

Hope Is Born out of Faith and Manifests Itself through Love *

I. Jesus Christ – The Source of Hope

The theme proposed by the Conference of European Churches for its 13th General Assembly, “Called to One Hope in Christ”, is as appropriate as can be for the current times for both this organisation and all Churches in Europe. In these times of financial crisis, of searches for new solutions for the surpassing of many challenges, Christians must reflect together upon what hope in Christ means for them, or, better said, how they can best harmonise their hopes with the one hope in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In the writings of the New Testament, Christian hope is described as “*a better hope*”, through which we are getting closer to God (Hebrews 7:19). This better hope is identified, in fact, by St Apostle Paul with Christ Himself – “*Our hope*” (1 Timothy 1:1; Colossians 1:27).

Jesus Christ is our Hope because He is both perfect God and complete man. He is the One through Whom “*all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made*” (John 1:3); “*all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. [...] He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross*” (Colossians 1:16-20).

* The speech of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, addressed at the 13th General Assembly of the Council of European Churches, Lyon, July 16, 2009.

Jesus Christ, God's love bestowed upon us, is **our Hope because He is the “image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15), the Creator, the Governor and the ultimate destination of the world and of the created existence.** He is the Son of God, the only begotten, incarnated for us humans and for our salvation, as St Apostle John the Evangelist states, “*for God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ, the Creator and Saviour of the world, is **our Hope because we live through Him** (1 John 4:9), the Word of God being sent into the world by the Father so that the world “*may have life, and have it to the full*” (John 10:10). St Apostle Paul says that our “*life is now hidden with Christ in God*” (Colossians 3:3).

Jesus Christ, “*the Light of the world*” (John 8:20), is **our Hope because He is the supreme and eternal Truth** (cf. John 14:6), *the One Who is the same yesterday and today and forever* (Hebrews 13:8), and *His word is truth* (cf. John 17:17; 1 Timothy 2:15).

Jesus Christ, the Victor over sin, death and hell, is **our Hope because He is our Peace, the One Who has reconciled man with God** (Ephesians 2:14), through him all gaining *access to the Father by one Spirit* (Ephesians 2:18).

Jesus Christ, our Merciful Benefactor, is **our Hope because He took on Himself the human being, cleansed it, sanctified it and raised it in glory, in the intimacy of the eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity.** Christ our Lord is the *Door* which leads to the inside of the divine life and communion, the *Door* through which whoever enters will be saved (cf. John 10:9). Hence, one can sense the intimate relationship between hope and salvation repeatedly affirmed in the New Testament: “*in this hope we were saved*” (Romans 8:24), because “*everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure*” (1 John 3:3).

In the teachings and acts of Jesus Christ, the mystery of the humble and all-powerful love of the Holy Trinity for the human being and man's possibility to participate in the eternal life of the Holy Trinity are shown. In this sense, St Apostle Paul says that through the crucified and resurrected Christ, God "*raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*" (Ephesians 2: 6). That is why, for all of us who, through Him, have believed in God, as St Apostle Peter also notes, He is "*our hope in God*" (cf. 1 Peter 1:21).

Founded upon the divine promise, according to which "*God, Who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful*" (1 Corinthians 1:9), Christians, in humbleness, must lay all their hope on the infinite love of Christ, as God helps those who humble themselves, granting them His grace (Proverbs 3:34). According to the words of St Apostle Paul, Christians are those "*who were the first to hope in Christ*" (Ephesians 1:12), being sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit (cf. Ephesians 1:13). This hope in Christ in which and through which God communicate Himself or is self-giving to humans is, also, a guarantee that in Him, in Christ, "*all will be resurrected*" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Faith in God is reinforced through the hope of the Gospel (cf. Colossians 1:23) and practiced through the love with which man responds to the unconditional love of God, as well as through love towards the neighbour. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, St Paul underlines very well the relationship between faith, hope and love, when writing about "*your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ*" (1 Thessalonians 1:3). According to St Maximus the Confessor, the knowledge of God is the living faith which nurtures hope, and hope nurtures love.

