

## WOMEN OF WUCWO, SOWERS OF HOPE

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The theme of the General assembly of WUCWO in 2014 is “Women of WUCWO, Sowers of Hope.” This prompts me to reflect about just what hope is. For most of this reflection I turn to comments made by Pope Francis who speaks often on this theme. I see his comments as falling into two categories: first, that hope is a “theological virtue”; second, that hope in the next world involves a commitment to action in this one. To complete these reflections, I turn to Vatican II and explore what Our Lady teaches us about hope

### 1. HOPE AS A THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE

In an interview with the editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica* in August 2013, Pope Francis was asked if he was an optimistic person. He replied: “I do not like to use the word optimism because that is about a psychological attitude. I like to use the word hope instead... it is a theological virtue.” A study this theological virtue must begin with the scriptures and proceed to the “scholastic” theologians of the middle ages who coined the term.

#### Hope in the Bible: “Already and Not Yet”

In the Hebrew Scriptures, a notion of hope emerged relatively late. At first, the Jews thought little about life after death but expected that God would reward the just and punish the wicked already in this life (see how many sheep Abraham and Job ended up with!). However, over the centuries a deeper approach to faith in God emerged, and this produced a notion of hope in an afterlife. One aspect of this deepening was a notion of a “new covenant.” This was introduced by prophets such as Hosea and Jeremiah who expressed exasperation at the inability of their fellow Jews to follow the covenant given to them by God through Moses, and noted that a major result of such disobedience lay in unjust treatment of the poor. They started to speak about a future time when God would give the gift of a change of heart to each individual Jew, enable them to obey the law and to act with justice to their neighbour.

This thinking deepened further when the Jews underwent the trauma of the destruction of their kingdom by invaders, around 590 BC, and the exile of parts of their population to Babylon. Remarkably, instead of becoming disillusioned with their faith at this time, the Jews deepened it. They continued to feel the presence of God to them and began to reflect on how their history might be part of a drama that included all the nations of the world. Now they became clearer than before that the one God had created the whole world, had a plan for human history, and had elected his “chosen people” the Jews so as to serve a function that could benefit all the other peoples. The prophets looked forward to two moments in the future: first, a return of the exiles to Jerusalem; second, an event that they described as the “Day of the Lord” (Amos 5:18-20) when a final reckoning would occur where the evil would meet punishment and the just—not least the poor—would enter their reward (Isaiah 25:6-9).

This deepening of sense hope began to incorporate a further, mysterious, insight: that suffering is intrinsically bound up with hope. Reflecting on the life-history of figures such as the

prophet Jeremiah who the Jews had persecuted, later authors began to suggest that the “just-man” seems destined to suffer and that this has some link to redeeming the people from their sins. In this manner, some prophets began to associate the Day of the Lord with a coming of a saviour figure, a “messiah,” who’s suffering would hasten the coming of the Day of the Lord:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities... The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities (Isaiah, 53: 1-11).

When Jesus began his public life, he drew on these traditions in the Hebrew scriptures. Luke’s Gospel portrays Jesus quoting Isaiah as he proposes a “manifesto” for his actions at the beginning of his public ministry: “I have come to bring good news for the poor” (Lk. 4:14-21). However, the experiences that Jesus passed through seemed to be different from any predicted by the Hebrew scriptures. Above all, the early Church noted the fact that while Jesus had risen from the dead, the end of time, the “Day of the Lord,” had not yet come. St. Paul was the great theologian of the early Church and he realised that the Church had to engage in fresh thinking about just what God had revealed through Jesus Christ. He realised that Christians were living in an “in-between time”: Christ had already won a victory over evil and death and Church felt his presence among them especially in the sacraments; however, at the same time, evil still continued in the world and many Christians seemed destined to suffer persecution much as Jesus did. St. Paul recognized that, somehow, the victory of Christ was “already and not yet.” This compelled him to reflect on the nature of Christian hope:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to your own mortal bodies through his Spirit living in you ... For we must be content to hope that we shall be saved— our salvation is not in sight, we should not have to be hoping for it if it were— but, as I say, we must hope to be saved since we are not saved yet— it is something we must wait for with patience (Romans 8: 10-11, 24-25)

