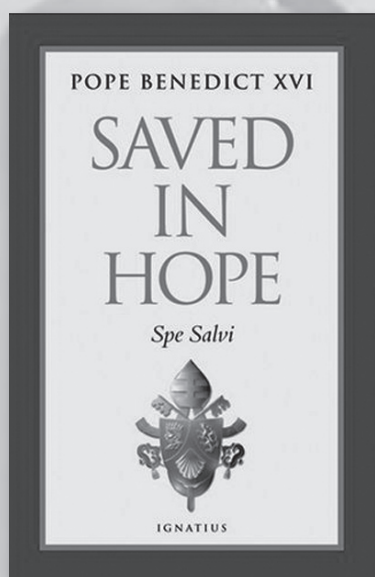


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Let your speech be “Yes, yes: no, no”; whatever is beyond these comes from the evil one. (Mt. 5:37)

• October 2008
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SPE SALVI: AN ENCYCLICAL THAT LEAVES MANY PERPLEXED

A reader writes us:

Most esteemed editorial staff,

As a faithful reader of *SìSiNoNo*, I would like to ask you to let me convey my perplexities about the recent encyclical of the Pontiff at present reigning, *Spe Salvi*, dated November 30, 2007.

This encyclical discusses the fundamental theme of “Christian hope,” which is hope in eternal life, promised by Christ to them that love Him and follow His teachings. The encyclical derives its title from a well-known passage of St. Paul: “*Spe salvi facti sumus*—In hope we were saved” (Rom. 8:24). Many have been struck by the fact, undoubtedly positive, that in this document the Pope did not once cite the Second Vatican Council, and also by the fact that

he criticized diverse aspects of modern and contemporary thought. To this, I add the fact that he has utilized extensively the letters of St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church in his discourse. St. Paul, in particular, had been shunted aside or misrepresented after Vatican II because he was clearly incompatible with the “ecumenical dialogue.”

From the point of view of the use of sources, it seems to me, therefore, that the encyclical marks a return to Tradition. All of these aspects are not, however, sufficient, in my opinion, to give an altogether positive judgment about it. As far as the absence of references to Vatican II is concerned, from which some appear to draw optimistic auspices for the beginning of a “recovery” from that disastrous Council, I point out that the texts of those acts do not truthfully give particular space to the theme of “Christian hope,” all caught as they are by the desire to “dialogue” with the values of the world.

Four Critical Observations

With this I come to my first critical observation about the encyclical: it seems to me that even within it the *supernatural dimension* of authentic Christian hope is lacking. Second observation: the papal document appears to accept the absurd idea (of de Lubac and his partners), according to which the Catholic view of salvation in the writings of St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church would have been “communitarian,” only to be progressively distorted subsequently into an “individualistic” view that would have selfishly reduced it to a mere “individual” salvation (*Spe Salvi*, §§13-15, citing from the Vatican online edition). In §14, the Encyclical openly praises the interpretation of de Lubac, striving to continue correcting this supposed “individualism” in the appropriate manner, that is, trying to find (it seems to me) the proper balance between the communitarian and individual conception of salvation! In other words: between the New Theology and the dogma of faith!

In third place, it seems to me that the hope of salvation is seen by the Pope above all from the angle of the “inner experience” of the subject (insofar as this corresponds to an “existential need” of the subject itself) more so than from the perspective of revealed Truth, which teaches us that the salvation of our individual soul is an *objective* reality, established by God, which will be realized in the Beatific Vision, but only for him who will have believed in Our Lord and will have died in the grace of God.

The discourse on “Christian hope” involves the exposition of the doctrine of the four last things, and

this exposition—this is my fourth observation—in the encyclical seems to me rather *ambiguous*. Neither heaven nor hell ever appears as it appears in Scripture, Tradition, and, finally, in the doctrine of the Church, which has always represented heaven and hell as *supernatural places* completely concrete and already established by the Father, where the soul is sent after [the particular] judgment by Our Lord immediately after death, in anticipation of being rejoined with the body after the Universal Judgment, which will confirm the judgment imparted individually to everyone.

