

SPE SALVI AND THE “PILGRIMS OF HOPE” JUBILEE: CONTINUITY OR CRISIS IN THE CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF HOPE?

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Abstract

The early twenty-first century is marked by global uncertainty – ecological degradation, wars, migration crises, technological disorientation, and a growing sense of meaninglessness, especially among the youth. In this context, the juxtaposition of Pope Benedict XVI’s *Spe Salvi* (2007) and Pope Francis’s 2025 Jubilee Year theme, *Pilgrims of Hope*, invites theological inquiry into the continuity or possible crisis in the Church’s magisterium regarding Christian hope. While Benedict offers a contemplative, Christocentric, and doctrinal exposition of hope rooted in faith, love, and eschatological fulfilment, Francis presents a pastoral, missionary, and socially engaged articulation of hope expressed through synodality, ecological concern, and solidarity with the suffering. At first glance, their approaches seem distinct – one philosophical and theological, the other practical and pastoral. Yet both emphasise the *status viatoris* (the human person as a pilgrim), the centrality of conversion, and the foundational role of

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hope in the Christian life. When viewed within the broader *locus theologicus* of Catholic tradition—Scripture, the Fathers, and Vatican II—it becomes clear that both papal visions emerge from a shared theological stream rather than opposition. The apparent tension reflects differing historical contexts and pastoral urgencies rather than doctrinal rupture. This paper argues that the relationship between *Spe Salvi* and *Pilgrims of Hope* is best understood as a development in continuity—a hermeneutic of expansion in which Benedict’s theological depth provides the metaphysical foundation on which Francis builds a concrete pastoral application. Rather than a crisis, their complementarity offers a unified Catholic theology of hope that integrates contemplation with mission, safeguarding the Church’s prophetic voice in an age of anxiety.

Keywords: Christian Hope, *Spe Salvi*, Pilgrims of Hope, Eschatology, Jubilee 2025, Hermeneutic of Continuity, Pastoral Theology

Introduction

The early decades of the twenty-first century have given rise to profound global anxieties—ecological collapse, armed conflicts, migration crises, technological disruption, and a pervasive sense of meaninglessness among young people. In this atmosphere of mounting uncertainty, the question of continuity between Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Spe Salvi*¹ (2007) and Pope Francis’s 2025 Jubilee Year, themed “Pilgrims of Hope,”² touches on one of the most fundamental theological and pastoral challenges facing the Catholic Church today.

In 2025, the Holy Year announced by Pope Francis bears the striking title “Pilgrims of Hope,” summoning the whole People of God to a concrete pilgrimage that is at once spiritual, ecological, and social. Less than two decades earlier, Pope Benedict XVI offered the Church a deep-rooted theological exposition of hope in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, presenting hope as the firm basis of the Christian journey, intimately linked with faith, love, and the communion of the Body of Christ.

The juxtaposition of these two texts has prompted legitimate discussion about whether they represent continuity in the Church’s magisterium or signal a theological or pastoral crisis. Does Francis’s focus on hope represent an organic development of Benedict’s

¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007.

² Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2025.

profound theological meditation, or does it signal a departure – even a rupture – in how the Church understands and proclaims Christian hope? At first glance, the two initiatives appear to be in harmonious dialogue: both stress hope as a salvific orientation, both locate the faithful in a *status viatoris* (pilgrim-person), and both call for a conversion of heart that bears fruit in concrete action.

Yet scholars have also noted tensions – a shift from the doctrinal-philosophical depth of *Spe Salvi* toward a pastoral-cultural articulation of hope in the Jubilee and a change in ecclesial self-understanding from an essentially doctrinal magisterium to a mission-oriented Church that embraces “hope for the world.” The question appears legitimate, given that Pope Benedict’s approach appears deeply contemplative, philosophical, and Christologically centred, while Pope Francis emphasises encounter, synodality, solidarity, and mission.

However, when examined within the broader *locus theologicus* of hope – Scripture, Patristic tradition, Vatican II, and the Catholic tradition – it becomes clear that both papal visions flow from a single theological stream, though expressed through different emphases, audiences, and pastoral urgencies. This article argues that while stylistic and emphatic differences exist, the relationship between these two papal initiatives reveals essential continuity rooted in shared theological foundations, even as they address hope’s demands in distinct historical moments. Far from a crisis, this represents a development in continuity – a hermeneutic of expansion rather than rupture.

