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Christian Hope and the New Evangelization



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Christian Hope and the New Evangelization

Benedict XVI on the Existential Importance of Hope

The virtue of hope is absolutely essential for life. This is a truth that Pope Benedict has greatly emphasized in his second encyclical, *Spe salvi* (*Saved in Hope*):

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 towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey. . . . Here too we see that a distinguishing mark of Christians is the fact that they have a future. It is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their 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 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.¹

Human experience shows us that we cannot live without a goal to motivate our action. Without a goal we drift and fall into depression. The psychologist Victor Frankl observed during his time at Auschwitz that people who lost all hope were the first to die:

Any attempt at fighting the camp's psychopathological influence on the prisoner . . . had to aim at giving him inner strength by pointing out to him a future goal to which he could look forward. Instinctively some of the prisoners attempted to find one on their own. It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future—*sub specie aeternitatis*. And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task. . . . The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happens quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate: . . . Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds.²

When the Gospel was first proclaimed in the ancient world, it was announced, and perceived, as a message of radical hope in a world marked by pervasive despair. St. Paul speaks of the new Christians at Ephesus as previously having being “without hope and without God in the world”

(*Eph 2:12*).³ The state of mankind today is very much like that of the pagan world when the Gospel was first proclaimed. St. Paul contrasts life “according to Christ” with the life of the pagan peoples under the dominion of the “elemental spirits of the universe” (*Col 2:8*). Polytheistic religion was essentially a cult of these elemental spirits or powers. The modern age, insofar as it is abandoning faith in the living God, is returning to this dominion “by the elemental spirits of the universe.” Even though man would like to think that he can dominate the laws of nature, the fact remains that he too is under those laws. If there is no God of love who is the author of natural laws, then man is ultimately a *prisoner* of impersonal elemental forces.

Jewish and Christian faith, on the other hand, set us free from this impersonal dominion, for God has revealed Himself as a Person: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As Pope Benedict writes:

It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; 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.⁴

The very center of both the Revelation to Israel and the Gospel is a message of hope: the promise of eternal life, while sharing in the beatitude of God Himself. The very word Gospel means “good tidings.” The New Evangelization, like the first one worked by the Apostles and first disciples, needs to center on the proclamation of hope in the Last Things.

Hope comes from an encounter with Christ

The early Christians in the midst of the climate of despair of the pagan Roman world found hope through their encounter with Christ as the living God who has come as the good shepherd to find the lost sheep and lead them to

³ See Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 2: “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. 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. In this phrase we see in no uncertain terms the point Paul was making. In the same vein he says to the Thessalonians: you must not “grieve as others do who have no hope” (*1 Thes 4:13*).”

⁴ *Spe salvi* 5.

¹ *Spe salvi* 1-2.

² Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4th ed., trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 81-82.

pasture. Despite all the human difficulties and sufferings of this life, hope has the capacity to transform life through the encounter with Christ. In order to illustrate this, Benedict recounts the life story of a newly canonized saint, the African ex-slave St. Josephine Bakhita.

Benedict writes:

She was born around 1869—she herself did not know the precise date—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 for the Italian consul Callisto Legnani, who returned to Italy as the Mahdists advanced. Here, after the terrifying “masters” who had owned her up to that point, Bakhita came to know a totally different kind of “master”—in Venetian dialect, which she was now learning, she used the name “*paron*” for 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 “*paron*” 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 “*Paron*”, 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. (SS3)

Faith gives us the “*substance* of things hoped for”

In his encyclical, Benedict speaks at some length on the proper translation of a word, “substance,” in Hebrews 11:1. This is surprising, for normally papal encyclicals leave such matters to Biblical exegetes. Benedict makes this brief foray into exegesis in order to make an important point about Christian hope. His concern is to emphasize that hope, although oriented to the future, already gives us a seed and foretaste of the reality that we hope to attain in heaven. Faith, hope, and charity already contain the content of eternal life, although in the embryonic state, as it were.

Hebrews 11:1 gives a famous definition of faith, which is defined in close connection with hope. Benedict argues that the proper translation should read as follows: “Faith

is the *substance* of things hoped for; the *proof* of things not seen.” The key disputed word in this definition is “substance,” which literally translates the Greek word, “*hypostasis*.” Benedict writes: “For the Fathers and for the theologians of the Middle Ages, it was clear that the Greek word *hypostasis* was to be rendered in Latin with the term *substantia*. The Latin translation of the text produced at the time of the early Church therefore reads: *Est autem fides sperandarum substantia rerum, argumentum non apparentium*—faith is the ‘substance’ of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen” (SS7).

