

A person with dark hair, wearing a white face mask and a light-colored patterned shirt, is seen from behind, looking at a large electronic stock market ticker board. The board displays various stock symbols and prices in yellow and green text on a dark background. The text is overlaid on the image in a large, white, serif font.

RISING FROM THE ASHES (PART 1): IS THERE STILL HOPE WHEN THE WORLD FAILS YOU?

DEACON SHERMAN KUEK OFS

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PREAMBLE

At the very moment of this writing, the cliché “Man proposes but God disposes” holds utterly true in my mind. Exactly one Easter ago, I would not have envisioned that I would be spending my Lent writing booklets and producing video recordings for fellow brothers and sisters in the faith whose movements were severely restricted under the pain of a global pandemic.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of my ordination as a permanent deacon of the Catholic Church, and I certainly had more exciting plans to commemorate this milestone than those which are taking place now (some voluntary and others externally enforced). While my plans were being crafted, there was no pandemic in sight and the world was moving at an unprecedentedly fast pace. But God saw it fit to slow the entire human race down, of which I am intrinsically and inseparably a part, such that much of our movement is now restricted for an indefinite length of time. I do not suppose any one member of the human race has been unscathed by the current pandemic

even in the smallest measure, emotionally, mentally, physically, economically, spiritually, or in some other aspect I fail to conceive.

Be that as it may, this is the twelfth Easter I am celebrating as a member of the Holy Catholic Church, and the tenth Easter that I am celebrating as a deacon of the Church. I was ordained on 16 June 2010 on the exact date of my 34th birthday as a permanent deacon by my then local ordinary, the Rt Rev. Dr Paul Tan, SJ, Bishop of Malacca Johore. My plans for the commemoration of this year have now been drastically altered. But we must do what we must do. It is not time for us to be sulking over the state of our disappointments, for the people of the world need a sense of hope; *real* hope. And there indeed is hope, as this Easter season reminds us. We must actualise this Christian hope and continue witnessing the Gospel of the Lord to a world that is watching us live.

This season of enforced movement control has proven fruitful for my vocation as a thinker, a writer, and a teacher. My sustained reflection throughout this period of time, as

I keep abreast of world events, has been on the topic of hope. It is what the world needs as daily reports abound of people and organisations in despair. I write not as a lofty philosopher or theologian, but as someone who is praying for my fellow brothers and sisters in humanity. The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, to whose encyclical on hope – entitled *Spe Salvi* (2007) – I give special and direct consideration in this writing, once instructed his visitors at an audience with a group of African priests and bishop, “He who prays does not waste his time, even if the situation has all the markings of being an emergency and seems to push us towards action alone.”¹

My reflection on this issue which I deem to be crucial at this point of time is rather lengthy. For the purpose of readability, I have divided the writing into two separate portions so that it can be disseminated as two separate booklets. It is my prayer that the contents of the booklets are found helpful in concrete ways for its readers. My prayers continue to accompany you in the months to

¹ Audience in Castel Gandolfo with priests and bishop from Mali, Africa, on 18 May 2007.

come as we make the necessary adjustments to our new way of life and patiently await our entry into a post-pandemic era.

Deacon Sherman Kuek OFS
Solemnity of the Resurrection of the Lord
Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020

THE FAILURE OF WORLD SYSTEMS

As we ponder on the hope of Easter, the infection of the coronavirus (Covid-19) in China since December 2019 and its subsequent spread outside of China since January 2020 has now affected nearly every country on the face of this earth.

From the outset of the epidemic (that is, when it was still localised), world governments in whom citizens invested their trust and often-misplaced hopes were entertaining the delusion that they could still, in the face of the fast-spreading viral infection, preserve the capitalistic eutopia

of their societies. Those who have been following the news on media are of course well-versed with how China is widely being accused of having suppressed information pertaining to how far the epidemic was taking ground within the city of Wuhan itself, and how the whistleblower ophthalmologist Dr Li Wenliang was admonished sternly by authorities for allegedly having mongered rumours.² Certainly, this issue has become a complicated controversy as many other relevant factors are considered, but that is a matter for a separate discussion.