For Benedict XVI, the hope of our faith is above all that of being “awaited by the Love of God” (§3). This is certainly an orthodox concept. But it is necessary to see how it is utilized. This “encounter” with the Love of God, which awaits us, should be such that it “change[s] our lives, so that we know we are redeemed through the hope that it [the encounter] expresses” (§4). One immediately notices that the “redemption” is presented in terms of an individual’s *inner need of redemption*, rather than as an objective reality, of supernatural origin, because it derives from the Cross and Resurrection of Our Lord. In reality, it matters little that we feel “redeemed” or less. After all, what Catholic can effectively feel “redeemed”? What matters is not our personal disposition with regard to the idea of redemption, but rather the fact of being *effectively* redeemed, that is to say, to achieve salvation, at the end of our earthly life. But to fulfill this objective, Revelation, and therefore the doctrine of the Church, tells us that it is not possible if we do not have faith in Our Lord and do not live according to His commandments. In short, Redemption as the *effective salvation of our soul* is not possible outside the Church, depositary of the divine Revelation and of the means of salvation. It does not seem to me, however, that redemption is presented in this manner in the Encyclical.

An Existential Notion of “Eternal Life”

What notion does the encyclical give of “eternal life”? In §§10-12, the Pope poses the question: “What is eternal life?” One would expect in vain a clear and precise answer consistent with the Church’s constant doctrine: it is the life in which the elect are as angels of the Lord, forever immersed in the beatitude of the Beatific Vision. He begins his discourse starting with what the individual believes about eternal life, if he truly desires it, if he does not desire it... We know that daily life is insufficient, and we feel that there must in some way exist another life, but we do not know what (§§10-11). These reflections are based on texts by St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, in which both Fathers of the

Church describe the uncertainty with which the children of the world imagine a hereafter, of which they confusedly feel the need, although without believing. But to this uncertainty the Fathers would reply with the *certainty* of eternal life, promised and guaranteed by the Risen Christ and attainable (only) by means of faith and works in Him. But this final aspect does not appear in the reconstruction of the Pope. How does he comment, in fact, on the following sentence from St. Ambrose in the funeral discourse for his deceased brother Satyrus: “Death is, then, no cause for mourning, for it is the cause of mankind’s salvation” (§10)? In this singular way: “*Whatever precisely St. Ambrose may have meant by these words—it is true that to eliminate death or to postpone it more or less indefinitely would place the earth and humanity in an impossible situation, and even for the individual would bring no benefit*” (§11; my italics).

The true meaning of St. Ambrose’s phrase

“Whatever” precisely St. Ambrose meant to say? But what he meant to say is extremely clear: death “is a cause of salvation” for us believers since by means of death we are finally removed from the tribulations of this world, and we enter into eternal life in which we will forever contemplate God “face to face,” as St. Paul says. For this reason Christians rightly called death “*dies natalis*,” day of our (true) birth, because it is birth into eternal life, the only true *life* for man. Our “salvation,” in a concrete, material sense, begins therefore with our death, which forever takes us out of the reach of the Prince of this world. For the unrepentant sinner, death is instead a cause of perdition, as he goes into eternal damnation.

This *objectively salvific meaning of our death*, which helps us to conquer the fear of death (result of human fragility, produced in turn by original sin), is already found in St. Paul. It suffices to think of the famous passage of the second letter to Timothy, in which he foretells his own martyrdom and considers death the desired “liberation” from the chains of this world, to be able finally to access the *sempiternal prize*:

For I am now ready to be sacrificed: and the time of my dissolution is at [*tempus resolutionis meae instat*]. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. As to the rest, there is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord the just judge will render to me in that day; and not only to me, but to them also that love his coming. (II Tim. 4:6-8)

Not only for St. Paul, obviously: for all believers who have persevered until the end in the “good fight” against themselves and the world, death is the “cause of salvation, liberation” that introduces them

to eternal life. Not only for St. Paul but for all true believers, “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21) because it allows us to join Christ forever. St. Ambrose meant to refer to this immortal “gain” in the passage cited by the Pope.

