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Eschatology as the Theology of Hope : A Theological Reflection Inspired by the Encyclical of His Holiness Benedict XVI Spe Salvi

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**ESCHATOLOGY AS THE THEOLOGY OF HOPE.
A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION INSPIRED
BY THE ENCYCLICAL OF HIS HOLINESS
BENEDICT XVI *SPE SALVI***

Since the second half of the last century, eschatology has been in its heyday. For centuries, however, the question of ultimate matters has represented two opposite poles of “being examined and looked into”: either this question has not been taken into consideration and everything has been put beyond the limits of earthly life (it should be remembered that catholic theology assigned eschatology the last place within dogmatic treaties!) – or there were too strong desires to have deep insight into and describe precisely these events and matters that will take place after death. The consequence of the isolation of eschatology in comparison with other dogmatic treaties was the act of “making it much more real” as well as the presentation of its separate issues in the scheme of “a piece of reportage from future”. The decisive turning point was made by the Protestant theologian Karl Barth. According to him, Christianity has nothing common with Jesus Christ¹ if it is not Christianity that is entirely and unreservedly eschatology. So the point was to have a new look at the place of eschatology in the whole Christian life. Eschatology is not only the description of the events which are to happen in future but it is the most current matter in the lifetime of each human being – of every Christian. So it is, because the mortal life of man is the ‘arena’ of making constant decisions: for or against God. The crucial point in approaching to eschatological issues was also the moment when a book written by a catholic theologian – Karl Rahner was published and which was devoted to the problem concerning the theology of death². Among many different and new presentations of issues concerning Christian eschatology of the 20th century we can mention: the interpretation by Hans Urs von Balthasar³, Jurgen Moltmann’s conception (that suggests to put theological issues including eschatology in the context of Christian hope⁴) or the concept concern-

¹ Cfr. K. Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, München 1922, p. 298.

² Cfr. K. Rahner, *Zur Theologie des Todes*, Freiburg² 1958.

³ Cfr. I. Bokwa, *Trynitarno-chrystologiczna interpretacja eschatologii w ujęciu Hansa Ursa von Balthasara*, Radom 1998.

⁴ Cfr. J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München 1969.

ing the final decision, supported by Ladislaus Boros⁵. To have a new look at the ultimate matters, we should also take the Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI *Spe Salvi* into careful considerations. It should be remembered that we cannot tell much about ultimate events if we do not include them in the context of Divine promise and Christian hope.

1. Hope as the foundation of human existence

It is hard to imagine our earthly life without hope. One can live in the present only when the future as the positive reality is certain⁶. Man lives in so far as he plans and strives to make things better – it means – inasmuch as he has hope. Hope is present in all the basic dimensions of human existence, in the course of man's lifetime, in his consciousness, time, freedom, historical nature, in his attitude towards his neighbors and the whole world. It is the part of the basic structure of man⁷. Christian tradition assigns it the place close by faith and love, among the main Christian virtues. Man is a historical individual, open to the future. Memory reaches the future, love gives man an appropriate process in his current development, the virtue of hope leads to the future⁸. Christian life “finds itself” and has its place among the salvation that is already brought to us in Jesus Christ and its ultimate fulfillment that is to take place in the moment of His final coming. Therefore, hope should give an appropriate direction to our life. It is not, however, possible without any certitude. A Christian finds this certitude in the person of Jesus Christ (cfr. Col 1:27; 1 Tim 1:1). When we talk about hope, we think of something that can be given to us. As we do not nurture hope towards something that is impossible to be achieved by us. Neither do we have ‘a hope’ for something that happens one way or another, whichever way we look at it and what has to happen – nor for such things we are convinced of and we know that they will inevitably happen. Whatever man hopes for in the true sense of the word, it is beyond the range of his predisposition and influence⁹. He expects the future to give him a happiness that does not affect him yet. It is like a lack of the plenitude of existence in him. He hopes for something more than it can be given to him by the current moment. So, that is why we can state that the virtue of hope is deeply ingrained in his earthly life – the life during which man has never got ‘himself’ in a complete way. He is ‘himself’ only when he is in the state of ‘being kept in suspense’ between the past and the future¹⁰. ‘Man of hope’ is not a person who would like to know something, but it is man who expects and hopes for something real; he tends to take part in something

⁵ Cfr. L. Boros, *Mysterium Mortis. Der Mensch in der letzten Entscheidung*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1962.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Vatican 2007, No. 2.