### **Thomas Aquinas on Hope**

In the centuries after St. Paul, theologians began to reflect more systematically on the experiences that he described. The great theologian of the middle-ages was Thomas Aquinas who lived around 1250. His theology had two main characteristics: first, it employed the thought of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, to understand the Christian faith; second, he proposed that we employ a distinction between notions of “natural” and “supernatural” to enable us to distinguish between philosophy and theology. For Aquinas, philosophy could help us employ reason to understand much about our world; furthermore, he suggested that we could employ the tools of philosophy to gain some limited understanding of the supernatural realities that had been revealed to us in Jesus Christ. When he wrote about the moral behaviour expected of a Christian, he first drew on Aristotle’s explanation of ethical behaviour, and then expanded this, especially with the “biattitudes” that Jesus had preached (“blessed are the poor” etc.), which went beyond any natural philosophy.

Aquinas recalled that Aristotle explored questions of ethics by speaking of “virtue,” which he defined as a habit of seeking to do what is right. Aristotle suggested that there are four main, or

“cardinal,” virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude. Aquinas accepted this philosophical point but added that human sinfulness makes it unlikely that human beings—left to their own devices—would actually practice these virtues. He then turned to the writings of St. Paul and suggested that religious conversion opens us up to receiving an “infusion” of “supernatural” virtues, which he called the theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. He then explained how these virtues help heal our natural capacity to exercise the cardinal virtues. In addition, he spoke of how God’s grace helps to “elevate” our human nature and to behave in a way that is Christ-like and surpasses any mere natural virtue, offering examples of the heroic—supernatural—behaviour of saints and martyrs, but he insisted that all Christians can grow in holiness and live lives where the theological virtues complete the cardinal virtues. The theology of Thomas Aquinas has remained part of Church teaching through the centuries and the Catechism of the Catholic Church states:

The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt the faculties of men and women for participation in the divine nature: for the theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1812)

Regarding the particular qualities of the virtue of hope, Aquinas echoed St. Paul in stressing that it involves a confidence in a future that we cannot yet see. However, to explain this point further, we need to move beyond the thought of Aquinas and to study the documents of Vatican II.

## **2. CHRISTIAN HOPE MEETS SECULAR HOPE**

If the reflections of Pope Francis include stressing that hope is a theological virtue, they extend to a further point: that Christian hope includes being committed to improving the human condition in this world as a way of expressing hope in a world to come. In taking this position, the Pope employs aspects of modern philosophy that go beyond the thought of Aquinas.

For Aquinas and Aristotle, reason must always search for what is permanently and universally true. By contrast, the discovery of modern science helps us to be more comfortable with things that are in a state of change. Natural scientists, such as physicists, never claim to have found the absolutely perfect and universal theory about what they study. Rather, they propose a theory and test it to see if it can help to explain current events and predict future ones. They are always open to the arrival of a further and better theory that can include what they have discovered and incorporate it within a wider theory that explains more. Similarly, in the study of human affairs, historians and philosophers have studied the diversity of cultures and how all of these undergo a process of change. They do not search for permanent truths about culture but rather ask whether the direction of change good or not. Of course, Christians hold that there are certainly values—for example the value of life—that are true for all cultures and at all times. However, Pope Francis also shows much concern for the details of how such values become accepted or rejected in the concrete flow of history:

God is to be encountered in the world of today...God manifests himself in historical revelation, in history. Time initiates processes, and space crystallises them. God is in history, in the processes. (Interview with the editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, August, 2013).