A Philosophical Notion of Eternal Life

These concepts are quite clear. Yet how does “eternal life” appear in the encyclical, always understood according to the existential meditations of the individual?

The term “eternal life” is intended to give a name to this known [known in the sense that it is known to exist] “unknown.” Inevitably it is an inadequate term that creates confusion. “Eternal,” in fact, suggests to us the idea of something interminable, and this frightens us; “life” makes us think of the life that we know and love and do not want to lose, even though very often it brings more toil than satisfaction, so that while, on the one hand, we desire it, on the other hand, we do not want it. (§12)

Thus, how do we arrive at a concept which is not contradictory? By understanding eternal life as plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in St. John’s Gospel: “I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (16:22). We must think along these lines.... (§12)

This seems to me a *philosophical* notion of eternal life, in which the idea of “joy” prevails, which will be proved in the “plunging ever anew into the vastness of being”: of *being*, in general, and not of God. The citation from St. John is used in support of this concept, which seems to me more Plotinian than Christian. And will this “plunging ever anew into the vastness of being” be granted to all, even to unrepentant sinners?

“Kantism” in the Encyclical?

Is the encyclical imbued with Kantian philosophy? With this last question I mean: How do we harmonize the Pope’s invitation to think “along these lines” with the truly Catholic concept of “eternal life”? Are they truly reconcilable? The “great hope” of man, writes Benedict XVI, “can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain”; God, and therefore “the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human

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face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety” (§31).

Have we here a clear assertion of the supernatural nature of the Kingdom of God and therefore of salvation? But the Pope continues:

His Kingdom is not an imaginary hereafter, situated in a future that will never arrive; His Kingdom is present wherever He is loved and wherever His love reaches us. (§31)

The Kingdom of God is therefore “present.” Where? “Wherever He is loved and wherever His love reaches us.” In our conscience, then? The Pope seems to wish to render the concept expressed by the famous Gospel phrase: “The Kingdom of God is within you” (Lk. 17:21). Indeed, he continues: “His love alone gives us the possibility of soberly persevering day by day, without ceasing to be spurred on by hope, in a world which by its very nature is imperfect” (§31). But immediately after he adds: “His love is at the same time our guarantee of the existence of what we only vaguely sense [eternal life] and which nevertheless, in our deepest self, we await: a life that is ‘truly’ life” (§31).

The “guarantee” of the existence of eternal life, beyond the vague intuition that our mind can have, is given, therefore, by the love of God for us. By Revelation, then? But the Pope does not say clearly that this “love of God” is certain for us *exclusively* on the basis of Revelation. In my opinion, he does not say it. The hope of salvation, thus outlined, remains then an act of the *inner experience* of the individual, who postulates the existence of the love of God as necessary to belief in the reality of the object of this hope.

Perhaps my conclusion is too “Kantian”? Does it strain the Pope’s thought? Why do I say: “Kantian”? Because, in the Pope’s discourse, the love of God appears to be understood as a necessary idea in order to believe in the existence of eternal life, which therefore would not result in an autonomous way from Revelation. Similarly, for Kant, the existence of God is an idea that reason requires to be able to legitimize the existence of morality. The god of Kant is not the living God; it is an idea of reason. However, can we say that the idea of God present in the encyclical is not that of the living God? In §26 does not the Pope say that through Christ “we have become certain of God, a God who is not a remote ‘first cause’ of the world, because his only-begotten Son has become man and of him everyone can say: ‘I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me’ (Gal. 2:20)?” And yet, next to the representation of God, who appears as a living God, in the encyclical one finds, in my opinion, the idea of the *god of the*

philosophers—I do not see how else to call it; that is to say, the idea of God that man’s interior experience postulates as necessary in order to satisfy his own spiritual exigencies of love, happiness, and justice.

