The Optimism of the Modern Age and Christian Hope

IN THE FIRST HALF of the I970's one of our circle undertook a journey to Holland, whose Church had increasingly become a talking point-seen by some as an image of hope of the better Church of tomorrow, regarded by others as a symptom of the disintegration that was the logical consequence of the attitude adopted. With some curiosity we awaited the report our friend gave us after his return home. Because he was an honest man and an accurate observer, all the phenomena of the disintegration were carefully mentioned: empty seminaries, religious orders with no novices, priests and religious who in shoals were turning their backs on their vocation, the disappearance of confession, the dramatic decline in Mass attendance, and so on. Of course the innovatory experiments were mentioned too, even though they could not change anything with regard to these symptoms of decline but rather confirmed them. The real surprise about this report came in the summing up it led up to: despite everything a wonderful Church, since nowhere was there any pessimism, everyone was looking forward to the morrow with optimism. The phenomenon of general optimism allowed all the decadence and destruction to be forgotten: it sufficed

to make up for all that was negative.

I thought to myself what would one say of a businessman whose accounts were completely in the red but who, instead of recognizing this evil, finding out its reasons, and courageously taking steps against it, wanted to commend himself to his creditors solely through optimism? What should one's attitude be to an optimism that was quite simply opposed to reality? I tried to get to the bottom of the matter and looked at a number of hypotheses. Optimism could possibly be merely a cover behind which lurked the despair that one was trying to overcome in this way. It could be something worse: possibly this optimism was the method come up with by those who desired the destruction of the old Church and under the guise of reform wanted without much fuss to build a totally different Church, a Church after their own taste-something they could not set in motion if their intention was noticed too soon. In this case the public optimism would be a way of reassuring the faithful in order to create the climate in which one could dismantle the Church as quietly as possible and gain power over it. There would thus be two parts to the phenomenon of optimism: on the one hand it presupposed the trustfulness, indeed the blindness of the faithful who let themselves be reassured by fine words; on the other hand it consisted of a deliberate strategy to rebuild the Church so that in it no other, higher will-God's will-would disturb us any longer and

prick the conscience but instead our own will would have the last word. It would thus ultimately be the optimism to liberate ourselves at last from the claim of the living God over our life, a claim that had become irksome for us. This optimism of the arrogance of apostasy would however make use of a naive optimism on the other side and indeed deliberately nurture it, as if this kind of optimism were nothing other than the Christian's certainty of hope, the divine virtue of hope, whereas in reality it is a parody of faith and hope.

I considered yet another hypothesis: possibly this optimism that had been discovered was simply a variant of the liberal faith in continuous progress-the bourgeois substitute for the lost hope of faith. Finally I came to the conclusion that probably all these different components were at work together without it being easy to determine which of them had the decisive weight and when and where.

Somewhat later my work led me to occupy myself with the work of Ernst Bloch, for whom the "principle of hope" is the central figure in his thinking. According to Bloch hope is the ontology of what does not yet exist. The right kind of philosophy ought not to aim at investigating what is (that would be conservatism or reaction): it must rather-and this would be its true business-prepare what is not yet. What is has the value that it perishes: the world that is really worthy of life has yet to be built. The task of creative humanity

would thus be to create this right kind of world that does not yet exist, and for this supreme task philosophy would have a decisive function to fulfill: it is the laboratory of hope, the anticipation in thought of the world of tomorrow-the anticipation of a rational and human world that would no longer be the result of accident but would be thought out and operated by us human beings and our reason. What surprised and struck me against the background of the experiences I have just recounted was the use of the word "optimism" in this context: for Bloch (and for many theologians who follow him) optimism is the shape and expression of belief in history and thus obligatory for someone who wishes to serve liberation, the revolutionary ushering in of the new world and the new man. According to this, hope would be the virtue of an aggressive ontology, the dynamic force of the march towards utopia.