⁷ J. Alfaro, *Nadzieje doczesne i nadzieja chrześcijańska*, Concilium 6-10, (163-170) (1970), p. 163.

⁸ Cf. O. Gonzales de Cardedal, *La entrana del cristianismo*, Salamanca 1998, p. 204.

⁹ J. Pieper, *Nadzieja a historia*, tłum. P. Waszczenko, Warszawa 1981, p. 12.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Nadzieja*, *Communio* 22, (3-15) (1984), p. 4.

that is good to him¹¹. On the one hand, hope includes “the dynamics of everything that is temporal” and the fact of going beyond the limits of any empirical fulfillments belongs to it too. But on the other hand, it also means that thanks to hope, everything that does not exist yet, simultaneously throws its ‘light’ onto our lives and has its significant influence on us¹². We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But without the great hope, which must surpass everything else, these are not enough. This great hope can only be God¹³. Only the great hope – the certitude that in spite of all failures my own life and all history are held firm by the indestructible power of Love thanks to which my existence have their meaning and significance – only this kind of hope can then additionally give the courage to act and go ahead. The great hope based upon God’s promises, gives us courage and directs our action in good times and bad¹⁴. Christian hope finds its most solid grounds in God and in Him – in the highest Good does a Christian find his ultimate aim; the real hope for man can only be God.

Benedict XVI teaches that life in its true sense is not something we have exclusively ‘in or from’ ourselves; it is a relationship. Human life in its totality is a relationship with Him who is the source. If we are still in relation with Him who does not die – who is Life itself and Love itself, then we live¹⁵. The basis of such a hope is faith. Benedict XVI states that faith is the substance of hope¹⁶. Hope is as it were the consequence of an earlier act of trusting in God. We can say that faith and hope ‘support each other’ on the way to achieve the aim. When we reach the eternal life, faith will be replaced by the vision of God whereas hope will be fully realized. Through faith, there are already present in us – as we can say in ‘embryo’ – the things that we hope for during the whole life. They are present in spite of the fact that they are not visible yet in the external world; as a dynamic reality they are still in ‘embryo’. Faith draws the future into the present¹⁷. The Second Vatican Council teaches that faith proclaimed on the basis of firm arguments, gives the answer to man’s anxiety about the future (GS 18). Therefore, Christian hope relates at first of all to eschatological reality. Man who has a hope is still open to a future fulfillment that is not achieved yet¹⁸. The Second Vatican Council’s fathers state that we do not know the time when the world and the mankind are to come to an end and we do not know the way in which the universe will be changed. It’s true that this world, as it is now, will not last much longer because of the sin, but we are told that God prepares the New Home and the New Earth where there is justice and where happiness will fulfill and surpass any needs for peace which all human hearts desires. The anticipation of the New World, however, should not weaken –

¹¹ J. Pieper, *Nadzieja a historia...*, p. 46.

¹² J. Ratzinger, *Nadzieja...*, p. 7-8.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 31.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, No. 35.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, No. 27.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, No. 10.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, No. 7.

¹⁸ Cfr. J. Pieper, *Nadzieja a historia...*, p. 17.