1. The Centre of Christian Hope – Scriptural and Doctrinal Foundations

Before examining the specific contributions of Benedict XVI and Francis, it is essential to establish the theological foundation upon which both build their visions of Christian hope.

1.1 Hope in Sacred Scripture

Hope fundamentally belongs to the theological virtues, rooted in God’s fidelity rather than in human optimism.³ Scripture delineates hope not merely as anticipation of future reward but as a dynamic participation in God’s salvific promise. St. Paul proclaims that “in hope we were saved” (Rom 8:24), situating salvation within a horizon

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, qq. 17-22.

of longing that shapes ethical action in history.⁴ This is the very text from which *Spe Salvi* takes its name and theological orientation.

The Letter to the Hebrews describes faith as “the assurance of things hoped for” (Heb 11:1), indicating that hope is inseparable from trust in the unseen yet active God.⁵ St. Peter exhorts believers to “be ready to give the reason for your hope” (1 Pet 3:15), implying that hope is not irrational but requires articulation in the public sphere.⁶ Both Benedict and Francis will repeatedly echo these Pauline and Petrine passages, establishing Scripture as the common ground of their teaching.

The New Testament frequently mixes the concepts of *faith* and *hope* (Heb 10:22-23; 1 Pet 3:15), as Benedict mentions in his encyclical. Before meeting Christ, early Christians “were without hope and without God” (Eph 2:12)—a state marked by darkness, doubt, and a sense of emptiness. On the other hand, hope acts as a gateway through the “dark door of time,” turning the present into a reality filled with the certainty of the future.

1.2 Hope in the Patristic Tradition

The patristic tradition further deepens this scriptural view. Augustine insists that Christian hope cannot be separated from the motif of pilgrimage, since believers are “citizens of the heavenly city” walking through a transient world.⁷ This Augustinian vision of the *status viatoris*—the Christian’s pilgrim status—will profoundly shape both Benedict’s theological articulation and Francis’s pastoral branding.⁸

Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of *epektasis*—the ceaseless movement of the soul toward God—portrays hope as an infinite horizon of ascent that reshapes moral life.⁹ Maximus the Confessor, whom Benedict cites extensively, reminds us that authentic hope “draws us into his being for all” (1 Tim 2:6) and obliges us to live for others.¹⁰ This patristic grounding establishes hope as both intensely personal (the

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §1.

⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §2.

⁶ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §18.

⁷ Augustine, *City of God*, Books XIX-XXII.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §4.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §28.

soul's movement toward God) and radically communal (participation in Christ's being-for-all).

1.3 Hope in Vatican II

This patristic grounding is complemented by the Second Vatican Council, which describes the Church as both “pilgrim” in *Lumen Gentium*¹¹ and as a companion sharing the “joys and hopes” of humanity in *Gaudium et Spes*.¹² The Council's teaching that the Church is both a sacrament of salvation and a pilgrim people finds doctrinal elaboration in *Spe Salvi* and pastoral application in “Pilgrims of Hope.”

These theological *loci* establish hope as simultaneously eschatological and historical, personal and communal, and contemplative and transformative. It is precisely within this dual tension that Benedict XVI and Francis articulate their visions. Both popes work within this rich theological tradition, retrieving and representing it for contemporary circumstances.

2. Pope Benedict XVI's *Spe Salvi* – The Foundations and Architecture of Hope

In the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict offers one of the most nuanced theological discussions of Christian hope in modern papal teaching. *Spe Salvi* revisits classical Christian eschatology for a secular age. Benedict begins his encyclical by recalling Paul's statement that “we are saved in hope” (Rom 8:24) and quickly connects hope with faith as the two main pillars of the theological virtues.¹³

2.1 Hope as Transformative Encounter

Benedict's central thesis is that, having displaced God, modernity has constructed false horizons of hope—technological progress, political ideologies, and human self-sufficiency—none of which can ultimately redeem humanity.¹⁴ He writes: “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”¹⁵ For Benedict, hope is not merely an attitude toward the future but a transformative present reality that reshapes how Christians live, suffer, and engage with the world.¹⁶

¹¹ Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, §48.