It dawned on me as the result of this reading that "optimism" is the theological virtue of a new god and a new religion, the virtue of deified history, of a god "history," and thus of the great god of modern ideologies and their promise. This promise is utopia, to be realized by means of the "revolution;' which for its part represents a kind of mythical godhead, as it were a "God the son" in relation to the "God the father" of history. In the Christian system of virtues despair, that is to say, the radical antithesis of faith and hope, is labeled as the sin against the Holy Spirit

because it excludes the latter's power to heal and to forgive and thereby rejects salvation+ Corresponding to this is the fact that in the new religion "pessimism" is the sin of all sins, for to doubt optimism, progress, utopia is a frontal attack on the spirit of the modern age: it is to dispute its fundamental creed on which its security rests, even though this is always under threat in view of the weakness of the sham god of history.

I was reminded of all this by the debate that was aroused in 1985 by the appearance of The Ratzinger Report. The indignation sparked by this modest little work culminated in the accusation that it was a pessimistic book. In many places efforts were made to stop its being sold, because a heresy of this magnitude simply could not be tolerated. The molders of public opinion placed it on the index of forbidden books: the new inquisition let its strength be felt. It showed once again that there is no worse sin against the spirit of the age than to show oneself lacking in optimism. It was not at all a question whether what was claimed was true or false, whether the diagnosis was correct or not: I have not been aware of people taking the time to investigate such old-fashioned questions. The criterion was quite simple: "Is it optimistic or not?"– and it completely failed this test. The discussion that was aroused over the use of the term "restoration," which did not really have anything to do with what was actually said in the book itself, was only a part of the debate: the dogma of progress

seemed to be called into question. With the rage that only sacrilege can call forth people let fly at this denial of the god of history and its promises. I was struck by a parallel in the field of theology. Many people link prophecy on the one hand with criticism (revolution) and on the other with optimism, and in this form make it the central criterion for distinguishing between true and false theology.

Why am I saying all this? I think one can only understand the true nature of Christian hope and can only live it afresh if one sees through for what they are its imitations and distortions that are trying to foist themselves on to it. The greatness and the reasonableness of Christian hope come to light again only if we liberate ourselves from the pinchbeck allure of their secular imitations. Before we can take up the business of reflecting positively on the nature of Christian hope it therefore seems to me important to summarize and complete the findings we have achieved so far. We said there was today an ideological optimism that could be described as the fundamental act of faith of modern ideologies. This now needs to be expanded under three heads:

(I) Ideological optimism, this surrogate for Christian hope, has to be distinguished from the kind of optimism that springs from someone's temperament and nature. This kind of optimism is simply a natural psychological disposition that can be linked equally with Christian hope or with ideological optimism but

that does not coincide with either. Temperamental optimism is a fine thing and useful in life's hardships and suffering: who would not rejoice over the natural happiness and confidence that shines out from some people, and who would not want it for himself or herself? Like all natural tendencies, this kind of optimism is first of all a morally neutral quality; and again like all predispositions it must be developed and cultivated in order to play a positive role in shaping someone's moral physiognomy. Then by means of Christian hope it can grow and become yet purer and more profound: on the other hand it can collapse into an empty and misguided existence and become a mere facade. What remains important for our discussion is not to confuse it with ideological optimism but at the same time not to equate it with Christian hope, which as we have said can build on it but as a theological virtue is a human quality of much greater profundity and of a different class.

(2) Ideological optimism can exist both on a liberal and on a Marxist foundation. In the first case it is faith in progress through evolution and through the scientifically guided development of human history. In the second case it is faith in the dialectical movement of history, in progress through the class struggle and revolution. The contrasts between these two fundamental tendencies of thought are obvious: both are again split up into different variants of the basic pattern-"heresies" that spring from the same trunk.

But the differences that are visible, especially in the political field, should not deceive one about the ultimate profound unity of the thinking that is at work in them. Their kind of optimism is a secularization of Christian hope: they depend ultimately on the transition from the transcendent God to the god "history:' It is here that is to be found the profound irrationalism of these views, despite all their superficial rationality.

