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The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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September 2016

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While it is obvious that the word hope is very much part of common usage, it is perhaps just as obvious that most of us don't take time to reflect on the reality we call hope, on its nature, its elements and aspects, its implications, its importance for our activities and the use of our talents and opportunities, indeed for the very meaning of our lives. We are more conscious of the fundamental significance of hope when we run up against situations where we have little hope, and especially where there is really no hope.

It will be important, then, to reflect on and attempt some analysis of this hope as it appears in our experience, so as to help us to understand it more fully and perhaps deepen and strengthen our own hope. This will go some way to ensure that we don't reduce hope to some sort of other-worldly phenomenon cut off from our experience of living in this world today.

OUR DAILY EXPERIENCE

'At this level most of our hopes do not even find expression in words, but they are tacitly implied in the future-oriented actions that we do.' Thus says John Macquarrie very accurately and realistically.¹ So, he adds: 'When someone sows a field or builds a house or takes a course of study or marries a spouse or brings children into the world, he or she has acted in hope.'² In all of these activities and in a host of others there is an affirmation of the future, a trust in the future, an investment in the future.³ In fact in almost everything we do, we are doing so in the expectation and hope that some goal will be achieved.

Hope in this ordinary sense is pre-reflective or implicit hope, which at times does become explicit and rise to the level of

1 In his book *In Search of Humanity – A Theological and Philosophical Approach*. SCM Press, London, 1982, p 245.

2 In his book *Christian Hope*. Mowbray, London & Oxford, 1978, p 4.

3 Macquarrie, *Christian Hope*, p 4. See also Seán O'Riordan, 'The Psychology of Hope' in *Seán O'Riordan – A Theologian of Development – Selected Essays*. Edited by Raphael Gallagher & Seán Cannon. *Quaestiones Morales. Editiones Academiae Alphonsonianae – Roma* and The Columba Press, Dublin, 1998, pp 97-99.

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conscious hope. It would seem that all our hoping arises out of or develops from this kind of implicit hope. This applies not just to the personal hopes of individuals and families but also to the larger hopes of public figures in society like politicians, social activists or prophetic personages calling for reform and renewal in state, society or church.⁴

THE EXPERIENCE OF HOPE

It is not at all easy to define or even describe hope but the following reflections will be of help.

One writer expresses it as follows: 'By hope I mean the belief that things need not be as they are, that they can be different, that we are not prisoners of the past or the present, that we can make for humankind a different future. In essence hope is a belief in possibilities – not that things *will* be better, but that things *can* be different.'⁵

Perhaps it would be more helpful to refer to hope as an attitude rather than just a belief.⁶ An attitude is an habitual or set way of perceiving some reality or aspect of life. In relation to hope we should see it as a fundamental human attitude that provides us with a positive and open outlook on life and the world and on particular realities in life. As Macquarrie says, 'The hopeful mood encourages outgoingness, willingness for experiment and change, even adventure ... it is one of the brighter and more positive moods. It includes elements of trust and expectancy'⁷

The mood opposite to hope is fear and this will tend to discourage openness to change, etc. and the tendency to hang on to the familiar and to avoid openness and innovation. There is an emotional element in hope, even though hope tends to be a settled disposition not easily or quickly upset or dissipated. Experience confirms also that when one's hope is unfulfilled, then one will feel disappointment and this will regularly bring a decrease in openness and energy and a mood that will have a negative element that will lack vitality and the will to do something different or to innovate. In short hope provides a dynamic for action; its absence does the opposite.⁸

Hope has long been understood as a virtue. A virtue is a settled

4 See Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity*, p 245.

5 Paul Wilding, 'Hope in our World', *The Way – A Review of Contemporary Christian Spirituality*. Heythrop College, 11 Cavendish Square, London, 1987, p 256.

6 Macquarrie, *Christian Hope*, p 5; also James M Gustafson, *Christian Ethics and The Community*. A Pilgrim Press Book, Philadelphia 1971, p 215.

7 *Christian Hope*, p 6.

8 Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*. SCM Press, London, 1966, 1971, p 451. See also Dermot A.Lane, *Keeping Hope Alive – Stirrings in Theology*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1996, p 59.

THE FURROW

disposition to act in certain ways that are good and to avoid actions that go in the opposite direction. As such hope is clearly a moral reality and gives us a facility and an energy for doing good, implementing policies and seeking goals that build one's moral character. This clearly implies that there is the possibility of change and that the human person is free to hope for change and work towards it. So hope implies and needs freedom; without that freedom there could be no hope. Hence, where there is hope there is freedom and where there is freedom there is room for hope. This points to the moral dimension of hope and enables us to see that as one develops a hopeful outlook and disposition over time one is thereby strengthening the virtue of hope as a vital dimension of one's moral character.

