

"Deus Est Caritas". A Surprising Catholic Encyclical

Maria Rita Latto (December 04, 2007)



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Nearly two years after the first Encyclical on Love by Pope Benedict XVI, "Deus Est Caritas" (God is Charity), on November 30th the second one was issued. All the main Vaticanists were expecting an Encyclical having social issues as the main subject. Instead, the Pope surprised everyone by choosing the second of the three theological virtues, Hope. The title is "Spe Salvi" (Saved by Hope) and it is a meditation on the topic of Christian Hope. The Pope was inspired by the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans, 8, 24: "Since in the Hope we have been saved". The document, which runs 76 pages in English, was written largely during the summer vacations, a period usually dedicated by the Pope to intense writing and study. Benedict XVI is also working on a third Encyclical, probably



concerning social issues, and on the second volume of his biography of Christ. The third Encyclical is expected to be released early next year. As it happens traditionally, the text will be published in Latin, Italian and, at least initially, in English, French, Spanish and German.

The "Spe Salvi" was released in a meaningful date. In fact, November 30th is the day before the beginning of the Advent, Saturday December 1st, a period considered in the Christian tradition as the time of Hope and Expectation. Moreover, November 30th is the feast of Saint Andrew, the older brother of Peter, who became, according to the tradition, the first bishop of Byzantium, later called Constantinople. He is also the patron of Russia, the Ukraine and Romania. So, it appears to be a date that is an explicit homage to the ancient Eastern Christianity and to the Orthodox world, a clear affirmation of ecumenism, an ideal at the center of the pontificate of Benedict XVI.

There is another coincidence connected to the release of the Encyclical: it came out in the week the city of Rome instituted a commission to decide whether or not to create a register of civil unions, which was required through the collection of signatures by citizens. Needless to say that in the last years the Vatican has fought with all its power against this idea, succeeding in the Italian Parliament, thanks to a transversal block created by Catholic deputies both in the right and in the left coalitions.

However, such a worry has not ruined the joy for the release of the second Encyclical intended by the Pope as the "answer to the deeper expectations of our contemporaries". Benedict XVI urges Christians to put their hope for the future in God and not in technology, wealth or political ideologies, which can often be deluding.

In the early days of Christianity, many people lived in slavery and servitude of various kinds. But Jesus was not a political liberator like Spartacus or Barabbas, "Spe Salvi" points out. Christ offered hope of a different sort of freedom, a hope that transformed the way his followers looked at life.

Christians also experienced a new sort of hope with the realization that their salvation lays in a loving personal God, and that through all the difficulties of life they remained children of this loving Father. The faithful no longer saw themselves as helpless in the face of inexorable physical forces or unseen cosmic powers. The Pope writes, "it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love, a Person."

In modern times, however, men have come to place their trust on different powers, the Pope says. Relying more and more heavily on scientific reason, men have pursued a cult of progress, in the belief that reason can ultimately bring about a "kingdom of man," a "new and perfect human community." This attitude, the Pope says, "led to the greatest forms of cruelty and violations of justice. A world which has to create its own justice is a world without hope."



According to the Christian faith, redemption, salvation, is not simply a given, but the promise of salvation provides "trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present."

Christians have confidence in their eternal fate, the Pope said. "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."

This sort of hope is not possible, the Pope states, "without God in the world." But for the believer, hope is enough to change one's approach to life, one's essential attitude. Thus, the Pope says, the virtue is "not just 'informative' but 'performative.'" Benedict XVI says that "the present-day crisis of faith is essentially a crisis of Christian hope." First in the French Revolution and again in Marxist ideology, political thinkers sought to establish a system of society based on reason, thinking that it would ensure the ultimate in human freedom. In fact, the Pope observes, the result was a "trail of appalling destruction." The problem with these ideological systems, the Pope argues, is their failure to address the innate spiritual dimension of human nature. Refusing to place their trust in God, ideologues ended up leaving men with no hope at all. "Let us put it very simply: man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope."

Christian hope points toward the future, the afterlife, and the Final Judgment, Pope Benedict reminds us. "There is justice. There is an 'undoing' of past suffering, a reparation that sets things aright." So the thought of a final reckoning is another "setting" for hope.

Pope Benedict concludes his Encyclical with a chapter entitled "Mary, Star of Hope." The Blessed Virgin, he writes, is an inspiration and a guide for the faithful in learning the virtue of hope. He ends "Spe Salvi" with a prayer for her intercession, as the ultimate remedy for the current "crisis of Christian hope."

Inevitably, the Encyclical has already aroused reactions, especially the sections dealing with science and the failure of the ideologies, topics already at the center of controversies between the Church and the lay world. One for all, was the reply to the Pope by Raffaele Carcano, secretary of the Union of the atheists and the agnostic rationalists. Mr. Carcano asks the Pope attacking atheism, who was responsible for provoking the greatest cruelties and violations of the justice, if "he forgot to read a history handbook". Mr. Carcano reminds to Benedict XVI "Nazism, a period in which the Vatican seemed to agree with the regime, few weeks after Hitler took the power. Or the Crusades. And the Holy Inquisition. Not to mention the idea that science is insignificant to the progress of humanity, because of its separation from religion." These are just few of the faults that atheists see in the Church's history.

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