Meanwhile, other governments (especially those in the West) failed to take the catastrophe seriously. Many seemed to selfishly have taken a back seat in being glad that the epidemic at that time was in some far-off oriental land and not in their own backyards.

² Rowan Scarborough, "China deliberately hid coronavirus, admonished whistleblowers", *The Washington Times*, 20 March 2020, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/mar/20/china-hid-coronavirus-admonished-whistleblowers/>.

In fact, news reports show how President Donald Trump's administration, in the ongoing battle between the Republicans and the Democrats in the United States of America, was preoccupied with the impeachment trial in January 2020 to the extent that he dismissed warnings from his own Health Secretary over the looming Covid-19 situation in America as "alarmist".³ There was perhaps a hint of triumphalism as well in America as they watched China burn and witnessed the value of the American dollar rising (which tends to happen whenever volatile circumstances emerge around the world).⁴ After all, the fact that China was shutting down would certainly weaken America's worthy opponent in the ongoing trade war between the two nations. It might even compel more American manufacturers to bring their operations back to

³ Tom Porter, "Trump reportedly dismissed January coronavirus warnings from Health Secretary Alex Azar as 'alarmist'", *Business Insider*, 5 April 2020, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.my/trump-dismissed-azar-coronavirus-warnings-as-alarmist-wapo-2020-4>.

⁴ Tim Ahmann, "Coronavirus to have little impact on US economy – Trump adviser", *The Star*, 31 January 2020, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2020/01/31/coronavirus-to-have-little-impact-on-us-economy---trump-adviser>

their own country, and this would certainly “Make America Great Again” (the campaign slogan that won Trump his 2016 Presidential election). And since they did not anticipate that this “fortunately” faraway event would have any drastic economic consequences on America, it was more convenient to ignore the warnings of their own healthcare experts by concluding that the situation was “like a miracle; it will disappear”.⁵ Never did the Trump Administration anticipate that the novel coronavirus would be infecting the American people in the hundreds of thousands, triggering a panic over the entire nation. And now that the unexpected has materialised, it has been deemed appropriate that the narrative be reconstructed through the demonisation of the country from whence the virus came, thus accusatorily naming this pandemic the “Chinese virus” against the advice of the

⁵ Ed Pilkington, “How science finally caught up with Trump’s playbook – with millions of lives at stake”, *The Guardian*, 4 April 2020, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/04/trump-coronavirus-science-analysis>

World Health Organisation about building blame into a name and perpetuating racial discrimination.⁶

Meanwhile, the European continent too has become the epicentre of the pandemic, and its political leaders are doing rather well at demonstrating just how the solidarity that the European nations have pledged to one another in their European Union is little more than a selfish relationship of convenience. With an ongoing focus on economic cooperation and mutual gain, none of the European governments took seriously the situation of the coronavirus pandemic. It was economically more expedient to ignore the countless warnings that simplistic containment efforts would prove inefficacious. But now that the continent has been hit by this crisis, member countries are found to have closed borders and kept medical resources from one another. Italy and Spain, being the worst hit countries, seem to be left out in the

⁶ Dan Mangan, "Trump blames China for coronavirus pandemic: 'The world is paying a very big price for what they did'", *CNBC*, 19 March 2020, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03/19/coronavirus-outbreak-trump-blames-china-for-virus-again.html>

cold as most of the other countries continue squabbling in a self-preserving spirit. Europe is in danger of not being able to weather this situation out economically, not because there are insufficient resources, but because there is a refusal of the richer north to offer support to the poorer south. Again, like America, this fair-weathered union finds it easier to point the blame finger at a common enemy: China.⁷

Of course, lest a picture of a noble Chinese Communist Party be painted by my unintended oversight, we cannot pretend that the Chinese government's seemingly benevolent action of disseminating medical supplies all around the world is anything altruistic. The news portals are replete with coverage on what is now dubbed as China's "mask diplomacy" being a manipulation of the current narrative to assert global dominance over the

⁷ Michael Ivanovich, "Europe should stand up and compete, not blame China", *CNBC*, 21 January 2020, accessed 8 April 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/21/europe-should-stand-up-and-compete-not-blame-china---commentary.html>

weakened West. Without prejudice towards the people of China, we must conclude that there is in fact no innocence in the seeming kindness that the Chinese government is portraying to the world. This is the same government that did attempt to suppress information from the rest of the world at the onset of the epidemic, most likely for economic reasons as well.

