

# Challenges of Hope from *Spe Salvi*

## *How will living in hope transform my life of faith?*

By Christopher Weber

If you want a resounding impression of this remarkable encyclical by Pope Benedict XVI, start with paragraph 1, but then turn immediately to paragraphs 30 and 31. Benedict's summary of the first six sections of the letter offers an eloquent exposition of what it means to be "saved by hope." These paragraphs drove home for me the importance of this letter for our ministry to the Church – and to the world.

Building on his first encyclical, *God is Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, Benedict asserts that the unconditional love of God is the grounding point for our very existence, and, ultimately, the key to a true and lasting hope. The God who remains the source of our hope is "the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety." (SS 31) Through much of this letter, Benedict demonstrates how placing our hope in anything less than this loving God leaves us unfulfilled and empty.

The encyclical is very dense in places, and showcases Benedict the scholar. At the same time, there are some wonderful quotable quotes in here. I found numerous points where Benedict's clarity and insight stopped me in my tracks and made me reassess my own belief and practice. *Spe Salvi* raises at least three important challenges for those of us who catechize:

### Challenge #1:

#### Do I really want Eternal Life?

I was riveted by Benedict's section "Eternal life – what is it?" He challenged me to rethink my sometimes blasé acceptance of the Church's teachings on eternal life. Pope Benedict asserts that Christians propose a lackluster vision of eternal life to the world.

For many believers and non-believers alike, eternal life is actually a frightening concept, because we think of "life" as the routine that we slog through, day in, and day out. How boring it would be to be stuck in the drudgery of life for eternity! By contrast to our stereotypical image of listless angels sitting

around on clouds, quietly playing their harps, the Pope reminds us of a dynamic vision of eternal life rooted in blissful communion with God:

*[Eternal life] would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time – the before and after- no longer exists...a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. (SS 12)*

This, of course, is not a new definition! However, I think he rightly asserts that we have neglected this idea, and have allowed ourselves to be lulled into the immediate comfort of the things we know: earthly relationships, earthly loves, earthly moments of happiness. By taking our eyes off a powerful dream for life eternal, we have

*The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.  
Spe Salvi #2*

inadvertently put aside the very experience that grounds Christian hope: a limitless God who wants nothing less than to be forever, intimately joined in love to those God created.

Some questions that this poses for my work in catechesis:

- Do I live as if I truly believe in the heavenly life to come?
- When I catechize, do people sense in my joy an authentic vision of eternal life?
- In my faith community, do we help others experience not just a “little bit of heaven on earth,” but also a foretaste of the Glory to come?

## Challenge #2: Is my Hope rooted in God?

Benedict spends considerable time detailing how modern society has replaced faith in God with what he calls “faith in progress” (SS17). In remarkably few pages, he details how historical revolutions – industrial, scientific, philosophical and political – have led us to a misplaced confidence in reason and freedom as remedies to society’s ills. Despite the positive accomplishments in just about all areas of human knowing, no political system, technology or philosophy has delivered the “Utopia” promised. No human creation will ever make us truly free. Human reason and freedom, without God, inevitably lead us to choices that dehumanize and enslave others.

Spe Salvi calls for the restoration of the right relationship between reason and faith. Far from denying the value of human

progress, Benedict simply notes that it must be grounded in the lasting fulfillment of the human person. The only true source for this fulfillment is God. Somehow we need to recover the insight that we are not redeemed by science or reason, but by love (SS 26).

While one can easily see the application of these ideas to modern culture and society, I applied them to my work in the Church. I found here an urgent reminder to keep God at the center of my ministry. It is too easy to get caught up in the humanity of the Church, to be let down by the everyday disappointments that are bound to happen when even the best-intentioned Christians work together. It is also too easy to take personal credit when programs or processes go well. *Spe Salvi* challenges me to humbly consider:

- Do I live as if I truly believe God is the source of my breath and life?
- Am I willing to let go of my own self-importance, and allow the Spirit to guide my work?
- Without denigrating the need for tasks and programs, does my work center first of all on leading people to an intimate relationship with God in Jesus Christ?

## Challenge #3: Do I Find Hope in God’s Judgment?

The section on “‘Settings’ for learning and practicing hope”

### **INSPIRATION FROM BENEDICT XVI**

#### *ON ETERNAL LIFE:*

*Do we really want this – to live eternally? Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive...To continue living forever – endlessly – appears more like a curse than a gift. SPE SALVI 10*

#### *ON RELATIONSHIPS WITH GOD AND OTHERS:*

*Life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively in or from ourselves; it is a relationship. And life in its totality is a relationship with him who is the source of life. If we are in relationship with him who does not die, who is Life itself and Love itself, then we are in life. Then we “live.” SPE SALVI 27*

*Christ died for all. To live for him means allowing oneself to be drawn into his being for others. SPE SALVI 28*

contains some of the most powerful language of the entire document. Benedict encourages us to let God purify our intentions and will through an intimate encounter of prayer. He asks us to reconsider the value of discovering hope amidst suffering, even that which takes us to the breaking point. He notes that while should do all that we can to alleviate suffering, we will never eliminate it. We also must never lose sight of the redemptive power of suffering:

*To suffer with the other and for others; to suffer for the sake of truth and justice; to suffer out of love and in order to become a person who truly loves – these are fundamental elements of humanity, and to abandon them would destroy man himself. (SS 39)*

What struck me as particularly novel in this section was Benedict's assertion that the Judgment of God can nurture hope within us. What an extraordinary thought! Benedict notes that the human longing for justice is a starting point for hope in God. Faced with the so much injustice, suffering and cruelty in the modern world, some have despaired of a good and just God. However, the very need for a universal resolution to the problem of evil supports the Christian faith in eternal life, and God's ultimate victory over the power of sin and death. (SS 43)

Benedict takes this one step further, applying the idea of justice and judgment to the life of the individual believer. In Christ Jesus, the Judge and Savior, we

are purified as if through fire. Being subject to Divine Judgment gives us pain, but it is also a stunning experience of the saving power of God:

*Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. (SS 47)*

What a beautiful paradox that we not only find hope in God meting out justice on our behalf, but also in the very experience of God judging us! Benedict tells us that the judgment of God is hope, because it is both justice and grace. (SS 47)

I found that I could apply these insights not only to my personal spiritual life, where I encounter God's judgment, but also to my ministerial life, where I receive the judgment of others. I constantly receive feedback, whether solicited or not, about the many tasks I do in the vineyard of the Lord. On better days, I take criticism as a gift, but I am sure you can guess how the not-so-good days go. Spe Salvi challenges me to look for grace in judgment:

- Do I live **as if I believe** that God's judgment is not a

### ***Inspiration from Benedict XVI***

#### **ON THE GREAT HOPE:**

*We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. SPE SALVI 31*

*Hope in a Christian sense is always hope for others as well. SPE SALVI 34*

#### **ON LOVE AND HOPE:**

*Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere. SPE SALVI 35*

moment of fear, but a moment of light and love?

- Do I allow the “purifying fire” of God’s grace into my life, and humbly ask the Lord each day to remove my shortcomings, so I can be a better disciple?
- Do I leave judgment and justice to God, and pray for others to receive it as grace?

## Living the Challenge of Hope

Throughout *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict cites saints and heroes who have been pillars of hope in spite of horrific trials. He ends the letter with a prayer to Mary, Mother of God, whom he deems a “star of hope” for us (SS 49). *Spe Salvi* is an exhortation for all of us to follow her example, and to shine as living lights of hope in the world. Are we up to the challenge? Global salvation is at stake!

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*As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well.*

**SPE SALVI 48**

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