Christian hope grows and yields fruits through the cooperation of man with God. Hope is God's gift to the human being, but a gift which must be cultivated. That is why *the Christian is required to fight in this life against everything which*

can hinder him in fulfilling Christ's will. Our Saviour Jesus Christ Himself has shown, through His words and His life, that in the fallen world, profoundly affected by sin, by selfish passions, by demonic work and death, it is hard, but not impossible, for the human being to live according to God's will, Who wants man's liberation from sin and death and his attaining of eternal life and joy.

The temptations with which Jesus was confronted in the desert (cf. Matthew 4:4), namely: *material greed (the economic problem)*, *the obsession of selfish pride (the problem of unreasonable self-esteem)*, *the desire to rule this world (the political problem)*, named by St Maximus Confessor “the temptations of pleasure”, are an permanent part of Christian's spiritual fight in this material world, which permanently attempts to substitute the Creator and to become an idol (cf. Romans 1:23). Departing from its vocation of being a stairway to heaven, the world, through sin, inches towards becoming a gateway to hell. From window towards God, it moves towards becoming an opaque wall of isolation. However, all these above mentioned temptations were rejected by Jesus, Who showed that “*man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4). Human being cannot exist only as a biological being, because it is a theological being, created in the image of God, who nourishes itself from its relationship of life and love with God. *The hope or the riches of His glorious inheritance* (cf. Ephesians 1:18) to which human being was called is, in fact, communion with Him, the eternal Being, a communion which starts in His Church and fulfils itself in the Kingdom of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:19).

The egotistical passion of ruling or dominating the terrestrial world, of creating domains, empires and paradises from the limited and passing material world, is, in fact, a perversion or deviance of human's desire for God's infinite love and richness; this deviation is – according to Maurice Blondel – “*the sinful search of the infinite in the finite things*”. Only when used in a state of gratefulness and

prayerfulness towards God the Creator, the created world becomes a multiple language or a multifaceted dialogue of human being with God and of humans with each other. *This is possible to the extent to which the Christian has inside the Spirit of Christ*, is a witness and follower to Christ, in the sense that he thinks, lives and fights in this world as Jesus Christ, our Lord, has taught, lived and fought. To this end, Christian life is first of all a spiritual fight, a crucifixion of selfish passions and of the victory of humble love over egotism, in order to live, not in selfish confrontation, but in a communion of fraternal love, according to St Apostle Paul, who says: *“those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other”* (Galatians 5:24-26).

The fight of the faithful in this world with the greed for material things and money, with the desire to rule and become superior to others, is more than a moral exercise, it is a spiritual fight which concretely experiments the hope that only by God’s help one can vanquish the sin in the human nature and the acts of evil or the spirits of evilness: *“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand”* (Ephesians 6:12-13). And this armour is made of: the breastplate of righteousness; the Gospel of peace; the shield of faith; the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (cf. Ephesians 6:14-17). In addition, St Paul encourages us to *“pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints”* (Ephesians 6:18).

The difficulty of Christian's struggle in the world is balanced by the joy of the victory brought by God's grace to those who love Christ and is strengthened by the hope in Christ. That is why the tension between the frailty or powerlessness of human nature, on one side, and the power of the working grace in the fighting Christians, which keeps the hope of victory alive, on the other side, was described by the same Apostle, a theologian of hope and shepherd of the universal Church, by the words: *"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. **We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.** We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body"* (2 Corinthians 4:7-10). When human being ceases to be a fighter against sin, understood as selfish individual and collective existence, he or she can no longer be fully and constantly a humble being who loves God and people, neither a courageous promoter of the evangelical hope. The crisis of hope in the secularised human being can be seen today especially in the practice of suicide, euthanasia, abortion, drugs, domestic and social violence, and in other expressions of despair and spiritual disorientation.

II. The Conference of European Churches – A Call for a Common Witness and a Ministry of the Gospel of Hope

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary since the foundation of the Conference of European Churches (1959-2009), we observe that underlining the importance of hope in Christ for the life of the Churches on our continent was a permanent goal of this organisation. The hope for a more just and peaceful world, inspired from the faith in the most glorified Triune God, was the binder through which the Conference of European Churches has encouraged Churches in Europe in a time when the people on this continent were living divided in antagonistic and

hostile ideological and military blocs. The Conference of European Churches looks today towards the future, trusting that the hope in Jesus Christ will inspire the Churches in Europe through the grace of the Holy Spirit, from the Father's infinite love, to continue their common work for the service of today's people.

