

Spe Salvi

“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.’”

(Spe Salvi – Paragraph 27).

Pope Benedict's encyclical on hope, which was released on November 30, is certainly timely.

First of all, it appears just prior to the Season of Advent, a time of hope, as we await the birth of our reason for hope, Jesus Christ; secondly, its release took place on the Feast of St Andrew, thus pointing to the hope of unity between Orthodox and Catholic; and, thirdly, its publication coincides with a time of new uncertainties, particularly for Ireland – on the one hand, the Celtic Tiger seems to be fading fast and, on the other, a new, potentially demoralising, awareness is emerging here of the extent of ‘moral collapse’ and its social and economic consequences.

Recently, there have been a number of attempts made to put a ‘brave face’ on Ireland's new economic situation and engender a type of ‘hope’ in the country; and, these attempts are not without their own legitimacy.

A new book by Newstalk's Economics Editor, Marc Coleman suggests that the future ‘may not be so bleak after all’ and that ‘the best is still to come’. Meanwhile, psychologist Marie Murray, writing in *The Irish Times*, has pointed up some likely coping mechanisms to watch out for in ourselves, as we face into the new economic and social climate.

The present encyclical, however, puts efforts such as these into perspective and, in it, Pope Benedict blows the dust off some of the enduring errors in our world's understanding of hope, while presenting some intriguing new thinking as well.

“It is true,” The Holy Father says, “that anyone who does not know God, even though he may entertain all kinds of hopes, is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole” (Paragraph 27).

The false god's, such as those alluded to by St Paul in his letter to the Ephesians (cf Ephesians 2:12), make only for a “dark world” and a “dark future” (Paragraph 2); whoever places his hope in these easily falls back ‘ab nihilo in nihil’ (from nothing into nothingness).

If, instead, we are to achieve our goal of what St Augustine refers to as the “blessed life” or, simply, “happiness” (Paragraph 11), only *Christian hope* – an anchor cast towards the throne of God (Paragraph 37) – can sustain us through the sufferings of this life (cf Victor Frankl's discovery, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, namely, that man can endure almost any ‘what’ provided he has a sufficient ‘why’).

This is important because “the capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth is the measure of humanity” (Paragraph 39).

Christian hope is, in this way, not merely “informative” but “performative” – it brings about a change in the life of the believer.

Prayer is needed to sustain this hope as are certain people who act as ‘lights of hope’ when they take their light from the true Light who is God.

Pre-eminent among these 'lights of hope' is Mary, whom The Pope refers to as "Star of Hope" and "Mother of Hope" and to whom he devotes the final section of the encyclical.

Like peace, the hope offered by Jesus Christ 'is one the world cannot give'. However, attempts have been made, in the modern age, at a "transformation of Christian faith-hope" – the use of the term 'faith-hope', here, seems to be inspired by Pope Benedict's observation that, in the Bible, the word 'hope' is sometimes used interchangeably with the word 'faith'. These attempts at "progress", which amount to the building of a 'kingdom of God', without God, are marked by their exclusive dependence on reason and one sense of the word, 'freedom'.

But reason and freedom cannot "guarantee by themselves ... a new and perfect human community" (Paragraph 18). On the contrary, without God, reason and freedom and whatever structures they inspire lead only to a "perverted" version of what Kant called the 'end of all things'. The failure of Marxism illustrates this point – one is reminded here of Fulton Sheen's observation that "sharing the same apple does not make men brothers but if men are brothers they will share the same apple".

But, while recognising that our hope is 'only in God', that it comes from a "relationship" with God, we should not take this to mean that our hope should be individualistic. Why? Because this relationship itself comes through communion with the whole Church.

In fact, the Pope says, "our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too" (Paragraph 48).

Such hope is demonstrated in the lives of religious who, on the one hand, bear witness to the fact that faith, "the *substance* of things hoped for" is a preferable and more solid basis on which to place our lives than that of material possessions. On the other hand, in the view of St Bernard of Clairvaux whom The Pope quotes in Paragraph 15, contemplative religious also perform a task for the whole Church and hence also for the world. "The human race," says St Bernard, "lives thanks to a few; were it not for them, the world would perish." All the more reason then that in spite of "the successes of science in progressively structuring the world," modern Christianity should not "restrict its attention to the individual and his salvation (for) in so doing it has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognize sufficiently the greatness of its task – even if it has continued to achieve great things in the formation of man and in care for the weak and the suffering." (Paragraph 25).

Pope Benedict leaves the last words to Our Lady, closing with the prayer, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!"