It would seem that the behaviour of most, if not all, world governments is driven primarily by economic concerns. In this case, this economic motivation has brought much detriment to the peoples of the world and the citizens of the nations who trusted in our governments to discharge their utmost administrative obligations with our wellbeing in mind.

Turning away from the larger nations and continental unions, let us come closer to home and consider what has been taking place in our own country, Malaysia, in the course of this pandemic. Instead of paying serious attention to the health risks confronting our citizens, certain government officials (who were supposed to be in

the line of duty!) were privately plotting a conspiracy to take over the government through morally ill means. They succeeded. It is now a historical fact that while Malaysia was supposed to be battling a serious viral outbreak in February 2020, the country was plunged by its political leaders into a self-serving political crisis, and this led to the swearing in of Malaysia's eighth Prime Minister.

The governments of the world, including our own, have failed their peoples. At the point of this writing, many of them have yet to get their act together, which explains why it has become doubly hard to combat the common enemy that is the novel coronavirus. Masking their hypocrisy, driven by selfishness and systemic sin, is the blame game. Such governmental failures should neither shock nor scandalise us, for the downfall of bureaucracies in various forms is probably as old as human civilisation.

There are two crucial points to note from what has been delineated above. Firstly, we cannot look to governments and human institutions to ensure the survival of our civilisations. To be sure, secular governments are

important in order to preserve a certain kind of order in human societies. Saint Augustine of Hippo, in his explanation on the two realms of government in *The City of God* (published in 426 CE), suggests that God has dichotomised the created world into two dimensions which are distinct from each other, although they are not entirely separate. On the one side is the “city of God” that consists of all things supernatural and includes the Christian community. The city of God is governed by divine law and is more concerned with the direction of creation to eternal existence. On the other side is the “earthly city” that consists of all things political such as the state government, the economy, social stratification, and the military. Whilst earthly governments are crucial for the purpose of establishing order in our temporal world, we must remember that it is the government of God that is most concerned for the moral order and the peace of humanity on earth, both being aspects constantly abandoned by civil governments when their characters are being tested throughout challenging times.

As Christians, if we have often forgotten that the moral authority of the city of God prescribes limits to the authority of the earthly city, we must now restore the authority of God's kingdom over our lives and choices that we make about how we shall live. For far too long, we have allowed ourselves to be deceived by the persuasions of the civil governments and their political and economic mechanisms. We must return to our ultimate obedience to the city of God, for that is the only government that will ensure the safety of humanity and the flourishing of the human spirit. We should cooperate with our governments only to the extent that they give rise to the dignity of human life and the common good of civil societies. The current failures that we witness of human governments remind us that we have perhaps misplaced an exaggerated magnitude of trust in human parliaments for far too long. Even the perfect vision of democracy has failed to keep the tyranny of human sin at bay. For a change, it is time to pay keener attention to how the kingdom of God says we should live through the current pandemic and after it.

Secondly, the pandemic has now spiraled into a global economic crisis. And many people, including Christians, are not protected from the effects of this economic situation because we have bought into the doctrine of modern capitalism lock, stock, and barrel. By modern capitalism, I mean more than merely undertaking some kind of economic activity in order to derive profits to assist us in our living. Modern capitalism is an all-encompassing system that controls the way societies function, not just financially, but also socially, politically, morally, psychologically, emotionally, and even religiously. Beyond having as its purpose the creation of wealth for survival, it propagates the greed of creating wealth for excessive abundance.