but rather strengthen all the forces directed towards the cultivation of this earth on which the body of the new human family grows – this body that can give the image of the New World (GS 39). The promised renewal we expect has already begun in Jesus Christ, it goes on and is continued in the coming of the Holy Spirit (the Pentecost). Thanks to Him, it is still present in the Church in which through faith, we are given the teaching about the sense, meaning and the importance of our lives. This way, with great hope do we bring our tasks and deeds to the end – the ones which have been entrusted us by God and we work on our own salvation (LG 48). Christian hope is not an idle act of hoping for future, but it means: taking concrete action in the present. Hope ‘takes’ the chance ‘now’ in order to ‘grasp’ everything that is connected with the future¹⁹. According to the Second Vatican Council’s teaching, eschatological hope does not make the importance of earthly tasks smaller, but rather strengthens their fulfillment with newer motives (GS 21). Fathers of the Second Vatican Council often direct their attention to the social dimension of Christian life. The Church consists of pilgrimaging people of God (cfr. LG 9-17) and – because the Second Vatican Council’s view and way of looking at the Church concentrates on the concept of communion – that’s why the question of hope should also be raised in the communitarian context. Benedict XVI in his encyclical teaches that hope in a Christian sense is always essentially also hope for others and that it is the hope for others only if it is truly hope for me too²⁰. Thus, hope is the foundation of human existence both in the individual dimension and the social one.

2. Man’s ultimate events read in the key of Christian hope

Christian eschatology is the eschatology of hope²¹ – and it should always be remembered that it does not merely refer to the teachings about all ultimate things, but at first of all to those which point to the ultimate encounter with God. To get closer, to learn from real God and to come to know Him means to receive hope; hope ensues from the real encounter with this God²². In the centre of eschatological considerations there is the teaching about crucified and risen Christ who is our hope. Pope Benedict XVI states that God who has revealed Himself in Christ, has already communicated to us “the substance” of things to come²³. In Jesus Christ, the history of the world and all humankind is given the proper meaning and the final orientation. Our salvation is already present in Him. The community with Him is the basic element of the life everlasting ie the eternal life. Thus, eschatol-

¹⁹ J. Hofmeier, *Nadzieja: instynkt, namietność i rozumienie*, Concilium 6-10, (156-162) (1970), p. 161.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 34 i 48.

²¹ J. Alfaro, *Nadzieje doczesne i nadzieja chrześcijańska...*, p. 169. Cfr. J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, München 1969.

²² Cfr. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 3.

²³ Cfr. *ibidem*, No. 9.

ogy concerns the teachings about God who calls man to be both in the community and communion with Him. Christians, then look towards the future with hope and all their opinions about the future are put in the context of hope. The particular “places” and settings for practising Christian hope in the context of ultimate events are: death, the Last Judgement and the eternal life.

The last aspect of human existence is death. Every man is convinced of his own inevitable death. If we want it or not: our whole existence is determined by its gradual coming. Similarly all our earthly hopes are brought to an end. In death, man goes through the experience of an absolute and total impossibility of saving himself using his own means or measures. He experiences the end of the fatal illusion of his own self-sufficiency. In this total impossibility of his own existence, man can only have a hope²⁴. “Earlier”, “before that” and “later” do not exist – “now” does only exist. I cannot change anything else, nothing can be put off or repaired. To have hope means to trust despite there is death²⁵. The encounter with God awakens my conscience in such a way that it no longer aims at self – justification, and is no longer a reflection of me and those of my contemporaries who have the influence on me – instead of this, it provides me with the ability of listening to the Good itself²⁶. With death, our life-choice cannot be questioned: our life stands before the judge²⁷. God judges with love, it means that at the moment of the judgement we experience the overwhelming power of His Love and that His judgement is not only just, but there ‘lies’ my salvation. The judgement takes place to our advantage as it makes it possible for us to become free of all of those different disappointments as well as those misleading ‘houses’ we have made ‘of cards’ and built during our lives. In God’s justice there is also grace but the grace does not cancel out the justice. According to Benedict XVI, the image of the Last Judgement is the decisive image of hope for us. The Judgement is a hope for the final justice. It also gives us a hope that everything will be accomplished in the rays of God’s grace²⁸. God is the righteous Judge, but simultaneously full of grace and mercy. God’s Love, that revealed and still reveals itself on the Cross, is a forgiving Love that makes man changed for better. Christian hope in the face of God’s judgement is substantiated by the teachings about God’s mercy. Real mercy is nothing else but a deeper source of justice. If the last one is by itself able to judge between people, sharing among them possessions with a proper measure, then love and only love (also the favourable love that is called “mercy”) is able to make man may affirm himself as man. Real Christian mercy is the personification of the justice, the personification that is more excellent. The fundamental structure of the justice always enters into the sphere of mercy²⁹. The encounter with Judge will either re-

²⁴ Cfr. J. Alfaro, *Nadzieje doczesne i nadzieja chrześcijańska...*, p. 165.