(3) Finally we must pay attention to the different ways in which optimism and hope act in order to get the nature of each in view. The goal of optimism is the utopia of the finally and everlastingly liberated and fortunate world, the perfect society in which history reaches its goal and reveals its divinity. The immediate aim, which as it were guarantees the reliability of the ultimate goal, is the success of our ability to do things. The goal of Christian hope is the kingdom of God, that is the union of world and man with God through an act of divine power and love. The immediate aim that shows us the way and confirms the rightness of the ultimate goal is the perpetual presence of this love and this power that accompanies us in what we do and takes us up at the point where the potential of our own ability to act comes to an end. The internal justification for optimism is the logic of history, which goes its own way and presses forward irrevocably towards its goal: the justification of Christian hope is the incarnation of

God's word and love in Jesus Christ.

If we now try to express what has been said in a more philosophical and theological terminology in something approaching the speech and thought of our everyday life, we can say that the goal of the ideologies is finally and ultimately success, in which we are able to realize our own wishes and plans. Our own ability and activity on which we are betting is however aware that ultimately it is guided and confirmed by an irrational fundamental tendency of development; the dynamic of progress means that everything ultimately becomes all right, as I was told recently by a physicist who regarded himself as important when I had the temerity to utter doubts about some modern techniques for handling nascent human life. The aim of Christian hope, by contrast, is a gift, the gift of love, which is given us beyond all our activity: to vouch for the fact that this thing that we cannot control or compel and that is yet the most important thing of all for human beings does exist, and that we are not clutching at thin air in waiting insatiably for it, we have the interventions of God's love in history, most powerfully in the figure of Jesus Christ in whom God's love encounters us in person.

But this means that the product of the promise of optimism is something that we must ultimately produce ourselves, trusting that the blind process of

development in connection with our own activity will finally lead to the right goal. The gift of the promise of hope, on the other hand, is precisely that, a gift that as something already bestowed we await from him who alone can really give: the God who in the midst of history has already begun his age through Jesus. This in turn means that in the first case there is in reality nothing to hope for, because what we are awaiting we must bring about ourselves, and nothing will be given us beyond what we can achieve ourselves. But in the second case real hope does exist beyond all our potential and possibilities, hope in the unbounded love that at the same time is unbounded power."

In reality ideological optimism is merely the facade of a world without hope that is trying to hide from its own despair with this deceptive sham. This is the only explanation for the immoderate and irrational anxiety, this traumatic and violent fear that breaks out when some setback or accident in technological or economic development casts doubt on the dogma of progress. The delight in horrors, the violent gestures of a mutually encouraged fear that we experienced after Chernobyl had something irrational and eerie about it, to the extent that it can only be understood if something much more profound lies behind it than an accident that, however serious, was nevertheless limited. The violence that marks these outbreaks of anxiety and fear is a kind of self-defense against the doubts that threaten belief in the ideal world of the

future, since human beings are by their nature directed toward the future. We cannot live if this fundamental element of our being becomes void.
This is where the problem of death crops up. Ideological optimism is an attempt to have death forgotten by continually talking about history striding forward to the perfect society. The fact that this is to skirt round what is really important and that people are being soothed with a lie becomes obvious whenever death itself moves into the vicinity. The hope of faith, on the other hand, reveals to us the true future beyond death, and it is only in this way that the real instances of progress that do exist become a future for us, for me, for every individual.

Three Biblical Examples of the Nature of Christian Hope

To understand the nature of Christian hope from within let us now simply turn to the basic document, the Bible-though not in the sense of a systematic investigation of what it has to say about hope. Instead I would like to single out just three passages where the essential distinction between "optimism" and hope becomes quite clear and where through this method of contrast what is specific and distinctive about believing hope is clarified.

