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2nd Cardinal Van Thuân Forum

Our hope as Christians in the crises of our time

‘Always be ready to give an answer to anyone who asks you about the hope that fills you.’ (1 Peter 3:14) And as an addition: ‘Answer humbly and reverently.’ This is the task given to Christians.

A personal preliminary remark

Sometimes I find it unbearable to watch the daily news on television: bombings of towns, destroyed houses and dreams, and every day new numbers of dead and injured - women, men, children. Each and every one of the dead was a unique person with plans for the future. Added to this are images of droughts and floods, of refugees fleeing with their few belongings. How can we speak of hope in the face of these tragedies? Can I even speak of hope?

There is a time for silence and for enduring silence. The line from a song comes to mind: ‘Lord, let my thoughts gather in you’ - a cry, a prayer. Silence and prayer are sources for me to reflect on and talk about hope. They are sources for me to tentatively approach hope.

One further note: unlike Dr Hubertus Blaumeiser, I have not met Cardinal Van Thuân personally. I know him from his writings. These, too, are a testimony to me and a source of strength for my hope.

Hope - a first approach

The philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977) wrote a three-volume work entitled ‘The Principle of Hope’ between 1938 and 1947 while in exile, and published it in the 1950s. He describes hope as an existential aspect of human life. This ‘principle of hope’ gave rise to a lasting impulse that also triggered a ‘theology of hope.’

Hope has become rare today. Many people prefer thinking about the past rather than concentrating on the future. However, hope seems to have been relegated to

the realm of antiques in many places, and is now reserved only for enthusiasts. The study 'Youth in Germany' (2024) shows that the young generation in Germany has a bleak view of the future, without much hope. Who can blame them?

As Christians, we must first pay account to ourselves for the hope that fills us. What is the reason for hope for us, for each and every one of us? There are no quick answers and certainly no clichés. In Cologne, there is a saying: 'Et is noch immer jot jejange' (Dialect: 'It has always gone well'). That may be a satisfactory answer for the Cologne mindset, but is it also satisfactory for Christians? Hope is different from optimism.

Question for reflection

What do I answer when asked about my personal view of hope?

Do I have a reason to hope?

The German word Hoffnung/Hoffen (hope) is derived from the Middle Low German ho-pen/hoppen - to jump (restlessly in anticipation), to fidget, cf. English 'hope'. A distinction is also made (as with faith) between 'spes qua', the act of hoping, and 'spes quae', the content of hope. So I have to answer *why and how* I hope and what I hope for.

While the noun 'hope' is often attributed something static (having hope), something clearly definable, the verb 'to hope' denotes an event, an activity - in contrast to waiting, for example. Waiting is passive. Everyone who travels by train knows that. Ernst Bloch: 'Hoping helps against waiting, because it gives you something not only to drink but also to cook.' Hope is not to be passively enjoyed, but actively practised and shaped. When I speak of 'hope,' please always 'hear' the activity of 'hoping' as well.

Today, we consider the reason for hope in light of Cardinal Van Thuân's testimony of life and in light of the crises of our time. During his 13 years of imprisonment, he wrote his works 'Prayers of Hope' and 'Paths of Hope'. We heard the essentials of this in Dr Blaumeiser's lecture. The place where the bishop struggled for hope and expressed his hope was a place of distress and suffering - prison, captivity.

The question that arises in view of the crises of our time is: How and why do you, as Christians, speak of hope in a world marked by war and violence, as in Ukraine and the Middle East, by civil wars, as in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Sudan, by hardship and injustice, a world in which children are killed and hunger is used as a weapon, as is currently the case in Gaza? What should be a reason for hope today? We are confronted with objections to hope that may also gnaw at some of us.

Objections to hope

Since ancient times, philosophers have raised objections to hope. And they have questioned whether hope, which was the last thing left in Pandora's box, is a curse or a blessing.

In German, there is a saying: 'Hoping and waiting make me a fool.' This implies that hope is something completely ridiculous, something that cannot withstand the reality of this world. Hope appears to be the practice of dreamers, far removed from reality.