¹² Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes*, §1.

¹³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §1-2.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §16-23.

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §2.

¹⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §3.

Benedict argues that salvation does not come from science or politics but from a relationship with the living God revealed in Christ.¹⁷ This does not negate the value of human progress but situates it within a deeper horizon.¹⁸ In this sense, hope becomes not an idea but a person: Jesus Christ, whose resurrection inaugurates a new future for humanity.¹⁹ Benedict stresses that hope is not a vague optimism but a trustworthy, eschatological hope grounded in the resurrection of Christ and the promise of eternal life. The Pope emphasises that this hope “justifies the very fact of redemption” because it gives meaning to present suffering and points toward the ultimate fulfilment in God.²⁰

2.2 Historical Critique: Modernity’s False Hopes

The encyclical situates this understanding historically by critiquing the Enlightenment’s transformation of Christian hope into faith in progress.²¹ Benedict traces how modernity’s rejection of eternal hope in favour of temporal improvement has led to devastating consequences—revolutionary violence, totalitarianism, and ultimately despair.²² He argues that when heaven is eliminated from the horizon of hope, earthly utopias become tyrannical, and that when faith is reduced to praxis, it loses its transformative power.²³

This critique is essential to understanding Benedict’s theological project: he seeks to protect hope from being reduced to socio-political projects while simultaneously affirming the legitimate role of human action in history. The tension he navigates is between divine transcendence and historical engagement—a tension that will find its complementary resolution in Francis’s pastoral approach.

2.3 Biblical Roots: Hope and Faith as Interchangeable

In the second chapter, Benedict shows that the New Testament often uses faith and hope interchangeably (Heb 10:22-23; 1 Pet 3:15).²⁴ The early Christians, he argues, “were without hope and without God” before encountering Christ (Eph 2:12). The absence of hope is identified with a world “without God”—a condition of darkness,

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §24-27.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §25.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §4-6.

²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §1.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §16-23.

²² Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §19-22.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §21.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §2.

uncertainty, and existential emptiness. Conversely, the presence of hope opens the “dark door of time” and transforms the present into a lived reality of future certainty.

2.4 The “Schools of Hope”: Prayer, Action, and Suffering

A key theological contribution of *Spe Salvi* is the articulation of the “schools of hope” – prayer, action, and suffering.²⁵ Benedict describes prayer as the space where hope is purified, because it opens the heart to the presence of God, who sustains the believer. Prayer is not an escape from the world but the deepest engagement with reality, since it connects the believer to the source of all hope.²⁶

Action becomes meaningful only when grounded in hope, preventing activism from descending into despair or violence. Benedict insists that authentic Christian hope does not lead to passivity but to engaged action in the world—action sustained precisely because it does not place ultimate hope in human achievement alone.²⁷

Suffering, surprisingly, becomes a locus of hope because it invites participation in Christ’s redemptive love.²⁸ Benedict highlights the experience of saints such as St. Josephine Bakhita, whose life embodies hope that transcends oppression. Suffering united with Christ’s passion becomes redemptive and purifying, transforming what appears meaningless into participation in divine love.

2.5 Hope as Personal and Communal Reality

Benedict repeatedly warns against a purely individualistic conception of hope.²⁹ In §28, he cites Maximus the Confessor to remind us that authentic hope “draws us into his being for all” (1 Tim 2:6) and obliges us to live for others. The communal dimension of hope is thus inseparable from the communion of the Church, the “Body of Christ,” in which each pilgrim is called to share in the love that “cannot be separated from the love of God in Christ” (Rom 8:38-39).³⁰

Central to *Spe Salvi* is the concept of “performative hope” – hope that acts upon and transforms the one who hopes.³¹ This hope is not

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §32-48.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §32-34.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §35-37.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §37-40.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §13, 28.

³⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §26.

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §15.

merely future-oriented but also transforms present existence. Benedict's discussion of the communion of saints and intercessory prayer underscores that Christian hope is never individualistic – we hope together or not at all.