The Prophet Jeremiah

The classical example of the distinction we are talking

about is provided for me by the prophet Jeremiah. Because of his pessimism he was condemned and imprisoned. The official optimism of the military, the nobility, the priesthood, and the establishment prophets demanded the conviction that God would protect his city and his temple. God was thus degraded to become the guarantee of human success and misused as the justification for irrationalism. The real, empirically comprehensible situation excluded a Jewish military success against the Babylonians. The rational outcome of a sober analysis of the situation had therefore to be to strive for an honorable compromise, as long as the enemy was prepared to concede this. The official optimism on the contrary demanded a continuation of the struggle and the firm conviction that this would end in victory. The contrast between Jeremiah on the one hand and Israel's religious and political elite on the other provides a valid representation of the nature of the contrast between on the one hand a theology that has become politicized, irrational, and directed at ideological power, and on the other the realism of the believer who incorporates genuine morality and political rationality. In this realism the different levels of human being and human thought are related to each other correctly without confusion or false distinction. From the point of view of official optimism the prophet's realism appeared as gross and inadmissible pessimism.

Typical of this opposition is the encounter between Jeremiah and Hananiah, the prophet of success who justified and defended the official optimism. Jeremiah, the true prophet, depends by contrast on the realism of reason as a moral duty, condemns ideological optimism, and lets God's promise and its in fact unconquerable hope become visible (Jer. 28). The criterion that Jeremiah lays down in v. 9 remains valid: the proclamation of empirical successes is to be judged by empirical criteria and cannot rely on theology. Anyone who today proclaims an ideal and perfect society for tomorrow must provide empirical proof for this announcement and cannot gloss over his or her claim with theological arguments. The message of God's kingdom and salvation cannot be adduced as proof that certain social techniques will bring forth a society that functions within history and does so empirically.

In Israel's catastrophic defeat, the collapse of all the preceding varieties of optimism, Jeremiah the pessimist showed himself to be the true bearer of hope. For the others everything had necessarily to have come to an end with this defeat: for him everything at this moment was beginning anew. God is never defeated, and his promises do not collapse in human defeats: indeed, they become greater, as love grows to the extent that the beloved has need of it. Israel's defeat and the official extinction of its national existence became the hour of the "pessimist"

Jeremiah and his message of hope: in this moment the prophet finds immortal words of comfort. He provides the power to start again and to hope, which endured through the darkness of seventy years' exile up to the return home. It was precisely in this hour that the proclamation of the new covenant was born (Jer. 31:31-34), the new presence of God through his Spirit in our hearts. From this hour date words that at the last supper Jesus was to take up again and disclose in their full meaning (cf. Luke 22:20)—in the hour of his defeat by death, which was also his final and definitive victory.

For his rejection of official optimism Jeremiah was condemned as a pessimist. But this "pessimism" is inseparably one with the greater and unconquerable hope that he proclaimed: indeed, it was only this true hope that enabled him to display the realism of resistance to mendacious optimism. In this inseparable unity of realism and true hope Jeremiah is incidentally the representative of all true prophets. The theory put forward by many scholars that all great prophets have been prophets of doom is false. But it is correct that their genuinely theological hope did not coincide with superficial optimism and that, as bearers of true hope, these great figures were at the same time relentless critics of current parodies of hope.

The Revelation of St. John

A second example that will help elucidate our

question is provided by the Apocalypse, or Revelation, of St. John. The vision of history that is displayed there represents the greatest possible antithesis one can imagine to faith in perpetual progress. To the extent that the course of history depends on human decisions it appears in this vision as a perpetual recurrence of the episode of the tower of Babel. Men and women are continually trying afresh to build bridges to heaven through their own technical ability, that is, by their own power to turn themselves into God. They are trying to give man that complete freedom, that absolute well-being, that unlimited power that seems to him to be the nature of the divine that one would like to bring down to one's own existence from the unattainable heights of the totally other. These efforts that sustain human behavior in all periods of history rest however on falsehood, on a "suppression of the truth": man is not God; he is a finite and limited being, and by no power of whatever kind can he make himself what he is not. For this reason all these attempts, however gigantic their beginnings may be, must end with collapse into destruction: their foundations will not hold.