Another objection is that hope may console people with the prospect of a better afterlife, but it robs them of the energy to work for a life worth living in this world. Hope, as the opium of the people, distracts them from the appalling conditions of this world and directs their gaze towards the afterlife.

Ernst Bloch formulated another serious objection as a bitter realisation: 'The jaws of death crush everything, and the maw of decay devours all theology.' In doing so, he raises the question of hope for the slain, for the dead. He himself cannot confirm hope for the dead. The saying goes: 'Defeated, we go home; our grandchildren will fight it out better.'

We must not dismiss these objections lightly. They weigh heavily on people and are not unfamiliar to some of us.

What follows is a search for clues and attempts at answers - in humility and modesty.

First clue: Gaudium et Spes

The motto that Cardinal Van Thuân chose as his guiding principle was ‘Gaudium et Spes’. He was referring to the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), adopted by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, 60 years ago today. The opening sentence sets out the agenda of a Church that is opening itself to the world: ‘The joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, are also the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ’ (GS, 1). This sentence expresses the fundamental bond between all human beings. The Council instructs us to ‘recognise the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel.’ The Council document does this in its introduction (GS, Chapters 4-10), which is entitled ‘Hope and Fear’ and takes up the justification and proclamation of Christian hope in the spirit of the times. So hope is neither an escape from reality, nor is it consolation.

With *Gaudium et Spes*, the Catholic Church has undergone a change of location and perspective. The Church no longer positions itself against the world, as in the anti-modernism of the 19th and 20th centuries, but within the world. Cardinal Van Thuân: ‘The way of the apostolate in our time: in the midst of the world, but not of the world, for the world, using the means of the world.’ This does not preach conformity to the spirit of the times, but rather situates Christian faith and Christian hope in relation to concrete contexts. The hope that Christians are called to give an account of must demonstrate its relevance in and for the world, not exclusively, but *ad extra* - with a view to the world. Christians and the Church do not inhabit a reserve shielded from the storms of time; the days of the house crowned with mighty towers, shining with glory, are over. The new version of the hymn ‘Ein Haus voll Glorie schauet’ (1975, Gotteslob 478) changes the original version from 1875 and incorporates the theology of GS. The fourth verse reads: ‘See God's tent on earth! He is hidden there, in human gestures he remains close to people.’ The reference to discovering God in the world.

In the current crises, Cardinal Van Thuân's work gives us an important clue: in 1994, he was appointed by Pope John Paul II in Rome as President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. This council was established to implement the decisions of the Second Vatican Council with the mission of ‘promoting justice and

peace in the world in the light of justice and the social teachings of the Church.’ For Cardinal Van Thuân, the power of hope and the commitment to justice and peace sprang from the same source: his connection to Christ.

This mission of GS still stands six decades after the publication of this document. The world has changed, the signs of the times are different - keywords: climate catastrophe, hunger, global injustice, terror, wars, flight and migration. Hope is only relevant if it faces up to crises - personal and socio-political ones. GS's answer is not a call to remain calm, but to engage in the world.

Questions for reflection:

Which situations pose particular challenges for me personally? How do these situations affect my hope?

Fifty years ago, the German Synod responded to the crises of the time with the resolution ‘Our Hope: A Confession of Faith in This Time’ (1975). It has lost none of its relevance. This document is in line with GS. The draft of this text was written by the theologian Johann Baptist Metz (1928-2018). For him, hope is not reduced to an individualistic notion of ‘save your soul!’ Preserving, teaching and practising hope, but above all acting on it, is the mission of the church community. The resolution takes up Jesus' message of God's reign as a message of hope. The Kingdom of God, which according to Christian belief began with Jesus of Nazareth, is already proving its effectiveness in the world, in the crises of Jesus' time and today. ‘Our hope’ brings the attentiveness of God's reign, the Kingdom of God, to the world in the provocative sentence ‘The Kingdom of God is not indifferent to world trade prices!’. I would add ‘And it is not indifferent to the climate catastrophe caused by humans’.

‘Memoria passionis’ is the guiding principle for Metz. In other words: ‘spes ex memoria passionis,’ a hope that arises from the memory of suffering and those who suffer. This corresponds to Cardinal Van Thuân, who speaks of a hope that arose for him in his situation of imprisonment.

