

## On Christian hope

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Once again, we celebrated Christmas. The parties and festivities we attended lightened our spirits. For a few days, we set aside the collective gloom that 2007 brought to us in Puerto Rico. As the new year dawns upon us, we look to the future with hope in our hearts. Hope that 2008 will be better for us, for our families, for Puerto Rico. Hope helps us to go on.

There are hopes and there are hopes. Life goes on because there are greater hopes and there are lesser hopes. There are individual hopes, there are family hopes, there are hopes of an entire people.

Hope can be the expectation of something desired, or it can be confidence in a future event. When it is confidence in a future event, it must be grounded in substance. This is the hope that moves and sustains us through hard times.

Christmas has to do with “the great hope.” The mother of all hopes. The overarching hope that nurtures our lesser hopes, which keep us going day by day.

Human’s search for meaning spans the arch of history. At first, myth supplied this need. At the time of the birth of Christ, myth had lost its meaning, the Roman state religion was merely political religion; philosophical rationalism had confined the gods within the realm of unreality. The divine was seen in various ways in cosmic forces, but a god to whom one could pray did not exist. At the very moment when the Magi guided by the star adored Christ, astrology came to an end because history was now moving in the orbit determined by Christ.

After that moment, human history, not myth, would record the life of a human totally committed in love to God. A man who only sought to do God’s will. A man who spoke like no other human had spoken before, who gave us the purest moral principles and abided by them; who cured the sick, and gave sight to the blind; whose love for us was so great that he gave his life for us upon a cross. These historical events, so coherent with the divine, lead to the resurrection that is the cornerstone of Christian faith. These events are the events upon which we ground our faith in Jesus as the son of God who revealed his father to us and through whom we know the substance of things to come. Jesus brought a new certainty to our expectation of God.

After the events initiated by what occurred in Bethlehem more than 2,000 years ago, it became clear it is not the laws of matter that ultimately govern the world and humankind but a personal God; 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 truly the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the

last word. We are not slaves of the universe and of its laws. We are free. Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter; within everything, and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who, in Jesus, has revealed himself as Love.

All of this is made clear in *Spe Salvi*, an Encyclical letter which His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI issued last November. According to Christian faith, 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. The present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads toward a goal, if we can be sure of this goal and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey. This goal is life eternal. But, what does this mean?

The term “eternal life,” says Benedict XVI, is an inadequate term that creates confusion. Eternal, in fact, suggests to us the idea of something interminable, and this frightens us; life makes us think of the life we know and love and do not want to lose, even though very often it brings more toil than satisfaction so that while on the one hand we desire it, on the other hand we do not want it.

Eternity, according to the Holy Father, 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; like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists.

We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in Saint John’s Gospel: “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (John 16:22). We must think along these lines, affirms the Pope, if we want to understand the object of Christian hope, to understand what it is that our faith leads us to expect.

When we reached the 17th century—the beginning of the modern age—a profound change occurred in our vision of redemption. Faith in Jesus was displaced to the private level and was substituted in world affairs by faith in progress. Humans discovered the link between science and the technical advances in production methods. Reason and freedom became associated with progress. During the 19th century progress toward the better, the definitively good world, became associated with politics—Marxism—revolution and all-encompassing change.

As the 20th century unfolded we realized that humans, in fact, are not merely the product of economic conditions—and it is not possible to redeem the purely from the outside by creating a favorable economic environment.

If technical progress, the Encyclical tell us, is not matched by corresponding progress in human’s ethical formation, in human’s inner growth, then it is not progress at all but a threat for humans and for the world. Progress, in order to be progress, needs moral growth on the part of humanity. The reason behind

action and capacity for action is likewise in need of integration through reason's openness to the saving forces of faith, to the differentiation between good and evil.

It is not science that redeems human: humans are redeemed by love, argues Benedict XVI. Being in communion with Jesus Christ draws us into his "being for all," and makes it our own way of being. He commits us to live for others, but only through communion with him does it become possible truly to be there for others, for the whole.

Let us go forward into 2008 with the great hope of Jesus in our hearts. Our individual hopes, our family hopes, the hopes of our entire people of Puerto Rico will then be grounded in substance. We will then look with confidence to the ensuing events.

