

BEYOND OPTIMISM, HOPE

A discussion on hope for happiness in a changed world arising from
Msgr. Luigi Giussani's book **"Is it possible to live this way?" Vol. 2 Hope**
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Good evening everybody.

I'd like to divide my contribution this evening into three parts: First I will address the question of expectation.

1) Expectation: The structure of man

"Has anyone ever promised us anything? Then why should we expect anything?" Fr. Giussani always cited this phrase of the Italian poet Cesare Pavese to point out to us the structure of man; expectation. Each one of us can recognise in their own experience the extent to which their life is full of expectation, whatever form that may take. We can say therefore that expectation is the very structure of our nature, it is the essence of our soul. In *The Religious Sense* Fr. Giussani explains this expectation - "It is not something calculated: it is given. For the promise is at the origin, from the very origin of our creation. He who has made man has also made him as "promise" Structurally man waits; structurally he is a beggar: structurally life is promise".

This expectation imposes itself on us in such a clear way that we think we know what we expect. Unfortunately on many occasions we have to recognise how true the phrase of the French writer, Francois Mauriac is, when he writes.

" I have always deceived myself about the object of my desires. We do not know what we desire". This observation is confirmed dramatically in the diary of Pavese. When he had obtained the most highly prized Italian literary award, the Premio Strega he commented: "You also have the gift of fertility. You are

the master of yourself, of your fate. You are as famous as any man can be who does not seek to be so. Yet all that will come to an end. This profound joy of yours, this glow of super-abundance, is made of things you did not take into account. It was given to you. By whom? Whom should you thank? Whom will you curse when it all disappears?" On the day of the prize giving in Rome he wrote "In Rome, glory. And then what?"

How many times have we too, like Pavese, been equally surprised by the same thought "And now what?" after obtaining, like him what we sought. Why? Why, after getting what we dreamt about, do we find ourselves with this insidious question on our lips? It is precisely in the moment of disappointment, paradoxically, that we realize the very nature of the expectation which constitutes us and reveals to us the nature of our person. That "eternal mystery of our being" which the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi speaks of. What is it that we are waiting for and that nothing, not even the most clamorous success is able to substitute?

Once again it is the genius of Pavese, who was so faithful to his own experience as to be marvelled by it, which gives an answer to this question "What a man seeks in his pleasures is infinite and no one would ever give up hope of attaining that infinity". Nothing is capable of satisfying us, because what we seek in what we like, in pleasures, is infinite. And it is this that allows us to understand our disappointment. In fact the very experience of disappointment reveals what our hearts are made for. If we did not have a limitless desire, we would not have the experience of disappointment.

If this is the human condition we must ask the question - does a reasonable foundation exist for expecting the fulfilment of our thirst for happiness? The present situation, in which it seems that everything is collapsing before our eyes, makes this question even more urgent. Is it possible to hope?

This question introduces us to our second point

2) **The Grace we need in order to have hope**

“In order to hope, my child, you have to be very happy, you have to have received a great gift or grace,” says the French poet Charles Peguy. With this affirmation Peguy places himself poles apart from any presumptuous attitude, because he recognises that the possibility of hope is founded not on anything we can construct but on grace, that is to say, on something which is given. It is a gift. It is this grace which makes hope reasonable.

Let me give you a simple example which allows us to understand the truth of what Peguy says. What is the experience of anyone who has received the grace to be brought up in a normal family situation? They have the experience of having reached an indestructible certainty that their mother loves them. This is not something we can take for granted, it is a real grace that our mother loves us like this. Now can whoever has had this type of experience ever imagine that there could be a moment in life when his or her mother may not love them. No! I cannot think, no matter what I might do that my mother will not love me, I would have to deny my own experience. On what am I basing this certainty for the future? On the certainty of my experience in the present.

With this experience before our eyes we can introduce in a simple way Fr. Giussani’s approach to the question of hope which is the theme of the book *Is it possible to live this Way? Volume 2 Hope* which is being presented here this evening.

What is this great grace of which Peguy speaks? It is faith in Jesus Christ. The great grace is the certainty of faith. Faith, as Fr. Giussani explains, is the recognition of a presence, which allows man to experience such a unique correspondence to the expectations of the heart and of which the only possible

origin can be divine. Andrei Tarkovsky, the famous Russian film-maker, made one of his characters in the movie *Andrei Rublev* say: “You know very well, you can’t manage to do anything, you are tired, you are exhausted, and at a certain moment you meet among the people the gaze of somebody, somebody’s gaze, and it is as if you approach the hidden divine, and everything becomes easier”. The experience of this presence, as in the case of the mother, is the foundation of hope.

