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Christian Hope for a Better Europe

Summary: The credibility of the Church is correlated to the future of Europe. So are related the vision for a Church modelled on the Gospel and the soul of Europe. The Church listens and learns from the world, just as she has a decisive role to play in front of changing scenarios, ethical dilemmas and unprecedented historical turnings. This paper proceeds in three steps and will be highlighting above all three key-terms: roots, self-criticism and trust. The first part of this paper emphasises *the necessity to experience the need for roots*. What is at stake here is to bring together a sense of realism and hope. The second step concerns a *much-needed discernment of modernity and modern Christianity*. Self-criticism is here presented as a way to challenge, renew and restore the Church, but especially today's Europe (and the world) to overcome any inability to mediate between today's culture and the core of revelation in Christ. In the third and final step, this paper proposes *an exploration of neglected dimensions in everyday life* according to Pope Francis' vision for the Church in Europe and the world. What is underlined here is then the beauty and richness of the human capacity for trust. Hope is ultimately experienced when truth and freedom are held together.

Keywords: Church, Europe, roots, self-criticism, truth, freedom, trust

On the 6th of May, 2016, Pope Francis, upon receiving the Charlemagne prize spoke on the *kairos* to renew the soul of Europe. His invitation was not simply to renew the dream of a unified and a peaceful Europe, but even more to re-discover its identity in the light of faith and its historical foundations. He urged everyone to embark on a quest for a new humanism based on three abilities: the capacity to *integrate*, the capacity for *dialogue* and the capacity to *generate*¹.

His heartening speech for all stakeholders to build a better Europe invokes not only a glance toward the future or a resolution to *overcome* confrontation and division. It is indeed a call to overcome scepticism and inertia, to *return* to the roots and to restore hope in the wider context. Taking cue from *Spe salvi* §22, which in my opinion has been overlooked by many of its readers, this paper suggests that the credibility of the Church and its mission lies in understanding and emphasising the inseparable unity between truth and freedom². In front of changing scenarios, ethi-

¹ See Pope Francis, *Address at his conferral of the Charlemagne Prize taking place on Friday, 6 May 2016 at Sala Regia*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html [11.08.2017].

² Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Hope *Spe salvi*, n. 22. See <http://w2.vati->

cal dilemmas and unprecedented historical turnings, the Church has a decisive role to play, precisely to present the indispensability of religious identity. This is possible through an exercise of “self-criticism”.

This paper shall proceed in three steps and will be highlighting above all three key-terms: (i) roots, (ii) self-criticism and (iii) trust. The first part of this paper emphasises *the necessity to experience the need for roots*. What is at stake here is to bring together a sense of realism and hope. The second step concerns *a much-needed discernment of modernity and modern Christianity*. Self-criticism is here presented as a way to challenge, renew and restore the Church, but especially today’s Europe (and the world) to overcome any inability to mediate between today’s culture and the core of revelation in Christ. In the third and final step, this paper proposes *an exploration of neglected dimensions in everyday life* according to Pope Francis’ vision for the Church in Europe and the world. What is underlined here is then the beauty and richness of the human capacity for trust.

1. Experiencing the Need for Roots

Any willingness to go back to the roots implies a readiness or a disposition to seek and embrace the truth. The emphasis here is not simply on the process of going back to the roots, but rather on the collective and communitarian *need* for it. One of the major problems today both in the Church and in Europe and the world is precisely the issue of “uprootedness”. This unfortunate reality is also evident in today’s manifestation of religious identity. Zygmunt Bauman (1925–), for instance, remarks that not only do people lack social skills (notwithstanding the accessibility of the social media), but they do also feel lonely and abandoned in a time of individualisation³. Is this a mirror image of life in the Church?

Simone Weil (1909–1943), in her book *The Need for Roots*, clearly wanted to underline the fact that while life had lost its old moorings in a world characterised by technology, human relationships equally shifted dramatically⁴. Uprootedness could then be considered as a spiritual malaise, which has social consequences. In this light, then the Church ought to re-discover and to re-propose its tradition in terms of the faith as being total and all encompassing. Religious identity in this sense depends on a faith that is both present and courageous.