Modern capitalistic governments themselves today are perpetuating this system of creating insatiable appetites in people, and then making them work excessively to earn the means to spend for the fulfilment of these infinite desires. It is a vicious cycle that has been in motion for generation after generation of humanity. This is precisely the mechanism that is breaking down at this time of the

pandemic, for suppliers are no longer able to function in regular fashion because of a breakdown in logistics, supply of raw materials, and supply of manpower. Buyers themselves too are affected because their work and therefore their incomes are impeded by the capitalists' inability to employ effectively, thereby causing a severance of gainful employment. Many are suffering because they have no money to pay for all the debts they have incurred over the years, and at a more basic level, they have no money to support their daily survival and that of their families. Christians too are not spared, for many of us have become complicit in this capitalistic system and its doctrine of continuous acquisition.

If the recent coronavirus pandemic has brought about one good, it is that it has actualised the failure of world governments to act rationally and morally in the interest of humanity and the breakdown of the economic system in which we have placed our trust for so many decades. Perhaps many are awakened to a new world today, a world upon which we have placed too much hope and

invested too much of our future at the expense of our life in the world to come.

While this writing is being penned, humanity is nowhere close to the conclusion of the pandemic. The pattern of this pandemic in many of our societies has not even peaked yet, and the movement control orders and lockdowns taking place are causing a financial, emotional, and mental crisis to the masses. The various governments are struggling to look like they are in perfect control of circumstances when they know they are not. For once, the reality of the situation confronting humanity is so stark it cannot be effectively masked by political or economic manipulators.

WHY IS THERE STILL HOPE?

I have most recently had a conversation with an old friend of mine, Dr James Koh, who is an Associate Professor at the International Medical University (Malaysia) and whose medical sub-specialisation deals with the very pertinent

field of Infectious Diseases. The sobering conversation with James began with his following statement:

I wonder if people are aware that COVID-19 is here to stay and we will have to live with it even after the lifting of the MCO (Movement Control Order), at least until an effective cure or vaccine is available.

In his practical estimation, life will certainly not revert to the way it was prior to the current pandemic. And should we all decide to stop observing proper social distancing etiquettes and begin congregating in large assemblies again, "Eventually most if not all of us will be infected. It's not a question of 'if', it's 'when'. And of these, three to four percent will perish."

My immediate reaction upon listening to his professional assessment of the situation was, "What hope have we?" It was rather an irony that this question presented itself because this conversation took place during Holy Week when all Christians were anticipating the lengthy

celebration of the Easter Season. At Easter, we celebrate our hope in Christ and His defeat of evil and death by His mighty resurrection. And yet, each day throughout this season, the lives of thousands of human beings were being taken by the coronavirus infections.

Just within the past two weeks alone, at the point of this writing, I had to witness from afar several friends whose family members were afflicted by death albeit not resulting from the coronavirus. The grieving families had to bury their dead without the usual large gathering of friends and community members who would otherwise have made themselves constantly present as a source of consolation for the mourning. In some way, I felt their pain and sorrow and wished that if death had to befall their family members, surely there could be “better” times for it. Hence, what hope did we have to speak of as we observed the coming Easter season? What cause did we have to rejoice?

I believe that the call of this Easter is to reposition our sense of hope in a source that is authentic, that promises

an immortality that we can know for sure will eventually become reality. For far too long, our sense of mortality has been acquired as a delusion that results from an abundance of wealth and health and all that capitalistic governments promise in order to keep the economic wheel turning. We felt invincible because of the organisational positions we held, the wealth we thought we had, and the excellent annual medical reports from our physicians. There was in fact little need for God, for we felt very much as if we were gods ourselves. That is in fact the point of modern capitalism: to render the delusion of invincibility into a commodity that can be traded. And the coronavirus pandemic has done well to remind us that we are not as invincible as we thought we were, that nations are not as indestructible as they would like people to believe they are. We have been gods only in our feebly deceived minds.

The point of this writing is not to say that our hope is in vain, but that our hope must not be placed in vain things. There is hope to be had, and this hope must be found in an authentic source. And if this hope is to be real, then it

cannot be a hope in a world that has broken down. We need a source that assures us of a real hope, that is, a hope that all the catastrophes of life we currently experience will not spiral into an ultimate tragedy for humanity.