Uncertain Nature of the Last Things

This impression also results, always in my opinion, from the last part of the document, in which the Pontiff explains to us the meaning of some “settings” for “learning and practising hope.” I will pass over “prayer” and “action and suffering” as a school of hope and dwell, instead, on “Judgment as a setting for learning and practising hope,” which is the part in which the four last things are necessarily discussed.

Christian hope is also “hope in God’s justice” (§41). In the Judgment there is therefore the “splendor of hope.” The Last Judgment is a “symbol of our responsibility for our lives” (*ibid.*)—an obscure sentence, in my opinion, because, among other reasons, the Judgment is not simply a “symbol of our responsibility,” but the *infallible decision* of the Just Judge that forever establishes our responsibilities, that is, our faults and our merits. However, the Pope continues, iconography has given, in time, “more and more prominence...to its ominous and frightening aspects,” hiding that of “hope” (*ibid.*). The authentic meaning of the Judgment would then seem to be one of hope, and not the “ominous and frightening” one. Why “ominous and frightening”? The Pontiff does not say, but it is understood that he is referring to the judgment of the damned.

In the Last Judgment, divine justice is, however, executed.

Yes, there is a resurrection of the flesh. There is justice. There is an “undoing” of past suffering, a reparation that sets things aright. For this reason, faith in the Last Judgment is first and foremost hope....I am convinced that the question of justice constitutes the essential argument, or in any case the strongest argument, in favor of faith in eternal life. The purely individual need for a fulfillment that is denied to us in this life, for an everlasting love that we await, is certainly an important motive for believing that man was made for eternity; but only in connection with the impossibility that the injustice of history should be the final word does the necessity for Christ’s return and for new life become *fully convincing* (emphasis added). (§43)

Are not the Parousia of Our Lord and the universal Judgment then to be considered “fully convincing” on the basis of Scripture and the doctrine of the Church? And it is in an Encyclical that we must find such an affirmation? And what is the “fully convincing” argument for the children of the world?—Always the one able to satisfy the inner need of the individual, which, according to



the Pope, would suffer in seeing injustice triumph in history. To prevent this triumph, it is necessary to believe in the justice that will “undo” past suffering and set things aright at the resurrection of the dead. Certainly, this is an argument in favor of the existence of God: given the injustice that there always is in the world, there must also be a God who one day will put everything back in place. But that this should be the argument upon which to establish “Christian hope” in a “fully convincing” manner is, in my opinion, at the very least dubious, since “Christian hope” in salvation is based on *facts* testified by Holy Scripture and Tradition, and on the teachings of the Church. Our hope has an *objective* foundation based on revealed Truth and kept in the “deposit of faith”—a *supernatural* foundation, therefore. It is not based on the so-called spiritual needs of the individual, on his *subjective* inner experience, always in search of something he does not find.

However, if in the Judgment, the “hope of justice” is fulfilled, will it be just or not that the wicked (the unrepentant sinners) go to eternal damnation? Should not the Encyclical have, at this point, reaffirmed traditional doctrine on hell, precisely in order to conclude the explanation of the idea of the “hope of justice” coherently? And instead, nothing. The text of the Pope seems to propose the image of the Judgment as that of a “hope” possibly stripped of the “ominous and frightening” aspect, that is, of sentences to eternal damnation! In fact, the encyclical interprets the parable of Lazarus and the rich man as if it showed us the existence of purgatory, not of hell

(§44). If some sinners exist, the document does not say so. The notion of sin as a specific notion does not even appear. Nor does hell appear—hell, which in fact is not *the place* of eternal damnation (“Abandon all hope, all ye who enter here,” Dante, *Inf.*, III, 8), but the *way of being* of

people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word *Hell*. (§45)

Are all saved, then? Indeed, we read that our defilement does not stain us forever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love [Reach out, how? In the intention?]. Indeed, it has already been burned away through Christ’s Passion. At the moment of Judgment we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of His love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. (§47)

Signed Letter

Translated from *Si Si No No*, March 15, 2008.