Fr. Giussani explains, “Hope is none other than the expanding of the certainty of faith regarding the future”. (p.86) If faith is the recognition of a presence which corresponds to the expectations of the heart, then hope is to have certainty for the future, which is born of that presence. It is the extension into the future of the certainty of the present.

In the beginning of his encyclical *Spe salvi* Pope Benedict the sixteenth speaks of “trustworthy hope” He states “Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey.” (*Spe Salvi* n.1)

For this reason hope is the most basic test to ascertain if our faith is an experience – an experience of certainty which is so real that we can base everything on it - , or if alternatively it is a mental category or discourse which is not capable of offering a solid foundation. For this reason Fr. Giussani insists “The great grace from which hope is born is the certainty of faith; the certainty of faith is the seed of the certainty of hope”. (p.12) So hope is based on a present “But a present is truly the present insofar as you possess it; therefore hope is certainty in the future that is based on a possession already given”.

(p.14) on a great grace as we said earlier.

Therefore, the Christian experience can be considered anything but unreasonable. It is not a vague unsubstantiated hope, some sort of irrational optimism which goes against the factual evidence. On the contrary its reasonableness is based on a knowledge which is verified in experience. For this reason we can say it is based on something which has already been given.

Once again *Spe salvi* points this out “Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a “proof” of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a ‘ not yet’. The fact that this future exists changes the present; the present is touched by the future reality, and thus the things of the future spill over into those of the present and those of the present into those of the future”. (n.7) And again “The promise of Christ is not only a reality that we await, but a real presence”. (n.8)

It is with this presence in front of me that I can now look without fear at the scope of my expectation, of my most profound desires. It is in the company of this presence that I can dare to pose the real question.

And this brings me to my final point this evening

3) The fulfilment of desire

“Will these desires even be satisfied, yes or no? This is the question. These desires, made according to the needs of your heart, can be sure of being realised, only to the degree that one abandons oneself, trusts and abandons oneself to the Presence” I have hope because I am certain of the power of the great presence recognised in faith, knowing that the need for happiness, which constitutes me, will be fulfilled only by God.

This means that my desire is fulfilled only to the extent that I surrender to the Presence that faith has recognized. The demands of the heart attest that the object of the heart exists, it is there in the future, because man is destined to be happy, just, and true. But the certainty that this will happen cannot be sustained by our heart. The certainty that this will happen can derive only from the Presence that faith recognizes: it is not we but He; it is the outstanding Presence of Christ that faith recognizes.

The dynamic of hope is a desire that could not last in time, which would always be subject to bitter disappointment, if it were not sustained and supported by the certainty of the power of the great Presence. This is why the entreaty for this Presence arises from the awareness that it is not we who fulfil, but His presence. Our freedom expresses itself as an entreaty to this Presence that it may fulfil. St Bernard summarizes this in a beautiful formula “Is not desire an invocation? Certainly it is, and a strong one too”. (p.32 Spirit.Ex.)

How does God answer this invocation?

The form of the answer to this invocation is not, as we often think, the creation of our imagination. On the contrary, “This form is none other than the great Presence Himself” (p.23) We can understand this well in our experience: it is not the gift that the person gives me that constitutes the fullness of that need for happiness. What makes me happy is the person him or herself, not the presents they give me! “The contemplation of God’s gift is certainly a sweet comfort for us” writes Guillaume de Saint Thierry, “but it does not satisfy us perfectly [even if we have everything] without His presence”.

Hope, therefore, does not mean hoping for “something” from God, but God Himself. Because of the fact that our nature is desire for infinite, only the Infinite God Himself can fulfil our desire.

St. Augustine says it well: “May the Lord God be your hope; do not hope for something from the Lord your God, but may your Lord Himself be your hope. Many hope from God something outside of Him; but you search for your God Himself.... forgetting other things, remember Him; leaving everything behind, press forward towards Him.... He will be your love”.

The form of the answer to human desire is Christ Himself. Christ is the only hope for the fulfilment of our affection. He alone, He alone is capable of satisfying, of truly fulfilling affection. Anything else can't really satisfy us. This is why all men burn with desire; but how difficult is to find one who says: “My soul thirsts for You, my God” (Sal 63,2)!

Christ, the Presence recognized by the faith, is the only reasonable foundation for hope. Without Him, human life lacks of a base for sustaining his or her life. But this is the way it is, because “man's life”, St Thomas Aquinas confirms, “consists in the affection that principally sustains it and in which he finds his greatest satisfaction”.

As a testimony of what kind of hope flourishes from Christian faith, capable of challenging even the worst human conditions, when everything collapses, I invite you to watch together this testimony of our friends in Uganda.