So is the “good news” being heard or are people enclosed deliberately in their comfort zones? Moreover, how does the Church expect people to understand her message, tradition and history, when some tend to be somewhat forgetful or some-

can.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html [11.08.2017].

³ Z. Bauman, *Social media are a trap*, See

http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/01/19/inenglish/1453208692_424660.html [07.07.2017].

⁴ It was first published in French in 1949, titled *L'Enracinement*. The first English translation (Routledge) was published in 1952.

how find themselves in a state of *acrasia*?

Challenging and paradoxical as might be, this provoking context steers the Church to be true to her calling and to seek out to its roots. In the light of Scripture, the Church is called to awaken hope through self-criticism and her engagement in Europe and the world. The Church has a lot to learn from a pluralist society, just as much as she has a lot to offer. We can recall the vision of *Gaudium et spes* here. The relationship between the Church and society can grow strong only in hope and trust. In this sense, hope can be explained in terms of waiting (*anaméno*), awaiting eagerly (*apekdékomai*), welcoming (*prosdékomai*), earnest waiting (*apokaradokia*) and persevering or remaining (*upoméne*).

In the last two papacies, people around the globe have witnessed huge struggles and relentless efforts of Popes toward a better understanding of the Church and its mission in a changing world. Both Popes Francis and Benedict propose a Church that while going to the roots, she equally engages in a process of dialogue, self-criticism and conversion. Recent magisterial documents including *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) are just few examples of this.

According to their own different but complementary style, they seek to present the Church in new light. She can indeed be contemporary and credible, while remaining in line with its origins and by keeping the Gospel pure. Having said this, experiencing the need for roots prove to be even more important in a pluralistic scenario where the Church's own voice is challenged and very often it requires courage and perseverance to witness the faith and communion in an perplexing environment characterised by pluralism, relativism, secularism and individualism just to mention a few. Nonetheless, the same can be said of modern day martyrs who face harsh trials.

To use Paul's words in his letter to the Romans, Europe and the world at large demand from us "to hope against all hope" (Rm 4:18). Just as today's contemporary crisis is a crisis of hope, so experiencing the need for roots reflects an ardent desire to build the Christian community characterised by solid faith, true friendship and sensible interaction. This leads us to speak of a second step that concerns a much-needed discernment of our context and belonging.

2. A Self-critique of Modernity and of Modern Christianity

One of Italy's most prominent contemporary theologians who has devoted many of his writings to enlarging the agenda for a renewed phenomenology and anthropology of faith is Pierangelo Sequeri (1944–). One of his principle concerns is the incapacity of modernity to acknowledge the anthropological richness of faith as knowledge. He thus seeks to present the Christian faith not simply in terms of the intellect or will, but also in terms of trust, affectivity and aesthetics. "The challenge", he says, "is inseparably religious and cultural, because the spiritual dignity of humanity is the

point where the quality of religion and of reason are inextricably linked”⁵. On these lines, if there is any crisis of religious identity, then it is because of a fragmentary vision of life. People and the Church are unfortunately caught unprepared and broken down in front of upcoming trials.

What lies at stake here is the enormous challenge facing western culture, that is, the relationship between Christianity and modernity or rather the role of the Church in a pluralist world. In this scenario, Pope Benedict in *Spe salvi* §22 proposes a two-fold measure as a way forward: a self-critique of modernity and a self-critique of modern Christianity. He says:

«A self-critique of modernity is needed in dialogue with Christianity and its concept of hope. In this dialogue Christians too, in the context of their knowledge and experience, must learn anew in what their hope truly consists, what they have to offer to the world and what they cannot offer. Flowing into this self-critique of the modern age there also has to be a self-critique of modern Christianity, which must constantly renew its self-understanding setting out from its roots»⁶.