2.6 Hope, Love, and Redemption

The encyclical stresses that love is the "true shape of Christian hope."³² In §26, Benedict declares that "it is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love" (Rom 8:38-39). The absolute love of Christ, as manifested on the cross, provides the certainty that makes hope possible. The redemptive power of love is not abstract; it is experienced in concrete encounters and in the social dimension of the Church's mission.

2.7 The Pilgrim Metaphor

Throughout *Spe Salvi*, Benedict employs the pilgrim metaphor (*status viatoris*) to depict the Christian life as a journey toward the homeland – the Kingdom of God.³³ Hope is the "firm basis" that sustains the pilgrim through the "temporal" and "spatial" challenges of life. The pilgrim's hopeful orientation is both personal (trust in God) and communal (participation in the People of God). This metaphor, deeply rooted in Augustine and the patristic tradition, serves as a bridge connecting Benedict's theology to Francis's Jubilee theme.

2.8 Hope and the Last Judgment

The encyclical concludes with a profound reflection on the Last Judgement, portraying it not as a threat but as the final vindication of justice.³⁴ In §47-48, Benedict links hope to the final judgement. He writes that the "judgement of God is hope, both because it is justice and because it is grace." The encounter with the Judge "burns us as through fire," yet this blessed pain purifies and frees us, allowing us to become "totally ourselves and thus totally of God."³⁵

This controversial emphasis on judgement as essential to hope argues that accountability gives moral seriousness to our choices. This theological connection between justice, grace, and hope provides a profound eschatological backdrop for the pilgrim's journey. In these

³² Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §26-27.

³³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §1, 4, 10.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §41-48.

³⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §47.

reflections, Benedict situates hope firmly within the Christological and eschatological centre of Christian existence.

3. Pope Francis's "Pilgrims of Hope" – A Pastoral and Missionary Horizon

While Benedict offers a philosophical and doctrinal meditation on hope, Pope Francis provides a pastoral, missionary, and communal vision. Pope Francis's announcement of the 2025 Jubilee Year, under the theme "Pilgrims of Hope," represents a characteristically Franciscan approach to this fundamental reality. While *Spe Salvi* is contemplative and theological, Francis's Jubilee is active and pastoral, emphasising movement, encounter, and mercy.

On May 9, 2024, Pope Francis promulgated the Bull of Indiction *Spes Non Confundit* ("Hope Does Not Disappoint"), officially proclaiming the Ordinary Jubilee of 2025. The Bull declares: "Hope is also the central message of the coming Jubilee," and speaks of "pilgrims of hope who will travel to Rome" and the call for all to be "tangible signs of hope."³⁶ The Jubilee officially opened on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2024, when Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica, proclaiming: "Tonight, the door of hope has opened wide to the world."³⁷

The Jubilee tradition itself—rooted in Leviticus 25 and the practice of holy years—emphasises renewal, forgiveness, and fresh beginnings. Francis has framed the 2025 Jubilee as an opportunity for the Church to become a more credible sign of hope in a world marked by war, inequality, the climate crisis, and the aftermath of the pandemic.

3.1 A Church that Walks with Humanity

The Jubilee theme "Pilgrims of Hope" signifies a Church that walks with humanity, especially the wounded and abandoned.³⁸ Francis frequently employs imagery of journey, encounter, and accompaniment, rooted in his broader magisterium, as expressed in *Evangelii Gaudium*,³⁹ *Laudato Si'*,⁴⁰ and *Fratelli Tutti*.⁴¹ For Francis, hope

³⁶ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §1.

³⁷ Francis, "Homily for the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord (Opening of the Holy Door) at St. Peter's Basilica on December 24, 2024." in <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20241224-omelia-natale.html>.

³⁸ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §5, 14, 24.

³⁹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013.

⁴⁰ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015.

⁴¹ Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020.

is credible only when embodied in concrete gestures of mercy and solidarity.⁴² The Church, therefore, must stand where hope is most threatened: war-torn regions, refugee camps, ecological disaster zones, and the existential loneliness shaped by digital fragmentation.

