards this seed and produces abundant fruit.⁶ Your mission is to use the press and other communications technologies to build bridges of hope, to open human cultures and desires to the transcendent dimension of the human being.

A *second mistake* is made by Christians who, dutifully insisting that “theological hope” also involves the building of a more human and fraternal world, end up reducing this hope to the mere hope of social and political liberation, ignoring the religious/transcendent dimension of the person. St. Paul warns: “If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable” (1 Co. 15:19). In fact, our “great hope” presupposes our liberation from sin—the radical evil of the person separated from God. Thanks to this interior liberation and as its integrating moment, “theological hope” is also translated into a determining contribution to liberation from the social and structural manifestations of sin, that is to say: from every type of discrimination, from degrading economic situations, from oppressive political regimes. Fr. Alberione strongly insisted on this point. The Daughters of St. Paul, he said, are called to interpret history in the light of the Word, allowing themselves to be immersed in the mystery of their spousal relationship with God. They are called to trace out paths of hope through which people can reach union with God, taking as their point of departure legitimate earthly hopes.

Finally, let us consider a *third mistake* that can make the proclamation of our “great hope” less credible: the discouragement and sadness that Christians often feel when faced with trials and adversities. Pessimism and a lack of joyous, beautiful and compelling witness—a witness that is not afraid of failure and delays—is the antithesis of the “Gospel of hope,” which, instead, teaches that true hope necessarily passes through the mystery of the cross, embraced with joy and faith. As Paul says, suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope—a hope that will not disappoint us (cf. Rm. 5:4). Therefore, bringing the world our “great hope” means, for the Daughters of St. Paul, bringing (together with the cross of the Lord) trust in his redeeming power, which alone gives meaning to sorrow and death and which does not allow us to continue to be sad “as others do who have no hope” (1 Th. 4:13).

At this point, social communications becomes the “royal road” of dialogue and meeting between human hopes and Christian hope. “Pastoral presence in that world must thus serve to show our contemporaries, especially the many people in our day who experience uncertainty and confusion, that God is near; that in Christ we all ‘belong to one another.’ In this way the Word can traverse the many crossroads created by the intersection of all the different

⁵ Cit. in *Civ. Catt.*, 1974, I, p. 530.

⁶ Cf. *Living the Interchapter Together: Some suggestions for reflection and prayer.*

'highways' that form cyberspace, and show that God has his rightful place in every age, including our own. Thanks to the new communications media, the Lord can walk the streets of our cities and, stopping before the threshold of our homes and our hearts, say once more: 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me' (Rv. 3:20)."⁷

It is now up to you to re-examine the forms of your apostolate in the light of the "Gospel of hope"—a "hope that does not disappoint."

⁷ *Ivi.*