Benedict suggests that there are at least five areas in modernity that needed be criticised and addressed. These include:

- i. relativism which is nothing less than a threat to human freedom;
- ii. the lack of a rigorous moral reflection stemming from a disconnection between philosophy and theology;
- iii. natural law being incomprehensible due to its metaphysical rather than empirical nature;
- iv. science which should not become the criterion of what is good, and
- v. whether progress truly enhances life or poses a threat for humanity.

A similar self-critique should take place in modern Christianity. Benedict mentions particularly two areas. The first being interreligious dialogue. He explains that in this field, two key issues need to be taken into consideration: religious freedom and the separation between political and religious power in a state⁷. Secondly, Christianity should also be clear on the issues of the De-Hellenization of Christianity and that of Biblicism. With regard to the first, he states that the relationship between faith and the use of human reason or of philosophy and theology is one of complementarity, rather than that of confrontation. Furthermore, he explains that while exegesis remains a crucial exercise in seeking the truth, nonetheless Scripture should be read

⁵ P. Sequeri, *Sensibili allo Spirito: Umanesimo religioso e ordine degli affetti*, Milan 2001, ix.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe* on Christian Hope *Spe salvi*, n. 22.

⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, See http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_2006_0912_university-regensburg.html [24.08.2017].

in the living tradition of the Church⁸.

In this light, the exercise of self-criticism emerges as a profitable attempt to restore the Church in itself and in its relationship to Europe and the world. Such is Antonio Rosmini's work *Of the Five Wounds of the Holy Church* published originally in Italian in 1848 and a more recent work by Vinicio Albanesi published in 2012. Albanesi explains that a positive outcome for the Church can happen when certain dangers are addressed. These include:

- i. verbalism:* i.e. the prevalence of human words on the Word of God;
- ii. aestheticism:* i.e. the lack of simplicity as reflected in the gospel and
- iii. moralism:* i.e. outdoing or outrightly ignoring Christian virtues⁹.

Certainly, then, to work for a solid religious identity implies a right disposition to embark on such quest as well as a to engage in a process of purification of the heart. This leads us then to talk of an often-neglected dimension in everyday life that is openness for others.

3. The Human Capacity for Trust

After having briefly dwelt on experiencing the need for roots and on self-criticism as a method of discernment, the last point concerns a new humanism that both the Church, Europe and the world are called to create today. Undoubtedly, religious identity depends on hope and reciprocity. Trust, according to Pope Francis, is the answer to all sentiments of scepticism, resignation and weariness in front of divisions and tough challenges *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

In front of modern thought that does not ponder the high anthropological profile of believing as the primordial structure of human consciousness, Pope Francis highlights at least five dimensions, which inevitably restore hope in humanity at large.

First, shifting *the focus to people and the peripheries keeps hope vibrant*. Restoring hope in the Church, in Europe and in the world means helping people identify themselves with the Church as well as to feel part of a wider social community. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis explains that instead of a monocultural Christianity, all people, but particularly those who struggle for survival, should experience a sense of belonging. This Church, he insists, "should be a Church whose doors are open" and again, "We must change". In this light, identity is all about one's authentic lifestyle.

Secondly, all forms of worldliness that lead to vanity and pride are to be excluded in the Church. Francis discourages a Church tainted with narcissism. He explains that to *eliminate "spiritual worldliness"*, bishops should draw close to their sheep, while priests should lead an exemplary life¹⁰. Moreover, the Church must struggle

⁸ See *ibid*.

⁹ V. Albanesi, *I tre mali della Chiesa in Italia. Ritrovare future*, Milano 2012.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Homily of his Holiness Pope Francis on Holy Chrism Mass*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150402_omelia-crisma.html

to control and address consumerism since this is a danger that stifles hope.

Thirdly, *hope is transformative* particularly when the poor become worthy agents of their own destiny. The Gospel, Pope Francis insists, should penetrate our complex modern economy. He explains that “the concern for the poor is in the Gospel; it is within the Tradition of the Church. It is not an invention of communism, and it must not be turned into an ideology”¹¹.