²⁵ Cfr. H. Schlier, *Besinnung auf das Neue Testament*, Freiburg 1964, p. 140.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 33.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, No. 45.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, No. 44, 47.

²⁹ Cfr. Ioannes Paulus II, *Dives in misericordia...*, No. 14.

veal our state of remaining close to Christ and being in communion with Him or not. It will also reveal our earthly accomplishment of the commandment to love God and the neighbour. Being in communion with Christ draws us into His “being for all” and it makes it our own way of being. Jesus Christ died for all the humankind. To live for Him means to let oneself to be drawn in His “being for”³⁰. The eternal life will be such state of remaining in the community together with brothers and sisters who belong to the Church of Christ.

A new dimension of existence has been given in Jesus Christ: heaven. Since then, man can no longer be understood exclusively in his earthly ranges of existence. His life has been explained and defined in reference to heaven – to this reality which in human life remains still at the stage of “becoming itself”³¹. We hope for the things to come and we do this starting from the present which has already been given to us in Jesus Christ. In his encyclical, Benedict XVI points to the arguments for the eternal life. They are as follows: the question of justice; the individual need for a fulfillment that is denied to us in this life; the need for an everlasting love that we await³².

So, the eternal life – what is it? Eternity is the attribute and the virtue of God himself. When we talk about the eternal life with reference to man, then we always think of the gift that is being given to us by God in the form of life. This life never ends, that means: is everlasting. God’s eternity does not penetrate the world created, does not “coincides” with it, does not anticipate or “prolongs” it endlessly, but it is beyond and above it. Eternity together with the integral mystery of God somehow “outwards” and “up above”, does it embrace everything that is “inwards”, submitted to time and change – everything that goes by. God is everlasting as He is the absolute plenitude of existence – and such a plenitude cannot be understood as the sum of the existence’s fragments and ‘elements’ that changes in time.

Saying: “God is everlasting”, I am actually thinking: “ God is the eternity”. This Being – Eternity embraces everything that is created and that goes by, even my small existence, all my deeds, every moment of my life³³. Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical states that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something that reminds us the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time –the before and after – no longer exists. We can only try to think that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being³⁴. Eternity can be experienced as ‘coming into existence’. Then, it is the fulfillment; It would be the development of my existence – the existence that tends to its fulfillment. I hope for the eterni-

³⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 28.

³¹ Cfr. L. Boros, *Duch nowego ujęcia eschatologii*, Concilium 1-10, (78-84) (1968), p. 78.

³² Cfr. Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 43.

³³ Cfr. *Katechezy Ojca Św. Jana Pawła II, Bóg Ojciec*, Kraków-Ząbki 1999, Katecheza 4.09.1985, pp. 86, 87.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi...*, No. 12.

ty because I expect that I will be myself with the whole of my being, but I am not yet. The eternity is the future of my being, of my existence that becomes itself; the eternity is the final aspect that is connected with this ‘coming into being’ of my individual. It becomes ‘the origin’ of becoming, the apotheosis of the existence : the existence that does not mean everything that it should become. Eternity which was the existence of my ‘coming into being’ – is, then the state in which my existence becomes itself³⁵.

