

CRISIS OF FAITH – CHRISTIAN HOPE

CC Lay Conference – February 2, 2008 – Fr. Terry Donahue, CC

I. The Crisis of Faith in the West

1) Medieval Western culture supported the Catholic faith

- Christian legal, moral and spiritual tradition. - grew in concert with society and culture.
- Society supported the transmission of the faith from one gen. to the next, through the culture.
- This is the ideal relationship between faith & culture, as highlighted in Vatican II.

2) But some aspects of that culture were not so ideal...

- Oppression of the poor, workers, women
- Lack of religious freedom and tolerance
- Cruel punishments imposed by the state, often working closely with the Church
- Bigotry & racism were tolerated and even supported in the culture, enshrined in law

“I do not think we are necessarily more wicked than our ancestors, overall. True, we are less courageous, less honest with ourselves, less self-disciplined, and obviously less chaste than they were. But they were more cruel, intolerant, snobbish, and inhumane than we are. They were better at the hard virtues; we are better at the soft virtues. The balance is fairly even, I think.”

(Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion*, p. 25)

3) In the past couple of centuries, there has been a rapid change in Western culture

- A massive cultural revolutions which has stripped the Church of these props
- De-Christianization of western society (legal, cultural mores, morality, media, entertainment)
- Major movements:
 - 1700s French Revolution → Secularization of the state, anti-clericalism
 - 1800s Rise of Relativism
 - 1900 Marxism/Communism → Militant atheism
 - 1940 Totalitarianism → state w/complete political, social, and cultural control
 - 1960s Sexual Revolution → Rejection of chastity, Rebellion against authority in generallowest birth rates are now in the nations of former Christendom
- Church has been responding to these changes (Vatican II, *Humanae Vitae*, *Veritatis Splendor*)

II. The Modern View: Hope = Faith in Progress

1) Religious Faith is denied or relegated to the “private” sphere (*Spe Salvi*, 17)

- The Christian faith is viewed as irrelevant to the modern world.
- Christian hope is then replaced with faith in *progress*.

2) Developments in *science* and *technology* will lead to a new world

Ex. I was surrounded by this world view while studying at MIT.

- This requires a kingdom of reason and freedom, both interpreted as “being in conflict with the shackles of faith and of the Church” (this figures heavily in the plot of *The Golden Compass*)

3) Combined with *political* attempts to forge a Kingdom of Man

The French Revolution – “an attempt to establish the rule of reason and freedom as a political reality” (*Spe Salvi*, 19)

Communism – “[Marx] showed precisely how to overthrow the existing order [by radical revolution], but he did not say how matters should proceed thereafter... we also know how it then developed, not ushering in a perfect world, but leaving behind a trail of appalling destruction... He forgot that freedom always remains also freedom for evil. His real error is materialism: man, in fact, is not merely the product of economic conditions, and it is not possible to redeem him purely from the outside by creating a favourable economic environment.” (*Spe Salvi*, 21)

4) Technical progress is *ambiguous* or *two-edged* (slingshot → atomic bomb)

“If technical progress is not matched by corresponding progress in man's ethical formation, in man's inner growth (cf. Eph 3:16; 2 Cor 4:16), then it is not progress at all, but a threat for man and for the world.” (*Spe Salvi*, 22)

“Science can contribute greatly to making the world and mankind more human. Yet it can also destroy mankind and the world unless it is steered by forces that lie outside it.” (*Spe Salvi*, 25)

5) Reason itself needs to be open to faith in order to be a sure guide

“Only thus does reason become truly human. It becomes human only if it is capable of directing the will along the right path, and it is capable of this only if it looks beyond itself.”

- As our society gains more technical powers without sufficient moral development, we become more and more *dangerous*.

“There is no doubt, therefore, that a ‘Kingdom of God’ accomplished without God—a kingdom therefore of man alone—inevitably ends up as the “perverse end” of all things... we have seen it, and we see it over and over again.” (*Spe Salvi*, 23)

III. The Paradox of Life

1) There is something that we long for, but we haven't experienced yet.

