

# The Meaning of Hope in Evil Times

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What is the meaning of hope in a period of history when things are getting worse?<sup>1</sup> Allow me to begin with some theological definitions. The New Testament speaks of hope as a gift of God that enables us to rely on the divine promises, abandon all fear with regard to the future, and look forward to the good things that have been prepared for us. The eschatological aspect of hope, refers to God's victory at the end of time, ushering in the new age. Yet the Christian tradition has never understood hope as exhausted by its eschatological reference: hope has always retained an earthly meaning.

The earthly meaning of hope generates the confidence that, regardless of what the future might bring, God will be present in it. Hope does not assure us that justice and happiness shall reign in our society. We have no assurance that our deep desire to be healthy, strong and useful to the community will be fulfilled. What hope's earthly dimension does assure us is that our future will be blessed, and even if our wishes and expectations should be frustrated; God will open new doors for us and give us the strength to walk on unexpected paths. Hope is the divine remedy for depression.

This earthly dimension of hope is quite different from the secular stance of optimism, which prompts people to overlook the destructive possibilities of the present and paint for themselves a rosy picture of the future. By contrast, Christian hope dares to confront the evidence of possible failure.

Many are calling attention to the massive deterioration of the economic circumstances and the social conditions among the poor nations of the Third World and, on a different scale, also among the rich nations of the North. The globalization of competitive capitalism forces the governments in all part of the world to impose structural adjustment policies on their societies, pushing ever growing numbers of people into unemployment, poverty and, in the Third World, into hunger and misery. What then is the earthly meaning of hope in these situations when things are only getting worse?

This is the question I asked myself with great anguish several months ago when the rich nations of the world engaged in the brutal Gulf War which killed a hundred thousand innocent Iraqis who had no power to influence their country's public policy. A statement by the American branch of Pax Christi, an international Catholic peace organization, was among the first to declare that the military action in the Gulf region was not a war in any recognizable sense, but a brutal massacre with deadly explosives coming from one side only. In my opinion, this technically perfect mass destruction of human life sealed in blood the orientation of the new international order, the globalized economic system protected by military power, that increasingly excludes masses of the population from the means of decent human survival. Many observers, especially in the churches, shared my depression.

In my sadness I turned to St. Augustine's book, *The City of God*. Augustine, I remembered, also lived in a period of history when things were also getting worse. He foresaw the collapse of the Roman Empire and the suffering of the people affected by this. What did hope mean to Augustine in this situation?

In the fourth century, when the Roman Empire abandoned its hostility to the Catholic Church and increasingly turned to the Christian religion, Christians rejoiced. They were now free to worship; they were able to live without fear of persecution. Some theologians went so far as to interpret this evolution as Christ's victory in history. The resurrection of Christ, they held, was unfolding its power in the Christianization of the Empire. These theologians introduced what we today would call "a theology of progress." Because of Christ's victory, they believed, the Empire, which by now had become Christian, had a magnificent future ahead of it.

When Augustine was a young bishop, he shared some of these ideas. He believed that the Empire would be rewarded for turning to Christianity. But at a later period, several events took place that made Augustine change his mind. In AD 410 the city of Rome was sacked by the "barbarian" Visigoths under their chief Alaric. Later another Germanic tribe, the Vandals, invaded North Africa and threatened to destroy the Roman civilization of that region.

Something deeply disturbing also happened within the Catholic Church. Since the Empire was now becoming Christian, the pagan masses began to join the Church, impelled not so much by Christian faith but by the desire for cultural conformity. When Augustine preached in his own

town of Hippo and in other towns of North Africa, he realized that the men and women before him were no longer the ardent believers he had known in the past but people with little interest in changing their lives.

In the years during which Augustine wrote *Civitas Dei* (413-426), he became increasingly convinced that the Roman Empire, despite its turn to Christianity, was destined to experience internal collapse through corruption and the decline of virtue, and military defeat by the vigorous armies of the Germanic tribes. Augustine recognized that he lived at a time when things were getting worse. What did Christian hope mean for Augustine in this situation? This is the question I had in mind when I reread Augustine's *The City of God* after the outbreak of the Gulf War.

Augustine introduced the famous distinction between "the city of man" and "the city of God," two cities generated by two kinds of love, the love of self and the love of God. In the city of man, "the proud city," people sought their own advantage, their pleasures and their personal triumphs, while in the city of God, "the humble city," people were friends, helping and serving one another, grateful to God, the Giver of all good things.

