

## **15TH ICCFM-MECS WORLD ASSEMBLY**

"Fighting with Hope, in Unity, for the Family"

In the battlefield of Transcendent Forces - Our Resources and Means on the Path of Holiness

Vác, 30 June 2023.

### **2. Hope**

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Brothers and sisters, I remember well when we organised this meeting with Father Gerardo and Balázs, and this threefold basic idea of this world assembly was born. That is, the spiritual struggle that we are engaged in. The reports from the two international bodies (*UN New York and Vienna - ed.*) are all about this, that the family is undesirable. We are in a great spiritual struggle, you need to know that.

Father Laszlo (Varga) said it very well: let us be very careful not to be dualistic. Pope Benedict once said that when we get very desperate, we are dualistic, because we think that the bad God is stronger than the good God. Father Laszlo made it clear that there is only the good God. And Pope Benedict says that if we believe in the good God, we must also believe what the Book of Revelation so beautifully describes, that if we believe in God, the head of the great fiery red dragon will fall into the sand and disappear. Those of us who have grown up under dictatorships - there are several countries like that here - know that the head of the great fiery red dragon can fall to the sand. We must be very careful about that.

Pope Francis spent a whole year in 2017 talking about hope. He used many interesting and beautiful phrases. "We are people of spring." - We looked at the numbers, pandemics, war, etc. here in Europe, but also elsewhere. We are grieving over it. Brothers and sisters, God does not think in terms of mathematics. He thinks differently.

Our Pope, Pope Francis, says in the general audience, "We have listened to the word of God, He says: "Behold, I am creating all things anew. The Christian hope is based on faith in a God who always creates something new in the life of man, creates something new in history, creates something new in the universe. Our God is a God who makes new things, because he is a God of surprises." That is why we dare to be the people of spring.

I really believe that this liberal nothingness in which our young people are growing up will bore them. They will get tired of the chaos that Father Laszlo spoke of. That has always been God's way. Christ destroyed our Lord on the cross, out of which came the resurrection. Our God is always a God of re-creation. This is the God we believe in, says Pope Francis. This gives us reason to be people of the spring.

"It is not Christian behaviour to walk with one's nose hanging down, as pigs do." Let me add something personal. My maternal grandfather was conscripted in Galicia in the first war, and was taken from Galicia to Siberia for four years. He always told me that the hardest time they had there in the camp was when they were not allowed to work, but had to circle in blocks in the camp yard. And if these peasant men noticed that one of their fellow soldiers had a nose

like a pig's, they would shout at him: 'Don't look at the ground, you'll die there anyway! We are not pigs, brothers, to hang our noses.

In all these countries we live in an environment that either overtly or covertly, does not like Christianity. They talk about Christian culture, but is it possible to maintain a Christian culture without a personal relationship with Christ? This is the question. So, instead of hanging our noses, kindly let us have a personal relationship with God!

Once again I read the Pope's original words, let us note: 'It is not Christian behaviour to go about with one's nose hanging down, as pigs do. They always go like that. They don't look at the horizon with their eyes, as if our whole journey of life ends here on earth after only a few metres, because that's all they can see of the earth. It is as if our lives have no purpose or port of call, we are forced to wander forever, and all our efforts are meaningless! This is not a Christian attitude! We are people of the spring.' So much from Pope Francis for now. Hanging our noses is not the way to behave. We are believers in the resurrection, we are people of the spring.

In fact, when I undertook to speak about hope, the first thing I thought of was Pope Benedict's encyclical *Spe salvi facti sumus*, and I will return to it. It is abstract but clear speech.

To come to this corner of the world from distant continents is no small undertaking. We have a sense of ambition, we believe in the spring, we believe in the horizon. At one time, perhaps when I was a young priest, hope reminded me of a kind of abandonment. We are redeemed for hope. It's as if God left man's creation halfway there, only to have us struggle for fulfillment.