Hope provides us with the dynamism for action. Hope is, as Macquarrie says, the dynamic of action.⁹ No doubt we are aware that many hopes are never fulfilled and hope is vulnerable, but when we are hopeful, action will usually follow. Not everything that one hopes for, not every object of hope is virtuous, since we can hope for things or that are far from moral. As Gustafson says, hope itself is morally neutral.¹⁰ The moral quality or virtuous character of our hopes depends on *what* we hope for and also on the motives that inspire us to hope. So any moral judgment about a hope depends upon what is hoped for. As Gustafson says again (p 159), 'some men [and women] hope and long for death; some hope and long for a new justice and peace in the world; some men [and women] hope for the second coming of Jesus; some for a classless society. What men [and women] hope for, conditions what purposes they have, what they live for, what they desire from day to day, what they are and what they do. Hope looks to the future, not as the end or as a threat to what is, but as an open field of possibilities of human fulfilment and achievement.'

HOPE AND OPTIMISM

While writers on hope agree that both hope and optimism stand opposed to pessimism and despair, they assert also that hope and optimism differ radically from each other.¹¹ In this context of a discussion of hope it seems optimism is frequently presented in a very negative manner. Thus Lane says (p 60): 'Optimism is the acceptance of the law of growth and the theory of human progress; optimism tends to ignore the ambiguity of the world in which we live and the presence of so much evil within that world. Optimism is a kind of presumption that neglects the realities of pain and

⁹ *Christian Hope*, p 9.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p 215.

¹¹ Macquarrie, *Christian Hope.*, p 13, and Lane, *op.cit.*, p 60.

evil, especially the vulnerability of human enterprise.' Macquarrie seems to be in basic agreement with this understanding of optimism (*Christian Hope*, p 13). However, he does talk about forms of optimism and extreme optimism which lead to negative effects (p 9). He mentions also irresponsible optimism.¹²

One has to agree that there are such forms of optimism and that they are very much inclined to ignore the ambiguity of the world and much pain and evil within it. However, ordinary experience and common sense seem to indicate that realistic optimism is not merely a better way of looking at things than pessimism but it is regularly a positive help in dealing with the realities of life. As such it is quite closely related to hope and may be said to be a valuable support to the hopeful person.

Goleman says (pp 88-89), that optimism is a 'near cousin' of hope and he cites a study in which insurance salesmen who were optimists did better in their job than pessimists by 37% in the first two years. In addition, a special group of salesmen who were high in optimism but had failed the usual [academic] test to get the job outsold the pessimists by 21% in their first year and by 57% in the second year. Optimism in this realistic sense is, then, Goleman says (p 89), an emotionally intelligent attitude and he tells us, reassuringly and positively, that like hope it can be learned. In this context he says, 'optimism, like hope, means having a strong expectation that, in general, things will turn out right in life, despite setbacks and frustrations' (p 88).

HOPE AND MORAL AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

While hope may provide the energy and inspiration for action in particular cases, it can also give rise to dissatisfaction with the present state of things in one's community, in society generally or even in oneself.¹³

There are many examples that might be used to illustrate this but in this year of 2016 the example that comes to mind most readily is that of the 1916 Rising in Ireland and the subsequent war of independence, all in the hope of winning for Ireland its political freedom from Britain. Those involved over those years on the Irish side were obviously gravely dissatisfied with the political situation where Ireland was subject to British rule and they were inspired by the hope of overthrowing this form of oppression, as they saw it, and winning freedom for their country. This hope supplied the dynamism for the rebellion and all that it involved and was realised, if not perfectly, then at least significantly, in the Treaty of 1921 and the Irish Free State.

¹² *In Search of Humanity*, p 246.

¹³ Macquarrie, *Christian Hope*, p 9

THE FURROW

Hope of improvement is also the spur to action in many other areas of life from one's own personal situation where one is dissatisfied with one's moral or spiritual condition or one's conditions of employment to the global concern and drive to deal positively with climate change and to promote better care for God's creation in all its aspects.

Of course not all discontent or dissatisfaction with the status quo is positive and creative and not all of it derives from hope. There can be selfish and even destructive motivation involved and the goals to be achieved may be such as to be attained for some at the expense of others.¹⁴

Corresponding to this virtue, there is, of course, a vice that is the opposite and the negation of hope. This is despair. Despair is a vice, an immoral attitude or disposition that negates and overwhelms hope and makes any action seem futile. The result is inaction and the failure and inability to do anything constructive that might make things better.