A second thread: theology as a wake-up call

Is it true, as Bloch put it, that the maw of decay devours all theology and renders it obsolete? Does death really mark the limit of any responsible discourse about God? In an interview, the philosopher Max Horkheimer (1895-197) argues that theology keeps us aware "that the world is an appearance, that it is not the absolute truth, the ultimate reality. Theology is — I am deliberately expressing myself cautiously — the hope that the injustice that characterises the world will not remain, that injustice will not have the last word." When asked whether theology is an expression of hope, Horkheimer replies: 'I would rather say: an expression of a longing, a longing that the murderer may not triumph over the innocent victim.' Hope keeps alive the longing for something completely different. Only out of faith can hope be founded and proclaimed for the humiliated and insulted, the slain and all the dead. It cannot be justified solely within the inner world.

Theology, as I understand it, is not an abstract theory, nor is it a sublime pleasure, such as that experienced when listening to Mozart's compositions, but first and foremost sober, responsible reflection and discourse on God. Theology was and always is contextual. The Bible, the Old and New Testaments, is testimony to an experiential, partly suffering reflection and discourse on God. Situations of need and suffering, as testified to in the Holy Scriptures, were and are places where God reveals himself and hope springs forth. From the first page to the last, the Bible is a book of hope. The prophets in particular proclaim hope in seemingly hopeless situations. I am reminded of the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the resurrection of the dead bones (Ezekiel 37:1-14), which he proclaimed to the despondent during the Babylonian captivity. Here, too, captivity is the place where hope springs forth.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, hope is tested in the face of knowledge of mortality (finitude) and death, 'whose jaws crush everything'. This also applies to Jesus. He experienced his crisis in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross: 'My God, my God, why (for what) have you forsaken me?' This cry is also familiar to many people.

A theology of hope is not possible in Christianity without a theology of the cross. As Christians, we are witnesses to a contested, crucified hope. Paul: 'But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.' (1 Cor 1:23) Jürgen Moltmann (1926-2024) speaks of the 'eschatologia crucis', which he contrasts with an 'eschatologia gloriae' and argues for 'hope as the foundation and driving force of theological thinking in general'. He writes: 'Without hope, however, faith decays, becomes weak faith and finally dead faith.'

Christian hope is hope in resurrection. The message of resurrection is not only a consolation, but God's protest against the finality of suffering and death. Hope is not a gentle sleeping pill; it unsettles and keeps us awake where others have resigned themselves to misery. Christian hope is a messianic hope that must not be reduced to individualism. It opposes widespread social anxiety about the future and philosophies that resign themselves to death as a final fact.

Learning to hope - how does that work?

In the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI names three places for learning and practising hope:

Prayer as a school of hope - spirituality.

Action and suffering as places for learning hope - compassion.

The court as a place for learning and practising hope.

Spirituality as a school of hope

The mission of the Church is to call people to the 'God of hope' (Romans 15:13). Where the Church becomes entangled in worldly things, where it is concerned with maintaining power, it loses the power to awaken faith and hope in people. Current developments and plans within the Catholic Church in Germany raise the question of whether the Church is now merely a place of structural reorganisation and no longer a place of spiritual renewal. 'Spirituality' has become a buzzword today, one that is ambiguous and used in many different ways. It is an expression of religious

searching as well as a programme for personal stress management. In Christianity, spirituality does not mean retreating into private life or escaping from the world. On the contrary: in spiritual exercises (retreats), people root themselves in the spirit that looks beyond the day and points the way forward. Ernst Bloch speaks of 'docta spes', of hope that can be taught and learned. Playing the piano can be learned (to a certain extent), sports can be practised, but can people also practise hope? Is there a school of hope? How is it possible to keep hope alive?

Conversation with your neighbour:

Do you see places and ways to learn hope? Which ones?

Teaching hope, docta spes, does not take place from a lectern, nor from a podium, but in the testimony of life. Hope is a spiritual exercise. Johann Baptist Metz speaks of the 'mysticism of open eyes'. Metz describes how people who are touched by spirituality must not close their eyes to the suffering and the suffering in this world. It is not a religious feel-good programme that conveys personal comfort.

