

SYNTHESIS

“RELIGIOUS LIFE IN EUROPE: STORIES OF HOPE, HOPE FOR HISTORY”

HOPE AS A MISSION IN OUR EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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THE CONTEXT

My lecture started with a gloss [explanation] of a text in Koheleth (Ecclesiastes). Everything has its time. There is a time for hope and a time for feeling hopeless! To the question: What is the time for Europe?, we have answered that it is an ambivalent time. The groups have studied this ambivalence in depth and proposed different perspectives, as we will see later.

In the first part of my lecture I intended to present the European context by underlining the problem that emerges when we try to justify – theoretically at least – our great Christian hope. In their discernment some groups have also stressed those difficulties and the challenges that we are confronted with. In my exposition I also spoke about the choices the European thinkers and scientists offer us in order to consider hope in a more dynamic and perhaps humble way and with more apophysis: the utopian idea, the interpretation of history after Auschwitz, the feasibility of hope for the victims of that horror, of extermination, the hope that shows us a way to humanization and practice of the species.

The dialogue that followed the first exposition enabled us to deepen some important aspects, which have afterwards been commented and developed in the groups. For instance, how can we awaken in ourselves – in our formative processes – a passion for hope? And we have noticed the importance of vulnerability, of a humble and compassionate attitude when we are confronted with facts that question and challenge us. To the question how to overcome the scepticism that utopian thoughts bring about and that the idea of the “end of history” once more advances, we have answered that it is necessary to develop a Holy Saturday theology. There is a Good Friday theology and an Easter Sunday theology. But maybe the Holy Saturday theology is missing. The feminist theology has marked out that theological vein as a way of manifesting our hope in these periods of ambivalence, obscurity and lack of answers. As an example I quote the German theologian Martha Zechmeister, “Karsamstag. Zu einer Theologie des Gott-Vermissens [Holy Saturday. Towards a theology of missing God]” in “Sammelwerk zu Ehren von [collection in honour of] Johann Baptist Metz ‘Vom Wagnis der Nichtidentität [About the bold venture of non-identity], Münster 1998’, and Paola Zavatta, “Teologia del Sabato Santo” [The theology of Holy Saturday], Città Nuova, Rome 2006.

Our visit to the extermination camp of Auschwitz was an overwhelming background to manifest that our hope is possible in the most terrific situations that can be imagined. The interventions in connection with this point have given a touching aspect to this perspective.

My lecture has been enriched by the contributions of the questions raised in the assembly and by the discussions in the groups:

- First of all, several groups have stressed the diversity in the European reality: there is a three-speed Europe: Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Southern Europe; each of them has its own way of acting
 - Even though in Eastern Europe the experience of freedom has not solved the basic problems and has generated new ones, they more easily breathe an air of hope, especially in consecrated life, among the young people...Nevertheless, the problems of Eastern Europe are linked with the difficulties of getting rid of the past.
 - In Central and Southern Europe the secularization process entails the search for new values and spirituality. We religious people try to focus on a lifestyle centred on the person, the

human being with all his/her dignity, but materialism creeps into the hearts of the majority of Europeans. The economic crisis of these last years dispels not only our material security but also our confidence in God. In spite of the crisis the Western world is still rich and has become a materialistic society which is losing the meaning of God. On the other hand, the burden of the problems linked to the age of religious men and women, the lack of vocations, the generation gap between so many elderly people and few youngsters, the difficulty of finding answers to the new challenges of the mission. The social and legal context of the different nations is changing: working in the traditional fields becomes more and more difficult: laws are changing, taxes increasing, bureaucracy is multiplying. But there too we notice differences between the male and female congregations.