Pope Benedict sees hope differently. It is not incompleteness. What does he say? "We are saved by hope. *Spe salvi facti sumus* (Rom 8,24). Redemption, salvation, according to the Christian faith, is not simply a gift." So we are redeemed, but St. Augustine's saying, "He who created you without you will not save you without you," seems like blackmail.

"Salvation has been given to us in such a way that we have been given hope. And a reliable hope, on which we can rely to cope with our present problems, to make the troubled present liveable and acceptable." So let us realize that we have been saved for hope, the hope of salvation. This is far better than having everything ready-made.

We often say that when a dying person has no one to wait for, he dies. God has designed our salvation so that hope can come from it. It's always good to have someone to wait for. How many widows complain that they have no one to wait for. I'm waiting for my husband, but he's not coming home. That's the hopelessness of having no one to wait for. That's how God designed our salvation, that we are saved for hope, so that there is always someone to wait for, something to wait for. You mothers are always waiting for your children to grow up. This is how your life will be spent. And that is good. It's a gift to be able to wait for someone.

We have hope, reasonable hope, certain hope, "if it leads to a goal, and we can be certain of that goal, if that goal is so significant that it justifies the effort required to get there," that's

good. Each of the MECS groups points to the future. It is a gift that we are on our way. Let's think like that. It is not imperfection. That's the whole point of redemption, that incompleteness.

"But here the question arises," says the Holy Father, "what this hope can be that allows the claim that we are redeemed because of this hope and simply because we have it. And what certainty flows from this?"

Hope and faith are very closely related. Pope Benedict gives the first chapter this title: faith is hope. "Before examining the questions often asked today, we must be a little more precise about what Scripture says about hope." Brothers and sisters, to speak of hope in this cruel situation that Father Laszlo has outlined, we must think in precise terms. We cannot waffle. What does Scripture say about hope?

"For hope is a central word of the biblical faith." Let me stop here. It always annoys me when Reverend Fathers - even if they are bishops - talk about optimism: we are optimists. We know what optimism is, we pick out the good things we like from reality and we smile. That is not hope. We are not optimists, we are hopeful people, brothers and sisters. I would very much like you to take it home to every continent. Optimism is not Christian speech. Christian speech is hope.

So hope is "a central word of biblical faith; so much so that the words faith and hope seem to be interchangeable in several places. Thus, Hebrews links the fullness of faith quite closely with the unswerving confession of hope." Faith is intimately connected with hope.

"When Peter, in his first letter, calls Christians to be always ready to give an account of the basis of their hope - in Greek, *logos* - 'hope' means the same as 'faith'."

"The extent to which the consciousness of the early Christians was determined by the gift of a reliable hope was also revealed in the way they compared Christian life with life before faith, or with the situation of followers of other religions. Paul reminds the Ephesians of how, before their encounter with Christ, they had been 'living without hope and without God in the world.'"

Dear brothers and sisters! Let us look around! Here in Hungary and in the cities it has become fashionable to have no church funerals. All kinds of - I say - nonsense is invented. How do they bury here? The husband of a former student of mine died. I asked, how did you bury him? She said, according to the ancient Hungarian custom. They got a shaman and a shaman's drum. It was the pagan, tribal religion of the early Hungarians. So they bury according to the ancient Hungarian custom, without hope. Another young woman - I didn't know her - also had a non-church funeral, but they projected slides of her life, including her first communion photo. They make up all sorts of parades, but there is no hope here. This kind of world in the spiritual warfare is without God and without hope. These two realities are closely related: God and hope, godlessness and hopelessness. This is where the crowd is going, the mainstream, as it is fashionable to say.

"Of course, they knew they had gods, they had religion, but their gods were questioned, and no hope sprang from contradictory myths. Despite their gods, they lived 'without God' and

therefore in a dark world, with a dark future." In Latin, the Pope quotes an old Hellenic phrase: *In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus* - 'from nothing to nothing, how quickly we return'. That was life without God and without hope. From nothing to nothing, how quickly we return!

