

# Hope - the most underrated virtue

When we consider the theological virtues, love/charity first comes to mind, followed by faith, and lastly, almost as an afterthought, we consider hope. How many sermons have we heard on love and faith? Probably too many to count, but I cannot recall one homily on hope.

Added to its neglect, hope is also misunderstood and misrepresented in society. Ask someone what they are hoping for and they'll likely respond: I'm hoping for a new job, a spouse, a great vacation, or a child. Some of these are noble things to hope for, but these worldly ends are not linked to hope as a theological virtue. Moreover, hope implies trusting in someone else, and in an age of self-determination, relying on a Being that is beyond us is unsettling and difficult.

Recently, I attended a lecture on hope, and the speaker began with a startling line. "One day we all are going to die, and we hope that it will be the greatest thing we ever experienced." I sat in my chair, shocked by the declaration, imaging death as something horrible, not the "greatest thing" that we will experience. While less colloquial, the catechism reaffirms this other world perspective of hope. "Hope is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness."

Hope acknowledges we live in a fallen world with suffering and pain, but also reminds us that something exists beyond this world, a perfect existence in heaven. The virtue, however, is not escapist; rather, focusing on the afterlife mysteriously benefits us in this world. C. S. Lewis offers a wonderful elaboration of this point: "It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next ... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."

When I learn of a famous celebrity committing suicide, I often reflect on the virtue of hope and its opposite, despair. These individuals had everything - money, fame, success, - but it was not enough because they lacked hope.

The increasing number of people suffering from depression is our culture's little dark secret which no one wants to talk about. The statistics are overwhelming. About 10 percent of Americans - or 27 million people - were taking antidepressants in 2005, which is the most recent data I could find, and that number was a 100 percent increase from 1996. I can only image the numbers have increased substantially since the economy has entered a recession and unemployment has risen to 8-10 percent. Even considering that antidepressants are used for many different reasons and doctors tend to overprescribe medicines, the numbers are awfully high.

Still, I am not surprised by the widespread level of depression. If you put your hope in a sport's team, you're going to be depressed. If you put your hope in politics, you're going to be depressed. If you put your hope in a television show, you're going to be depressed. They will not live up to your expectations. In the news, on the Internet, and in my personal contacts, I see a population that is discouraged. We blame everyone else for letting us down: the wealthy, corrupt politicians, or even Church leaders. We need, however, to look closer. We can only change ourselves, placing our hope in someone who can truly and completely satisfy - God.

Hope is strengthened by glimpses of the happiness of heaven that we experience here on earth. Our future bliss is foreshadowed in a beautiful piece of music, an impressive landscape, loving relationships, and most profoundly, in the Eucharist. These tastes of heaven are powerful proofs that God exists and that He has many great mysteries in store for us.

Hope is essential to a Christian worldview, and its absence can inflict profound pain. In many ways, the suffering of hell is due to the hopelessness of the situation. In Dante's *Inferno*, the gate of hell is inscribed with the foreboding line, "Abandon all hope — Ye Who Enter Here." Contrarily, hope provides the living with the ability to overcome any trial, no matter how difficult. By focusing on the eternal, we know that every suffering will end, and we hope to one day be in heaven with God experiencing perfect joy.

*(I am not a psychologist, but I understand that many people suffer depression due to an experience of extreme trauma or biological factors. These individuals need to*

*continue receiving professional attention and taking prescribed medicines. In addition to these treatments, NOT to replace them, I would suggest placing hope in God and trusting in His plan.)*