Many of the problems confronting Churches in Europe today are still influenced by the complex process of European integration. But the European integration regarded only from an economic, juridical, financial and strategic-defensive viewpoint is not sufficient. If we limit ourselves only to these, many aspects of the identity and capacity for dialogue of the Churches are neglected, unused or even humiliated. Thus, speaking about an authentic and real European integration, the spiritual and cultural factors are of prime importance. The spiritual factor, and, most of all, the religious one, because religion is the most profound dimension of human spirituality, cannot be disregarded. We are expressing here the joy that in the recent years the European institutions have shown increased interest for the cultural dimension of European integration in general, as well as for the dialogue with the European Churches. During the Third European Ecumenical Assembly, hosted by the Romanian Orthodox Church in Sibiu, Romania, in September 2007, several possibilities of cooperation between the Churches and the European institutions were highlighted, aiming at a fairer and safer world on our continent.

The entire world is preoccupied today by the economic crisis which affects it and towards which the Churches cannot remain indifferent. The economic crisis, which also includes a spiritual crisis, that of the greed for money, can, however, be converted in a chance for progress, even if it generates an entire series of social problems, which the Churches cannot circumvent. The Gospel shows that Jesus Christ has a preference for the poor, for those in suffering, for those who cannot rely entirely on themselves, and the Church, as the Mystical Body of Christ, cannot

have another attitude. Therefore, in this context of economic crisis, the cooperation between the Churches in Eastern Europe and those in Western Europe must be a missionary one, which can bring hopes, prepared by critical observations, by changes of attitudes, by the rethinking of the relationship between spiritual and material, between the amassing of wealth and the solidarity with the poor.

In the current European context, marked by this profound spiritual crisis, there is a certain tension between tradition and modernity, a loss of traditional Christian values, a painful instability of the family, a conflict between generations and much agnosticism, individualism, doubled by sectarianism, proselytism, and religious fundamentalism.

Thus, there is a spiritual crisis indeed, because secularism (understood as an attitude of building the society and human life disregarding transcendental eternal values, as if God did not exist) does not solve the problems of personal and social life. Secularism leaves a void which, if not filled with authentic Christianity, is more and more filled by a diffuse and syncretistic religiosity, or by a radical and violent religiosity, as a reaction towards the nihilistic indifference of the secularised human being.

One can notice that, due to the massive movement of people from one area to another, generated by migration, a very complex phenomenon in today's Europe, as a result of the permanent search by humans for a better life, radical changes on the religious map of Europe took place. In this very complex context, which is, certainly, permanently changing and a great challenge for the Churches, we cannot afford to be nostalgic by attempting to restore a Christian medieval Europe. As this is a new reality which brings about new challenges, the Churches must find together new solutions for new problems. We will have to become more and more used to religious pluralism, with respect for the others, without falling into doctrinal or moral relativism. But how can we keep our own identity, when

everything is changing around us? Of course, only through the cultivation and enrichment of our relationship with Jesus Christ, *the same yesterday and today and forever* (cf. Hebrews 13:8), in His Church, which is His Mystical Body.

Generally, today's European society – often more indifferent than unfaithful – needs the Church, because it needs spiritual healing and communion. This society needs healing especially because it identifies freedom of the person with egotistical individualism and with the possession of limited and passing material things; however, human life cannot be built strong and lasting on the spiritual void of forgetfulness of God and of the heavenly or transcendent calling of the human being. Without spiritual or metaphysical perspective, human life is quickly reduced to <<mathematics>> namely a number of robotised individuals and quantities of finite products, for well defined purposes, but living in a world which is closed in itself, self-sufficient.

On another side, true Christian life is not content only with the belief that God exists somewhere in heavens; it fulfils itself as foretasting or living experience of Christ's presence in those who love Him, His Gospel and His Church. Let us remember that the Gospel according to Matthew ends with the words of Christ which He spoke before His Ascension to heavens: "*Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

Assured by this promise, let us put our faith in Him, the One Who will enlighten us with His Holy Spirit, enabling us to feel the love of God the Father and to give the world the good news of the Gospel of God's love for the entire humankind, for all nations and all human persons.

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