God and hope go together. I have been quoting a lot lately the fundamental saying of the Camaldolese: the earth turns, the cross stands. This is our hope. The earth turns, the cross stands. We are not without God and without hope, but believers in God, hopeful, because we know that while the earth turns, the cross stands. In this sense Paul "says to the Thessalonians: do not be sad, 'like the rest who have no hope.' Here again, the distinctive characteristic of Christians is that they have a future: not that they knew in detail what lay ahead, but that they knew in principle that their lives were not going to nowhere."

I have dealt with quite a lot of young people in my life. When they ask me if there is life after death, I just tell them this: kids, when a couple decides to have a child, the first thing they do when he pops his head out of his mother's womb is not to wring his neck. If one believes there is a God and God is love, one does not believe in annihilation. To believe in God and think in the grave pit or the urn is silly, inconsistent. To believe in the God who is love is clearly linked to hope. So don't mourn like heathens, he says. This is not about mourning, but about hope. In this unfortunate spiritual battle we seem to be losing. This cannot happen if there is a God and we believe in Him.

A very important concept is brought here by the Holy Father. He says: "We can therefore now say that Christianity was not just 'good news', as we used to say, the communication of a hitherto unknown content. In today's language we could say: the Christian message is not only 'informative', or 'informing', but rather 'performative', or 'transforming'."

Again, I would love to put those two words on your hearts. Whether for us what I have said so far is merely informative, or performative, permeating our lives?

The Holy Father calls Christians by many names. In one of his recent speeches he said that we should not be 'ornamental' Christians. This is the man who stops at the informative level. The performative is like St. Paul, who cannot remain silent. I want to quote St. John: what we have seen with our eyes, what we have touched with our hands, we proclaim to you the word of life. Life has appeared so that you may be in communion with us, because we are in communion with Him.

Informative and performative Christianity. John could say it about himself - group leaders! - be in communion with us, because we are in communion with Him. That would be MECS, too. Those who are leaders at such and such a level, the essence of it is that we are in communion with Him, and if you are in communion with us, you are in communion with Him. Be very, very careful not to let those who come to us or ourselves get bogged down in informational Christianity! It must be performative! Let what we believe permeate us! You cannot evangelise with a boring face.

So Christianity, Pope Benedict goes on to say, "is not a communication of something that is known, but a communication that produces facts and changes lives." This is performative.

There was a Marxist teacher, back in the days of flourishing socialism, who used to attend the religious education of students. One day he came up to me, not incognito - he said he was a Marxist teacher. He taught Marxism. He comes to me after one of my classes, he says, "Listen! I teach from the cathedra that true communion can only come about on a Marxist basis. Everything else is a sham. You have real community, and I have not even a sham community." I once had a long talk with him about Christ. He knew St. Augustine, he recited what he said about Christ - informatively. But the performative thing was what he said, that I don't even have a sham community, and you have a real community - under socialism! Here is the revival of the CFM. I would be happy if it were linked to Hungary.

"Those who have hope live differently. He has been given the gift of a new life." So the hope and the spring that our Pope is talking about, Pope Francis, they are linked. A man of hope is a man of spring. But what is this hope?

I am not going to read Pope Benedict's speech. Here he quotes Sister Josephine Bakhita. She was perhaps Sudanese, she is beatified. Bakhita Josephina was sold as a slave, she had a cruel history, I don't know how many hundreds of wounds were found on her body. In the end, she got taken to an Italian general. Poor Bakhita didn't care, she expected to be beaten by another master there that day. And she realized, after a long time, that Paron, the boss, my master, doesn't beat me. He loves me. With this she comes to the reality of love, to faith. God, who is love - she knows - definitively loves me. The end of her life will be to go to be a nun and be venerated as a saint today. This is performative Christianity. When she experienced firsthand - literally - what it means that there is love, definitive love.