In November 2007, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, promulgated his second encyclical *Spe Salvi* ("Saved by Hope"). My reflections in this writing shall dwell much on his encyclical for it deals with our current concern in a very direct manner.

Benedict XVI begins his encyclical by acknowledging that if hope is to be real, then it has to come with a certainty for those who hold this hope. For Christians, he says, the certainty of hope comes from "the fact that they have a future" (#2). He qualifies this by explaining that this hope does not come from knowing with exact precision all the details of what the future holds. Rather, it comes from a knowing that their lives will not be for nothing, since they have encountered the light of Christ and therefore are enlightened by the meaning of their existence. This hope

brings a transformation of life and a commitment defined and guided by the very meaning of one's existence. The basis of this entire logic of Christian hope is found in knowing God. When one knows God in a personal way, this knowing sheds light on every other matter pertaining to one's own existence and to events taking place within human history.

It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love – a Person. And if we know this Person and he knows us, then truly the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the last word; we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws, we are free... Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love. (*Spe Salvi*, 5)

One of the most prominent among philosophers of the modern age who were hostile to the idea of hope in a personal God was Karl Marx. For Marx, the 19th-century German philosopher whom many people understand to be the father of socialism, economics was the basis of how human life was regulated and how human history unfolded. Economic considerations were what gave birth to various social classes and the distinctions between them, as well as division of labour, together with all sorts of societal mechanisms that functioned to preserve this *status quo*. Religion, for him, was yet another tool employed by oppressors in order to give a false hope to the suffering and deprived, to lull them into a state of resignation that their pitiful economic lot in life would somehow culminate in an eternity of hope and bliss. This led to his statement, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people;" or often simply paraphrased as "religion is the opium of the masses" (*die religion ist das opium des*

volkesis).⁸ For Marx, humanity created religion, not *vice versa*. Religion is therefore nothing but a creature of capitalism that oppresses the poor to serve the ideals of the rich; there is actually no God as the religious communities propose. Religion is purely a social construct to ensure the continuous suppression of the poor masses and to help them cope with the horrors of modern economic life.

There is much to be said about Karl Marx, for the depth of his systematic thought cannot be reduced into a single paragraph. However, for the purpose of brevity, we must move on with our discussion on where Marx went wrong in his assessment of religion, in his case, Christianity (Marx was born into a Jewish family but they converted into Christianity in order that his father might continue in his career as a legal practitioner under the Prussian anti-Jewish laws).

8 Karl Marx, *Introduction to "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right"*, *Collected Works*, volume 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1976).

There is indeed credit in rather a few points that Marx advances against modern capitalism. Many Christian authors have interacted with his writings precisely because they have found themselves grappling with the same questions as Marx's own with regards to modern capitalism. But his thinking radically diverges from the Christian schema at the point where a solution is to be identified. He calls for the abolishment of religion as one of the important solutions to end the oppression of the lower classes of people. He desires an egalitarian society wherein everyone is equal, and religion, together with its belief in a transcendent God, stands in the way of his proposed system.

Elsewhere, Benedict XVI explains that Marx's vision failed because of the simplistic assumption that once the socio-economic systems are set right, humanity would achieve its desired state of equality:

He forgot that man always remains man. He forgot man and he forgot man's freedom. He forgot that freedom always remains also freedom for evil. He

thought that once the economy had been put right, everything would automatically be put right. His real error is materialism: man, in fact, is not merely the product of economic conditions, and it is not possible to redeem him purely from the outside by creating a favourable economic environment.⁹

In other words, the problem with the alienation experienced by mankind is more than an external environment gone wrong. Marx forgot about humanity's own intrinsic propensity towards evil such that even an ideal system would be flawed by man's own choices and actions. This is why the communism(s) that we witness alive in specific localities around the world today are debris of an expired ideology, heavily redefined and drastically distorted at best. In fact, these modern deviated forms of the socialist system proposed by Marx

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe? The Church in the Modern World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), p.82.

are not in the least attempting to participate in Marx's social transformation project.