Spirituality and meditation, like prayer, are on a different level from the rational pursuit of hope. Both paths - spiritual roots and rational justification of hope - are necessary.

Current events: The Hamas attack on 7 October has horrified people in Israel and around the world. Is hope still possible, or has it been extinguished by the massacre? Rabbi Delphin Horvilleur speaks of her wounded hope and writes that, especially after the massacre, she hears the ancient testimonies of the Bible over and over again and brings them up for discussion. 'A tradition that extends far beyond me is expressed in me. This wisdom was there before me and will outlive me, and if it is expressed through my body at this moment, it is because it has permeated me.' Hope and comfort are not something people grant themselves; they are granted to them - through ancient texts that have been speaking to people for many centuries. And hope is brought to life by people like Cardinal Van Thuân, who have become and continue to be witnesses of hope in their lives.

The celebration of the Eucharist is an important source of hope. Cardinal Van Thuân celebrated the Eucharist during his imprisonment under extreme difficulties. 'We proclaim your death, O Lord, and we praise your resurrection until you come in glory.' 'For without the Eucharist, we cannot live the life of God.' The celebration of the Eucharist and the Lord's Supper are celebrations of hope and peace. In the face of a world where people are deprived of bread and hunger is used as a weapon, Jesus interprets his life in the sharing of bread and remains present in the Eucharistic bread and wine in our torn world. 'Take and eat, all of you.' Personally, I place my hope not in weapons and armament, but in the willingness and practice of sharing bread.

Compassion and remembrance as impetus for action

In an interview at the beginning of the year (2025), multimillionaire Elon Musk said: 'The weakness of Western civilisation is empathy.' This is an outrageous statement to Christian ears. How many people have been and continue to be victims of senseless, destructive violence! Hearing the cries of the wounded and remembering those who have been senselessly murdered cannot heal the victims or make up for the injustices they have suffered. In a world where violence continues to be perpetrated and terror legitimised, believers take the memory of those who suffer as a call to repentance and action against inhumanity. Not apathy, but sympathy! The school of hope lies in practising compassion and mercy, the biblical word for empathy and sympathy. Listening to the Bible means listening to God, who is mercy and love. God's passion is compassion, *compassio*. Jesus lived this, obedient to God, who is love, even to the cross (Phil 2:4-11).

Faithful remembrance brings the memory into the present and, promising hope, into the future. The message of the Bible: the promise of God's reign applies to the living and the dead. 'To hope is to act as if salvation were possible. It is not certain that our efforts are in vain,' says Fulbert Steffensky.

A third track: hope for salvation

At the beginning, the question was raised as to what the content of Christian hope is. The answer: God himself, who came into the world in Jesus of Nazareth, is the 'content' of hope. He is the 'God of our hope' (Romans 15:13). However, we do not possess the 'God of our hope' like a piece of jewellery; we seek him and feel him. Paul expresses it this way: 'We are saved by hope. But hope that is already fulfilled is not hope. For how can one hope for something that one sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience' (Rom 8:24f). Patience as faithfulness to the promise is the sister of hope.

An evident expression of hope, embedded in a great vision of peace, can be found in the prophet Isaiah: 'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. The government shall be upon his shoulder' (Isaiah 9:5). God's reign does not rest on the shoulders of the powerful of this world. 'Thought and hope are not oriented towards death, but towards birth, not towards being in the world, but towards coming into the world.' Christian hope has its place not only in the immanence of action - as significant as it is - but in the transcendence of faith.

Conclusion: Advent existence

In Christianity, Advent is a time for practising hope - in listening to the word of God, in silence, in watching and in prayer. Advent is not only the time in the church year when we prepare for the feast of the Incarnation of God, but also a Christian attitude to life that we can learn from Cardinal Van Thuân.

Once again: 'Hope and waiting make me a fool.' Fools were people who held up a mirror to the powerful. Today, more than ever, we need 'fools of hope' who do not give up, but even in failure, in situations of despair, start afresh, completely afresh - after a time of silence, stillness and prayer - then heaven and earth meet. (Gotteslob 832).