

Women of Hope

CWL Provincial Convention

28 May 2010

Dear brother priests, members of the Catholic Women's League, ladies and gentlemen:

Introduction

Thank you so very much for your kind invitation, issued through Marianna Caldwell, to spend some time with you this morning at this Provincial Convention of the Catholic Women's League of British Columbia and the Yukon. Before beginning my presentation, I would like to express my enormous gratitude to all of you for being *who* you are – Catholic women of faith, unafraid to confront the often difficult situations in the Church and society – and for *what* you are doing in your parishes, communities and dioceses to bring the light of the Gospel, its message of compassion and service, to all of us. I especially commend your activities on behalf of women and families in crisis, your determined efforts to foster a culture of life, your firm commitment to end human trafficking and your practical service to the parish families to which you belong. During this Year for Priests, I also would like to thank you for being there for your shepherds, especially in times of crisis and pain. They would be unable to carry out their ministry without your prayers, your support and your counsel. You know, I hope, how much we appreciate you.

I pray that in the years ahead your presence will be increasingly valued everywhere as full cooperators in the Church's mission.

Theme of Keynote Address

The theme for my address this morning is taken from your national theme for this year, "Women of Peace and Hope." I will, however, shorten this by removing "peace" from my remarks – though not from your lives and aspirations! – and concentrate on your vocation to be women of hope for the Church and Canada.

What I really want to do is talk to you about hope: what that virtue means. To do so, I will be drawing extensively on Pope Benedict XVI's second encyclical, released on the First Sunday of Advent in 2007, called *Spe Salvi*, "Saved by Hope." What I wish to accomplish is to help you reflect on your vocation as women who are both witnesses to hope and heralds of hope. These reflections are offered to help you live your mission in the Church as women who hope, truly hope, and can convey that hope to others.

The Encyclical

The Encyclical expresses the Holy Father's desire to re-present the basic ideas of our faith to a world jaded by a sort of weary familiarity with Christianity. In the document he writes: "We who have always lived with the Christian concept of God, and have grown accustomed to it, have almost ceased to notice that we possess the hope that ensues from a real encounter with this God."¹ But what is this hope that we possess? Do we really have it?

1. What Is *Christian Hope*?

Let's pull back a little from our own situations and look at the broader canvas. Here, the theme of hope is timely. *Spe Salvi* speaks to the anguish, foreboding and even the desperation that mark today's world. There are attention-getting signs of hopelessness such as alarming suicide rates and declining birthrates, which always indicate a lack of confidence in the future, and smaller signs of unease as well, such as weariness, boredom and a retreat into a thrill-seeking existence which relies only on gratification in the present moment. Of course, our present situation is not entirely without precedent.

Nearly two thousand years ago, in writing to the Christian community at Ephesus, St. Paul reminded them that, before embracing faith in Christ, they had "no hope and [were] without God in the world" (2: 12). This same situation, the Pope thinks, describes "the contemporary nihilism that corrodes the hope in man's heart, inducing him to think

¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 3.

that within and around him nothingness prevails: nothing before birth and nothing after death. In fact, if God is lacking, hope is lacking.”² Quite simply, anyone who does not know God “is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life.”³

Substitutes for hope, of course, must inevitably arise on the horizon when “the real thing,” true hope abhors a vacuum. In fact, the secular world – and by that I mean the “world” which claims independence from Providence – proposes its own versions of “hope,” a hope cut loose from any moorings in God. The modern words used instead of “hope” are “progress” or even a misunderstood “social justice.” In a word, hope has been secularized; its reference to God has all but eliminated. “The modern idea of hope always means dissatisfaction with the present in the light of some presumed future that is not only better, but is the man-made answer to what we mean by complete happiness.”⁴ Nazism, communism, radical Islam and, today, perhaps, a soulless environmentalism, all direct people to rely on a future of supposed happiness without God. Here the object of hope is a future “utopia, a totally new world, . . . the kingdom of man.”⁵ But such “hope” is secular; it can be attained without God and perhaps even opposed to him. This is the kind of hope that fuels all ideological fanaticism, offering a promise of a better world that can be achieved without respect for human life or human dignity.

Pope Benedict, however, is convinced that, even if people recognize it only dimly, the world is hungry for the message of true hope that the Gospel brings. The members of the Catholic Women’s League, then, are certainly among the first ones called to awaken Christian hope in themselves and among those with whom they interact on a daily basis in their families, neighbourhoods, parishes, workplaces and communities.

² Benedict XVI, Homily at First Vespers for the First Sunday of Advent (1 December 2007).

³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 27.

⁴ James Schall, Interview I: Zenit.