The etymology of the word “substance,” like the Greek “*hypostasis*,” means that which “stands under.” “Substance” can thus refer to a foundational reality. Here it seems to refer to a foundational and germinal presence of things hoped for. Through faith, and hope which springs from faith, the things hoped for—the content of eternal life—already become truly present in substance, although still in seed or embryo. This germinal presence, as the second part of the verse goes on to say, creates a certainty or “proof” of the things hoped for, but not yet seen. Benedict explains:

Through faith, in a tentative way, or as we might say “in embryo”—and thus according to the “substance”—there are already present in us the things that are hoped for: the whole, true life. And precisely because the thing itself is already present, this presence of what is to come also creates certainty: this “thing” which must come is not yet visible in the external world (it does not “appear”), but because of the fact that, as an initial and dynamic reality, we carry it within us, a certain perception of it has even now come into existence. (SS7)

Benedict also observes that Martin Luther abandoned the traditional interpretation of this verse, substituting a more subjective reading. Benedict says: “To Luther, who was not particularly fond of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the concept of ‘substance,’ in the context of his view of faith, meant nothing. For this reason he understood the term *hypostasis/substance* not in the objective sense (of a reality present within us), but in the subjective sense, as an expression of an interior attitude” (SS7).

Benedict observes that the Lutheran translation has also influenced Catholic versions. He cites an ecumenical edition approved by the German bishops, which translates Hebrews 11:1 as: “*standing firm* in what one hopes, *being convinced* of what one does not see.” Benedict remarks that “This in itself is not incorrect, but it is not the meaning of the text, because the Greek term used (*elenchos*) does not have the subjective sense of ‘conviction’ but the objective sense of ‘proof.’”

By the way, the English RSV Catholic edition is similar to the Lutheran version criticized by Benedict: “Now faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen.” A better translation is given by the Douay

Rheims version: “Now faith is the *substance* of things to be hoped for, the *evidence* of things that appear not.”

The key point in this exegetical discussion is that “faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a ‘not yet.’ The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future” (SS7).

Benedict goes on to support his interpretation of Hebrews 11:1 by looking at the preceding verses, which speak of the persecution endured by the community to whom the letter is addressed. The original Greek makes a subtle play on words which is lost in translation. The letter contrasts the temporal goods (*hyparchonta*) lost in the persecution with the substance (*hyparxin, hypostasis*) of eternal things hoped for and given through faith. Hebrews 10:34 reads: “You had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property (*hyparchonton*), since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession (*hyparxin—substantiam*) and an abiding one.”

Growth in Hope

“Prayer as a School of Hope”⁵

In the last part of his encyclical, entitled “Settings for Learning and Practicing Hope,” Benedict speaks of some remedies for the modern world’s crisis of hope. The first and most obvious school of hope is prayer. Prayer, by its very nature, is an expression of hope confided to God. In prayer we ask God for happiness—the “blessed life”⁶—and the means to achieve it. Hope is thus the very content of prayer.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* begins its section on prayer with a quote from St. Therese of Lisieux: “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.”⁷ St. John Damascene defines prayer as “the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God.”⁸

The principal “good things” we should request from God are enumerated for us in the Our Father. This prayer taught by Jesus Himself encapsulates all that we should hope for and desire in seven perfectly ordered petitions. The Introduction to the *Roman Catechism* states that “the Lord’s Prayer contains whatever can be the object of the Christian’s desires, or hopes, or prayers.”

The invocation of God as our Father, before the petitions, already serves to stir up filial confidence, and shows us the

ultimate focus of all our hopes, which is to be confirmed as sons and daughters of God in Christ the Son, and to enter ever more deeply into the intimacy of a filial relationship with Him (which implies a fraternal relation with all our brethren).

The first petition, like the first commandment, concerns the sanctification or glorification of the name of God. We are taught to hope and desire first and foremost that the glory due to God be given to Him, for His name’s sake. God has created all things to manifest His goodness and glory, and so it is fitting that all things give glory to God. We pray here that the very goal of the universe be accomplished. And it is above all in the human heart that this goal of the sanctification of God’s name is to be accomplished. We pray and hope that our heart and every human heart unite to give glory to God above all.

However, how are we to do this? We know the weakness of our own prayer and of our own human efforts. The sanctification of God’s name must be accomplished through the work of God. Thus the second petition is for the kingdom of God, a kingdom in which God’s name will be perfectly sanctified.

