Horizons of hope: A critique of 'Spe salvi'

by Jürgen Moltmann in the May 20, 2008 issue

“In hope we were saved” (Spe salvi facti sumus). *Pope Benedict’s encyclical* Spe salvi, *released in late 2007, begins with this quote from Paul’s letter to the Romans* (*8:24*). *Benedict goes on immediately to speak of redemption*: “*According to the Christian faith, “redemption”—salvation—is not simply a given. 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.” Commenting on this encyclical is the German Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, who has for years pondered a theology of hope*.

If we compare Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical on hope, *Spe Salvi*, with Vatican II’s 1965 document on “Joy and Hope,” or *Gaudium et Spes* (also known as “The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”), the peculiarity of Benedict’s encyclical immediately catches our eye. Benedict’s encyclical is intended for church insiders; it is aimed spiritually and pastorally at the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church and “all Christian believers.” It limits Christian hope to the faithful and separates them from those in the world “who have no hope.”

By contrast, *Gaudium et Spes* begins with the church’s deep solidarity with “the entire human family.” This solidarity is described as follows: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.” The Vatican II document addresses and responds to the concerns of today’s world: human dignity and human rights as well as peace and the development of an international community.

None of these concerns is discussed in Benedict’s encyclical, which begins neither with the solidarity of Christians with all people nor with the universal “God of hope.” Rather, it subjectively and ecclesially begins with “us”: “in hope we are saved.” We and not the others; the church and not the world. This is a stark distinction indeed between the believing and the unbelieving or otherwise-believing: we have hope—the others have no hope.

“Faith is hope” is the first heading following the introduction and is the encyclical’s primary expression of confidence. What is meant, however, is actually the reverse. “Hope is synonymous with faith.” With this formulation, the distinctive character of Christian hope falls away. The encyclical could also have been called “Through Faith We Are Saved.” One wonders why Paul and the entire theological tradition of faith and hope have thus been altered.

The encyclical positions itself apologetically in response to modern complaints that Christian hope is “individualistic” and in contrast calls it communal. Salvation has always been seen as a “social reality.” “While this community-oriented vision of the ‘blessed life’ is certainly directed beyond the present world, as such it also has to do with the building up of this world.” Yet the section ends with a warning: “Are we perhaps seeing once again, in the light of current history, that no positive world order can prosper where souls are overgrown?”

What is lacking in the papal writing? What is missing is the gospel of the kingdom of God, the gospel that Jesus himself proclaimed. What is missing is the message of the lordship of the risen Christ over the living and the dead and the entire cosmos that we find in the apostle Paul. What is missing is the “resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come” as it appears in the creeds. What is missing is the salvation of a groaning creation and the hope of a new earth where justice dwells. In short, what is missing is the hope of the all-encompassing promise of God who is coming: “See, I am making all things new.” By limiting hope to the blessedness of souls in eternal life, Benedict also leaves out the prophetic promises of the Old Testament. Christian hope then becomes hard to differentiate from a Gnostic religion of salvation.

The encyclical criticizes the modern world’s faith in the idea of progress and human delusions of grandeur. Because faith in progress was finished off by the catastrophes of both world wars in the 20th century, the papal critique resembles the killing of a corpse. The same applies to the critique of the modern Age of Reason and the modern bourgeois and socialist revolutions of freedom. The enthusiasm of the philosopher Immanuel Kant for the Enlightenment is discarded while feudalism and its absolutism that granted no rights is ignored. The corpse of Marxism is subsequently convicted of “fundamental errors.” Marx’s real error is materialism. “He forgot that man always remains man. He forgot man and he forgot man’s freedom. He forgot that freedom always remains also freedom for evil.” Late-born anti-Marxism is rarely more smoothly put!

The pope appropriates the “self-critique” of modernity that came to expression in Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s treatment of “the dialectic of enlightenment”: “Man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope.” That will not convince modern, thinking persons, however, since they have already absorbed this self-criticism, and for it they need no theology.

Supported by the Second Vatican Council, Catholic and Protestant theologians entered into Christian-Marxist dialogue in the 1960s through the Catholic *Paulus-Gesellschaft*. The participants tried to bring the humanistic Marxists, who were acquainted with evil and knew the power of death, near to grace and the hope of the resurrection. Milan Machovec and Roger Garaudy understood very well the deficiency of the immanent hopes of the modern age, and we theologians, for our part, took up their passion for the liberation of the oppressed and for the rights of the humiliated. The “theology of hope” and the “theology of liberation” arose from a cooperative-critical engagement with the situation of modernity. “Political theology” shaped greater frameworks for the deepest solidarity of the church “with the entire human family.”

The statement that “a world without God is a world without hope” is in its simplicity empirically misleading, for a world with God is empirically also a world with resignation and terror in the name of God. Hope depends on the God of Israel and of Jesus Christ, on the God of the resurrection of the coming kingdom on earth. Only this One is the “God of hope.” Only this God is expected to be the “One who comes.”

The encyclical does well to name “settings for learning and practicing hope.” “Prayer as a school of hope” is named first. That is certainly correct. But prayer is just as much a school of faith. What joins hope to prayer? It is watching. In the temptation of Gethsemane, Jesus asks the sleeping disciples only this: “So could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray, that you may not enter into temptation.” Prayer is always linked with waking up to the world of God and the awakening of all the senses. In prayer we hear and speak, in watching we open our eyes and all our senses for the arrival of God in our life and in the world. Praying with Christ belongs to the spirituality of watchful senses by which we “see” Christ in the poor, sick and imprisoned. That watching is the setting for the learning of hope.

Finally, the encyclical names “judgment as a setting for learning and practicing hope.” That too is not false. But I want to direct the view of the end toward the beginning. The origin of hope is birth, not death. The birth of a new life is an

occasion for hope. The rebirth of lived life is an occasion for even greater hope. And when the dead are raised, they enter into the fulfilled hope of life. The setting for learning hope in life, therefore, is the possibility of starting anew and a new beginning, the true freedom.

Benedict XVI closes with a hymn to Mary, the humble and obedient handmaiden of the Lord, who becomes the mother of all the faithful and is named “the Mother of hope.” This is in the Bible, but so too is the other Mary, the Mary who rejoiced in God her Savior: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:51-53). She takes the song of Hannah from the book of Samuel and praises the revolutionary God of the prophets. Paul saw this God at work in the community of Christ: “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, the things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. . . . Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:27b-28, 31).

The God who creates justice for those who suffer violence, the God who has raised up the degraded and crucified Jesus, that is the God of hope for Mary, the prophets and the apostles.

This article was translated by Sean Hayden and Gerald Liu.