"Let us return to the early Church before we ask the question: can an encounter with God, who in Christ has shown us his face and opened his heart to us, be more for us than merely 'informative'; namely, can it be 'performative', that is, life-transforming, so that we can know ourselves redeemed in the hope that this encounter represents. It is not difficult to see that the experience of the little African slave girl Bakhita was also the experience of many beaten and enslaved people in the age of nascent Christianity. Christianity did not bring any revolutionary message to transform society." - Referring to Spartacus, the Holy Father then recounts the inside of the letter to Philemon.

Brothers and sisters, we must love the Letter to Philemon very much. There is nothing aggressive about it. He sends Onesimus back to Philemon, baptized. He leaves him as a slave, but "take him as your brother". This is performative Christianity. It is not the society, not the structure - here in MECS too -, not the structures that we need to change, there will be no renewal from that. Instead, as leaders, as members of communities, we should start this performative life.

There is a very nice chapter in this section. The Holy Father brings out how in the early Church hope appears on the side of the sarcophagi. The Holy Father says that "on the early sarcophagi, the figure of Christ is seen mainly in two forms: as a philosopher and as a shepherd. In those days, philosophy was not a difficult academic discipline as we know it today, but the philosopher was the man who could teach the most important art: the art of how to be human in the right way - the art of living and dying. People knew, of course, that

many of those who went about the world as philosophers, as teachers of life, were charlatans who made money with their words but had nothing to say about real life."

"All the more reason to look for a true philosopher who could really show the way to life. It is only at the beginning of the 3rd century that the figure of Christ as the true philosopher first appears on a child's sarcophagus in Rome in connection with the resurrection of Lazarus." The Pope does not hesitate to describe what Christ, raising Lazarus, looks like on this child sarcophagus.

He is a true philosopher, "holding the Gospel in one hand and the philosopher's staff in the other. With this staff he conquers death; the Gospel brings the truth which the philosophers of the wagon have sought in vain. In this image, which was to remain in sarcophagus art for a long time afterwards, we see what both educated and simple men found in Christ: he tells us who man really is and what he must do to be truly man. He shows us the way, and that way is truth. He is both, and therefore he is also the life we all long for. He also shows the way through death; only the true Master of life is the one who can do this."

Let me stop here. When our Lord Jesus was carved again and again on the sarcophagi as a philosopher, it was because our ancestors believed: I am the way, the truth and the life. Here in Budapest, on the façade of St Stephen's Basilica, in gold cast in huge letters, is the inscription *Ego sum via, veritas et vita*. Someone looked up at this sentence and knew what it meant - and was converted.

That's why on the sarcophagi Christ is there as a philosopher with glasses - think of it, in the 3rd century - with glasses and a stick. *Ego sum via, veritas et vita*. I am the way, the truth and the life. This is the basis of hope. So faith and hope. He who has no faith is without hope. Whoever believes this is full of hope.

Now comes the image of the good shepherd. "In the figure of the shepherd, too, the early Church could relate to the prototypes of Roman art. At that time, the shepherd was a common expression of the dream of a serene and simple life that people longed for in the hustle and bustle of the big city." The Hungarian folk song, I tell our guests, also says that the shepherd is doing well. The shepherd was not a doomed creature in Hungarian thought, nor in early Christian thought. So they carved the shepherd on the sarcophagus.

The shepherd, I repeat, 'was the general expression of the dream of a serene and simple life, which people longed for in the hustle and bustle of the big city. Now, however, the image has been interpreted from a new background that gives it a deeper meaning." He quotes Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want [...] Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me."

We see the connection: the philosopher, there in the Hellenic world, what could he say about death? Death has nothing to do with us, because we are still alive, we are not dead; and if we are dead, we are no longer alive, so what do we care. That's as far as Greek philosophy got. And Jesus can deal with death.

The image of the good shepherd in the Old Testament: even in the dark valley of the shadow of death, you are with me. Let me tell you about my experience as a young priest. I went to a deathbed to hear a confession. The old man began to tell his woe, and suddenly he stopped: "But what am I talking about? - he looked at the crucifix - "For the dear Saviour also suffered!" In their minds he was there, and he was risen.