But alongside this one historical factor—the Sisyphuslike efforts to bring heaven down to earth—the Apocalypse knows a second force in history: the hand of God. Superficially it appears as punitive, but God does not create evil and does not will the suffering of his creatures. He is not an envious God.

In reality this hand of God is the force that gives hope to history despite and in opposition to the power of self-destructive behavior based on falsehood: the hand of God impedes man when it comes to the final implementation of self-destruction. God does not permit the annihilation of his creation. That is the meaning of his action at the building of the tower of Babel, the meaning of all his interventions described in the Apocalypse. What is represented there as divine punishment is not a scourge wielded in a positivistic sense from outside but the becoming visible of the internal legal status of a human action that is opposed to the truth and thus is directed toward nothing, toward death. The "hand of God" that is revealed in the inner resistance of being to its own destruction prevents the march into the abyss and thus bears the sheep that has gone astray back to the pasture of being, of love. Even when it is painful to be taken out of the thicket we have sought ourselves and to be brought back, it is nevertheless the act of our redemption, the event that gives us hope. And who could not see the hand of God even today grasping hold of man at the uttermost limit of his destructive rage and his perversions and preventing him from going further?

If we put everything together we can say that in the Apocalypse there is displayed the same mutual relationship between apparent "pessimism" and radical hope that we found in Jeremiah. The only thing

is that what in the first case referred to a particular historical moment and its complex of situations is now extended to a comprehensive vision of history as a whole. The Apocalypse is far removed from the promise of continual progress: still less does it recognize the possibility of establishing a once and for all fortunate and definitive form of society through our own human activity. Despite or rather precisely because of this rejection of irrational expectations it is a book of hope.

What it is ultimately telling us is this: despite all the horrors human history will not be drowned in the night of self-destruction; God will not let it be torn from his hands. The divine judgments, the great sufferings in which humankind is submerged are not instances of destruction but serve the salvation of humankind. Even "after Auschwitz," even after the most tragic catastrophe of history, God remains God: he remains good with an indestructible goodness. He remains the redeemer in whose hands man's destructive and cruel activity is transformed by his love. Man is not the only actor on the stage of history, and that is why death does not have the last word in it. The fact that there is this other person who is active is alone the firm and certain anchor of a hope that is stronger and more real than all the frightfulness of the world.

The Sermon on the Mount

My third example I take from the sermon on the mount, and essentially I would like to restrict myself to the beatitudes. In their linguistic and philosophical structure they are paradoxes. Let us take only one to demonstrate this quite graphically: "Blessed are those who mourn" (Matt. 5:4). To underline the paradox we could translate this as: "Blessed are those who are not overloaded with good fortune:' The word "blessed" in the beatitudes has in this way nothing semantically to do with words like "happy" or "well." It is precisely this that the person who mourns is not. "Happy are those who are not happy" is how one would have to translate it to bring out the entire paradox.

But what strange kind of good fortune is it then that is meant by the word "blessed"? I think the word has two temporal dimensions: it embraces both present and future, and each in a different way. The present aspect consists of the fact that those addressed are told of a special closeness to them of God and his kingdom. This would then mean: It is precisely in the sphere of suffering and mourning that God with his kingdom is particularly close. When someone suffers and complains, God's heart is moved and affected in a special way. The complaint invokes his coming down to deliver this person (cf. Exod. 3:7). This presence of God's concern that is lurking in the word "blessed" includes a future: God's presence that is still hidden will one day be manifest. Hence what the phrase is saying is: Do not be afraid in your distress;

God is close to you, and he will be your great comfort. The proportion of present and future varies in the different beatitudes, but the basic relationship is always the same.