Not all inaction in particular circumstances is due to despair. There often are situations in which a person or group make a quite rational and indeed morally right decision not to do anything or to cease from the action contemplated or already under way. This will arise when it is judged that any action will be unproductive or might even do more harm than good.¹⁵ This may be illustrated again from the 1916 Rising when the leaders agreed to surrender unconditionally, because further military action was viewed by them as futile and also as likely to endanger many more innocent civilians.

THE UNDERSTANDING IMPLIED IN THE EXPERIENCE OF HOPE

From what has been said already it is clear that hope implies and assumes that change is possible in oneself, others and the world. What is hoped for is change for the better, though the opposite is possible too. This change for the better hopes to create something new and thus to transform the existing situation, so that there will be difference but also continuity.¹⁶ Implied in all this also is the idea that the world we live in is not totally fixed or pre-determined but is open to some change and transformation. The fact that some change is possible in people and in the world makes it clear that neither people nor the world are/is perfect and hence improvement is possible. So hope can exist only in an ambiguous world that is neither totally evil nor absurd nor completely perfect. Hence, since hope does exist in our world as it is, there is room and need

14 Ibid., pp 9-10.

15 Ibid., p 10.

16 Ibid., p 11.

for human freedom to turn hope into action. This may involve creating something new in one's own life or in society or even in the Church. Thus hope can be imaginative and creative. This creativity can extend not just to envisaging new goals but also to the process of working out how these might be attained. In other words, hope will need to be creative in regard to planning for the future one hopes for and works for.¹⁷

Hope can at times be unrealistic, illusory or even dangerous and wrong. So we have to exercise caution and be critical in relation to hopes we ourselves entertain and would like to work towards. Similarly in regard to hopes others put forward. Experience and common sense will need to come into play and prevent wasted time and effort. Individuals or groups may entertain and even plan for hopes that may be foolish, harmful or dangerous or even immoral, at least in the eyes of many. Examples: placing a large bet on a horse or competition in the hope of recovering heavy losses; expecting to achieve a top degree with little effort put into dedicated study; hoping for a cure while largely ignoring expert medical advice; joining a political grouping in the hope of promoting anti-Semitism; working to deny women equality in the workplace or to exclude all Muslims from Europe.

A significant amount of space has here been given to understanding our human experience of hope. Much more has been written about Christian hope in theology than about the experience of hope as a universal human phenomenon.

THE HOPE OF CHRISTIANS

Dermot Lane expresses well the origin and core meaning of the hope of Christians. His basic ideas are the following:¹⁸ Christian hope is founded on the preaching and praxis of Jesus concerning the reign of God. That reign has been established in principle through the death and resurrection of Christ. The Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection is, therefore, the centrepiece of Christian hope. Because this is so, Christian hope embraces both the present and the future, both this-worldly realities and other-worldly realities. It must be affirmed, then, that Christian hope includes the cultivation of creation and humanity in this life as well as the transformation of humanity and creation in eternity. The ultimate aim of God's plan is a new heaven and a new earth embracing the transformation of the cosmos as well as the transfiguration of humanity. To this extent Christian hope is human, historical and cosmic.

In the light of these central points that Lane makes we can speak of Christian hope as an important reality in our daily lives

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 14.

¹⁸ *Keeping Hope Alive*, pp 68-70.

THE FURROW

as Christians and in the life of the Church community, while also giving attention to our hope beyond death.

Our Christian hope gives a new and deeper meaning to our lives in the Christian church and in the world. As Christian believers our hope is based on and inspired by God's love for us in Christ. This hope has all the qualities and aspects of hope as a universal phenomenon. But now this human hope is caught up in our hope in Christ and so is given new meaning and depth as our lives in all their aspects are now inspired, motivated and indeed based on our faith-hope-love of God in Christ. Hence, for example, if one entertains the hope for better personal relationships in one's life, that for the Christian is now understood as the Christian hoping that God's love in Christ will touch his/her relationships with the people in his/her family and circle. If one has the hope of improving the respect for a particular human right in one's society or even in the Church, then the Christian will feel called by God to promote this important moral issue and so work to realise the Christian hope involved and the will of God at the same time.

