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*The Virtue of Hope*  
in St. Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*

„In Deum salutare meum et gloria mea Deus  
auxilii mei et spes mea in Deo est” (Ps. 61: 8, VUL).

**INTRODUCTION**

Following Saint Paul's words, “nunc autem manet *fides, spes, caritas*, tria haec; maior autem his est caritas” (I Cor. 13: 13, VUL), the Fathers of the Church and all those who came after them recognized three fundamental virtues, which they called “theological”: *faith, hope and charity*. These virtues are a supernatural gift of God, “a reflection of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit within the Christian,”<sup>1</sup> for they help human beings to attain their supernatural end – the eternal happiness.

In this essay we will treat of one of these theological virtues, namely *hope*, using Saint Thomas' discussion in *Summa Theologiae*, especially in IIa IIae, q. 17. First, we will treat of *hope as virtue*, especially as a *theological virtue*; second, we will analyze *the object* of this virtue, and in the end we will relate hope to the other two theological virtues, that is, to faith and charity.

**I. HOPE AS THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE**

In his treatise on the passions of the soul, Saint Thomas defines hope as “a *movement of the appetitive power* ensuing from the apprehension of a *future good, difficult but possible to obtain*.”<sup>2</sup> However, this definition refers to hope as passion, not as virtue. Saint Thomas classifies hope as one among the five passions proper to the irascible appetite (hope/despair, fear/daring and anger), and consequently it is not possible in such a context for hope to be a

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1841.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia IIae, q. 40, a. 2, corpus.

virtue. Rather, as opposed to despair, hope is moderated by other virtues, as fortitude,<sup>3</sup> magnificence [Gr., *megaloprepeia*] and magnanimity.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, there is a virtue of hope, which is different from the passion of the irascible appetite, although it borrows its name on account of some similarities with it. But how is it then different from hope as passion of the irascible appetite? What makes it a virtue? To answer these questions, Saint Thomas uses first the definition of virtue given by Aristotle in *Ethics*: “the virtue of a thing is that which *makes its subject good, and its work good likewise*.”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, he defines what makes a human act good, namely, the attainment of *its proper rule or measure*. But this rule is twofold: one proximate and homogeneous, namely, the *natural reason*, and one remote and excelling, namely, *God*. Therefore, when one’s act attains<sup>6</sup> reason or God Himself, this act is to be considered a good one. Now, coming back to the object of hope as passion – a future good difficult but *possible* to obtain, this possibility can refer either to *one’s own power* or to *one being helped by somebody else*. Thus, inasmuch as one hopes to obtain some future difficult good as being possible by his own power, his hope is merely a passion of his irascible appetite. But when one hopes to obtain some future difficult good *as possible by means of Divine help*, then his hope attains God Himself. Consequently, his hope is a *virtue*, for it makes one’s act to attain the due rule, in this case God Himself.

A further question arises now: what kind of virtue hope is? To answer it one should analyze *the object* of this virtue,<sup>7</sup> for *it is the object that specifies a habit*. In the case of hope, its object must be something worthy of God, since the one who hopes relies on the help of God when expecting to attain the desired good. But, inasmuch as God is *infinite*, an object worthy of His help should also be an infinite one, namely, God Himself. Therefore, the virtue of hope has as its primary and proper object God Himself. However, the highest way in which an intellectual being can attain God is *the beatific vision*, which eternal happiness consists in. Hence it can be said also that *eternal happiness is the proper object of hope*. Finally, since the

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, Ia, q. 95, a. 3, ad secundum.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, Ia IIae, q. 60, a. 5, corpus.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, IIa IIae, q. 17, a. 1, corpus.

<sup>6</sup> Here “attains” means “is ruled by”, “is subject to” or “is in harmony with”.

<sup>7</sup> Although we dedicated the third chapter of this paper to the analysis of the object of hope, we will touch this subject to some extent in this chapter also, as much as it is necessary for our discussion.

principles that direct human beings aright to their supernatural happiness are called *theological virtues*,<sup>8</sup> it follows that hope in God is one of the theological virtues.

