

Hope in the Lord



“...and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Rom 5:5)

Of the three Theological Virtues, the one that is arguably the most overlooked is the “middle child” of the trio. While Faith is the first step in our journey towards eternal life, and Charity is the “queen of all the virtues,” very often the virtue of Hope is underappreciated and misunderstood even among many believers today. A proper view of the importance of this Theological virtue is essential for us on our journey to our heavenly homeland.

What exactly is the Theological virtue of hope? As the theologian, Dr. Lawrence Feingold, points out, there are two different kinds of hope, namely, natural and supernatural. He writes: *“On the natural human level, hope is a desire for difficult and arduous goods and goals. It is an emotion through which we put our heart on great things, despite the obstacles. Human hope in itself is not a virtue, for it is not reasonable to hope for everything, but only for what is truly good for us.”* This kind of hope can be imprudent and misplaced, and can be either good or bad depending on the various

objects in which we place our hope.

The Theological virtue of hope, however, is far superior to this natural, human hope in that it completely transcends the natural, physical world and has, instead, for its object the one true good and goal of our entire existence: God Himself. Feingold continues: *“One can never hope in God too much, for His mercy and power exceed our power to trust in them. He is infinitely more worthy of hope than our ability to hope in Him, no matter how much we grow in hope throughout the Christian life.”* The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines hope as “the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.” (#1817) Hope is a properly directed desire for eternal happiness with God in heaven, by means of His grace. Notice the Catechism’s insistence that attaining this goal can only be done by “relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the

Holy Spirit.” Relying on our own strength, instead of on God’s grace, would lead us to one form of the sin of presumption. The opposite attitude, however, is also a form of sin of presumption, but it presumes that God will do everything Himself, even without our cooperation. We should have a strong confidence in God’s assistance, but this confidence does not take away our responsibility to cooperate with that grace.

A helpful analogy is that of the two-person bicycle. We (as Christians) being on the front seat and God, Himself, on the back seat. We must ask for the grace of God with confidence that he will start the peddling, but then we must pedal ourselves also, with God’s grace preceding and accompanying us. Without this strong desire for heaven, our spiritual life can easily start to stagnate. Therefore, the virtue of hope is absolutely essential for our life here as pilgrims.

Do we, as followers of Christ, in our present day and age really have this strong desire for heaven? Pope Benedict XVI asks a similar question in his encyclical *Spe Salvi*: “...the question arises: do we really want this — to live eternally? Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive. What they desire is not eternal life at all, but this present life, for which faith in eternal life seems something of an impediment.”

These are powerful words and seem to be right on the mark when it comes to the state or the world, and even the Church, today. Love and hope are intimately connected. “Love,” says Dionysius the Areopogite, “strives, in accordance with its nature, after union with the object loved.” St. Alphonsus Liguori says: “A soul that tenderly loves Jesus Christ cannot live here below without the most ardent longing to be united with Him in heaven.” St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the highest degree of love that a soul on earth can attain is an ardent desire for heaven; to be there united to God and to possess

Him forever.

Another virtue that is closely tied to hope is the virtue of confidence in God, and trust in His infinite mercy. The virtue of hope will give us perseverance in good, and constancy of will when faced with difficult situations and temptations, but this hope must be placed, not in our own strength or virtue, but in the help of God’s grace. Pridefully trusting in our own strength will lead to a fall but, trusting in God, we will never be confounded. Our sins of distrust deeply wound the Sacred Heart of our Lord, as He told St. Faustina: “Distrust on the part of souls is tearing at my insides. The distrust of a chosen soul causes me even greater pain; despite my inexhaustible love for them they do not trust me.”

Now let us take a look at the two biggest snares that the evil one lays in our path to destroy the hope within us, namely the sins of despair and presumption. Virtue is always a mean between two extremes, and hope is the mean between the two extremes of despair (no hope), and presumption (an inordinate hope). Both these vices are rampant in our world today, but especially the sin of presumption.

Feingold gives a good explanation of these two vices: “Despair gives up on achieving beatitude altogether. Its motto is ‘eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.’ Despair is intimately tied to blasphemy against faith, for despair implies the negation of God’s Mercy and love. It is possible however to fall into despair without denying the faith. This happens when a person does not deny God’s mercy in general, but only with regard to himself, because of the perceived incurable gravity of his sin. With regard to the gravity of despair, St. Thomas holds that it is less grievous in itself than the sin of unbelief or hatred of God. Nevertheless, in some ways it is still more dangerous in its consequences: ‘Despair is more dangerous, since hope withdraws us from evils and induces us to seek for good things, so that when hope is given up, men rush headlong

“Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive. What they desire is not eternal life at all, but this present life, for which faith in eternal life seems something of an impediment.”

- Pope Benedict XVI

into sin, and are drawn away from good works.”

It is easy to see how, once the hope of eternal beatitude is given up through despair, one's life becomes unbearable to endure, which may explain the sad phenomena of suicides, especially among the youth, ravaging our world today. Atheism and hatred of God in all forms leads only to a very sad existence here and, unfortunately, a more horrible one for all eternity. Fiengold continues:

“Presumption, on the contrary, does not give up on beatitude, but thinks to achieve it in one's own way and not in God's way, which means without God's grace, without repentance, or without satisfying God's justice. It thus consists in despising the Divine justice and presuming in the divine mercy though lack of salutary fear of God. St. Thomas Aquinas explains: ‘just as, through despair, a man despises the Divine mercy, on which hope relies, so, through presumption, he despises the Divine justice, which punishes the sinner.’”

“...Both despair and spiritual presumption are sins against the Holy Spirit, in that they completely impede the path to repentance and forgiveness. However, as St. Thomas specifies: ‘It is not every presumption that is accounted a sin against the Holy Ghost, but that by which one shows contempt for the Divine justice through inordinate confidence in the Divine mercy.’”

“The blasphemy consisting in presumption is given emblematic form in the famous words of Luther's letter to Melancthon: ‘Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly ... no sin will separate us from the Lamb, even though we commit fornication and murder a thousand times a day.’ Just as despair is rooted in a false judgment about God, disparaging His mercy, so presumption is likewise rooted in a false judgment that minimizes His justice. It is evident that this type of presumption which is a sin against the Holy Spirit is an extremely prevalent phenomenon in contemporary culture, which tends to have an ‘inordinate confidence in the Divine mercy’ while showing ‘contempt for the Divine justice.’ for this reason we like to think that perhaps all men shall be saved, that salvation does not depend on supernatural faith, that all men are ‘anonymous Christians,’ that ‘I'm OK, you're OK,’ no matter what. The modern world is oscillating unstably between presumption and despair, two contrary blasphemies against the Holy Spirit.”

As we begin a new year, may we examine our souls on our hope in God, resolving to place our hope ever more in Him and less in ourselves, confident that He will never fail us. By living thus, may we become bright lights leading men away from the sins of despair and presumption and towards God's mercy in an ever darkening world. ❖