

Called Out of Darkness: Presenting Christian Hope to People with Depression

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*“The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”*¹ These are the words of Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 encyclical, *Spe Salvi*, in which he reignites the flame of Christian hope for the modern world. The notion of hope, both in the encyclical and in the reality of life, is juxtaposed with suffering. While the two may seem at first glance to be opposites, they are actually deeply intertwined.

A particular type of suffering steadily growing in prevalence today is the branch of mental illness known as depression. Affecting about 18 million people at any given time in the United States,² it is a phenomenon spoken of infrequently within the Church, yet one that can influence the mental, emotional, and even spiritual well-being of many Catholics. Held up as a disorder defined by hopelessness, it is one that a Church rooted in faith, hope, and love must explore more deeply and discuss more freely.

This paper will seek to parse out the way the Catholic Church has come to understand both hope and depression, and to lay out effective and practical pastoral strategies for revitalizing a common understanding of Christian hope and presenting it to men and women with depression.

Defining Depression in the Catholic Church

The Church has often been reticent to speak about depression itself, or its correlation to the virtue of hope. It is an admittedly complex subject that demands serious attention, and reviewing what little the members of the hierarchy have written about this subject demonstrates the necessity for a more thorough discourse. Without delving too deeply into a game of

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (Boston: Pauline Books&Media, 2007), par.2.

² The Anxiety and Depression Association of America provides some statistics for rates of depression on their website: <http://www.adaa.org/about-adaa/press-room/facts-statistics>. For the figure of 18 million, combine the rates of Major Depression and Persistent Depressive Disorder.

semantics, it is worthwhile to highlight some insights on depression and hope provided by the Church that need further nuancing and development.

In the secular realm, the term depression is often linked with despair, indicating a depth of sadness and isolation that leaves one feeling devoid of much emotion or interpersonal connection. Depression is also considered synonymous with hopelessness, meaning a loss or lack of belief that one's future holds promise. One may no longer believe that the effort needed to sustain relationships, employment, and so on is "worth it" because the outcome may not be better than the current state.

For Catholics, despair is a rather loaded word that carries additional weight. Dubbed by the Catechism as the act of ceasing "to hope for...personal salvation from God" or for "the forgiveness of [one's] sins," despair is labeled as a "sin against hope."³ This confusion of terms and definitions by the Catechism has led some faith leaders to presume depression to be sinful behavior, and at times to even confuse it with a deliberate choice to refuse hope and to refuse God. The allegation that one's purported "hopelessness" is a sign of spiritual sloth or opposition can arise out of a shallow understanding of the complexity of genuine depression.

This is too complex an argument to unpack in this necessarily brief context, but suffice it to say that this path of conflating terms without sufficient nuance can be a dangerous one. It leads to a blurring of lines between experiences like desolation or acedia and clinical depression.⁴ This is not to say that there is no overlap amongst different conditions on some occasions, but rather to say that one cannot fault one who has clinical depression, as if to say that such a person has been negligent in his or her spiritual life. Modern psychology makes it clear that depression is caused by a combination of "multiple factors, including biological,

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2091.

⁴ For a more in-depth discussion on the differentiation among these terms, consider Aaron Kheriarty's *The Catholic Guide to Depression* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 2012) or James Martin's "Shadows in Prayer: The Seven D's of the Spiritual Life." *America* (March 17, 2008).

psychological, and environmental” conditions that can lie beyond the bounds of any individual choices.⁵

Due to these limited and sometimes confusing interpretations of depression in the Church, many Catholics who experience depression have not been ministered to in the most helpful or healthy ways. There is much work to be done in addressing this, but one focal point for improving ministry to people with depression is on reorienting the understanding of hope to its true Christian sense.

Revitalizing Christian Hope

Turning from the Church’s mixed understandings of depression, it is now important to look at the distinction of Christian hope against more secular or loose interpretations of the term. While hope has been recognized as a central theological virtue for centuries, and volumes could be written on its meaning, Benedict XVI’s relatively recent encyclical *Spe Salvi* offers a particularly strong analysis of Christian hope and its role and importance in the modern world. In this document Pope Benedict XVI writes, “To come to know God...means to receive hope”⁶ for God is “the great hope that sustains the whole of life (cf. *Eph* 2:12)...[and] which holds firm in spite of all disappointments.”⁷ In contrast to a secular understanding of hope as a joyful anticipation of future prospects or a general optimism about one’s life course, Christian hope is anchored in relationship with Christ and points to the joy of life eternal from the midst of earthly existence. It need not explicitly correlate to a happy disposition, but instead involves a faithful trust that the God of Love enters into suffering, and that there is light and life beyond the darkness. Further, Christian hope is not bound to expectations of success in earthly life, but grounded in belief in a blissful eternal life.

⁵ “What is Depression?” *Stanford School of Medicine, Depression Research Clinic*, accessed January 23, 2015, <http://drc.stanford.edu/depression.html>.

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, par.3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, par.27.

In his encyclical, Benedict also addresses the communal nature of hope, consistently calling for Christians to act in a way that “engender[s] hope for us and for others.”⁸ Within this call to community, Benedict also emphasizes the importance of hope in the lives of those who suffer, including those who have mental illnesses. He not only acknowledges the suffering that can accompany mental illness, but also explicitly calls all Christians to respond to this marginalized portion of the population. He considers the act of assisting others in “overcoming mental suffering” to be “among the fundamental requirements of the Christian life and every truly human life.”⁹ This call to action by Pope Benedict XVI is largely the catalyst for the compilation of the remainder of this paper: effective strategies for accompanying others in suffering and methods for acting as beacons of hope for people with depression.