2. What Hope Is Not

At the outset, it's helpful to clear up what the Pope does *not* mean by hope, at least hope as understood in the Christian tradition. The object of our hope, and the hope that we bring to those around us, comes more easily to light if we first free ourselves from counterfeit versions of hope that are widely circulated and accepted.

A good example of a misconception about hope peppers our ordinary daily conversation. Someone asks, "Do you think she will get better?" And the other answers, "I hope so." This response is, in a sense, the opposite of confidence and security. In fact, the "I hope so" sounds like a strong wish tinged with doubt. What the responder really seems to be saying is "I'm not sure," "maybe . . . but maybe not." Such retorts fall short of the biblical understanding of hope. Christian hope does not have the "maybe not" kind of doubt, even though it does not yet see what it hopes for.

Many people talk about "hope" when what they really mean is "hopelessness." This happens routinely when people use expressions like "well, there's nothing left for us to do but hope," which in translation means "We might as well give up. It's hopeless."

Sometimes we use the word "hope" in ways which express what the Pope calls "lesser hopes"; for example, "I hope they like the new recipe I put so much effort into"; or "I hope she will respond to the treatment"; or "I hope my son gets the job he needs." Hopes such as these are undoubtedly necessary to keep life going on an even keel, but they are not what the Bible and Tradition mean by hope. Even when things turn out well, they are not totally satisfying. There is always another hope waiting in the wings.

Perhaps the most common way that we misunderstand Christian hope is to equate it with optimism. The words "hope" and "optimism" are often used interchangeably, and we frequently describe an upbeat optimist as a person of hope. "Cheer up," the optimist tells us. "Things are sure to get better tomorrow!" But Christian hope is not the same

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 17.

thing as an optimism that springs from a person's sunny temperament. This kind of optimism – we might say that someone is always “positive” or “looks on the bright side of things” – is certainly agreeable. It can be useful in facing life's hardships and giving us strength to carry on in difficult circumstances. Nonetheless, the optimist – for all her pleasantness – is not what it means to be a herald of Christian hope.

3. The True Meaning of Christian Hope

So far I have spoken about hope by describing what *Christian* hope is not. Now to the positive side: what does it mean to be women of Christian hope? What then do they yearn for and hope for? The Pope answers this question in his Encyclical, and his answer is simple: we all yearn for unconditional and unending love. All other loves are fragile and can be destroyed by death. Human beings need unconditional love. We need the certainty which can lead us to say: “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).⁶

In other words, only a “great hope” can truly sustain us – not the “lesser hopes” or any false understandings of hope. “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’ (cf. Jn 13:1 and 19:30).”⁷ The lesser hopes are not enough to sustain us on our journey through life without this great hope, which surpasses everything else. Only God, who encompasses the whole of reality, can bestow upon the person what he or she most longs for.

I believe that we can face the present, with all its difficulties, and help others to do so as well, only if we have our eyes on our ultimate goal: communion with God forever. Unfortunately, the present age is marked by an “eclipse of the sense of God and of man,

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 26.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 27.

typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities themselves to the test.”⁸

A distinguishing mark of Christian believers is their conviction 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.”⁹ If we have hope, we live the present differently.

According to the New Testament, the hope of Christians is rooted in God’s plan of salvation for us and our conviction that he will be faithful to his work of Redemption. When the Letter to the Hebrews says, “We have this (hope) as a sure and steady anchor of the soul” (6:18), it gave us an image of hope now familiar to us: the anchor. As waves buffet the unsteady boat on the surface of the water, we know we are attached to an anchor with chains that will not break, far below the surface and out of our range of sight. Moreover, the anchor’s reliability, tested over time, has been vouched for by others who have sailed through the same turbulent waters, sometimes more menacing than what we are facing.

If we imagine God as the rock or Christ as the rock – an image, incidentally, with ample biblical precedent (cf. Ps. 62:6; 71:3; 89:26; 92:15; 1 Cor 10:4) – we might get the idea of the solidity, steadiness and constancy of hope.

Hope does not disappoint us, because God is our hope; and it is the nature of God to honour commitments, to lead us through the valley of darkness. Christian hope, quite simply, is based on the reliability of God.

Indeed, the greatest hope we have and can bring to others lies not in promising them some positive result or benefit in the here and now. Rather we hope for nothing less

⁸ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 21.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 2.

than the fullness of life, what we also call “eternal life” in the New Testament, a life which is directed beyond the present world: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10) So often we forget or trivialize this great hope, limiting ourselves to a hope whose horizon is finite and fading.

As Christians, who have been freely given this hope, infused in our souls at Baptism, the fact that we have hope should make a difference, a real difference in the way we lead our lives. Indeed, it must shape our lives.

