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Hope

Understanding the Virtue of Hope

Hope is one of the theological virtues, alongside Faith and Charity. They are so called because “they guide and direct us to God,” and because their “immediate object is God.” It should be immediately and carefully noted that Hope has two dimensions. The natural Hope and hope as a theological virtue. Following the classical and scholastic tradition, natural Hope is a passion, an affective orientation to perceived goods one takes to be impeded by various obstacles. It aims at finite good the person construes as possible but is difficult to attain.

On the other hand, the theological virtue of hope, which draws from Christian perspectives, is “an infused virtue, that disposes a person to entrust himself or herself to God to bring her into union with him both now and in the fullness of time. St Thomas Aquinas, a great scholastic philosopher and theologian, considered that “the object of hope is a future good, difficult but possible to obtain.” He maintained that, as far as we hope for anything as a possibility we can attain by Divine assistance, “our hope attains to God Himself,” on whose aid it depends.

Notably, while the natural hope, is conceived as a passion which drives one towards a perceived good, that is possible but difficult to get, the theological virtue of hope has God as its object, thus relying on His assistance to attain that good. It is this second dimension on the theological virtue, this Christian perspective, that I will focus on in this essay.

Hope, therefore, keeps the human person from discouragement; sustains him/her during times of trial, and opens his/her heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Thus, it is a “theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness.” In the virtue of one respond to the aspirations to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every human person; it unfolds from the beginnings of the gospel proclamation of the beatitudes and anchored on its promises, thus, it affords us joy even in our trials. Little wonder then it is popularly said that “the worst thing to be without is hope.”

How hope resonates with me

This work on Hope reminds me of my experience of loss in the past, when I lost a mate and bosom friend, in an accident. Initially, when the news came, I did not realize the weight of the incident, the weight of his loss. As time passed, it became clearer to me that I had lost a friend, a confidant and one that I shared a greater part of my life’s experiences. It was at the time of processing these memories, what Mellissa Kelley, a professor of pastoral counselling, calls “Meaning Making,” that I realized that I was going to begin a new chapter in my life without him. Kelley had underscored that “meaning making” is the deep sense we make of things, the way we understand the world, how we articulate the overarching purpose of our lives, the significance we seek in living, the core values by which we order our lives. And this process usually or most times happen after a serious loss. All efforts I made to overcome the shock of the new reality seemed to be elusive. Yet, with ardent hope in the afterlife, I admonished myself that my friend is in a better place, where we all aspire to be, and that it is time I learned to live and to find happiness without him.

Bob Deits, a pastoral psychologist, and writer, hinted that, in times of loss, such “why” questions as “why did I get this cancer?” “Why did my husband die, etc.?” that grievers ask, reflect a

desperate yearning for meaning and purpose in their loss. He further narrated that in his experience as a clergy, repeatedly, griever who are going through the challenges of loss, keep asking such questions as “where is God?” “How could God let this happen?” Unfortunately, these lamentations remain unanswered. In contrast, Kelley noted that in her research study on grief, many participants who shared their beliefs about what had become of their loved ones, expressed such hopeful beliefs as: “he is at peace,” “she is in heaven,” etc. thus she agrees that a part of the wholeness that may emerge from the brokenness of grief is learning that a new future is always available to us, that numerous opportunities exist in every present circumstance. To this degree, one’s construction of meaning can be enhanced, as I experienced in my own situation. Hope, therefore, is a virtuous disposition, a tool of self-comfort; it throws a healing light even in times of trial and grief; it reassures of God’s steadfastness and availability.

Our hope does not fail us

Writing to the Roman church, St. Paul reminded them that “hope does not disappoint us” (Rom. 5:5). Although, this expression may have been used in a different context, it remains a truism that the theological virtue of hope creates that internal disposition that there is always a newness, which may be invisible but perceived, and that through God’s help, one can tend towards that intended newness.

Interestingly, one may think of resilience while thinking of the virtue of hope. While it is possible that one can find a connection between both, it is important to know that they are different in a variety of ways. For instance, resilient people, as Mary Van Hook observed, can draw upon their internal resources and potential ones in their environment to cope with challenges. About hope, God initiates it and beckons the agent to look up to the perceived better future, to which the agent responds.

Conclusion

In this short essay, I have tried to reflect on the general understanding of the theological virtue of hope, which is subtly different from the natural conception of hope. I have also drawn from authors like Thomas Aquinas to discuss the Christian notion of hope, which is considered as an infused virtue; a virtue given by God. using my own experience of loss, I have attempted to show how this virtue plays out in my experience and how through god's help I have been able to set sail towards healing and flourishing. I would think that one important phenomenon about this virtue is that while we live in a world laden with so many disappointments, uncertainties, and emotional instabilities, it always reassures and never allows the mind to despair, in the understanding that "god is always close to the broken-hearted" (Ps. 34:18).

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