His preparation documents and homilies have consistently emphasised several themes: hope as a pilgrimage and a journey rather than a static possession; the centrality of mercy and reconciliation; attention to the marginalised and the suffering; ecological conversion; and ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

3.2 Theological Anthropology: Hope through Communion

Francis’s theological anthropology emphasises relationality.⁴³ Human beings discover hope not in isolated interiority but through communion—with God, with others, and with creation. Synodality, which Francis presents as a defining mark of the contemporary Church, is an expression of hope because it signifies a Church that listens, discerns, and journeys together.⁴⁴ This is not a departure from Benedict’s theology but its social unfolding. Whereas *Spe Salvi* provides the interior foundation, “Pilgrims of Hope” channels that foundation into a missionary posture capable of addressing the social and cultural wounds of today.

3.3 Theological Inspiration: Extending the Vision

Although *Spe Salvi*’s language is explicitly theological, the Jubilee’s promotional material highlights “hope as a tangible, lived experience”—a hope that “mends our bond with the Earth, each other, and God.”⁴⁵ The phrase “Pilgrims of Hope” recalls the pilgrim figure in Benedict’s theology but emphasises the ecological and social aspects of the journey more strongly. The Jubilee, therefore, extends the theological hope of *Spe Salvi* into the realm of creation, echoing Francis’s earlier ecological concerns.

3.4 Pastoral Initiatives: Embodying Hope Concretely

Francis’s approach reflects his pastoral priority of reaching “the peripheries”—those who feel excluded from or wounded by the

⁴² Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §1.

⁴³ Francis, “Homily at Rebibbia Prison Complex on the Feast of St Stephen on December 26, 2024.” <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20241226-apertura-portasanta-rebibbia.html>.”

⁴⁴ Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §66-68, 91-92.

⁴⁵ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §16.

Church.⁴⁶ The Jubilee's practical emphasis includes several key initiatives that materialise hope in concrete forms.

The Pilgrimages of Hope for Creation consist of guided trips to sacred sites with an ecological focus, including routes that incorporate reforestation projects, embodying hope for ecological renewal.⁴⁷ The Pilgrim's Card and App provide digital tools for tracking spiritual milestones, sharing testimonies, and accessing prayers, fostering both personal and communal senses of hope.⁴⁸ The Pilgrims Welcome Centre in Rome serves as a physical hub for pilgrims to receive spiritual direction, sacramental preparation, and catechesis, reinforcing the communion aspect of hope. Volunteer and Service Opportunities encourage pilgrims to live the Gospel through acts of charity, such as helping refugees and caring for the poor, aligning with Benedict's insistence that hope must manifest in service to others.

This democratisation of the Jubilee experience—opening Holy Doors in dioceses worldwide (not just Rome), encouraging pilgrimages to local shrines, emphasising the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, and special attention to prisoners, migrants, and the poor—reflects Francis's consistent concern that the Church's treasures reach all people, especially the marginalised. Diocesan websites echo the Vatican's call, urging the faithful to repent, forgive, and renew their commitment to hope in personal and social dimensions.

3.5 The Cultural-Ecological Sign

The Jubilee's branding explicitly links hope with creation: "Healing our connection to the Earth, to one another, and to God."⁴⁹ This tri-dimensional approach (earth-people-God) expands the anthropological horizon of hope from the salvation-oriented focus of *Spe Salvi* to a planetary-integral vision, addressing the urgent environmental crisis that threatens hope for future generations.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §20-24.

⁴⁷ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §16.

⁴⁸ Vatican, "Pilgrim's Card and digital App," <https://www.iubilaeum2025.va/en.html>.

⁴⁹ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §3-5; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "2025 Jubilee Year: Pilgrims of Hope," <https://www.usccb.org/jubilee2025>.

⁵⁰ Francis, "Homily for the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord on December 24, 2024."

3.6 Liturgical and Sacramental Dimensions

The Jubilee year includes a Special Mass of the Pilgrims of Hope celebrated on the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity (June 2025).⁵¹ The proper texts for the Liturgy of the Word draw from Romans 8:38-39, Hebrews 10:22-23, and 1 Peter 3:15, deliberately echoing the biblical sources that undergird *Spe Salvi*.⁵² The sacrament of reconciliation is highlighted in the “Pilgrims Welcome Centre” as the “sacramental gateway to renewed hope.”