Readers in the Middle Ages interpreted Augustine as if the city of man referred to secular society and the city of God to the Catholic Church. They concluded from this that the Church as the divine city exercised supervisory power over secular society and its princes. This medieval theory is often called "political Augustinianism."

But the medieval interpreters were quite wrong. When Augustine speaks of the city of God, generated by love of God and love of neighbour, he occasionally refers to the Church, but most of the time he does not. For Augustine, the city of God, the humble city, emerges in history whenever and wherever people transcend their selfishness inherited from birth, loving, helping and serving one another. God's grace alive in people's hearts prompts them to forget themselves, share with their neighbours, and construct communities based on mutual respect and solidarity. The city of God is thus built in the midst of an imperial civilization.

It is the Gospel that summons people to build the city of God. This city may well be a parish, a diocese, or a monastery, but this city is not restricted to the confines of the Christian Church. The humble city also emerges elsewhere, wherever God chooses to call and empower people to love and help one another and build institutions to serve the common good.

While the city of God includes institutions and offices, an organization as such is never a guarantee that the community remains faithful to the love of God. The city of God becomes present wherever people love and serve one another, but it gives way to the city of man, the proud city, when people become self-centred, pursue their own advantage, betray their friends and abandon social solidarity. For Augustine, the city of God is a vulnerable historical reality that must be built continuously by new deeds of love and service.

Because of the New Testament promises, Augustine believed that the Church in its totality, vulnerable though it be, was enabled by the Holy Spirit to remain a sign of love given to humanity. When Augustine recognized the vulnerability of all institutions, he lost interest in the theology of progress that had attracted him as a younger man. He no longer believed that the Christian message contained the assurance that the Empire and the imperial civilization, officially turned Christian, would develop and thrive in the future. He even became convinced that the Roman Empire was doomed. Still, hope continued to have an earthly meaning for Augustine. He hoped that the humble city, i.e., communities of love and service, supported by God, would spread and thrive in the midst of the proud city, the imperial civilization.

This is the answer which I sought in Augustine's book. If we translate his idea of hope into contemporary language, we would say that while conditions are getting worse in the global society, we continue to work for and have hope in alternative movements and communities, religious and secular, that embody respect, love, service and universal solidarity. Hope here means that we will not be paralysed, that there is room for action, that we resist the dominant economic order by performing deeds of love and service, that we join others in building networks of justice and solidarity.

St. Augustine's theology of history fulfills a double purpose: on the one hand, it saves us from any false idea of evolution or linear progress as if history were moving humanity forward toward the perfect society. Any progress made toward peace and justice remains vulnerable to human sin. Institutions that are helpful and serve the community at one time can become structures of oppression at another. Augustine's theology of history saves us from the secular messianism, the illusory dream of the Enlightenment, whether in its liberal or its Marxist form, that reason is the organ of human self-liberation and becomes the certain guide toward ever

greater progress. If Augustine is right, then even Christian forms of progressivism such as the theology of Teilhard de Chardin are unacceptable. Augustine's theology protects us from all messianic expectations on this earth.

On the other hand, St. Augustine's theology also saves us from the wide-spread, quietistic misunderstanding of the Gospel according to which we are summoned to cultivate the inner life and withdraw from the world as much as possible. Augustine's theology inoculates us against Christian pessimism and secular cynicism that persuades us that nothing can be done to change society, that things are always going to be bad for the great majority, that only the lucky ones who belong to the elites of money, power or education will live.

Augustine did not give up hope, even when he thought that his own civilization was about to collapse. He believed that the Gospel called and enabled Christians, wherever they were, to be socially engaged in building the city of God. We have here a remarkable theology of history (foreshadowing liberation theology) that at one and the same time motivates the whole-hearted social engagement of Christians and rejects as illusory and dangerous any and every evolutionary expectation.

We recognize, of course, that being "socially engaged" in St. Augustine's century was different from what socially engaged might mean in contemporary society. If today's world is really Mr. Bush's new "international order," then—following the logic of St. Augustine—being socially engaged, buoyed up by the gift of hope, means to build networks of resistance, create communities of friendship and service, and promote a counter-culture of social solidarity.

### Notes

1. This is a revised version of an article published in *Relations* (December 1991).