- The whole of Europe has been struck by the fall of the ideologies (capitalist, communist and scientific) and after this fall Europe is more open to transcendence. But there is also an ever-recurring violence, a constant lack of humanity in so many attitudes and actions: the pursuance of personal interests, the disdain of the others, the persecution of the other person just because he/she is “different”.
- The signs of hope are among us: old things are disappearing, new ones appearing. There are seeds of hope, tender shoots of green, so many new initiatives that become stabilized. In this working context we perceive that the presence of the Holy Spirit is manifesting itself: there is the attempt of being open to the new realities: immigration, the abuse of minors, the trafficking of women, and also the experiments in collaborating between communities and congregations, the participation in social networks on national and international level, the collaboration with lay-people, etc. A sign of hope is the merciful presence of religious men and women among people who are poor and in need.
- But there is also a certain interior and exterior scepticism: this has always existed. Although there have been remarkable changes in quality, they have not enabled people to follow new ways into the future: globalization generates new forms of dependency among people. Atomic energy is a sword of Damocles. Little spots of hope must be justified. In greater spaces hope rather creates scepticism. According to another group, people are waiting for new answers to their questions and problems. The language of the Church no longer moves the heart of our contemporaries: they do not find in the Church the answers they are looking for. Even after the fall of the Berlin wall Europe encounters situations of despair. During the discussions somebody presented the image of the insecurity of an unmanned space vehicle (Runaway World by Anthony Giddens) that will crash on earth. In a society that wants to control everything, we cannot possibly control anguish, insecurity, organised crime. The question is: is there a way of escaping from this catastrophe?
- We religious men and women,
 - must rediscover the alphabet of hope
 - In this situation of ambivalence we must have a positive view on things: for there is not a single story without any positive seeds. God has not forgotten man. It is a question of how we look at things!
 - We must consider our world as the “kairos” that God has given us to achieve something, to roll up our sleeves, to put ourselves at God’s disposal.
 - Time has come to speak, to dialogue, to understand each other in religious life in spite of the enormous differences existing between East and West. It is a time for great responsibility for each one individually and for the groups as well: living our faith and teaching that faith from which hope springs forth.
 - We want to be formed in the art of hoping. How can we live hopefully in a violent society? How can we be moulded by vulnerability and so take part in Christ’s passion for mankind? How can we let ourselves be formed by the constant mutations in front of the challenges that come our way? We should achieve a greater flexibility while staying open to future situations. A creative faithfulness that will help us to establish an unavoidable link between the past and the future, between faithfulness and creativity.
 - Our creativity becomes stronger when we are aware of our daydreams, with open eyes.
 - We, religious people, want to live our hope in a Holy Saturday context without overlooking the “memoria Passionis” and without heading to the Resurrection. Too many communities passed too quickly from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Several groups have referred to this image of “Holy Saturday” as a waiting time and not a time of pessimism and passivity.

SPIRITUALITY

In the second part my lecture has tried to reflect on the Christian hope in the perspective of an apocalyptic spirituality. We are not thinkers who are trying to find the truth of the future. We have been touched by the grace of revelation. Truth came to us in Jesus Christ. As starting points we have used two texts of St. Paul in the letter to the Romans (Chapters 5 and 8). The Christian hope is presented there as an action of the Spirit, as a love infused in our hearts and as a faithfulness of God to his Covenant with us and with the whole creation. But, at the same time, I have underlined the way hope passes through the Cross that the Church calls our "spes unica". This link between hope and the cross, hope and struggle appears very clearly in the last book of Scripture: the Book of Revelation. This book, the Omega of God's Word, was given to everybody at Auschwitz; Pope John Paul II presented it as the icon of the Church in Europe.

The Book of Revelation is an appeal to live the apocalyptic spirituality which shines out from the whole text. The Christian apocalypse, when correctly understood and interpreted, does not deny the values of creation, it does not proclaim the destruction of everything to build up something entirely new: it certainly denies that which destroys the covenant between God and mankind and creation. The apocalyptic language is certainly prophetic, symbolic, visionary and mystical. The eschatological dimension of all spirituality becomes apocalyptic in frontier situations. Such was Etty Hillesum's experience: how to protect what is godly in us! The apocalypse is not simply a prophecy of consolation, it is above all the justification that God gives of himself when confronted with pain, the suffering in creation and mankind. God manifests that he is faithful to the Covenant until the end.

The Christian apocalypse teaches us that, in order to come to Easter, we must pass through Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The atmosphere present in Holy Saturday must be communicated. Holy Saturday does not speak yet of victory. It is the time for asking ourselves painful questions. On Holy Saturday we recognize what we are missing. It is a day of apophysis, the day we have no answer to all questions. It is a day of compassion, of the 'memoria passionis' (J.B. Metz). Finally, I have tried to propose some keys to learning the art of hope. The groups have greatly enriched and stimulated the reflection on this theme of the spirituality of hope.