Witnesses to Hope

Women who bear witness to this “great hope” give others a reason for genuine hope, one which ultimately rests in God, the One for whom our hearts are restless, wrote St. Augustine, until they rest in him. Such women know that those who fail to give God to others in their interactions give too little. As Blessed Teresa of Calcutta frequently observed, the worst poverty is not to know Christ.

Suffering and Hope

Perhaps the major difficulty that arises for us in any discussion of hope is the age-old question of suffering. For many people – and for ourselves included – suffering, especially that of the innocent, seems to place a barrier in the way of hoping. One formulation of the question is, “how can I hope in God’s faithfulness when suffering exists around me?” In his Encyclical, the Holy Father reflects on this serious question. He first affirms that “suffering stems partly from our finitude, and partly from the mass of sin which has accumulated over the course of history, and continues to grow unabated today. Certainly we must do whatever we can to reduce suffering: to avoid as far as possible the suffering of the innocent; to soothe pain; to give assistance in overcoming mental suffering.”¹⁰ We must try to limit suffering and we must fight against it. Yet, he adds, that banishing suffering is not within our power:

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 36.

This is simply because we are unable to shake off our finitude and because none of us is capable of eliminating the power of evil, of sin which, as we plainly see, is a constant source of suffering. Only God is able to do this: only a God who personally enters history by making himself man and suffering within history. We know that this God exists, and hence that this power to “take away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29) is present in the world.¹¹

If we follow the Pope’s argument, he leads us to see that the only possible response to suffering leads us to the mystery of the Incarnation, Passion and Death of Christ. Without the Cross and Resurrection, whose salvific efficacy will only be fully manifest when he comes again in glory, there would be no reason to hope that suffering will be overcome.

II. CWL Members as Heralds of Hope

Now I would like to offer some reflections on how you, as CWL members, can be women of home, heralds of hope to all the different communities to which you belong: family, friends, neighbourhoods, associations, work-place, parish, diocesan Church and so on.

I want to make three suggestions: the first two touch on doctrinal points for consideration; and the third is more exhortatory, urging you to be ready to give “an accounting for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15) to anyone who asks you.

To be women of hope, to witness to that hope, it is necessary to understand, as much as we can, the doctrines that touch upon the specifically Christian understanding of hope. Two such doctrines come to mind: the relationship of hope to “eternal life” and, secondly, its relationship to the Church’s teaching on purgatory.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 36.

1. Living Forever: “Eternal Life”

In *Spe Salvi* the Pope treats an important question which touches directly on your being able to be convinced women of hope. I am referring to the notion of “eternal life.” If the “great hope,” if true Christian hope lies in this, then we have to face the fact that many people today do not consciously desire eternal life, and so the promises of the Gospel seem unrealistic and unattractive. Surely you know such people; most of us need look no farther than our extended families. Indeed, even believers are often tempted by similar feelings. This is how Benedict describes the situation:

Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive. What they desire is not eternal life at all, but this present life, for which faith in eternal life seems something of an impediment. To continue living for ever – endlessly – appears more like a curse than a gift. Death, admittedly, one would wish to postpone for as long as possible. But to live always, without end – this, all things considered, can only be monotonous and ultimately unbearable.¹²

Here the Holy Father confronts a contradiction that lies in many a human heart. On the one hand, people do not want to die and, on the other hand, neither do they want to continue living indefinitely.¹³

Perhaps a way out of this contradiction is to clarify better what we mean by “eternal life.” As the Pope points out, the idea of “eternal” life suggests something interminable, and this can frighten us. But the Christian understanding of “eternal” is not that of “an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction . . . It would be 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

¹² Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 10.

¹³ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 11.

into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy.”¹⁴ This is the eternal life which is the object of Christian hope: to be in relationship with the One who is the source of life, who does not die, who is Life and Love itself.¹⁵ This is eternal life.

2. Purgatory and Hope

Among the topics which should be clear in our minds so that we can offer hope to others is that of the Church’s teaching on Purgatory. For some Catholics, especially those of a certain age, the mention of Purgatory conjures up frightful images of fire, pain and suffering. For them, it is a mini-hell of torments to be endured as punishment for sins. In his encyclical, however, Pope Benedict links the doctrine of Purgatory to hope. In fact, he presents it as a teaching of great consolation, and I would like to spend a little time on this all-too-often forgotten doctrine.

With death, we know, our life-choice becomes definitive. Who we have become in life stands before the Judge in the solemn moment of death. What took a certain shape in the course of a life-time can have a variety of forms. Sadly, it seems that there can be people who have totally destroyed their readiness to love, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. As the Pope says, “This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word Hell.”¹⁶

On the other hand there are those who are already completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbours, people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfilment what they already are. After judgment heaven awaits them.

But then there are what the Pope considers “the great majority of people,” those neither deserving eternal separation from God nor immediate communion with God. He

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 12.