4. Points of Continuity: Shared Theological Foundations

Although their styles and emphases differ, Benedict’s theological vision and Francis’s pastoral approach share several key continuities. These fundamental continuities demonstrate essential theological unity despite methodological and stylistic differences.

a) First, both popes ground hope Christologically: For Benedict, Christ is “the great hope”⁵³; for Francis, pilgrimage toward Christ through the Church’s mercy constitutes the journey of hope.⁵⁴ Neither pope succumbs to secular optimism or therapeutic positivity.⁵⁵ Both insist that authentic Christian hope is inseparable from the person of Jesus Christ, as encountered in Scripture, the sacraments, and the life of the Church.

b) Second, both understand hope as transformative of present life, not merely future-oriented: Benedict’s “performative hope” that changes how we live⁵⁶ finds its

⁵¹ Francis, “Homily on the Pilgrims of Hope during the Holy Mass celebrated on the Solemnity of the Holy Trinity on June 15, 2025.” in <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250615-omelia-giubileo-sport.html>.”

⁵² Francis, “General Audience Speech on Jesus Christ our Hope on December 18, 2024.” in <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2024/documents/20241218-udienza-generale.html>.”

⁵³ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* §4-6, 31.

⁵⁴ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §1-5; Francis, “General Audience Catechesis on Jesus Christ our Hope on December 26, 2024.” in <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2025/documents/20250205-udienza-generale.html>.”

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §16-31; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §52-75.

⁵⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §2: “The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life.”

pastoral expression in Francis's call to concrete acts of mercy and justice.⁵⁷ The Jubilee's emphasis on pilgrimage, works of mercy, and ecological conversion translates Benedict's theological insight into practical action. Hope, for both popes, is proved genuine by its fruits in love and service.⁵⁸

c) Third, both popes recognise suffering as intrinsic to Christian hope: Benedict's extended meditation on suffering in *Spe Salvi* points out that suffering, united with Christ's passion, becomes redemptive and purifying.⁵⁹ Francis, drawing on his Latin American background and experience with the poor, consistently highlights that the Church must support those who suffer, showing that hope prevails over suffering. His focus on a "field hospital" Church reflects the same theological belief that Benedict expresses more academically.

d) Fourth, both emphasise hope's communal and ecclesial dimension. Benedict's discussion of the communion of saints and intercessory prayer underscores that Christian hope is never individualistic.⁶⁰ Francis's emphasis on synodality, on the Church as "People of God" on pilgrimage together, and on ecumenical dialogue expresses the same conviction in more explicitly institutional terms.⁶¹ The Jubilee's communal celebrations, shared pilgrimages, and focus on reconciliation reflect Benedict's insight that our hope is collective – either we hope together or not at all.

e) Fifth, both popes situate hope against modernity's crises. Benedict's critique of the Enlightenment's failed promise of progress through reason and technology alone⁶² finds its counterpart in Francis's repeated warnings about the

⁵⁷ Francis, *Spes Non Confundit*, §22-23; Francis, "Homily for the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord on December 24, 2024."

⁵⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §35-37; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §169-175.

⁵⁹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §37-40.

⁶⁰ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §13-15, 27-28. Benedict emphasises the communion of saints and warns against individualistic hope in §28: "No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone."

⁶¹ Francis, in numerous documents on synodality (2021-2023), emphasises "People of God" throughout pontificate; ecumenical initiatives, including joint pilgrimage plans in *Spes Non Confundit*.

⁶² Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §16-23.

“throwaway culture,” the technocratic paradigm, and the globalisation of indifference.⁶³ Both popes recognise that contemporary humanity suffers from the eclipse of hope, though they diagnose and address this crisis differently – Benedict more philosophically, Francis more pastorally.⁶⁴

5. Points of Distinction

The differences between Benedict and Francis on hope are primarily matters of emphasis, method, and pastoral strategy rather than fundamental theological disagreement. These distinctions reflect the inexhaustible richness of the biblical and traditional understanding of hope rather than a fundamental disagreement.

a) Intellectual versus Pastoral Emphasis

Spe Salvi is a theological-philosophical document, steeped in patristic citations (e.g., Maximus the Confessor, Augustine) and a rigorous doctrinal articulation of hope. Benedict’s approach is scholarly, drawing extensively on Scripture, the Church Fathers, and philosophical critique. His intended audience includes intellectuals, theologians, and those capable of engaging in sustained theological argument.