- We all want to be happy, but we don't know exactly what happiness is...

- We can't put our finger on it exactly, but we know it is more than what we have now...

“...we have no idea what we ultimately desire, what we would really like. We do not know this reality at all; even in those moments when we think we can reach out and touch it, it eludes us... All we know is that it is not this. Yet in not knowing, we know that this reality must exist.” (*Spe Salvi*, 11, cf. Ep. 130 Ad Probam 14, 25-15, 28: CSEL 44, 68-73)

2) This desire for true life is what drives us...

“In some way we want life itself, true life, untouched even by death; yet at the same time we do not know the thing towards which we feel driven. We cannot stop reaching out for it, and yet we know that all we can experience or accomplish is not what we yearn for.” (*Spe Salvi*, 12)

...and this drive can lead to *hope* OR *despair*:

“This unknown “thing” is the true “hope” which drives us, and at the same time the fact that it is unknown is the cause of all forms of despair and also of all efforts, whether positive or destructive, directed towards worldly authenticity and human authenticity.” (*Spe Salvi*, 12)

3) What we're longing for is *eternal life*!

- But many people do not find the prospect of “eternal life” attractive. Why?

“Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive... To continue living for ever —endlessly—appears more like a curse than a gift... monotonous and ultimately unbearable.” (*Spe Salvi*, 10)

4) The term “eternal life” confuses us: the words don’t mean what we think they mean!

- But the “life” of eternal life is *not* life as we know it now, which has things we want, but also what we *don’t* want (toil, suffering, lack of satisfaction).
- Furthermore, the “eternal” of eternal life is *not* “something interminable” (like a boring class that never ends). Rather, eternal means *outside of time itself*.

“[Eternal life is]...something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality... plunging into an ocean of infinite love where time (before and after) no longer exist... a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy.” (*Spe Salvi*, 12)

“*I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.*” (Jn 16:22)

IV. The Christian Proposal

1) Life without God → Life with no ultimate hope

“Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were “without hope and without God in the world” (*Eph* 2:12). Of course he knew they had had gods, he knew they had had a religion, but their gods had proved questionable, and no hope emerged from their contradictory myths.” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2)

“Notwithstanding their gods, they were “without God” and consequently found themselves in a dark world, facing a dark future. *In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus* (How quickly we fall back from nothing to nothing): so says an epitaph of that period.” (*Spe Salvi*, 2, cf. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum VI*, no. 26003)

2) We are redeemed by Love

“It is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love...” (*Spe Salvi*, 27)

Everyone is looking for love. But the love we experience from our friends, our family, even our spouse, is fulfilling, but leaves us longing for more. God created you with that emptiness in your heart so that you would seek for Him, and find Him, and be completely fulfilled by Him. Nothing else can truly satisfy you, because you are made for a perfect Love.

“Man's great, true hope which holds firm in spite of all disappointments can only be God—God who has loved us and who continues to love us “to the end,” until all “is accomplished”.” (*Spe Salvi*, 27)

“To come to know God—the true God—means to receive hope.” (*Spe Salvi*, 3)

Ex. “During my sophomore year of high school, I went through 10 months of loneliness, pain, stress, and tears. It was everything combined – school, family, wanting to find a soul mate, my brother disappearing out of my life. Then, something happened. I finally found out what I was missing.

At first, I wasn’t exactly liking the idea of praising God in the way they did at the Steubenville youth conference in Attleboro Massachusetts. But the first night I was there, I broke into tears. I was emotional for no reason, yet it helped me. I knew something was going on inside of me, but I didn’t know what.

The second night, my heart started pounding as I listened to the speaker. I started crying like a baby, again, for some unknown reason. Later on, my youth director told me it was God

beckoning me and I had to unlock the door to my heart and let Him in. So I did. I let Him in that night, something I had never done.