Some might object that hope is not a virtue, for it *is not a mean* between two vices. However, none of the theological virtues is such a mean. The proper object of these virtues is God Himself, who is infinite; thus it cannot be an excess of trusting God, of hoping in God or of loving God,<sup>9</sup> who can never be trusted too much, hoped in too much or loved too much. Also, when a moral virtue, for example, observes a mean between two extremes, its object is ruled by reason. By contrary, a theological virtue *finds no rule above its object*, since this object Himself – God – is the Supreme and First Rule. Therefore hope is a virtue, and a theological one.

There are now other two characteristics of hope following immediately upon its definition as a theological virtue: hope is *infused in us by God alone* and *its existence is known to us only by Divine revelation in Scriptures*.<sup>10</sup> By revelation alone we come to know about man's supernatural end, and the attainment of this end is possible only by a supernatural help of God – the Divine grace, which the theological virtues are a fruit of. Hence, hope is necessary for salvation (“we are saved by hope”<sup>11</sup>) and it is a characteristic sign of the new life in Christ: “who . . . hath regenerated us unto a *lively hope* . . . unto an inheritance incorruptible . . . reserved in heaven.”<sup>12</sup>

## II. THE OBJECT OF HOPE

Though we touched this subject in the precedent chapter, we should have now a more detailed analysis of the object of hope as theological virtue. We have seen that the proper object is God Himself, or in other words the eternal happiness, which consists in sharing in the Divine life. However, one may hope to obtain by the help of God many different goods; would then this hope be of a different kind? The answer is simple: if those goods are means to the last supreme good, then it is the same virtue of hope by which one expects to obtain both the supreme good

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<sup>8</sup> Saint Thomas, op. cit., Ia IIae, q. 62, a. 1, corpus.

<sup>9</sup> Although there is often a deficiency in trusting, hoping in and loving God.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Thomas, op. cit., Ia IIae, q. 62, a. 1, corpus.

<sup>11</sup> Rom. 8: 24.

<sup>12</sup> I Peter 1: 3-4.

and those goods directed to it. The same happens with the theological virtue of charity, by which one loves God and his neighbor for the sake of God. But, as in this case one loves God principally and everything else secondarily (and for the sake of God), in the same way the object of hope is God principally and the other goods directed to God secondarily (and for the sake of God).

Moreover, the object of one's hope can be not only his own eternal happiness, but also *someone else's happiness*. Though "movement is always towards its own term which is proportionate to the subject moved,"<sup>13</sup> when one loves his friend he regards him *as his other self*, thus he desires for his friend what he desires for himself *as for himself*. But if he hopes the eternal happiness for himself, then he will hope the same happiness for his friend whom he loves. In fact, this is a certain sign of friendship; *if one does not hope this supreme good for someone else, then he does not regard him as a friend*.

Another distinction to be made is with respect to the help one relies on when hoping the eternal life. Since only God can move a human being to attain this last end, it would appear that no one should expect this help from a creature, as Jeremiah says: "Cursed be the man that trusts in man."<sup>14</sup> But the Church always taught that we should ask for the help of the saints, or for the prayers of others. Would not then be a contradiction between these two teachings? Saint Thomas, using his blessed principle *semper distinguere*, answers that one should hope in the help of God principally and in the help of the others secondarily, as they are the ministers of God's Providence. In other words, God is regarded as the primary efficient cause of this help, while all others are secondary efficient causes (or instrumental efficient causes), on account on their absolute dependence upon God. Thus, it is not forbidden to hope to attain the eternal happiness by the help of the others, provided that he who hopes relies primarily on the help of God and only secondarily on the help of creatures, as instruments of God. It would be however a grave sin for someone to hope to attain happiness primarily by the help of a creature, for this would mean to idolize that creature and by consequence to deprive God of His due place in one's life.

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<sup>13</sup> Saint Thomas, op. cit., IIa IIae, q. 17, a. 3, corpus.

<sup>14</sup> Jer. 17: 5.