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Some Bishops Rebel Against the Pope:

Yet Another Fruit of the Council's Reformed Collegiality?

What are we to make of bishops who rebel against the Pope? One of our readers asked this question in relation to the open rebellion of a part of the episcopate against the *Motu Proprio* of the reigning Pontiff (*Summorum Pontificum* of July 6, 2007), which “liberalizes,” as they say, the celebration of the holy Mass according to the ancient Roman rite, the so-called Tridentine Mass, as well as the sacraments also of the ancient rite.

This is what we think: the modernizers will not let go. They are, moreover, always the same ones. Among the rebellious bishops, one finds the names of Cardinals Martini and Tettamanzi. The first has for years been considered the principal representative of the progressivist (that is to say, neo-modernist) faction in the bosom of the hierarchy. The second, of the same tendency, recently made the papers when, in the Cathedral of Milan, he celebrated the Epiphany with “multiethnic” rites that included the participation of Asian dancers (from Sri Lanka) in clinging costumes that bared the midriff. But for years the ecumenical rites of the *Novus Ordo* have been celebrating a so-called “festival of peoples” in conjunction with the Epiphany. The faithful are used

to it. What caused a scandal at Milan, more than the ceremony itself, was the kind of participation the Cardinal felt obliged to allow. But it is clear that, abstracting from the more or less scandalous costumes worn by the participants, the real scandal is constituted by the ecumenical rite itself, which makes possible the sacrilegious medley of sacred and profane thanks to the “liturgical creativity” ratified by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

The Negative Effect of the New Collegiality

With this last reference, we broaden the response to the question raised by our reader. For we think that if Vatican II had not confounded the traditional meaning of collegiality by obscuring the institutional relationship between the bishops and the pope, the bishops who are against papal directives would never have dared to openly defy the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff. The fact is, whether we like it or not, that after this reform, the bishops taken as a *coetus* united in a college with the pope can consider themselves equal to the pope as *titulary* of the *summa potestas* over the Church.

What is the essential notion of the reform? Romano Amerio expressed it clearly and concisely in *Iota Unum*:

The *Nota praevia* rejects the familiar notion of collegiality, according to which the Pope alone is the subject of supreme authority in the Church, sharing his authority as he wills with the whole body of bishops summoned by him to a council. In this view, supreme authority is collegial only through being communicated at the discretion of the Pope. But the *Nota praevia* also rejects the novel theory that supreme authority in the Church is lodged in the college together with the Pope, and never without the Pope, who is its head, but in such a way that when the Pope exercises supreme power, even alone, he exercises it precisely as head of the college, and therefore as a representative of the college, which he is obliged to consult in order to express its opinion. This view is influenced by the theory that authority derives from the multitude, and is hard to reconcile with the divine constitution of the Church. Rejecting both of these theories, the *Nota praevia* holds firmly to the view that supreme authority does indeed reside in the college of bishops united to their head, but that the head can exercise it independently of the college, while the college cannot exercise it independently of the head.¹

A Novelty Dangerous to Papal Primacy

Such is the novelty that was introduced in the teaching of the hierarchy, a novelty that seems to fall midway between the traditional doctrine and more revolutionary theories. In effect, a supreme power of the college of bishops “together with its head” did not exist in the constitution of the Church before Article

22 of *Lumen Gentium*. In the 1917 Code of Canon Law, which was then still in vigor, there is no trace of it (see Canons 218 and 219, which define the figure of the Roman Pontiff, and 329, consecrated to that of the bishop). It is question of an undeniably *important* novelty. Before, the supreme power of governing and teaching in the Church had always been recognized *iure divino* to the Sovereign Pontiff *alone*, and not to the college of bishops, even with the pope at its head.