Fourthly, in promoting a “culture of encounter”, the Church shows how *hope leads to a fruitful dialogue*. An authentic dialogue requires that all partakers open their minds and hearts to each other with empathy and sincere welcome¹². Furthermore, he explains that if there is a place for dialogue, for the Pope, it is the family. These should be treated with a sense of hospitality and pastoral care.

Lastly, *hope is possible through mercy*. Francis explains that mercy is God’s attitude of having open arms to embrace humanity. What is hope then if not tenderness that all people can experience in relationship to God in Europe and the world? In this light, “the Church’s task is like that of a field hospital” where everyone can touch the goodness and tenderness of God¹³.

Conclusion

The promotion of religious identity and the overall role of the Church in a pluralist society then rests with the exercise of experiencing the need for roots, carrying out self-criticism as well as to prove trustworthy in terms of its message and its role in society. Proposing a solid religious identity requires to walk the extra mile. It means readiness to change one’s lifestyle, but above all to listen to the whispers of God in everyday life.

In this sense, restoring Christian hope bears the meaning of the crossing of an era. What better way could be found to conclude these reflections, if not by reference to the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) on hope that gives Christianity and religious identity its credibility and unique charm:

“Where there is still hope, there is no defeat; there may be every kind of weakness, much clamour and complaining, much anxious shouting; nevertheless, because hope is present, the victory has already been won. This is the mystery of suffering in the Church and in the Christian life: it is exactly the doorway marked “abandon all hope”, the doorway of suffering, catastrophe and death,

[11.04.2017].

¹¹ A. Torielli, G. Galeazzi, *Papa Francesco. Questa economia uccide*, Casale Monferrato 2015.

¹² See Pope Francis, *Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150923_usa-vescovi.html [12.11.2016].

¹³ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family *Amoris Laetitia*, 291. See https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html [07.06.2017].

that is transformed for us into the doorway of great hope, the doorway of glory and splendour”¹⁴.

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Chrześcijańska nadzieja na lepszą Europę

Streszczenie: Wiarygodność Kościoła jest skorelowana z przyszłością Europy. Wiąże się z tym wizja Kościoła wzorowana na Ewangelii i duszy Europy. Kościół słucha i uczy się od świata, a jednocześnie ma decydującą rolę do odegrania w obliczu zmieniających się scenariuszy, dylematów etycznych i bezprecedensowych zawirowań historycznych. Niniejszy artykuł składa się z trzech części i skupia się przede wszystkim na trzech kluczowych terminach: korzenie, samokrytycyzm i zaufanie. Pierwsza część artykułu podkreśla konieczność odczuwania potrzeby korzeni. Stawką jest tu połączenie poczucia realizmu i nadziei. Druga część dotyczy bardzo potrzebnego rozeznania nowoczesności i nowoczesnego chrześcijaństwa. Samokrytycyzm jest tutaj przedstawiany jako droga do wyzwania, odnowy i odbudowy, ale szczególnie dzisiejszej Europy

¹⁴ D. Bonhoeffer, *Predicas e alocuções*, São Leopoldo 2007, 76: Dove c'è speranza, non c'è sconfitta anche se c'è grande fragilità, grande miseria e desolazione, grande clamore pieno di paura la vittoria è già percepibile. Questo è il mistero della sofferenza nella Chiesa e nella vita cristiana: è proprio il portale con la scritta ‘abbandona la speranza’, il portale della sofferenza, della catastrofe e della morte, che si trasforma per noi nel portale della grande speranza, nel portale della gloria e dello splendore.

(i świata), aby przezwyciężyć wszelką niezdolność do pośredniczenia między dzisiejszą kulturą a rdzeniem Objawienia w Chrystusie. W trzeciej i ostatniej części artykuł proponuje zbadanie zaniedbanych wymiarów w codziennym życiu zgodnie z wizją papieża Franciszka dla Kościoła w Europie i na świecie. W tym miejscu zostaje podkreślone piękno i bogactwo ludzkiej zdolności zaufania. Nadzieja jest ostatecznie doświadczana, gdy prawda i wolność są ze sobą połączone.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół, Europa, korzenie, samokrytycyzm, prawda, wolność, zaufanie