### III. HOPE RELATED TO FAITH AND CHARITY

It remains now to see how is the theological virtue of hope *similar* and in the same time *different* from the other two theological virtues, namely, faith and charity. In order to do that, we have to recall the definitions of these two other virtues. Thus, faith<sup>15</sup> is a supernatural habit of the mind that enables one to adhere firmly to the First Truth (God Himself), adherence which is the beginning of salvation. Further, charity is a supernatural habit that unites one to God through love, union which will be perfect only in the state of bliss. Thus, if we define hope as a supernatural habit of the mind that enables one to expect to attain the Supreme Good (God Himself) by the help of God, then the similarities and the differences between the three theological virtues become clear. First, with respect to similarities, one can easily observe that, as theological virtues, all of them have as their proper object God Himself. Also, all of them are *infused* by God and *known through revelation only*, being necessary to salvation. As Saint Thomas observes, these “supernatural principles”<sup>16</sup> come to perfect the natural principles of intellect and will, in order to enable one to reach his supernatural end.

As regards their differences, though all of them have God as their proper object, yet *they adhere to God in a different manner*. One can adhere to something either for its own sake, or for the sake of something else. Thus, through the virtue of charity one adheres to God for His own sake, loving Him unconditionally. On the other hand, through the virtues of faith and hope one adheres to God as to someone by whom he attains his supernatural end. For example, by faith one adheres to God as to the First Truth, as to the One from whom he derives the knowledge of truth whereby his salvation begins. Likewise, by hope one adheres to God as to the supreme Helper, the One in whose assistance he can trust. Therefore all the theological virtues have as their proper object God Himself, but *under a different aspect*, and this difference in aspect is sufficient to differentiate these virtues from one another.

Another difference to be noted between these virtues is with respect to *their order in generation and perfection*. Thus, since one must know something before loving it or before hoping to obtain it, it is clear that faith, which gives the knowledge of God, must be first in the

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<sup>15</sup> As theological virtue, of course.

<sup>16</sup> Saint Thomas, op. cit, Ia IIae, q. 62, a. 3, corpus.

order of generation. Both hope and charity depend on faith, which is the beginning of salvation, for all the revealed truths about God – that He exists,<sup>17</sup> that He is good, that He is willing to help us, that He is our supreme happiness – are known through faith. Furthermore, in order to love God as his Supreme Good, one must hope that he is able to attain this Good by Divine help. Thus in this sense hope precedes charity in generation. Another argument in the same sense is that hope, which is the expression of an imperfect love,<sup>18</sup> must precede charity, which is the perfection of love (inasmuch as perfection is posterior to imperfection). Therefore, simply speaking, in the order of generation faith comes first, hope second and charity is the last among the theological virtues.

As regards *the order of perfection*, since in the order of generation the imperfect precedes the perfect, it could be easily said that charity is the first, hope is the second and faith is the last. We should explain now how hope perfects faith and how charity perfects both faith and hope. Thus, hope can be considered a confirmation of faith, for no one can hope to attain happiness by the help of God unless he firmly believes that this happiness exists, that it is possible for him to attain it and that God is willing to help him. Likewise, since through charity one loves God as a friend, this friendship will make his faith and his hope stronger, for one trusts more a friend and hopes mostly in his friend. Finally, since charity is *the form of all virtues*,<sup>19</sup> it perfects all virtues, therefore faith and hope as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that hope is a virtue because it has God as *its proper object*, for through hope one is moved to expect the attainment of eternal happiness by the help of God. Thus, hope is one among the three theological virtues and differs specifically from the other two on account of the different aspect under which it attains God – the Supreme Helper. Its existence is not known to us by natural reason, but only by Divine revelation. Moreover, we have seen that one

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<sup>17</sup> This can be known also by natural reason alone, but it is also possible that one comes to the certitude of God's existence through faith.

<sup>18</sup> For through hope God is loved not for His own sake, but for the sake of something else, namely, the attainment of eternal happiness.

<sup>19</sup> Saint Thomas, op. cit., IIa IIae, q. 23, a. 8, corpus.

can hope not only for eternal happiness, but also for all other goods directed to this happiness, and that in hoping the attainment of happiness and of the other goods directed to it one can rely primarily only on the help of God, and secondarily on the help of His creatures that are His instruments. As Saint Paul says, “in this hope we were saved” (Rom. 8: 24).