

Hope and the New Year

THE START OF A NEW year nearly always brings with it a renewed sense of hope; hope for a better world, a better Church, a better family or community and/or a better self. In short, we tend to hope that the new year is better than the last. Nor are we satisfied with simply standing by and watching it unfold; we make New Year's Resolutions to help bring about at least some of these improvements. When the year draws to an end, we look back and compare the reality to the hopes we had at its start. Even if none of our hopes were realized, even if the whole year was far worse than we could have imagined, still a new hope rises up in our hearts with the coming of the new year and we begin all over again. Often, it is this hope that keeps us going from year to year. Should we lose it, we would give way to cynicism, depression and/or despondency. So much of our life depends on hope that it is worth reflecting on what it is and how we can strengthen and sustain it amidst the trials of life, especially in the spiritual life.

It goes without saying that we only hope for good things. While preparing for his imminent departure for the monastery several years ago, one of our monks-to-be received a phone call asking him to participate

in a survey. Asked whether he thought his finances would improve in the coming year, he answered, "I hope not!" This surprised the lady conducting the survey and he had to explain that he was joining a monastery where he hoped to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. What she and others might have considered an evil, he hoped for because he saw consecrated poverty as a good thing. We also only hope for things that we do not already have. "For who hopes for what he sees?" St. Paul asked the Romans (8:21). One can't hope to be rich if he already *is* rich. Lastly, we hope for things that may or may not come to us; things that can be a challenge to get. One need not hope to quench his thirst with a glass of water within arm's reach, but if there were a poisonous snake between him and the water he would have to hope to either avoid or overcome the snake or else give up in despair. For we only hope for things that we really think we have some chance of getting.

All of the above applies to our hope for getting a good meal as much as our hope for a happy life. Yet, when it comes to eternal happiness and an intimate union with the Holy Trinity, we need something stronger than this natural hope; we need a *supernatural* hope infused in our souls by God Himself. This hope is one of the

three theological virtues received at baptism (the other two being faith and charity) and it sustains us in our journey toward the Kingdom of God. Like the natural virtue of hope, it seeks not just what is good, but the **greatest** good of all: God Himself! As the Catechism puts it:

“The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man; it takes up the hopes that inspire men’s activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, he is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity.” (CCC 1818)

Given the difficulties involved in preserving sanctifying grace over the course of a lifetime and the fact that union with God is beyond the merits and natural abilities of any creature, it is not hard to see why we need a supernatural virtue of hope to keep us going. Yet this is not a virtue that we make use of every once in a while, but one that we need *daily*.

Like any virtue, hope, even on a supernatural level, has two vices associated with it. On the one hand, to lose hope in one’s eternal salvation is to despair, on the other, to have a false notion of God’s mercy is presumption. We should be clear that not everyone who has fallen into the vice of despair goes about with a scowl on his face; nor is every presumptuous person walking about with a smug smile. Our modern society is full of despair, often in the form of maximizing pleasures in this life with no hope of finding eternal happiness in the next. Among the more spiritually minded, however, presumption is also all too common, with the

dogma of God’s infinite love for each person invoked as a means to avoid repentance from sin and the conversion of one’s life. Hope stands between these two pitfalls giving us confidence in God’s mercy when we are all too conscious of our sinfulness and restraining us from presuming on God’s forgiveness when tempted to fall into sin. Seeing how our struggles with sin, leading to either despair or presumption, takes place each

“...not everyone who has fallen into the vice of despair goes about with a scowl on his face”

day, we can begin to understand how necessary it is for us to exercise the virtue of hope on a daily basis. So how do we do this, and how can we grow in this God-given virtue?

If you picture the theological virtues as three parts of a column, faith would be the first piece, resting on the ground, charity would be the last piece, above the other two, and hope would be in the middle, nestled between faith and charity. In fact, our hope rests on our measure of faith, for the greater our faith is in God’s promises, the greater our hope in receiving those promises. Speaking of Abraham, the man of faith, St. Paul wrote, “In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, ... No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” (Rom 4:18, 20-21) As we grow in faith through meditating on the truths of faith, or seeing it in action in the lives of the saints (and of the saintly), we necessarily grow in hope, and as we grow in hope, we grow in charity, that is, the love of God. Ultimately, we will be judged on our measure of charity, and this alone remains forever (see 1 Cor. 13:8), but if our hope is small, our life of charity will surely reflect it.

One way to gauge our measure of hope is by looking at who or what we turn to in times of trouble. Do we hope in ourselves, our strengths, abilities, or friends to save us or do we hope in the Lord, trusting that, regardless of the immediate outcome, He has our best interests at heart? Do we live solely for our possessions, pleasures, projects or loved ones, or for a growing union with God? In short, do we hope in the things of this

Act of Hope

O my God, relying on Your almighty power and infinite mercy and promises, I hope to obtain the pardon of my sins, the help of Your grace and life everlasting, through the merits of Jesus Christ, my Lord and Redeemer. Amen.

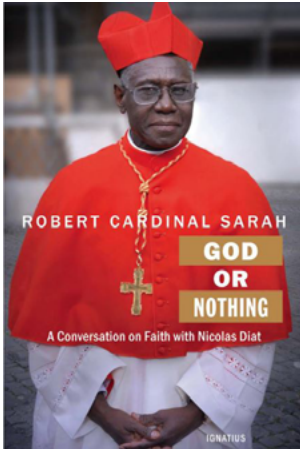
world to satisfy our hearts or in the things of God? If our hope in God is not what we wish it to be, let us ask Him to increase our hope, trusting that He will do it.

So as we begin a new year with new hopes and expectations, make a New Year's resolution to grow in the theological virtues, asking God to increase your faith,

hope and charity, and trusting that the trials and temptations that you endure are means to that end. For, indeed, "the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love" (Psalm 33:18).



Book Review: *God or Nothing*



In these days when we constantly hear so much about the past sinfulness of some unfaithful prelates and others who are seeking to turn the Church away from the Gospel of Christ and become "relevant" to the world, it is refreshing to have in our midst a prelate whose first and foremost loyalty is to Jesus Christ. That love and loyalty shows itself in the title of

the book about him: *God or Nothing*, the story of Robert Cardinal Sarah.

Cardinal Sarah as a seminarian and a young priest experienced the suffering that one experiences in a totalitarian system because in the 60's Guinea came under a Communist dictator. You see the faithfulness of the clergy and people in the midst of this suffering which

also formed the future cardinal.

As a Cardinal and pastor of souls, faithfulness to Christ dominated all that he did. He particularly stresses the need for the Liturgy to be first and foremost the worship and adoration of God. He reminds us that we have forgotten God's majesty and what is due to Him by the fact that He is GOD. He contrasts this with the modern liturgical concept of community self-exaltation. Cardinal Sarah particularly champions worshipping *ad orientem* — priest and people together facing God instead of looking at each other — and using Latin as a sacred language instead of the "baby talk" prayers that have so long dominated the liturgical scene. Also that the Liturgy must carry forth into personal lives of holiness.

For Cardinal Sarah that's what the Christian life is all about: becoming saints. **All** of us can become saints. So if you're looking for some good inspiring reading, this book delivers. You will see that no matter how dark the times are, God always inspires living saints.