

PRESENTATION ON THE VIRTUE OF HOPE

I. The virtue of hope is the determined recognition that our final happiness lies in heaven alone, and a trust that, with God's grace and our cooperation, we can arrive there. See Catechism 1817. It keeps our efforts focused on treating this world as a journey, for ourselves and others towards a greater kingdom.

A. Charity draws us toward the rightful object of love, God above all and other people and even creation as reflecting His glory. Faith shows us the truth about God and others, and the way to live out a life worthy of Him. Hope gives us the trust that God will guide and sustain us along this path, if we are willing. As St. Paul says "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. . . . At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, as I am known. So faith, hope, love, remain, these three; but the strongest of these is love." 1 Cor. 13:7-12-13.

- St. Thomas argues that the natural progression is from faith to hope and from hope to love, although all three virtues are given in beginning form at baptism. Summa Theologica II-II q. 17 art. 8. Part of the idea is that God inspires in the human soul faith and a certain awe-inspiring delight in God's presence. It does not take long for an honest human to recognize his own sinfulness and unworthiness in God's presence. But God offers forgiveness and grace through Jesus that we may be able to stand in God's presence. Placing hope in that offer, and having the courage to act upon it, we then love God at a deeper level. Thus, as Jesus says, "The one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." Luke 7:47. This progress does not occur merely once for all, but continues progressing in life, as it did, for example in the lives of St. Peter and St. Paul. See, e.g., Luke 5:1-11, 23:54-62, John 21:15-19 (Peter's conversion and re-conversion); Acts 9:1-22; 2 Cor. 12:7-10 (Saul's conversion and then a second recognition of a need of God's grace.)

B. Hope sustains the longings for justice, and keeps one from growing embittered at continuing injustices in the world. It guides one to work for justice, using worldly institutions, but also understanding that final justice comes from God alone. It thus keeps one both from indifference and from false hopes in programs and human institutions.

C. Hope sustains fortitude, especially in difficult and disappointing times, knowing as St. Paul says, "God makes all things work to the good of those who love Him." Romans 8:28; Catechism 1819.

D. Hope gives us a supernatural prudence, guiding us to work for a sanctity that would seem impossible, and for changes in

human hearts that seem unattainable. As the Catechism says, "Christians hope unfolds from the beginning of Jesus' preaching in the proclamation of the beatitudes." Hope takes God's command to be perfect and seeks to act upon it, knowing that God will bless all of our efforts. Hope also forbids us from believing that evil is ever necessary, knowing that God will sustain His Church and all souls who are faithful to Him. See John 15:1-7, 17:33.

E. Hope both gives one more confidence in efforts at temperance and gives temperance its final goal. It recognizes that control of desires on this earth is a continual struggle, but that, on this earth or after it we will succeed in attaining perfect freedom if we cooperate with God's grace provided through Christ.

F. Hope is a supernatural virtue because it goes beyond mere reason, which would tell us that a certain advancement is possible, but cannot tell us whether our desires for perfection will be fulfilled at last. On a natural level, a virtuous human would be torn between humility, which recognizes our sinfulness and the vast, humanly unbridgeable distance between ourselves and the holiness of God, and courage and magnanimity, which strives towards great things. Placing our hope in Christ we can attain this goal of greatness. See Romans 7:14-25, 8:24..

II. Hope gives a certain excitement to life, making one realize that this life is an adventure, a struggle towards the goal of heaven, which we can attain with God's grace, but that we can also reject.

A. Overall, hope tells us that this life is a continual journey toward holiness and virtue, and keeps us either from despairing of ever attaining it, thinking that we can please God without efforts (presumption), or thinking that we can attain it entirely on our own without God's grace (Pelagianism.) Likewise, hope sees human history as having meaning in showing forth God's saving work, especially through the Church, but keeps one from seeing any time (past, present, or future) as the fulfillment of our hopes.

B. There is an excitement, for we do not know what events the future holds, but rather know God's promises to sustain us through the unknown. We also are not certain, although by living a Christian life we can become increasingly so, about whether we will cooperate with God's grace in the future. Rather, we must continually make efforts to do so. As St. Paul says, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the one who, for His good purpose works in you both to desire and to work." Phil. 12-13.

C. Recognizing that all of this life is but the beginning of everlasting life, and therefore, that we can change dramatically as youth do, and living the adventure of life, hope is thus the virtue of youth. As Josef Pieper, a Frenchman and one of the leading Christian philosophers of modern times put it, "Natural hope blossoms with the strength of youth. . . . Supernatural hope . . . is actually rooted in a much more substantial youthfulness. . . . [I]t gives man such a long future that the past seems short however long and rich his life." See also 2 Cor. 14:16.

D. Hope therefore, gives one the confidence to take on all sinfulness, but the recognition that we can fall into it and will do so if we do not cooperate with God's grace. Hope thus leads to an excitement that is associated with the fear of the Lord. Thus does Isaiah say, "His delight shall be the fear of the Lord." Isaiah 11:3. St. Paul draws upon the image of battle, saying, "Since we are of the day, let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is the hope of salvation." 1 Thess. 5:8.

III. The sins against hope are above all despair and presumption. Catechism 1091-92.

A. Despair is either a refusal to believe that God can forgive past sins or a refusal to believe that one can overcome sins.

1. Despair frequently comes from *acedia*, or a certain sloth, a lack of desire to be holy. Seeing the demands of holiness and God's law and not wanting to make the sacrifices necessary for them, it can be tempting to conclude that they are impossible.
2. Despair can also come from a fear of failing or an unwillingness to confront one's own sins. This fear leads to the "worldly sadness" that St. Paul speaks of. See 2 Cor. 7:10.
3. There is also a certain pride in despair, a conclusion that one's own sins are greater than God's forgiveness.
4. Despair was the final sin of Judas Iscariot. And it is likely at the root of much of the modern flight into distractions and meaningless novelties. As St. Thomas points out, the sadness and sloth that leads to and builds on despair causes a restlessness of mind that creates an excessive loquacity, noise, and instability of place or purpose. Paradoxically, therefore, a sloth and despair regarding our eternal destiny can lead to a restless exhausting activity as people seek to drown out the urgings of conscience.

5. Eventually, there is a hostility to all things that remind one of the calling that one has despaired of. King Herod was at that first stage of the restless pursuit of distractions. Herodias demonstrated that hostility that later comes when a prophet brings the truth.

B. False hopes can involve either presumption about God's help or final hope being placed in things of this world.

1. Presumption about God's help involves either Pelagianism, the view that we can achieve holiness by our own efforts without God's grace, or a certain quietism that says that our own efforts do not matter. The classic Protestant approach took the latter view, but emphasized that the faith needed for salvation was difficult to attain. That view at least looked upon good works as a sign that one had attained this difficult level of faith. Modern lax spiritualities tend to say that everyone is saved anyway and that even faith is not necessary.

2. False hopes in the world would say that this program or that state will bring all people or an individual person to holiness. Such false hopes both turn a person away from God's grace, which works in all circumstances, and can lead a person to commit sins so that this desired, and presumed necessary, situation can come about. As the Psalmist says, "Place not thy trust in princes in mere mortals powerless to save." Ps. 146:3. As St. Thomas points out, we may, and at times must, rightfully hope in another assisting us in cooperating in God's grace, but our final hope is in God alone. Summa Theologica II-II q.47 art. 5.