- One group said it is necessary to start from people's aspirations. They are very numerous and are situated on different levels: 1) superficially people long for success, beauty, wellbeing; 2) fundamentally to security, a better living standard, family life, peace and good relationships. These aspirations very plainly show the desire to live. Nothing more. Our attitude as religious people must be to take these aspirations seriously so that they may be deepened to Jesus' perspective: "You are worried and troubled over so many things, but just one is needed" (Lc 10. 41-42).
- The tasks of the spirituality of hope put forward by the groups:
 - Manifesting the joy of giving ourselves to God, God's beauty in what we are and what we do.
 - Having a total confidence in the Spirit, listening more to God's voice than to the voices of the world, which is so much in need of listening to God's voice in order to live up to the Covenant.
- For hope to become mission we must
 - Develop the eschatological way of speaking
 - Promote the spirituality of Holy Saturday: a time for silence, contemplation of the icon of the Apocalypse so as to distinguish in this icon the hidden and manifest faces, to let us be judged by the icon, to listen to the voice of the Spirit. Discern the germs of love in this old crumbling world. A Marian attitude of faith, confidence, love. On Holy Saturday the women stay there near the tomb: thus they show how faithful they are to love, even though there seems to be no future. A spirituality of waiting, of silence, of humbly searching. The grain fallen on the ground will produce grains in due time: "I tell you, if the grain of wheat dropped into the ground does not die, it remains by itself; if it dies, it produces many grains" (John 12.24).
 - Have an eschatological view of religious life.
 - Learn the art of hope: the keys of the apprenticeship (Benedict XVI). Pay attention to our daydreams.
- The spirituality of Hope, the eschatological and apocalyptic spirituality constitutes the core of the spirituality of the Covenant. In it becomes manifest all God's constant fidelity that is always willing to start anew. Just as God is faithful, so the hope of the Christians remains firm when God's

fidelity seems to be hidden. Because hope does not give any certainty. The mysticism of hope is therapeutic and transforms from within.

- Concrete proposals to revive the spirituality of hope:
 - Our communities should be places where we pray, intercede and meet God
 - Daring to show our poverty, to transfer a pastoral work from one nation that does not need it to another that needs it.
- Characteristics of the spirituality of hope:
 - An apocalyptic spirituality: of 'Marana Tha. Christ is coming. The light of Resurrection illuminates. The Covenant will be achieved when the world is reconciled with the Father. Living with the certainty that God will not forget his Covenant, that He has purified us through the water of his baptism, that he has relieved us on Easter Day through his Son's blood. The icon of the Apocalypse.
 - Our time is marked by evil. We need purification. Ruminating in order to purify. It's the time for ruminating. Learning the art of spiritual struggle or battle. To purify something precious ruminating is needed; one must die, pass through a Holy Saturday time. Refusing this time of ruminating is a synonym for dying... It's the only way to glory, to life. And it's done together with Jesus Christ. The difficulty of living this and the mentality of "everything... immediately", the refusal of ruminating, death.
 - The radicalism of spirituality is apocalyptic if it accepts death, working for life.
- Several groups have stressed the importance of understanding the Church and religious life as starting from "mysterium lunae" (the mystery of the moon). The Church, religious life are only the moon, not the sun. The light of the sun is reflected by the moon. The moon has not a light of its own. But the sun does not only light up the moon. The sun shines everywhere: "so you become the sons of your Father in Heaven; for He makes his sun to shine on good and bad people alike" (Mt 5.45). It is the spirituality that will make the Church and religious life a permanent reflection of God, of Jesus and that will avoid idolatry and self-centredness. Some also wanted to underline that hope is, above all, for the world and not for ourselves.

SERVICE

In the third part of my lecture I wanted to present the mission of religious life in Europe as a "mission of hope". I first turned my attention to some theological and basic reflections. Mission is considered as "mission Dei", i.e. as a mission in which the Trinitarian God is implicated, with all his protagonism. But it is also a mission that is shared with us in a covenant. We are collaborators of the Holy Spirit in these days. Hence, we are not the only people responsible for hope in our world.

Mission is understood not only as "missio ad gentes", but especially in this time as a "missio inter gentes", a mission in dialogue and before all a life dialogue. A group expressed it this way: not only a prophetic mission of announcing and denouncing, but of visiting as our Lady did. In the mission "inter gentes" we consider that the light of the sun shines upon the whole world and that we can be illuminated by anyone. The hospitality of mind and heart is a characteristic feature of the mission inter gentes. In the world of the Bible hospitality is 'philoxenia' [friendly hospitality]. It is a characteristic of God himself and also of God's disciples. The opposite of 'philoxenia' is xenophobia. Hospitality is now becoming the existential form of the dialogue of life, of the missio inter gentes. We do not know where this "shared mission" will lead us. But it will be the moment when the mission becomes "trans-mission" and transformation for all of us.