Now I realize I'm just like any other teenager in the world. There was this feeling inside of me just waiting to come out, burning a hole in me. I no longer have that feeling because I found out what I was missing. I was missing religion. I was missing faith in God, and now that I have found it, I'm forever changed." (*Rocked by God: Teen's Experiences of God*, written and compiled by Fr. Dave Pivonka, TOR with Katrina J. Zeno, p. 58)

- But Christianity is *not* individualistic (i.e. just me & Jesus)

3) Love for God → Justice, Generosity & Responsibility toward others (*Spe Salvi*, 28-29)

"The one who loves God cannot hold on to money but rather gives it out in God's fashion ..."
(Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on charity, Centuria 1*, ch. 1: PG 90, 965)

"After his conversion, St. Augustine described his daily life: "The turbulent have to be corrected, the faint-hearted cheered up, the weak supported; the Gospel's opponents need to be refuted, its insidious enemies guarded against; the unlearned need to be taught, the indolent stirred up, the argumentative checked; the proud must be put in their place, the desperate set on their feet, those engaged in quarrels reconciled; the needy have to be helped, the oppressed to be liberated, the good to be encouraged, the bad to be tolerated; all must be loved." (St. Augustine, *Sermo 340*, 3: PL 38, 1484; cf. F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, London and New York 1961, p. 268)

"The Gospel terrifies me." (St. Augustine, *Sermo 339*, 4: PL 38, 1481)

"[Christ] intercedes for us, otherwise I should despair. My weaknesses are many and grave, many and grave indeed, but more abundant still is your medicine. We might have thought that your word was far distant from union with man, and so we might have despaired of ourselves, if this Word had not become flesh and dwelt among us." (St. Augustine, *Conf. X 43*, 69: CSEL 33, 279)

4) As Christians, we have a future, and this changes how we live *now*

- not the details, but the general truth that life will not end in emptiness

"Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well. The Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. 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)

5) Improving social structures is necessary but not enough

- The best structures function when the community is moved by convictions to do the right thing.
- Every generation must make a contribution to the common good.

6) Evangelization builds a Civilization of Love

"For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new: 'Now I am making the whole creation new' (Rev 21:5)." (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 17)

"Only a humanity in which there reigns the 'civilization of love' will be able to enjoy authentic and lasting peace" (John Paul II, *Message for the World Day of Peace*, Jan 1, 2004)

What if my hope is weak? What if I'm losing hope?

V. Growing in Hope

A. Little hopes & Big hopes

“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... [God’s] love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect.” (*Spe Salvi*, 31)

B. Schools of Hope (*Spe Salvi*, 32-40)

Prayer – “St. Augustine... defines prayer as an exercise of desire. Man was created for greatness—for God himself; he was created to be filled by God. But his heart is too small for the greatness to which it is destined. It must be stretched. “By delaying [his gift], God strengthens our desire; through desire he enlarges our soul and by expanding it he increases its capacity [for receiving him]”.” (*Spe Salvi*, 33, quoting *In I Ioannis* 4, 6: PL 35, 2008f)

“Brothers, I for my part do not consider myself to have taken possession. Just one thing: forgetting what lies behind but straining forward to what lies ahead, I continue my pursuit toward the goal, the prize of God's upward calling, in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 3:13-14)

- Through prayer God purifies our desires and hopes.

Action – “It is important to know that I can always continue to hope, even if in my own life, or the historical period in which I am living, there seems to be nothing left to hope for. 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)

- The Kingdom of God is a gift, not earned by our own efforts

- We are “God's fellow workers”, contributed to the world's salvation (cf. 1 Cor 3:9; 1 Th 3:2)

Suffering – “We can try to limit suffering, to fight against it, but we cannot eliminate it. It is when we attempt to avoid suffering by withdrawing from anything that might involve hurt, when we try to spare ourselves the effort and pain of pursuing truth, love, and goodness, that we drift into a life of emptiness, in which there may be almost no pain, but the dark sensation of meaninglessness and abandonment is all the greater. 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.” (*Spe Salvi*, 37)

- Only knowledge of God gives sure hope in the midst of suffering.