Marxism and liberation theology has inspired a desire for the kingdom of God conceived as a reform of certain social structures rather than a reform of the human heart by grace. Instead, we pray here for God to reign in us—individually and socially—so that God’s name will be sanctified in us. This reign of God has to be principally a reign of interior grace, by which our hearts are made to conform to God’s law and will, for this is what sanctifies God’s name. The kingdom of God must be primarily interior and invisible, as Jesus says in Luke 17:21.⁹

However, this kingdom has an essential social dimension, as Pope Benedict continually reminds us. The kingdom that we yearn for is one in which perfect communion reigns, the vertical communion between God and His adopted sons and daughters, and the horizontal communion binding together all the children of God, so that we may be one, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one (see Jn 17:22). But how can perfect communion be established and maintained?

This leads us to the next petition: Thy will be done on earth as it in heaven. The kingdom of God in us, by which we can glorify God’s name, consists in the conformity of our wills with the will of God, as expressed in His eternal Law.

And how are we to gain the strength to conform our will to God’s will? This leads us to the next petition: Give us this day our daily bread.” This petition can be interpreted

⁵ *Spe salvi* 32-34.

⁶ See *Spe salvi* 11.

⁷ St. Therese of Lisieux, *Manuscripts autobiographiques*, C 25r. Quoted in CCC 2558.

⁸ St. John Damascene, *On the Orthodox Faith* 3.24 (PG 94,1089C). Quoted in CCC 2559.

⁹ Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, “The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, ‘Lo, here it is!’ or ‘There!’ for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you [or: within you].”

in two senses: (a) as referring to our temporal needs, symbolized in the gift of bread, and (b) as referring to our spiritual needs, which are filled through the gift of the Eucharist, the bread from heaven. The principal meaning is the second, although without excluding the first. Above all, we need spiritual food, and God has supplied us in a superabundant way by giving us the Body of Christ as our spiritual nourishment in the Eucharist. It is only through the grace given to us in the Eucharist that we are made able to glorify God's name, that His Kingdom may be realized in us, and that His will be accomplished in our lives.

What else do we need to hope from God beside temporal and spiritual nourishment? Above all, we need the forgiveness of sins, which is made contingent on our forgiveness of the sins of our neighbors against us.

The sixth petition—lead us not into temptation—is the petition that God not allow us to be ensnared by the devil, as were Adam and Eve in the Fall. We do not pray that we be spared trials in this world, for God permits them for our spiritual growth, but we express the great hope that we not be allowed to fall into the snare and offend God, separating ourselves from Him.

Finally, we pray and hope that we be delivered from all evil and from the Evil One, who seeks to lead us into temptation. We pray for freedom from all evils that have befallen mankind since the Fall, and thus ultimately we pray and hope for the fullness of God's kingdom in heaven where all evil shall be banished forever.

The Lord's Prayer thus shows us what should be the true content of our hope. How often our prayers and hopes fall short from this model, and center on this world! Prayer serves, therefore, to purify our desires and hopes, and so to kindle the one great hope: to share the life of God.

By encountering Christ in prayer, we are taught to enlarge our hearts. Psalm 119:32 speaks of this enlargement of the heart, connecting it with the ready desire to do God's will: "I have run the way of thy commandments, when thou didst enlarge my heart." Benedict explains this in *Spe salvi* 33, drawing on St. Augustine: "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].'"

Liturgy as a School of Hope: Liturgical "Orientation"

I would like to make a brief digression here on the notion of "orientation" in the liturgy. In his classic work, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger speaks of the symbolic significance of the orientation of the priest in the liturgy. The common practice of all liturgical rites for most of the

history of the Church has been to have both the people and the priest face east. Although not always literally oriented to the geographical east, this practice symbolized the fact that the whole Church, Head and members, hierarchy and faithful, are turned towards God the Father, through, with, and in Christ, and in expectation of the *parousia*, the glorious return of Christ, the sun of justice who is symbolized by the dawn.

By having the priest and people share a common orientation towards the Cross, towards God, the liturgy manifests the participation of the faithful in the priesthood of Christ, which is exercised by the ministerial priest.

The Church in worship is like a ship (which, by the way, is the meaning of the word "nave") directed towards the east, towards the *parousia*. The ship is led by the ministerial priests, who offer the sacrifice of the Church in the person of Christ, but its crew is composed of the faithful who offer that same sacrifice with the priest. Or we may liken the Church in worship to an army in battle array, led by her general and captains, all facing a common goal.

Both the ministerial priesthood and the royal priesthood of the faithful, although essentially distinct, share the same orientation towards God, towards the *parousia*. Since the royal priesthood depends on the ministerial priesthood, it is fitting that the faithful stand behind the priest in the nave, joining their spiritual sacrifices to that of Christ.