In the paradoxes of the beatitudes we find reflected precisely the paradox of the figure of Jeremiah as well as the Apocalypse's portrait of history. The particular element of the beatitudes consists of the fact that the prophetic paradox now becomes the model of Christian life and existence. The beatitudes tell us: "If you live as Christians, you will always find yourselves in this paradoxical tension:' What is meant becomes clear in the portrait of the apostle that Paul sketches in his second letter to the Corinthians. This picture seems to have developed precisely from the paradoxes of the sermon on the mount and illustrates it from what the apostle of the heathen experienced in his own life: "We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Cor. 6:8b-10).

A wonderful summary of this entire paradox of Christian existence, again shaped by the experience he has suffered and lived through, is to be found in 2 Cor. 4:l6: "Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day." Our

life's linear progression towards death is answered by the circle of divine love, which becomes a new line for us—the perpetual and progressive renewal of life in us, with life increasing simply according to the relationship that is established between me and the truth that has become a person, Jesus. The inescapable linearity of our path towards death is transformed by the directness of our path to Jesus: "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's" (Rom. 14:8).

Let us return to the beatitudes. In this matter we can now establish within the Bible a double line of movement. On the one hand the path leads from the figures of actual experience like Jeremiah and other prophets to the universally valid form expressed in the sermon on the mount, with the beatitudes breaking this one pattern down into a variety of forms. The beatitudes are not, as they are often misunderstood to be, a comprehensive ethical conspectus, a kind of New Testament Decalogue, but a representation of the single Christian paradox realized in different ways in keeping with the different fates men and women encounter in their lives; in general they will not all be found together to the same degree united in one person. On the other hand new patterns of actualization are continually emerging from this general form, as we have found in the case of the apostle Paul.

In order to grasp the true profundity of the

beatitudes and thereby the core of Christian hope, we must now bring to light yet another aspect that, as far as I can see, is little regarded in modern exegesis but that, I am convinced, is decisive for a faithful interpretation of the sermon on the mount as a whole: its inner logic depends on the facts we are about to consider. What I have in mind is the Christological dimension of this text.

To make it clear as quickly as possible what I am thinking of I shall start once again from an actual example a brief interpretation of the closing passage of Matthew's version of the sermon on the mount (Matt. 7:24-27):

> Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

The immediately obvious meaning of the parable is a warning of Jesus to build one's own life on firm ground. The firm ground that stands fast in every

storm is the word of Jesus himself. This immediate "moral" obviously has its own absolute worth. But the profundity as well as the promise of this passage becomes completely clear only if one pays attention to the hidden connection with another passage of Matthew: Matt. 16: I 3-20. Here too Jesus is speaking of a house that is to be constructed and that will be built on the rock so that it will not be destroyed by the powers of the abyss. The image and the language in both passages are the same down to the details, so that a connection is obvious. But in this second passage it is Jesus himself who builds the house: he behaves like the wise man who chooses a foundation of rock—he whom the same Gospel calls "wisdom" (Matt. 11:19). The old image of wisdom who built herself a house (Prov. 9:1-6) comes to mind.

Thus behind the moral significance the Christological level becomes visible, and it is this that gives the moral aspect the dimension of hope: if we remain alone with our own strength we do not succeed in building our life as a firmly established house. Our strength and our wisdom are not enough for that. Is human life therefore absurd, is it despair—a meaningless path towards death? The gospel tells us: there is the one who is truly wise; he has found the rock, and he himself (his word) is the rock; he himself has laid the foundation of the house. We are wise if we leave the foolish isolation of self-realization that builds on the sand of our own ability. We are wise

if we do not try in isolation, with everyone acting for himself or herself, to build the purely private house of our own individual life. It is our wisdom to build the joint house with him so that we ourselves become his living house.