Ex. “African Josephine Bakhita... was born around 1869... in Darfur in Sudan. At the age of nine, she was kidnapped by slave-traders, beaten till she bled, and sold five times in the slave-markets of Sudan. Eventually she found herself working as a slave for the mother and the wife of a general, and there she was flogged every day till she bled; as a result of this she bore 144 scars throughout her life. Finally, in 1882, she was bought by an Italian merchant... Bakhita [then] came to know a totally different kind of “master”... the living God, the God of Jesus Christ. Up to that time she had known only masters who despised and maltreated her, or at best considered her a useful slave. Now, however, she heard that there is a [Master] above all masters, the Lord of all lords, and that this Lord is good, goodness in person. She came to know that this Lord even knew her, that he had created her—that he actually loved her. She too was loved, and by none other than the supreme [Master], before whom all other masters are themselves no more than lowly servants. She was known and loved and she was awaited. What is more, this master had himself accepted the destiny of being flogged and now he was waiting for her “at the Father's right hand”. Now she had “hope” — no longer simply the modest hope of finding masters who would be less cruel, but the great hope: “I am definitively loved and whatever happens to me—I am awaited by this

Love. And so my life is good.” Through the knowledge of this hope she was “redeemed”, no longer a slave, but a free child of God. She understood what Paul meant when he reminded the Ephesians that previously they were without hope and without God in the world—without hope *because* without God... [In] 1890, she was baptized and confirmed and received her first Holy Communion...” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 3) She later became a religious sister and promoted the missions.

Judgment – As Christians, we believe that Christ “will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead” This expresses our hope in God’s justice, for “...there can be no justice without a resurrection of the dead.” (*Spe Salvi*, 42)

- Praying for the souls in Purgatory to play a part in his purification. “What can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise?” (*Spe Salvi*, 48)

VI. Conclusion

The New Springtime – Pope John Paul II saw this very clearly and had tremendous hope for a new springtime in the Church, ushered in by a New Evangelization. God has raised up new movements, new communities, new expressions within the Church... God has touched the hearts of each one of you in this particular time in Church history to share in Christ’s mission, to build a civilization of love.

Do not be afraid! – “Do not be afraid to break out of comfortable and routine modes of living in order to take up the challenge of making Christ known in the modern metropolis. It is you who must go out into the byroads and invite everyone you meet to the banquet which God has prepared for his people.”

“Do not be afraid of presenting Christ to someone who does not yet know Him. Christ is the true answer, the most complete answer to all the questions which concern the human person and his destiny. Helping a brother or sister to discover Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life, is a true act of love for one’s neighbour.” - John Paul II, WYD ‘93

Saints - This is the kind of situation in which God raises up saints! Saints arise in the crucibles (most difficult periods) of history. Think of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Anthony of the Desert & St. Athanasius, St. Bernard, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis de Sales, St. Maximilian Kolbe.

“We live in an age where we’d rather find death and all its gloom as an answer to life, rather than God in all His glory. It may be that our God has the eternal appetite of infancy. For we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. Christ is the happy Man, the happy God-Man, who puts modern man to shame for all his gloom and hopelessness.

Modern man drinks and shouts across the tavern of time, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die!” Well, this is not the clarion call to joy; this is the voice of doom, chiding the almost dead rats on a sinking ship. [Modern man] is no more a reveler than he is a saint. The early Church was grounded on a serious *joie de vive*. Jesus Christ himself made wine not a medicine, but a Sacrament. [Modern man] makes wine not a Sacrament but a medicine. Modern man feasts because life is not joyful. He revels because he is not glad.

“Drink,” he says, “for you know not whence you come, nor why. Drink, for you know not when you go nor where. Drink, because the stars are cruel and the earth is idle as a humming top. Drink, because there is nothing worth trusting, nothing worth fighting for...” And so he stands, offering us the cup in his hand.

But at the high altar of Christianity, stands another figure in whose hand is also a cup. “Drink,” He says, “for the whole world is as red as this wine with the crimson of the love and wrath of God. Drink, for the trumpets are blowing for battle, and this is the stirrup-cup. Drink, for this is My blood of the new Covenant that is shed for you. Drink, for I know of whence you come and why. Drink for I know of when you go and where.” (G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, ch 7)