This kind of thinking has an impact on Pope Francis's notion of hope. He recognizes that modern thinking has produced what we can call a secular notion of hope (i.e. hope considered as a natural virtue). At its worst this secular notion has produced violent revolutions leading to oppressive political systems such as communism, and this reveals how easily natural virtue becomes obscured by sin. However, the Pope also believes that this natural notion of hope can be "healed and elevated" by a supernatural version:

There have been so many revolutionaries in history, many indeed. Yet none of them have had the force of this revolution which brought Jesus to us: a revolution to transform history, a revolution that changes the human heart in depth. The revolutions of history have changed political and economic systems but none have really changed the human heart. True revolution, the revolution that radically transforms life was brought about by Jesus Christ through his Resurrection (Address to Participants in the Ecclesial Convention of the Diocese Of Rome, 17 June, 2013).

### **3. OUR LADY, HOPE, AND VATICAN II**

When Pope Francis speaks of understanding hope in this way, he is in fact echoing the message of Vatican II. We can recall, for example, the document entitled, "The Church in the Modern World," whose opening states:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ (*Gaudium et spes*: The Church in the Modern World, paragraph 1).

In fact, this spirit of hopefulness regarding the modern world pervades all the documents of this council. Another key document of the Council is *Lumen gentium* ("The Church as Light of the Nations"). Pope Francis likes to quote this document which uses an image from the Hebrew scriptures to describe the Church: "The People of God." This image evokes the memory of the people of Israel undertaking their exodus out of Egypt and following Moses to the promised land. Understanding the Church according to this image involves a twofold way of thinking about just what the People of God is: at one level it is the community of Christians who live within history; at another level it is the entire human race, within which the Christian community has a key role to play. *Lumen gentium* explores this point by speaking of the Church as involved in an "eschatological pilgrimage." The term "pilgrimage" is obviously a religious term but it also refers to a secular notion of hope, and how we can improve the human condition as we pass through history. In this way, Christians, who understand better the deeper meaning of history, are described as being ready to collaborate with all people of good-will in guiding history until the second coming of Christ on the last day—the eschatological "end of time."

It is in this context that *Lumen gentium* turns to Our Lady. It recalls, first of all, that Our Lady enjoyed the gift of Pentecost, along with the other disciples and proceeded to become a "fellow traveller" with the early Christians until the end of her earthly life. Next it recalls the Christian belief that, at the end of her earthly life, Our Lady was assumed into heaven where she lives in glory with her son. The meaning of this is that Mary already enjoys the fullness of life that will arrive for other human beings only at the end of time. In this way Mary embodies the hope of the Church:

we may still be on our eschatological pilgrimage but we are confident that this one human being has already arrived at the glorious end-point of this process:

In the interim just as the Mother of Jesus, glorified in body and soul in heaven, is the image and beginning of the Church as it is to be perfected in the world to come, so too does she shine forth on earth, until the day of the Lord shall come, as a sign of sure hope and solace to the people of God during its sojourn on earth (Vatican II, *Lumen gentium*, paragraph 68).

## **CONCLUSION**

Pope Francis speaks often of Our Lady. He has offered a marvellous comment that challenges theologians like me who can tend to inflate their own importance: “This is how it is with Mary: If you want to know who she is, you ask theologians; if you want to know how to love her, you have to ask the people” (Interview with *La Civiltà Cattolica*, August 2013). I believe that members of WUCWO are the kind of people to which Pope Francis is referring here. As we all know, Mary is understood in different ways and with different titles. I believe that Pope Francis encourages us, in the spirit of Vatican II, to understand Mary in terms such as “Our Lady of Pentecost,” “model of discipleship,” “symbol of hope,” and “mother of the Church.” As WUCWO heads toward our general assembly of 2014 we need to begin thinking about how to articulate a new set of priorities that will guide the elected officials during the following four years—priorities rooted in Catholic social teaching. This teaching, of course, expresses the Church’s commitment to a hope that seeks to influence culture and social structures around us. This is the way we make concrete our commitment to hope in this eschatological pilgrimage in which we partake, which will be completed only with the second coming of Christ. Let us pray to Our Lady to help all members of WUCWO to become truly “sowers of hope.”