We can say, then, that our Christian hope can and must have a this-worldly dimension that commits the Christian to work for personal growth in all aspects of his/her life but also to do all he/she can to love the neighbour as fully as possible. In addition, Christian hope calls us to work for justice, peace and the integrity of creation as a necessary element of our spirituality as followers of Jesus the Lord.¹⁹

Christian hope calls us to hope and work for a better world. It is this this-worldly dimension and challenge of Christian hope that has been under-played and even overlooked in the past but which must now be kept clearly before the Church, its institutions, its leadership and its members. Vatican II re-affirms this Christian responsibility when it teaches: 'Hope in a life to come does not take away from the importance of the duties of this life on earth but rather adds to it by giving new motives for fulfilling these duties ... the cultivation of this world is able to make ready the material of the celestial realm and is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age.'²⁰ Lane also states: 'The time has come ... to see Christian hope as this-worldly *and* other-worldly, as embracing the present *and* the future, as integrating the spiritual *and* the social.'²¹

THE CHRISTIAN HOPE FOR ETERNAL LIFE

It is not intended here to take an apologetical approach to this

19 *Ibid.*, p 130.

20 *Gaudium et Spes* (1964), nn. 21, 38-39 as quoted in Lane, p 129.

21 In his chapter in *Catholic Theology Facing the Future – Historical Perspectives*. Edited by Dermot A. Lane. The Columba Press, Dublin, 2003, p 141.

Christian belief by supplying arguments to back it up and show how reasonable and certain it is.²² Nor will there be any discussion of the various aspects of this Christian doctrine like heaven, hell or purgatory. Rather our concern is simply focused on the Christian hope for eternal life and how that can and does impact on our lives here below.

Macquarrie says: 'a hope transcending death has been characteristic of man from the beginning and has been deepened and transformed in the light of growing knowledge and experience.'²³ The Christian hope for life beyond death is described by many images.²⁴ We may refer to it, using one image, as sharing the divine life, eternal life with the Trinity and based on the resurrection of Jesus to new life with the Father – where he [Jesus] has gone we hope to follow – and also on God's promise of the fulfilment of the reign of God in the future.

This Christian hope for eternal life in heaven transforms our understanding of human life and also adds a whole new dimension to our hope in and for earthly life.

One's first response to God's goodness in making Christian hope possible should be thanksgiving for such a life-changing gift and destiny. It enriches our understanding of human life and of the activity which we are called to engage in so as to build God's reign. Hence, we can say that 'Christian hope is confidence in the goodness of God whose power brings all created values into being',²⁵ and through human activity prepares for us all the consummation of God's reign.

Our Christian hope in eternal life overcomes for us believers the oft-repeated assertion that death renders human life meaningless. For us Christians Jesus in and by his resurrection has conquered death, not by abolishing it, obviously, but by winning a new life for us beyond death in the divine realm where we will share God's own life. Thus Christian hope gives human life its ultimate meaning with God in eternity. This provides inspiration and energy for our daily lives and the projects we undertake, because they are now seen, not just as helping our neighbour, building one's own moral character and perhaps promoting the common good, but also as having value for eternity. Now we understand our Christian lives as building God's reign as well as contributing to the welfare of humanity. This adds deeper motivation and meaning to our moral and spiritual lives and so is a source of inspiration for better human and Christian living.

22 See Macquarrie, *Christian Hope*, chapter 1, n.2 and chapters III, IV and V.

23 *Christian Hope*, p 21; and *In Search of Humanity*, pp 249-252.

24 Lane, *Keeping Hope Alive*, .pp 138-140.

25 James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life*, Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, Evanston and London, 1968, p 252.

THE FURROW

Our Christian faith and hope in eternal life is or at least should be a significant spiritual help when the Christian comes to the end of life. The fear of death would seem to be a natural human experience but our belief in the new life of heaven should take the sting out of our passing from this life, as St Paul noted. I remember when Cardinal Basil Hume of Westminster diocese was facing death back in 1999, he was reported to have said that he was looking forward to meeting God in his true home in heaven. This was surely an instance of deep and inspiring faith and hope in a very holy man. It was also an example of how the Christian hope in eternal life with God can make the truth that we have here no lasting city nothing to be feared and can enable us to face death with serenity and even expectation of the fullness of life with our loving God to come.²⁶

CONCLUSION

Most of our attention in this essay has been placed on trying to understand hope as a reality for all in human living, as a universal human phenomenon. This has been a main focus in the foregoing pages, because in Christian theology, philosophy and spirituality there has been a dearth of significant reflection on this datum of our experience, at least until recent times. It is hoped that this will have brought to mind some important insights into hope itself and given us a better foundation and, as it were, springboard, to present a rather brief account of our Christian hope as it impacts on us during our earthly journey and opens up for us the eternal destiny won for us by Jesus in and through his resurrection to the fullness of divine life with the Father in heaven.

26 For a fuller exposition of our Christian hope see Lane, *Keeping Hope Alive*, chapters 6 to 9, Macquarrie, *Christian Hope*, chapters III to V, and *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1994, nn. 1817 to 1820.