But given the fact that, in the *exercise* of this power, the pope is superior to the college since the college cannot exercise its authority independently of its head, requiring as it does his authorization, while the head exercises it independently of the college, does this not preserve the primacy of the pope, thereby avoiding a dogmatic rupture with tradition? This is precisely what must be established. The Council clearly affirmed its desire to conserve the primacy. This intention comes through explicitly in the declarations contained in Article 18 of *Lumen Gentium*. But this is not enough, obviously. In this delicate matter, declarations of intention, however sincere, do not suffice. It is necessary to see how the primacy was effectively conserved, whether it is intact or not, and whether it was conserved in a conceptually clear manner that does not contradict (even in part) the previously taught doctrine.

Does the supremacy of the pope in relation to the college of bishops concern just the *exercise* of the *summa potestas*, or also (which would be logical), the titularity of that power. In effect, if he lacks supremacy in the titularity of the *summa potestas*, by virtue of what can the Pontiff exercise it over the bishops? But how can this supremacy also include (as it should) the titularity of this power if the latter is now *also* attributed to the order of bishops in union with the Pope? *Lumen Gentium* 22 states: “The order of bishops...is *also* the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church, provided we understand this body together with its head the Roman Pontiff and never without this head. This power can be exercised only with the consent of the Roman Pontiff.” The word *also* appears here because it has just recalled the traditional understanding of primacy: “In virtue of his office, that is as Vicar of Christ and pastor of the whole Church, the Roman Pontiff has full, supreme and universal power over the Church. And he is always free to exercise this power.”

Does not the extension to the college of bishops (together with its head) of the titularity of the *summa potestas* imply the diminution of the pope’s superiority vis-à-vis the bishops, introducing a crack in the primacy? And it is even more than a crack, it seems to us. This extension seems to attribute the

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summa potestas to two distinct subjects as organs of the Church's constitution: to the Pope an *uti singulus* and to the college of bishops together with the pope, as a *coetus* with the pontiff as head. But can a *summa potestas*, which is in itself of divine origin, be attributed to two subjects constitutionally distinct and, what's more, hierarchically subordinated, given that it is the pope who appoints and directs the bishops, and not the reverse? Obviously not. That would create an unacceptable *diarchy*, a source of confusion, both conceptual and practical, in the Church.

These ambiguous yet essential aspects of the "reforms" introduced by Vatican II should be clarified once and for all, for the good of souls. The need to open the debate on Vatican II in the Church is becoming increasingly urgent. It seems unwise to us to continue to impede it by retreating behind a façade that everything is going well since the pope was not subordinated to the Episcopal college, as the revolutionaries, the *new theologians*, desired; and it preserved the primacy, which allows him to exercise the *summa potestas* alone, unlike the Episcopal college. In reality, the superiority of the pope is no longer the same as it was in the past; it has even become less clear in its foundation if the titularity of the *summa potestas* is henceforth also attributed to the college with the pope.

By reason of the *new* constitutionally guaranteed position of the Episcopal body, in the general mentality the image has faded of the Sovereign Pontiff as the Vicar of Christ unilaterally exercising the primacy without having to render an account to anyone as his sovereign prerogatives of divine right monarch allow him to do, limited only by the divine and natural law. That is why a *motu proprio* like

Summorum Pontificum, in which the Pontiff exercised the primacy by substantially *ordering* the bishops not to oppose those who request the celebration of the holy Mass following the ancient Roman rite, was greeted with such coldness and an attitude of passive resistance visible to all, and even causing a veritable rebellion amongst the most audacious. 

Canonicus

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¹ Romano Amerio, *Iota Unum: A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century* (Kansas City: Sarto House, 1996), p.90. The new collegiality was introduced by the conciliar Constitution *Lumen Gentium* in its Article 22. But since it seemed ambiguous to many, a *nota praevia* (in reality posterior) was added to the Constitution that gave the authentic interpretation of this article so as to remove all doubts.

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