

Pope Benedict XVI's second encyclical was released on November 30. Entitled, *Spe Salvi (Saved in Hope)*, the encyclical is an extended meditation on the theological virtue of hope and its pivotal role in the Christian life. While much of our Holy Father's meditation focuses on the cultural, political and economic factors which have shaped the world as we know it today, there are also many practical and relevant insights to be gleaned from the document.

Many self-help guides which have emerged over the past decade or so suggest that a good way to organize one's life is around goals. Goals help us to focus our energies, assess our strengths and weaknesses, and keep us set on a certain path toward fulfillment. This is certainly true of faith. From the very outset of the encyclical, Pope Benedict is clear that Christian faith is about having a goal. Contrary to the seemingly popular opinion—even among believers—that faith is merely one *aspect* or *characteristic* of a many-faceted life, the Pope is clear that faith dramatically shapes the life of the believer, directing the one who believes to his or her *ultimate* goal: salvation. And this salvation, the goal of eternal union with God, “is not simply a given.” Salvation, while offered as a free gift, requires our cooperation. Therefore, it is not something we have certainty of achieving, but something we *hope* for.

This notion is tangentially related to a concept that the Holy Father calls the “performative” nature of the Christian message. The Gospel does not merely offer us a series of propositions to be accepted or denied, but an encounter with it must be a life-changing experience. The Pope points out: “the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing.” This is, of course, because the Gospel introduces us not to an *idea*, but to a *person*, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. And no true encounter with him leaves us unchanged. The hope which he offers us cannot help but change us; this is a hope which “...transformed life and the world from within.” As one theologian expressed it, Christ is the agent and pattern of a transformation in which we become more and more ourselves, not less and less. Pope Benedict affirms a similar notion when he says that Jesus “...tells us who man truly is and what a man must do in order to be truly human.” This theme is really an echo of what the Second Vatican Council taught in the Declaration on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which stated that “Christ...fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear.” In Christ, man finds his origin, his ultimate destiny and the sole hope of achieving it.

Thus, it is clear that man cannot be his own savior. While human efforts to assist the plights of the sick, poor and underprivileged are necessary aspects of our call to an “other-centered” Christian life, ultimately, only Christ can restore what has been lost by humanity's disobedience. As the Holy Father states rather strongly: “Certainly we cannot ‘build’ the Kingdom of God by our own efforts—what we build will always be the kingdom of man with all the limitations proper to our human nature...we must do all we can to overcome suffering, but to banish it from the world altogether is not in our power...Only God is able to do this: only a God who personally enters history by making himself man and suffering within history.” This is not to say that humanitarian efforts are totally in vain, but that the physical and social ills that plague so many of our world are not their own cause, they are the result of a spiritual disorder within man, and therefore only a spiritual remedy will heal them. Jesus Christ alone provides the remedy for fallen man. Only he can provide the hope of overcoming the tragic effects of our fallen nature.

The Holy Father rounds out his encyclical by proposing that hope is best learned in three “schools”: the school of prayer, the experience of suffering and submission to judgment.

Firstly, prayer must become an experience of self-reflection and transformation. The Holy Father points out that often our prayer is misguided, even bordering on trite, when we understand it merely as a means of asking God to accommodate our many and often fluctuating needs and desires. Prayer, rather, is the experience that purifies and refines our desires and hopes. If prayer is authentic, then it cannot leave us unchanged. Henri Nouwen once wrote that “...although we often feel a real desire to pray, we experience at the same time a strong resistance. We want to move closer to God...but the closer we come to him the more intimately and urgently we experience his demand to let go of the many familiar ways in which we organize our lives.” Pope Benedict makes a similar point when says in the encyclical: “When we pray properly we undergo a process of inner purification which opens us up to God and thus to our fellow human beings as well.”

Secondly, the experience of suffering fosters hope. This is not a pious platitude intended to comfort those who find themselves in a state of suffering. Rather, suffering is for all Christians the path to Jesus. The mystery of Jesus is the mystery of a God who takes on our flesh, not to eliminate human suffering, but to enter into it himself. Thus, the central image of our faith is the cross, which is Jesus' most profound experience of suffering with a wounded humanity. It is only by following in his steps that we are given the hope of suffering as transformative. As the Pope states: “It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love.”

Finally, submission to judgment also serves as a school of hope. Much like suffering, we are somewhat inclined to avoid judgment at all costs. But in reality, judgment keeps us authentically connected with a standard of measurement which is not restricted by the ebb and flow of our own personal subjective experience. We tend to forget that our actions and decisions really matter to God. They help shape or deform us, and they will ultimately factor into our eternal destiny. Only a truly irresponsible person would believe that none of their choices will really have an effect in the long run. In fact, this is often an error associated with childhood or adolescence; the older we become, the more we realize that our choices really do make a difference, for good or for bad. The Holy Father points out early on in the encyclical that while sin alienates us from God and others, it also causes a severe disintegration within our very selves. Therefore, to measure our acts against the objective standard of God's judgment is the first step in overcoming sin and growing more

in union with God, others, and ultimately restoring inner harmony and union. As the Holy Father points out, “The encounter with [Christ] is the decisive act of judgment. 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.” This purification from our own self-destructive tendencies gives us the hope of a life lived in harmony with all of reality.

Closing his encyclical by invoking Mary, the Mother of Hope, the Pope offers us the hand of our Blessed Mother, to guide us and lead us through the many trials and challenges of life. As the Holy Father points out, “...to reach [Christ] we also need lights close by—people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way.” The Holy Father could certainly not end his encyclical on a better note. Mary always leads us closer to her Son, and therefore, always closer to hope. It is especially appropriate during this season of Advent, while we look to Mary, pregnant with hope, to reflect on the many ways in which Jesus is inviting us to closer union with him through a deep personal transformation. An encounter with hope never leaves us unchanged, and the world could certainly use more witnesses to hope.

*The full text of the encyclical is available online at <http://www.vatican.va>.*