Our ultimate hope is not in transforming worldly governments or replacing the monetary system that regulates human societies today. If the hope we have is only thus deep, then the state of our societies today in the face of the current pandemic is pitiable and all hope for a future is abolished in the light of human helplessness. Evidently, a hope that is placed in political and economic mechanisms as means for the perfection of the world is a misplaced one at best.

Returning to the contents of *Spe Salvi*, Benedict XVI sets out to help the children of the Church to understand that our hope is in the Kingdom of God, that is, a timeless reality that can be experienced in the present life. The key to experiencing this timeless Kingdom is faith, and the fruit of this faith is hope.

And how can we know that our faith in God and his Kingdom is not in vain? The Holy Father explains that our

faith in God enables us to be drawn into an experience of His Kingdom in the here-and-now, and this experience is what confirms that our faith is true and thus is worthy of our Christian hope. Further to that, this experience is not just a private or individualistic one, for if that were so, then one could be merely suffering from hallucination. On the contrary, the Christian faith, and the hope that it bears, is in fact a very social one. It is a faith that is shared by countless individuals within a community that experiences this hope together and embodies it in a visible way. The Christian community enjoys this hope together and actualises it concretely by sharing in a heavenly communion of love. When faith is embraced beyond one's self and its hope is experienced by an entire community that is drawn into the heavenly life, this hope cannot be a mere collective hallucination. Hence, a requisite for receiving this faith and its resulting hope is, paradoxically, self-abandonment and self-denial, opening the self to others to enter into our lives and our space in order that we too may be drawn into the common faith.

For the Holy Father, this communal aspect of the Christian faith is utterly crucial especially given that the religious senses of the modern people have gone in two polar directions today. There are those who have become secular to the extent that their faith is placed in systems, in politics, in economics, and in calculable and replicable mechanisms. Their hope thrives on the promise of predictability, extrapolation, monitoring and control. And then, there are also those who have swung to the other extreme of a hyper-spirituality that defines spiritual experiences in a totally exclusive and individualistic framework. In this latter case, there is no way to verify that which the adherents think to be revelations from divine sources. The Christian faith and its accompanying hope sits in favour of neither one of these two alternatives. It is a faith that is deeply experiential, and yet its experience of the hope of heaven is shared intimately at a communal scale.

Evidently, the Marxist philosophy that has contributed to the material atheism today has failed. Many, even in the religious world, do not identify themselves as material

atheists for they do profess belief in God. But at the same time, the life that is lived is one of practical atheism, paying primary attention to the acquisition of wealth and health and all temporal concerns whilst paying nothing more than a regular weekly lip service to all matters “unseen”. If hope is to be recovered when all these idols of our age have failed us, we must return to a real faith in God and in the communion that partakes in His life, that is, His Holy Church; only then can our hope be real.

It is worth noting that the Holy Father, at the end of his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, devotes a portion of it to the necessity of the human hope itself being purified. While we revel in the idea of hope, the sinful state of humanity in the present order is such that even our ultimate desires can be severely disordered at worst or mildly distorted at best, and our final entry into eternity may need to be punctuated by a process of purification in order to align our hopes with the real hope that God offers to all of creation. This is the process that the Holy Catholic Church refers to as purgatory (*purgatio* in Latin, which simply means “purification”).

A PRELIMINARY SUMMARY

The current times call upon Christians to embrace a new way of life with accordance to the ancient Christian mind, a way that is relevant to the need of contemporary society for a hope that is authentic and real.

I remember a simple sentence preached by a Christian lady when I was a very young boy who understood very little about life and faith. She said much to me week after week, but this is the only sentence I remember from her and which I carry with me to this day, and it rings true now at a time when hope in everything else seems to have failed: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IS NOT HOPELESS.

In the next portion of my writing which will be released soon as another electronic booklet, I shall reflect more on the praxis of hope in the Christian life.



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