"The true shepherd is he who knows even the way through the valley of the shadow of death; he who, on the path of final solitude, where no one can accompany me, comes with me and leads me along: he himself has walked this path; he has descended into the kingdom of the dead, conquered death, and returned to accompany us now, and to give us the assurance that, if we are with him, we can walk the path. This assurance is that there is someone who will accompany me in death and 'protect me with his rod and his staff'. Do you know the difference between a rod and a staff? I learned this from Pope Benedict. The rod was the one that when the sheep came to a stream and didn't dare to cross, he would poke the sheep with the rod and it would cross. And the stick was to keep the game away. These are the shepherds' pictures of sarcophagi. With a stick and a rod. They are not synonymous.

Our hope is based on Jesus Christ, who died and rose again. Father Laszlo quoted the Book of Revelation. It is full of hope. We were in the third or fourth grade of high school, and Father Fidel was reading the Book of Revelation, and he said - I remember his phrasing - "Boys, boys, love the Book of Revelation, because it's about the future!" Every sentence in the Book of Revelation could be quoted when we talk about hope, because it is about the future. Brothers and sisters, we are therefore men of the spring.

In our everyday practices, what is the expression of hope? Prayer. When we are asked to pray for someone, we wish that young or old person to get from point A to point B. And it is about hope.

Our Pope Benedict takes it further: work. In work, we also accomplish something, we get from point A to point B. We take the dirty dish out of the sink, we put it away as a clean dish. But I could also talk about men's work. Work is always about hope. The hardest thing is not to work. Many times we are so proud to take care of our elders. He would much rather care for others than be cared for. It is a great gift to work. Man's relationship to work is through sin; [work] is essentially a gift, it serves the development of the person, and makes the whole created world more beautiful, if it is done with attention to God.

The struggle with suffering. In suffering, too, man goes from point A to point B. In my 920 days of being in hospital, people who visited me said we didn't think you would walk. It's true that I'm not a competitive runner, at most a Paralympian, but those 920 days were a great gift because I got from point A to point B. And hope - God gave me the gift of serenity. A great gift! What we do in the MECS should not smell of sweat, but it should be a joyful service! In doing so, we are all witnessing to hope. The army does not march after an uncertain horn. This is the hope in our work, in our service, which we have been given as a gift.

Once again I take the picture of Pope Francis, I take another picture. Baptism makes you a Christ-bearer - this is his 29th discourse on hope. "There was a time," says Pope Francis, "when churches were built facing East." We know that in ancient church architecture, the sanctuary was always in the east, the exit was always in the west. And the western wall - we took this from the Egyptians who buried their dead on the west bank of the Nile - the west is the realm of death. In one of the royal tombs in Egypt, there's a beautiful series of paintings of what the sun has to fight against the darkness until it rises in the morning. So, in the old days, when people went into the temple - they always went in the morning - they faced the rising sun in the temple. Urban architecture, urbanisation, has taken away this treasure. As the place gave itself - we have forgotten the East. The ancient man who entered the church saw the light in the morning, the rising sun. Ex oriente lux.

This is Christianity. I quote Pope Francis: 'The people entered the sacred building through a doorway that opened to the west, and walking along the nave of the church, they turned to the east. This was an important symbol for ancient man, but over the course of history this allegory has gradually disappeared. We, the people of the modern age, are much less able to grasp the great signs of the universe, almost never noticing such details. The west is the twilight sky where the light goes out. The East, on the other hand, is the place where the first rays of dawn overcome the darkness and focus our attention on Christ, the sun rising from the horizon on high.'

"The ancient rites of baptism required that the first part of the creed be recited by the believer facing west." So the renewal of the baptismal vow was a real gym class in ancient times. First they had to face west, to say no to evil, to darkness, then they had to face east, and facing east, where the sun rises, they said yes to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are this people who believe that the sun rises every morning.