If it is right with Vatican II to read the Bible as a whole and as a unity, we should perhaps go yet one step further. In the Apocalypse we are told that the dragon-the great opponent of the redeemer-stood "on the sand of the sea" (Rev. 12:17). Despite his great words, despite his immense and almost miraculous technical ability, despite his power and his crafty cunning, the monster does not know true wisdom but rounds off the image of the foolish man, just as Christ is the image of the wise man. And that is why the dragon ultimately disappears just as the house built on sand does: its fall was great. Once again in the contrast between Christ and the dragon we find the paradox of Christian hope, its empirical miserableness and its unconquerability: "Dying, and behold we live" (2 Cor. 6:9, cf. 4:7—12).

To return to the sermon on the mount: the closing parable with its hardly mistakable Christological background is for me a key that opens a door into the profundity of the text. The secret subject of the sermon on the mount is Jesus. It is only on the basis of this subject that we can discover the entire

meaning of this key text of Christian faith and life. The sermon on the mount is not some exaggerated and unreal moral lecture that loses any definite relationship to our life and seems completely impractical. Nor is it, as the opposite hypothesis would have, merely a mirror in which it becomes clear that everyone is and remains a sinner in everything and can only reach salvation through unconditional grace. This contrast between moralism and the theory of pure grace, with a complete antithesis between law and gospel, does not help one to enter into the text but rather to repel it from one. Christ is the middle, the mean, that unites the two, and it is only discovering Christ in the text that opens it up for us and enables it to become a word of hope. This cannot be followed through in detail here: a hint will have to suffice. If we get to the bottom of the beatitudes, the secret subject Jesus appears everywhere. He it is in whom it becomes clear what it means to be "poor in spirit": it is he who mourns, who is meek, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who is the merciful. He is pure in heart, he is the peacemaker, he is persecuted for righteousness' sake. All the sayings of the sermon on the mount are flesh and blood in him. In this way we can finally discern the text's twofold anthropological intention, its actual definite instructions for us:

(a) The sermon on the mount is a summons to follow Jesus Christ in discipleship. He alone is

"perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect" (the demand reaching into the depths of one's being in which the individual instructions of the sermon on the mount are condensed and united: Matt. 5:48). On our own we cannot "be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect"—but we must be to correspond to the task our nature lays upon us. We cannot do this, but we can follow him, cling to him, become his. If we belong to him as his limbs or members, then through our participation we become what he is: his goodness becomes ours. What the father says in the parable of the prodigal son is realized in us: "All that is mine is yours" (Luke I 5:31). The moralism of the sermon on the mount that is all too stiff for us is brought together and transformed into communion with Jesus, into being a disciple of Jesus: in clinging fast to our relationship to him, in friendship with him and in confidence in him.

(b) The second aspect concerns the future hidden in the present. The sermon on the mount is a word of hope. In fellowship with Jesus what is impossible becomes possible: the camel goes through the eye of a needle (Mark 10:25). In being one with him we become capable too of fellowship with God and thus of conclusive salvation. To the extent that we belong to Jesus his qualities are realized in us too-the beatitudes, the perfection of the Father. The letter to the Hebrews explains this connection of Christology and hope when it says we have a sure and steadfast

anchor of our life that enters into the inner shrine behind the curtain, there where Jesus has entered (Heb. 6:19-20). The new man is not utopian: he exists, and to the extent that we are united with him hope is present and in no way merely future. Eternal life and the real fellowship and community, liberation, are not utopia, the mere expectation of what does not exist. "Eternal life" is the real life, even today and at present in communion with Jesus. Augustine emphasized this here-and-now quality of Christian hope in his exposition of the saying in Romans: "In this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:24). According to him Paul is teaching not that salvation will be granted us but that we are saved. Of course we do not yet see what we hope for. But we are already the body of the head in whom everything is already present that we are hoping for.

Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas on Christian Hope

Let me conclude this meditation on hope with two brief considerations of the act of hoping, of the way in which hope is to be lived out. In St. Bonaventure's Advent sermons I have found a wonderful parable of hope. The seraphic doctor told his hearers that the movement of hope was like the flight of a bird: in order to fly the bird stretches its wings out as far as possible and applies all its energies to the movement of flight;

as it were it turns itself completely into movement and thus reaches the heights—and flies. To hope is to fly, said Bonaventure: hope demands of us a radical commitment; it asks of us that all our limbs become movement in order to lift off from the pull of the earth's gravity, in order to rise up to the true heights of our being, to God's promises. In this the Franciscan preacher developed a fine synthesis of the doctrine of the external and internal senses. Anyone who hopes, he said, "must lift up his head by directing his thoughts upwards, to the height of our existence, that is, to God. He must lift up his eyes in order to perceive all the dimensions of reality. He must lift up his heart by opening his feelings to the highest love and to all its reflections in the world. He must also move his hands in work. ... " So here too we find the essential element of a theology of work, which belongs to the movement of hope and when properly carried out is a dimension of it.

The supernatural, the great promise, does not push nature to one side. Quite the contrary: it calls forth the commitment of all our energies for the complete opening up of our being, for the unfolding of all its possibilities. To put it another way, the great promise of faith does not destroy our activity, nor does it make it superfluous, but gives it for the first time its proper shape, its place and its freedom. A typical example of this is offered by the history of monasticism. It started with the *fuga saeculi*, the flight

into the desert, the non-world, from a world that was shut in on itself. In this there prevailed the hope that precisely in this nothing as far as the world was concerned, in radical poverty, the everything of God, true freedom, would be found. But it was precisely this freedom of the new life that in the desert allowed the foundation of a new city, a new possibility of human life, a civilization of fraternity, out of which grew islands of life and survival in the collapse of the civilization of the ancient world. "Seek first [the] kingdom [of God] and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well," says our Lord (Matt. 6:33). History confirms what he says: it adds a quite human optimism to theological hope.

The second consideration follows a remark of St. Thomas Aquinas that was then taken up and developed in the Roman Catechism. In his *Summa Theologiae* Thomas says that prayer is the interpretation of hope. Praying is the language of hope. The concluding formula of liturgical prayers, "through Christ our Lord," corresponds to the fact that Christ is realized hope, the anchor of our hoping. In his uncompleted compendium of theology Thomas intended to present the whole of theology in the pattern of faith, hope, and love. In fact the work ends with the first chapter of the second part and thus with the start of the section on hope. And this section in fact offers us an exposition of the Lord's Prayer. The Lord teaches us hope by teaching us his prayer, says

Thomas. The Our Father is the school of hope—its actual practice.

In the Roman Catechism the exposition of the Our Father forms the fourth part of the basic Christian catechesis, alongside the explanation of the creed, of the commandments, and of the sacraments. Here too the Lord's Prayer functions as an exposition of hope. Those who despair do not pray any more because they no longer hope: those who are sure of themselves and their own power do not pray because they rely only on themselves. Those who pray hope in a goodness and in a power that transcend their own capabilities. Prayer is hope in execution.

If to start with we omit the first set of petitions in the Lord's Prayer, we can say that in the second set of petitions our daily cares and anxieties turn to hope. Here we find worry about how we shall make out on earth, peace with our neighbors, and finally the threat that outweighs all threats—the danger of losing the faith, of falling away from God into immeasurable distance from him, of no longer being able to perceive God and thus landing in absolute emptiness, exposed to each and every evil. By means of these worries becoming petitions the way is opened up from wishes and hopes to hope, from the second part of the Lord's Prayer to the first. All our anxieties are ultimately fear of losing love and of the total isolation that follows from this. Thus all our hopes are at bottom hope in the great and boundless love: they are hope in paradise,

the kingdom of God, being with God and like God, sharing his nature (2 Pet. 1:4). All our hopes find their culmination in the one hope: thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The earth will become like heaven, it will itself become heaven. In his will is to be found all our hope. Learning to pray is learning to hope and thus learning to love.