3. Conclusions

To summarize all these considerations, we are able to conclude that hope allows and helps us to live. It gives the meaning to our lives. To be man of hope means to understand one’s own insufficiency and at the same time to be able to trust both oneself as well as everything else to God. To look humanly at it , man as a definite individual aims at death. The mystery of a human fate reveals itself probably in the clearest way in the face of the death. It can be said that man is afraid of suffering but at first of all he is afraid of annihilation forever. On the other hand, he feels with an inward instinct of his heart that it cannot be the end of his personality and he rejects the possibility of the total annihilation. Therefore, according to the Second Vatican Council: man has an element in himself – so called the embryo of eternity. A human person has been created by God to live also beyond the limits of eternity (cfr. GS 18). How to rise, then, the question of the ultimate events today? In accordance with the teachings of Benedict XVI, every Christian should look at the ultimate events – where the starting point is death – with hope. The language of eschatology is the language of hope. In the face of the ultimate reality, man has the courage of hope. The source of Christian hope is belief in God who is Love. According to the Holy Bible: God caused man to be an image of His own eternity and created him for immortality (cfr. Ws 2:23-24) God is the donor of hope (cfr. Rom 15:13), therefore such a hope cannot let anybody down (cfr. Rom 5:5). The author of the Letter to Hebrews also teaches us: “Let us hold on firmly to the hope we profess, because we can trust God to keep His promise” (Heb 10:23). The moment of death gives the starting point to the whole process of eschatological events. Death, the Last Judgement and the life everlasting ie the eternity are the basic turning points in the realization of Christian hope. Thus, the faith and hope that: man’s life changes, but it does not end (cfr. the Preface about the dead no. 1), the belief that: the Last Judgement will be the encounter with God who is the righteous Judge but simultaneously also the Father full of mercy and finally the belief that: man’s ultimate destiny is the participation in Divine Life (cfr. LG 2) ie the eternity – they all are the fundamental message of the Christian address concerning eschatological events – of the address that concerns Christian hope for an endless life.

³⁵ J. Durandeaux, *Wieczność w życiu codziennym*, tłum. L. Rutowska, Warszawa 1968, p. 102.

**ESCHATOLOGIA JAKO TEOLOGIA NADZIEI.
REFLEKSJA TEOLOGICZNA INSPIROWANA ENCYKLIKĄ
BENEDYKTA XVI *SPE SALVI***

Streszczenie

Od drugiej połowy minionego wieku eschatologia przeżywa swój rozwój. Przez długie jednak wieki sprawy ostateczne umieszczano na dwóch różnych krańcach: albo nie interesowano się tą kwestią, przerzucając wszystko poza doczesność, albo też nadmierne chciano rozeznaczyć i dokładnie opisać to wszystko, co będzie miało miejsce po śmierci. Pewną konsekwencją izolacji eschatologii w stosunku do innych traktatów dogmatycznych było jej „urzechowienie”, a także przedstawianie poszczególnych zagadnień w tonacji „reportażu z przyszłości”. Dziś trzeba na nowo zrozumieć, jakie miejsce zajmuje eschatologia w całym życiu chrześcijańskim. Eschatologia nie może być jedynie opisem wydarzeń, które mają nastąpić w przyszłości, ale problematyka eschatologiczna powinna stać się sprawą najbardziej aktualną w życiu każdego człowieka. W nurcie nowego spojrzenia na sprawy ostateczne należy umieścić encyklikę Benedykta XVI o nadziei chrześcijańskiej, *Spe Salvi*. Niewiele bowiem możemy powiedzieć o wydarzeniach ostatecznych, nie umieszczając ich w kontekście Bożej obietnicy i chrześcijańskiej nadziei. W nauczaniu Benedykta XVI eschatologia chrześcijańska jest eschatologią nadziei, to znaczy jest nauką o Bogu, który powołuje człowieka do wspólnoty z sobą. Chrześcijanin spogląda więc w przyszłość z nadzieją. Stąd również i wszelkie wypowiedzi o przyszłości umieszcza on w kontekście nadziei. Według papieża, szczególnymi „miejscami” urzeczywistniania się nadziei chrześcijańskiej w kontekście wydarzeń ostatecznych są: śmierć, sąd Boży i życie wieczne. Język eschatologii to przede wszystkim język nadziei. W obliczu rzeczywistości ostatecznej człowiek zdobywa się na odwagę nadziei. U źródeł zaś chrześcijańskiej nadziei leży wiara w Boga, który jest Miłością.