Strategies for Effective Pastoral Ministry

The time has come for all Christians to better embrace and accompany their brothers and sisters who live with depression. In particular, it is vital that ministers within the Church, whether lay or ordained, become better equipped for this responsibility. To be clear, ministers are not replacements for professional counselors. Rather, they are an important supplement that allows for holistic coping and healing. By being able to embrace more fully those Christians who have depression, ministers help to convey the boundless love of Christ and act as beacons of Christian hope. As a synthesis of material so far that is pertinent for these practical strategies, recall that Christian hope is rooted in relationship with Christ, is a communal act, and points toward a hope in eternal life.

Compassion

Benedict XVI astutely states in *Spe Salvi* that “it is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it, and

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love.”¹⁰ In this regard, it is important for ministers to willingly accompany those who experience depression and offer genuine compassion and consolation. Often, well-meaning ministers presume that if depression is a deep sadness, then the best remedy is positivity. By avoiding negative feelings and encouraging a person to be more cheery, ministers may feel they are speeding the process of healing for a person who is suffering. Unfortunately, this naïve approach can be hurtful if a person with depression feels that his or her suffering is not fully acknowledged. Instead, to simply be present with someone in his or her suffering and to engage in meaningful relationship with him or her is to offer an example of Christian hope. Being a compassionate companion for another allows for a sharing in the burden of suffering, wherein the suffering can be “penetrated by the light of love.”¹¹ Furthermore, this opens a line of communication wherein the minister can remind a person with depression that Jesus too understands the pain of suffering, of loneliness, of anguish, and that to enter into loving relationship with him is to encounter living hope.

Scripture

An abundant resource for people with depression is Scripture. Throughout the Old and New Testament, there are many passages that can bring reassurance to those who suffer that they are not alone, and passages that speak of hope even in the midst of darkness. Connection to Scripture can be particularly valuable for people who struggle to vocalize their own pain, or who prefer to be alone when their depression spikes. Many books and articles have been written about the wisdom and healing found in and through particular books or passages from the Bible, so for the sake of brevity I will offer just a few of those passages I believe to be most helpful.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, par. 37.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, par. 38.

When guiding a person in need of companionship in suffering, the Psalms are a wonderful starting place. Psalm 88 conveys the pain of loneliness and feeling of desolation that can accompany an episode of depression. Psalms 42 and 130 call for hope in the midst of suffering. They point to God as the source of true hope, and speak of faith unshaken even when sorrow and suffering seem to prevail. In times of health and recovery, Psalms 30 and 34 are the exultations of people who are filled with joy but who have not forgotten their painful pasts.

Since Jesus Christ, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, is the “one who experiences that suffering with us” and who “is present in all suffering,” stories of Jesus in the New Testament are also touchstones of connection with suffering.¹² For someone who feels that he or she cannot get a firm handle on his or her emotions, the short but exceptionally powerful verse, John 11:35, brings a sense of solidarity. At the death of his dear friend Lazarus, Jesus weeps. He is in touch with human emotion, particularly that of sorrow. Jesus’ experience of anguish is also well exemplified in the synoptic accounts of His praying in the Garden of Gethsemane.¹³ Mark’s description of this event has a particular grasp on the raw emotion behind Jesus’ pleas to the Father, and captures the fear and desolation that seem to creep into Jesus’ mind as He anticipates His death.

Gratitude

Secular psychologists and religious leaders alike can agree on the importance of gratitude for a healthful existence.¹⁴ Practicing gratitude can be a challenge for people who experience depression and who struggle to see positivity and joy in their surroundings. Consistently

¹² Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, par.39.

¹³ See Mt 26:36-46; Mk 14:32-42; Lk 22:39-46

¹⁴ For example see Dr. Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 123-24.

acknowledging gratitude over time can help alleviate symptoms of depression,¹⁵ and is also a recommended spiritual practice for building a more intimate relationship with God.

There are many different ways to offer gratitude, but the important element is to have a consistent practice, and ideally one that includes a written record that can be reflected upon continually. By acknowledging gratitude daily, the “greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day” become clearer, and can thus be traced to “the great hope, which must surpass everything else,” namely Jesus Christ.¹⁶ Some practical options for daily reflection on gratitude are keeping a journal, writing notes on small slips of paper that are kept in a jar or box, having a gratitude partner with whom to verbally share moments of thankfulness, or even utilizing a smart phone because, yes, ‘there’s an app for that.’¹⁷

The Future of Christian Hope

Ultimately, the task of embracing people who live with depression or other mental illnesses belongs to every Christian. In a particular way, though, those who represent the Church in any official capacity must be even more committed to learning about the reality of depression, the true meaning of Christian hope, and the most effective strategies for ministering to people with depression. The hierarchy of the Church should take action in addressing this critical issue, and it is reasonable to believe that they will. Until such a time comes, it is in the hands of those of us in the field and on the ground to be catalysts for change and beacons of hope, reminding those we encounter that we have been called out of darkness into marvelous light.¹⁸

¹⁵ Nancy L. Sin and Sonja Lyumbomirsky, “Enhancing Well-Being and Alleviating Depressive Symptoms with Positive Psychology Interventions: A Practice-Friendly Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 65, no.5 (2009): 467-487.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, par.31.

¹⁷ Several such applications are available. One particularly successful app, “Happier,” can be found here: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/happier/id499033500?mt=8>.

¹⁸ cf. 1 Peter 2:9