

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE – Part One

(Some foundational spiritual and moral principles for our present need)

In the current coronavirus crisis, which is engulfing the whole world step by step I have been meditating of the three theological virtues infused in our souls at baptism. How much we need these divine gifts currently namely: Faith, Hope and Love.

By prayer we can activate these gifts in our lives to help and support us with the strength that comes from God. Whilst we are using every human effort and ingenuity to mitigate the crisis ultimately, we also need the assistance of divinely given faith, hope, love and moral courage as foundational principles in our lives.

Theological virtues are virtues associated in Christian theology and philosophy with salvation resulting from the grace of God. Virtues are traits or qualities which dispose one to conduct oneself in a morally good manner. Traditionally they have been named Faith, Hope, and Charity, and can trace their importance in Christian theology to Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 13, who also pointed out that “the greatest of these is love.”

The medieval Catholic philosopher St Thomas Aquinas explained that these virtues are called theological virtues "because they have God for their object, both in so far as by them we are properly directed to Him, and because they are infused into our souls by God alone, as also, finally, because we come to know of them only by Divine revelation in the Sacred Scriptures".

A person receives the theological virtues by their being "infused"—through Divine grace—into the person. The theological virtues are so named because their object is the divine being (theos).

Faith is the infused virtue, by which the intellect, by a movement of the will, assents to the supernatural truths of Revelation, not on the motive of intrinsic evidence, but on the sole ground of the infallible authority of God revealing. As has been said in the past "What God says is supremely credible, though not necessarily supremely intelligible for us." The First Vatican Council (III, iii;) stated that "faith is a supernatural virtue by which we with the inspiration and assistance of God's grace, believe those things to be true which He has revealed...although the assent of faith is in no sense blind, yet no one can assent to the Gospel teaching in the way necessary for salvation without the illumination of the Holy Spirit..." It is a gratuitous gift of God.

Hope is defined as a Divinely infused virtue, acts upon the will, by which one trusts, with confidence grounded on the Divine assistance, to attain life everlasting. Its opposite is the sin of despair.

Charity is a divinely infused virtue, inclining the human will to cherish God for his own sake above all things, and man for the sake of God. To love God is to wish Him all honour and glory and every good, and to endeavour, as far as one can, to obtain it for Him. John 14:23 notes a unique feature of reciprocity which makes charity a veritable friendship of man with God. "Whoever loves me will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our dwelling with him." Lack of love may give place to hatred, wrath or indifference. 1 Corinthians 13

The first mention in Christian literature of the three theological virtues is in St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians 1:3, "...calling to mind your work of faith and labour of love and endurance in hope..." In 1 Thessalonians 5:8, he refers to this triad of virtues again, "But since we are of the day, let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is hope for salvation."

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul places the greater emphasis on Charity (Love). "So, faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love." First, because it informs the other two: "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." According to Augustine of Hippo, from a temporal perspective, love lasts, while "Hope isn't hope if its object is seen", and faith gives way to possession. This view is shared by Gregory of Nyssa.

St Thomas Aquinas found an interconnection of practical wisdom and moral virtue (e.g. courage without prudence risks becoming mere foolhardiness). This is frequently termed "the Unity of the Virtues."

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In his treatment of the virtues, St Thomas viewed the theological virtues as being the product of habitual grace. According to St Thomas, this grace, through the theological virtues, allows humanity to become agents in meritorious action that is beyond their own natural ability. In this way it is supernatural.

St Thomas says, "Faith has the character of a virtue, not because of the things it believes, for faith is of things that appear not, but because it adheres to the testimony of one in whom truth is infallibly found". (De Veritate, xiv, 8)

St Thomas further connected the theological virtues with the cardinal virtues. He views the supernatural inclinations of the theological virtues, caused by habitual grace, to find their fulfilment in being acted upon in the cardinal virtues.

The moral virtues are acquired by practice and habit. Catholic moral theology holds that the theological virtues differ from the cardinal virtues in that they cannot be obtained by human effort but are infused by God into a person. Like the cardinal virtues, an individual who exercises these virtues strengthens and increases them, i.e., they are more disposed to practice them.

Following St. Augustine, St Thomas also recognized a separate but related type of moral virtue which is also infused by God. The distinction lies both in their source and end. The moral virtue of temperance recognizes food as a good that sustains life, but guards against the sin of gluttony. The infused virtue of temperance disposes the individual to practice fasting and abstinence. The infused moral virtues are connected to the theological virtue of Charity.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote three encyclicals about the theological virtues: 'Deus caritas est' (about love), 'Spe salvi' (about hope), and 'Lumen fidei' (about faith: this encyclical was written both by Pope Benedict XVI and by Pope Francis).

Pray, by God's grace, an increase to our Faith, strength to our Hope and to love Him and our neighbour the more.