

**PRESENTATION BY FATHER PAUL S. VEVIK FOR THE
GONZAGA UNIVERSITY SOCRATIC CLUB PANEL ON EVIL
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Pope Benedict XVI gave a speech at Regensburg, Germany, in which he spoke about Christianity's engagement with the Enlightenment. Reason, said Pope Benedict XVI, is the foundation of Western thought and culture, just as it is fundamental to the thought and culture of the Church. When a culture abandons reason as the basis for thought and action, an anti-human reality is created. When religion abandons reason as constitutive of its theology and action, it becomes a fanatical anti-human experience.

The Pope has thought deeply about the important issues of our shared humanity for more than 80 years. The encyclical letter, *Spe Salvi [Saved in Hope]*, given just about a year ago [Nov. 30, 2007], gives us some of his mature thinking about the problem of evil. The heaped-up evil of the world can lead to a heart and mind without hope.

Benedict writes, "Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were 'without hope and without God in the world'" (Eph 2:12). The Gospel is not merely the "communication of things that can be known – it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life." [Cf. No. 2.] **TO LIVE WITHOUT GOD IS TO LIVE WITHOUT HOPE.** This is the dilemma of Western Civilization: in rejecting God it has rejected hope. Without hope, evil triumphs and carries the day. Christian hope is the one adequate response to the problem of evil in the world.

An adequate description of human nature requires the elements of *reason and freedom*. Reason allows us to make **moral judgments**. Reason is truly human "only if it is capable of directing the will along the right path, and it is capable of this only if it looks beyond itself. Otherwise, man's situation, in view of the imbalance between his material capacity [science, technology, etc.] and the lack of judgment in his heart, becomes a threat for him and for creation." [Cf. No. 23.] Rational moral judgments require reason and freedom.

As to freedom he writes, “The moral treasury of humanity is not readily at hand like tools that we use; it is present as an appeal to freedom and a possibility for it. This, however, means that:

“a) The right state of human affairs, the moral well-being of the world can never be guaranteed simply through structures alone, however good they are. Such structures are not only important, but necessary; yet they cannot and must not marginalize human freedom. Even the best structures function only when the community is animated by convictions capable of motivating people to assent freely to the social order. Freedom requires conviction; conviction does not exist on its own, but must always be gained anew by the community.

“b) Since man always remains free and since his freedom is always fragile, the kingdom of good will never be definitively established in this world. Anyone who promises the better world that is guaranteed to last forever is making a false promise; he is overlooking human freedom. Freedom must constantly be won over for the cause of good. Free assent to the good never exists simply by itself. If there were structures which could irrevocably guarantee a determined, good, state of the world, man’s freedom would be denied, and hence they would not be good structures at all.” [Cf. No. 24.]

Evil results from a moral lapse, from the lack of reason, from the selfish use of freedom that exploits other people and creation. The ordering of the world we long for is not given by the state, or by science, or by romantic longing. The world we long for is given to man only through love. And although our human loving is inadequate it points us in the right direction. The fulfillment of the human heart is through love. Love is the answer to the problem of evil in the world. And the definitive act of love for the world is found in the Christian dogma of the LAST JUDGMENT. There, love will judge between good and evil. And the confused reality of the lived lives of people will be seen in limpid, lucid clarity. [*All that follows is taken almost directly from the encyclical.*]

THE LOVE THAT JUDGES EVIL will be demonstrated by Christ who is coming to judge the living and the dead. It is the hour of JUSTICE produced by God. Humanity cannot produce justice in the world. Where it tries, it is false and leads to the greatest forms of cruelty and the greatest violations of justice. A world that produces its own

justice is a world without hope. And yet we long for a world where *present suffering would be wiped out* and *the irrevocable past would be undone* [Reference to Adorno].

The Last Judgment is about HOPE. The human heart longs for fulfillment that is always denied to us in this life. Humanity seeks an “everlasting love” that is given only in eternity. The injustice of this world, the suffering of the innocent, cannot be the last word. Hope allows God to set things right. The Last Judgment is about JUSTICE but also about GRACE. At the Last Judgment, *in the face of the Crucified and Risen Christ*, we will see justice and grace in their correct inner relationship.

GRACE does not cancel out justice. Grace does not make wrong into right. Grace is not a sponge which wipes everything away. All that has been done on earth is not of equal value. Evildoers, in the end, do not sit at table at the eternal banquet beside their victims without distinction as though nothing has happened. Justice must be served.

When we die, our life-choice becomes definitive. Our life stands before Christ the Judge. Our choices take on a certain shape during the course of our entire life. WE CAN ENVISION THREE POSSIBILITIES for the final shape of one’s life:

1. **EVIL:** There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth, their readiness for love; people where everything has become a lie; people who have lived for hatred; people who have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought. Yet, our own history shows us certain figures like this. In such people, ALL WOULD BE BEYOND REMEDY; the destruction of good would be irrevocable. This is what we mean by HELL.
2. **GOOD:** There can be people who are utterly pure, permeated by God; and thus fully open to their neighbors; people in deep communion with God – who gives their entire being direction; people whose journey to God at their death only brings to perfection what they already are.
3. **NEITHER CASE** is normal in human life. For the great majority of people there is in the depths of their being a heart-felt openness to truth, love, to God.

But in everyday choices of daily living there are compromises with evil. Much filth covers purity. But the thirst for truth, love, God, constantly re-emerges and remains present within the soul.

What will happen to such people (of this third possibility) when they appear before the Judge? Will the evil they have amassed through life suddenly cease to matter? Not at all. The Church uses the image of fire: burning away what is base; purifying what is incomplete. One passes through “fire” so as to become fully open to receiving God – and prepared to take one’s place at the table of the eternal wedding feast.

At the Last Judgment, BEFORE THE FACE OF CHRIST – in the fire of his love:

- All falsehood in our lives melts away.
- We are transformed.
- We are free at last.
- We become truly ourselves.
- All we built from straw will be burned away.
- All our bluster and pride will collapse.

In the pain of this encounter, as the impurity, the sickness, the evil of our lives becomes evident to us: therein lies our HOPE; for all this is burned away in the fire of divine love. The face of Christ, his gaze upon us, the touch of his heart, HEALS US through an undeniably painful transformation “as through fire.”

The JUSTICE of God and the GRACE of God become clear for the first time. The way we live our lives *is* significant. Yet, evil does not stain us forever. Evil was present *at the same time* as we reached out towards God, truth, and love. The Last Judgment is a reckoning of what we did in this world – good and evil – and the triumph of JUSTICE, GRACE and LOVE established in humanity by Christ who has given us HOPE and GOD in the world.