In the mission we have the responsibility to announce the Gospel of Hope which enables us to say that another world is possible, that there is hope for everybody and everything, that hope requires new ethics.

I concluded my lecture by insisting on the importance of our contribution within the European educational space to a new model of mission in the education of the human being, for a new world citizenship.

The groups have enriched this last part of the reflection with very interesting contributions:

- If the mission is the Covenant with God, we must increasingly strengthen our relationship with God and continually renew the pact. This vision should be studied in depth.

- The mission is often carried out in contexts of crucifying and suffering. Consequently endurance in the mission is necessary to avoid discouragement.
- The aim of the mission of hope is to offer a purpose, a horizon, a future. But – according to one group – there is some danger of having a too naïve vision of this world. How to envisage this world? Is this world possible? To avoid becoming fundamentalists we must educate ourselves to being available and open-minded, with attitudes that do not depend on too concrete representations regarding the future world: we must inculcate attitudes of respect, attention, perseverance, fidelity, friendliness, readiness to forgiveness and reconciliation. Eventually, this means letting God distinctly manifest Himself. Father Maximilian Kolbe was an incarnation of these attitudes and a sign of hope for other people.
- The new challenges of our European society, the advanced age of so many religious men and women in Europe push us to re-dimension our mission, our structures and our services. This asks for humility and good humour (humus, humilitas, humor). We have to re-discover new missions that better meet our dreams and feasibilities.
- We admit that the mission of hope requires some virtues from us:
 - The first is the virtue of hospitality which manifests itself in various achievements, when our communities become centres for refugees, dialogue, spirituality.
 - Other virtues for today's mission are: piety, compassion, mercy, reconciliation in order to heal the wounds of so many victims.
- The mission of hope makes us open to new services in which we are already involved and which are bearing hope.
 - The trafficking of human beings, especially of women and children
 - Handicapped persons.
 - Pilgrimages as tokens of hope: the spirituality of wayfaring.
 - Networking for religious with well-defined targets.
 - Promoting the culture of silence when confronted with insufficient answers.
 - Solidarity for Haiti, where one discovers that some tragedies are the onset towards a better life.
- New tasks for formation and management in the mission:
 - Understand formative and pedagogical ways that help people and the communities to live in a less structured manner, but that give them the capacity of a greater docility to the Holy Spirit.
 - Develop a greater spirituality of hope in the sense of being able to wait, to persevere, to live present time with its ambivalences.
 - Bring people to discovering in themselves “new organs” (in Ety Hillesum's words), new capacities: for dialogue, for exerting some influence on the transformation of the cultural codes, the macrostructures.
 - New forms of collaboration and dialogue, within networks.
 - Change from too heavily institutionalized services to other more flexible forms of presence.
 - Be careful that our youngsters are not overloaded with extra charges.
 - Give new forms to the pedagogical mission: go beyond the historical model. Educational models for our present-day world.
 - Find new bonds and new words to unite people around us.
 - New values such as ecology, the theology of creation.
 - Prepare the religious for the mission, especially in cases of extreme weakness and personal problems...
 - In the new Europe the memory of the nations is a wounded memory that must be healed.
 - The invocation of and obedience to the Holy Spirit to discover the work and see the signs of his presence. Today situations ask us to be free in order to listen to the Spirit and let his action prosper. We, religious people, must admit our uncertainties and our vulnerability, let ourselves be given up to Him, to being changed by Him.
 - The service of the faith in Christ and of confidence in Him: Christ has risen from the tomb and has taken us definitely with Him. We must continue our way courageously because Christ has vanquished Evil and has liberated the whole of mankind.

I think the Spirit has given us the grace of reflecting on hope in a context of authentic theological hope. We have the keys to overcome fear and to enter confidently into the clouds and the luminous darkness of this Holy Saturday of Europe. Like the apocalyptic Seer we are summoned to prayer, worship, listening, intercession and to call up to the end, like at the end of the Holy Scripture: Marana Tha! The Spirit and the Bride!