Where the priest faces the people, there can be a danger that the faithful may concentrate too much on the person of the priest who is celebrating and forget that the entire Eucharistic liturgy is oriented vertically towards God the Father and eastward towards Christ who will return in glory at the end of history to consummate His Kingdom. Already in the Mass He is coming to us under sacramental veils, as the pledge of His future Coming. Joseph Ratzinger writes:

The turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is closed in on itself. The common turning toward the east was not a "celebration toward the wall"; it did not mean that the priest "had his back to the people": the priest himself was not regarded as so important. For just as the congregation in the synagogue looked together toward Jerusalem, so in the Christian liturgy the congregation looked together "toward the Lord". As one of the fathers of Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy, J. A. Jungmann, put it, it was much more a question of priest and people facing in the same direction, knowing that together they were in a procession toward the Lord. They did not close themselves into a circle; they did not gaze at one another; but as the pilgrim People of God they set off for the *Oriens*, for the Christ who comes to meet us.¹⁰

10 Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. J. Saward, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 80. See also *Spe salvi* 41: "Faith in Christ has never looked merely backwards or merely upwards, but always also forwards to the hour of justice that the Lord repeatedly proclaimed. This looking ahead has given Christianity its importance for

This danger can be remedied in various ways, one of which is for priest and faithful to focus on the altar Cross as the fulcrum of the sacrificial offering. Joseph Ratzinger writes:

Ought we really to be rearranging everything all over again? Nothing is more harmful to the liturgy than a constant activism, even if it seems to be for the sake of genuine renewal. I see a solution in a suggestion. . . . Facing east . . . was linked with the “sign of the Son of Man,” with the Cross, which announces the Lord’s Second Coming. That is why very early on the east was linked with the sign of the Cross. Where a direct common turning toward the east is not possible, the cross can serve as the interior “east” of faith. It should stand in the middle of the altar and be the common point of focus for both priest and praying community. In this way we obey the ancient call to prayer: “*Conversi ad Dominum*,” Turn toward the Lord! In this way we look together at the One whose death tore the veil of the Temple—the One who stands before the Father for us and encloses us in his arms in order to make us the new and living Temple. Moving the altar cross to the side to give an uninterrupted view of the priest is something I regard as one of the truly absurd phenomena of recent decades. Is the cross disruptive during Mass? . . . The Lord is the point of reference. He is the rising sun of history.¹¹

“Action and Suffering as Settings for Learning Hope”¹²

A second setting for learning hope, spoken of in *Spe salvi*, is “action and suffering.” Secular messianisms, such as Marxism, idolize revolutionary action as the privileged expression of revolutionary hope. These hopes, however, fall far too short. Revolutionary activity is only valued by revolutionary movements to the extent that it leads to the eventual triumph of the utopian Cause, the immanent goal of history. However, this means that the greatness of an act is measured ultimately only by its success from a worldly point of view. Every good and salvific act has transcendent importance for the Kingdom of God, no matter how unnoticed and devoid of worldly success. Pope Benedict writes:

It is important to know that I can always continue to hope, even if in my own life . . . 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. 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. The Kingdom of God is a

the present moment. In the arrangement of Christian sacred buildings, which were intended to make visible the historic and cosmic breadth of faith in Christ, it became customary to depict the Lord returning as a king—the symbol of hope—at the east end.”

11 Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, 83–84.

12 *Spe salvi* 35–39.

gift, and precisely because of this, it is great and beautiful, and constitutes the response to our hope...¹³

If it is only “the great hope based upon God’s promises that gives us courage and directs our action in good times and bad,” this is especially true when apparent failure is coupled with intense suffering. Benedict illustrates this section with a Vietnamese martyr from the nineteenth century, Paul Le-Bao-Tinh († 1857). He gives a long extract from a letter written by Paul from prison:

I, Paul, in chains for the name of Christ, wish to relate to you the trials besetting me daily, in order that you may be inflamed with love for God and join with me in his praises, for his mercy is for ever (Ps 136). The prison here is a true image of everlasting Hell: to cruel tortures of every kind—shackles, iron chains, manacles—are added hatred, vengeance, calumnies, obscene speech, quarrels, evil acts, swearing, curses, as well as anguish and grief. . . . In the midst of these torments, which usually terrify others, I am, by the grace of God, full of joy and gladness, because I am not alone —Christ is with me. . . . In the midst of this storm I cast my anchor towards the throne of God, the anchor that is the lively hope in my heart.