¹⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 27.

says of them:

there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil – much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul. What happens to such individuals when they appear before the Judge? Will all the impurity they have amassed through life suddenly cease to matter? What else might occur?¹⁷

The Pope answers this question citing St. Paul (1 Cor 3:12-15), which “gives us an idea of the differing impact of God’s judgement according to each person’s particular circumstances.”¹⁸ As would be expected, the One who knows what is in our hearts, treats each one in the light of truth.

But what does St. Paul say, and how does Pope Benedict interpret this text? Now if any one builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – the work of each builder will become visible; for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire (1 Cor 3:12-15).

For St. Paul, the life of every Christian is built upon a common foundation: Jesus Christ. This foundation endures. If our life has been built on Christ, such a foundation cannot be taken away, even in death. In Paul’s text, it is evident that the path of our salvation can take different forms: some have built on the foundation with gold and silver, and some with hay and straw. Some of what has been built up will be burned down, but the builder

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 45.

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 46.

– the Christian – will nonetheless be saved, but will have to pass through “fire.” And what will that “fire” do? It will make the person “become fully open to receiving God and able to take our place at the table of the eternal marriage-feast.”¹⁹

The encounter with Christ in death is the decisive act of judgment. Some recent theologians think that the “fire” of which St. Paul speaks, a fire which both burns away what cannot remain on the foundation – yet a fire which saves at the same time – is Christ himself, our Saviour and our Judge. Fully in accord with the great Tradition, yet enriching it with his own insight and beauty, Benedict describes Purgatory as follows:

Before his [Christ’s] gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation.

His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation “as through fire.” But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. In this way the inter-relation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but our defilement does not stain us for ever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love.

Indeed, it has already been burned away through Christ’s Passion. At the moment of judgement we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy.²⁰

Thus, God’s judgment in Christ is the cause of hope. It is just, because it ensures our

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 46.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 46.

freedom and responsibility for ourselves and the world – earthly actions do matter – and it is grace, because of God’s mercy.

How long does such transformation take? We certainly cannot calculate this “burning” in terms of the chronological measurements of this world. “The transforming ‘moment’ of this encounter eludes earthly time-reckoning – it is the heart’s time, it is the time of ‘passage’ to communion with God in the Body of Christ.”²¹ There is no need for us to try to determine God’s time in terms of our earthly time.

It is also a consoling to tell people – but first of all ourselves! – that in the Body of Christ where we are all united. Love reaches into the afterlife and reciprocal giving and receiving remains possible. We can still pray for one another. Our affection for one another continues beyond the iron doors of death.

3. Accounting for Our Hope

Now to my last point. Pope Benedict forcefully and frequently calls to our attention the need to engage contemporary culture not only by the witness of a joyful life of friendship with God but also by a careful presentation of truth which is well-argued and persuasive. When dealing with those whose faith is weak, or who are questioning and even possibly antagonistic, it is not enough simply to repeat *verbatim* the truths of Christianity. The Pope’s distinguished theological works tell us differently.

Your task might not be to bring the Gospel to the far corners of the world but to often more difficult places: to your families and relatives, to your friends and neighbours, to your co-workers and to those you meet.

Here is the challenge for Catholic women who are heralds of hope. Of course you must practice what you preach, but you must also *preach what you practice*. The days of saying nothing and relying exclusively on silent witness are over. Witness needs the complementarity of word if it is to be effective in the noisy marketplace of today’s world.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 47.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 47.

Every individual woman and every CWL parish group must be concerned with spreading the Good News, of accounting for the hope that is within them. “There is nothing more beautiful than to know [Christ] him and to speak to others of our friendship with him,”²² the Pope said in the inaugural homily of his pontificate.

Women of hope must be prayerfully skilled in being able to give an “accounting,” to explain what their hope is and why it animates their life. They need to be ready to *explain* what they believe, not just recite it. I have just one further observation on this point. Always take into account the dignity of your listener, and recognize that the Holy Spirit is already at work, opening the human heart and making it ready to welcome the truth of the Gospel. Certainly you must be informed, but we only plant the seeds. But, without any planting of seeds, there is no harvest!

Conclusion: Mother of Hope, Star of the Sea

As is customary, the Holy Father ends his Encyclical with a meditation to Mary, whom he describes as Mother of Hope and Star of the Sea. She is the one who guides us, opening our minds to speak wisely and our hearts to love purely. Allow me to conclude with the Pope’s words:

²² Benedict XVI, Homily at the Inauguration of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome (24 April 2005).

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).²³

I thank you, dear CWL members, for being women of hope like Mary. You too are opening the door of the world to hope, to God himself, who is “our great hope,” the only anchor in the tumultuous sea of life.

J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

²³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 49.