The Jubilee, by contrast, is framed in accessible pastoral language that reduces the richness of the hope doctrine to simpler terms. Francis’s approach is homiletic, using vivid imagery, personal stories, and direct exhortation. His primary audience is the broader faithful, especially those alienated from academic theology. This stylistic shift reflects differences among audiences rather than differences in doctrine.

b) Objective Foundation versus Subjective Appropriation

Benedict highlights the objective foundation of hope—the historical reality of Christ’s resurrection and the promise of eternal life.⁶⁵ Francis focuses on the subjective appropriation of hope—how believers embody and communicate it through mercy and service. Both dimensions are essential to authentic Christian hope.

⁶³ Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §20-22, 101-136 on “throwaway culture” and “technocratic paradigm”; Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §52-75 on “globalization of indifference.”

⁶⁴ Benedict diagnoses the crisis philosophically and historically (*Spe Salvi*, §16-31); Francis diagnoses it pastorally through attention to concrete contemporary crises (*Spes Non Confundit; Laudato Si’; Fratelli Tutti*).

⁶⁵ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §4-7.

c) Interior Transformation versus Social Engagement

While both popes connect personal conversion with social change, they highlight different elements. Benedict emphasises the importance of inner transformation achieved through prayer, contemplation, and personal encounter with Christ.⁶⁶ Francis, although not denying this, more frequently highlights the social aspects of hope—justice for the poor, care for creation, and welcoming migrants.⁶⁷ This reflects different but complementary aspects of Catholic social teaching.

d) Ecological Emphasis: Development not Departure

Benedict's hope is primarily salvific—focused on personal redemption and communal communion with Christ. The Jubilee adds an ecological dimension, presenting hope as a force for planetary renewal. While the encyclical does not deny the importance of creation, it does not treat ecological concern as the primary locus of hope.

However, this represents legitimate development rather than a departure. Francis extends Benedict's anthropology to include explicit attention to humanity's relationship with creation, addressing urgent contemporary concerns while remaining rooted in the same Christological foundation, thereby developing an integral ecology.

e) Eschatological versus Historical Orientation

Benedict foregrounds the eschatological orientation of hope—its grounding in eternal realities that transcend history.⁶⁸ The encyclical presents hope in explicitly eschatological terms: a forward-looking orientation toward the final fulfilment of God's kingdom. Benedict's approach is more universal and philosophical, engaging with humanity's broader condition in modernity.

Francis emphasises the historical mediation of hope—its embodiment in concrete acts of love and justice. The Jubilee's "year of hope" highlights a defined temporal horizon (2025) in which pilgrims are invited to renewal. Francis's approach is more context-sensitive and attentive to Latin American liberation concerns, the ecological crisis, migration, and specific social injustices.

⁶⁶ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §32-34 on prayer as school of hope.

⁶⁷ Francis, *Laudato Si'* and Jubilee materials emphasizing social and ecological action.

⁶⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §41-48 on eschatological fulfilment.

Christianity has always insisted on both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of salvation. The apparent tensions might be understood through the classical theological distinction between the “already” and “not yet” of Christian eschatology. Catholic theology affirms both dimensions.

f) Cognitive Content versus Practical Expression

Benedict draws attention to the cognitive dimension of hope—what we believe about God’s promises and human destiny. Francis points to hope’s lived expression—how we act in light of those promises. Catholic tradition has consistently rejected any opposition between orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

e) Judgment versus Mercy

Spe Salvi presents divine judgement as integral to hope, maintaining that accountability lends moral gravity to human freedom and choice.⁶⁹ By contrast, Francis’s pontificate has consistently highlighted mercy, accompaniment, and the unconditional love of God. While some interpreters perceive a tension between these perspectives, they are better understood as complementary accents: Benedict underscores that authentic mercy presupposes truth and justice, whereas Francis illustrates that genuine justice ultimately finds its fulfilment in mercy.