The anchor is one of the traditional symbols of hope, because hope gives us constancy in the midst of the shifting winds and currents of life. Hebrews 6:19–20 uses this image: “We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.” The anchor in Christian iconography is generally connected with the Cross, and is a symbol of the hope of salvation and eternal life based on the cross of Christ. Hope anchors the soul in the midst of suffering, enabling one to persevere to the end, because, through hope, the future goal is already present in seed. A society without transcendent hope is a society that is unable to bear suffering, either one’s own or that of others. Hope, therefore, greatly strengthens compassion, which is a “suffering with.”

We instinctively understand this when we encounter saints like Mother Theresa of Calcutta. We grasp that she was able to do what she did because of the strength of her hope in Christ, not just for herself, but for every person. Charity builds on hope, and shows its strength in suffering and compassion. Benedict twice repeats that the ability to suffer is the measure of our humanity:

Let us say it once again: the capacity to suffer for the sake of the truth is the measure of humanity. Yet this capacity to suffer depends on the type and extent of the hope that we bear within us and build upon. The saints were able to make the great journey of human existence in the way that Christ had done before them, because they were brimming with great hope.¹⁴

13 *Spe salvi* 35.

14 *Spe salvi* 39.

Our comfortable Western society so often tries to solve the problem of suffering by seeking simply to eliminate and flee from it. Benedict warns and challenges us that such an attitude leads us to lose the measure of our humanity:

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.¹⁵

How can we learn to practice hope in suffering? Benedict urges the Church to recover the traditional practice of “offering up” the little crosses of daily life, inserting them into “Christ’s great ‘com-passion’ so that they somehow became part of the treasury of compassion so greatly needed by the human race. In this way, even the small inconveniences of daily life could acquire meaning and contribute to the economy of good and of human love” (SS 40).

Mary, Star of Hope

Pope Benedict ends his encyclical on hope with a beautiful chapter on Mary, Star of Hope:

With a hymn composed in the eighth or ninth century, thus for over a thousand years, the Church has greeted Mary, the Mother of God, as “Star of the Sea”: *Ave maris stella*. Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route. The true stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives. They are lights of hope. Certainly, Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by—people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us? With her “yes” she opened the door of our world to God himself; she became the living Ark of the Covenant, in whom God took flesh, became one of us, and pitched his tent among us (cf. Jn 1:14).¹⁶

Pope Benedict brings out beautifully the continuity between the hope of Israel and that of the Church in this last chapter invoking the intercession of Mary for all believers. Mary incarnated the hope of Israel:

So we cry to her: Holy Mary, you belonged to the humble and great souls of Israel who, like Simeon, were “looking for the consolation of Israel” (Lk 2:25) and hoping, like Anna, “for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38). Your life was thoroughly imbued with the sacred scriptures of Israel which spoke of hope, of the promise made to Abraham and his descendants (cf. Lk 1:55). In this way we can appreciate

the holy fear that overcame you when the angel of the Lord appeared to you and told you that you would give birth to the One who was the hope of Israel, the One awaited by the world. Through you, through your “yes”, the hope of the ages became reality, entering this world and its history. You bowed low before the greatness of this task and gave your consent: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). When you hastened with holy joy across the mountains of Judea to see your cousin Elizabeth, you became the image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world in her womb across the mountains of history. But alongside the joy which, with your Magnificat, you proclaimed in word and song for all the centuries to hear, you also knew the dark sayings of the prophets about the suffering of the servant of God in this world. . . .¹⁷

Just as Mary summed up the hope of Israel, so she inaugurated the hope of the Church. In the despair of Calvary, she alone had firm hope, in her heart alone there burned the hope of the Church which we have received:

From the Cross you received a new mission. From the Cross you became a mother in a new way: the mother of all those who believe in your Son Jesus and wish to follow him. The sword of sorrow pierced your heart. Did hope die? Did the world remain definitively without light, and life without purpose? . . . Before the hour of his betrayal he had said to his disciples: “Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (Jn 16:33). “Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn 14:27). “Do not be afraid, Mary!” In that hour at Nazareth the angel had also said to you: “Of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk 1:33). Could it have ended before it began? No, at the foot of the Cross, on the strength of Jesus’s own word, you became the mother of believers. In this faith, which even in the darkness of Holy Saturday bore the certitude of hope, you made your way towards Easter morning. . . . Thus you remain in the midst of the disciples as their Mother, as the Mother of hope. 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!

¹⁵ *Spe salvi* 37.

¹⁶ *Spe salvi* 49.

¹⁷ *Spe salvi* 50.