f) The Role of Magisterial Authority

Benedict underscores the Magisterium’s authority as the custodian and guarantor of the truth of hope (his reference to the “authority of the apostolic Church”). Pope Francis, while fully affirming this authority, places greater weight on a synodal and participatory vision of the Church, inviting the laity to “become pilgrims of hope” through personal responsibility and initiative. These differences point not to doctrinal rupture, but to distinct yet complementary ecclesial styles.

g) Universal versus Particular

Benedict’s approach in *Spe Salvi* is more universal and philosophical, addressing humanity’s general condition in modernity. Francis’s approach is more attentive to particular contexts—specific social injustices and concrete historical needs. This reflects their

⁶⁹ Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, §44-48.

different backgrounds and pastoral experiences rather than a theological contradiction.

6. Conclusion – Unity in Hope

The theological and pastoral visions of hope presented by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis are not opposed; they are mutually enriching expressions of a single Christian truth rooted in Scripture and tradition. The Jubilee of 2025, *Pilgrims of Hope*, does not constitute a rupture with *Spe Salvi*; rather, it extends Benedict's theological vision into contemporary realities marked by ecological crisis, social fragmentation, migration, and global uncertainty.

Both pontificates share essential foundations: hope rooted in Christ's resurrection, grounded in Scripture (especially Romans 8 and Hebrews 10–11), transformative of present life, inseparable from suffering, and intrinsically communal. Where Benedict offers doctrinal depth—articulating hope as a divine gift ordered toward eternal life—Francis gives pastoral embodiment, presenting hope as encounter, solidarity, and missionary pilgrimage.

Their differences are complementary accents rather than contradictions. Benedict underscores the objective and eschatological foundation of hope; Francis highlights its historical mediation and lived expression. Benedict clarifies what we believe; Francis demonstrates how we live it. Together, they present a coherent and dynamic theology of hope that speaks to both the metaphysical longing of the human heart and the concrete wounds of contemporary society.

The Jubilee introduces new emphases—ecology, synodality, digital participation—but these represent development, not rupture. In continuity with Benedict's hermeneutic of reform, tradition remains alive by addressing new contexts without abandoning its core.

In a world marked by anxiety and polarisation, the Church must be both guardian of hope's theological truth and companion to humanity's struggles. Benedict provided the theological architecture; Francis charts the pastoral pathways.

One reminds the Church why it hopes; the other shows how to witness to that hope.

Ultimately, the test of this continuity lies in credibility: whether the Church becomes a living sacrament of hope for the world. Held together, theological clarity and pastoral compassion reveal the full arc of Christian hope – hope given in Christ, hope lived in love, and hope shared in mission. In this unity, the Church walks as a pilgrim people toward the Kingdom, where hope finds its fulfilment and the promise that “hope does not disappoint” (Rom 5:5) is fully fulfilled.

Contemporary Applications – A Unified Theology of Hope

The synergy between Benedict and Francis becomes evident when confronting today’s major crises. In the context of global migration, Benedict offers a theological basis by emphasising the dignity of every migrant, created in God’s image, while Francis advocates tangible actions such as hospitality, fair policies, and integration. Environmental despair, especially among young people, is addressed through Benedict’s reassurance that creation reflects God’s faithfulness and will not be abandoned, whereas Francis promotes ecological conversion and practical care for the environment. Digital fragmentation and loneliness are countered by Benedict’s call for genuine encounters with Christ rather than virtual ones, and by Francis’s focus on accompaniment and presence, particularly for isolated youth. In times of war and violence, Benedict’s perspective of suffering as redemptive helps prevent despair, and Francis’s initiatives for peace and reconciliation foster active hope. These crises highlight that hope must combine theological insight with missionary action. The current crisis of meaning – characterised by anxiety and a lack of purpose among young people – requires Benedict’s philosophical clarity on life’s meaning and Francis’s pastoral guidance in dark times. Together, they present a cohesive Catholic response: hope that encompasses both eternal destiny and ongoing historical struggles.