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UNTO A LIVING HOPE

DAMIAN LEE, O.P.



WHILE walking through the woods one day, a young man came upon a strange looking path marked, "Travel At Your Own Risk." In spite of the warning he decided to follow the path and see where it led. He found that some sections were covered with snow, some with mud, and still others with sharp, jagged stones. Soon he overtook a frail old man laboring along the difficult road. The ghostly figure was dragging a burlap bag on the ground behind him. The youth watched curiously as the old man pulled the sack over the snow, through the heavy mud, and then across the sharp stones. Occasionally the man would stop, open the bag and gaze upon its contents with sorrowful eyes. Puzzled by this behavior the youth approached and asked, "What do you have in the sack that causes you such effort to haul and such great sorrow to gaze upon?" The old man looked sadly at the youth and said, "It is my heart." "Then," said the youth, "why do you not pick it up and carry it?" The man tugged at the bag and said, "Because it is a Christian heart laden with duties and obligations that I cannot bear. It is too heavy to raise up and carry in my breast." The man turned to leave and the youth asked, "Where are you taking it?" "I do not know," came the reply as the old man resumed his hopeless journey. The man was again dragging his heart through the cold of indifference, into the muck of temptation, and with great difficulty over the jagged stones of sin. Turning away in horror the youth saw a sign by the side of the road. It read, "This is the road from presumption to despair."

THE BURDEN

For those who walk the road from presumption to despair, life is a burden which gradually tears out the Christian heart for

virtue, the Christian hope for happiness. The history of the Age of Science is a grim reminder of the fact that the gaiety and lightness of the presumptuous heart cannot long be sustained in the face of reality.

One hundred years ago the world had a light and carefree heart. Many believed that man could shape a glorious destiny for himself here on earth. They trusted in science to bring perfect happiness. God would no longer be man's support nor even less his final reward. Science would produce beatitude. That was the presumption that ushered in the age of science. Yet, even as science added new discoveries, new inventions, material success upon success, man came gradually to realize that science alone was not offering the perfect comfort, peace, and happiness for which his spirit longed. In fact it was creating chaos. The final bubble of presumption burst over Hiroshima. Man knew that science could destroy even more effectively than it could comfort and aid him.

But the shock the world received at realizing the failure of science has not turned its eyes to God with hope. The world now greedily seeks to obtain whatever crumb of sensible pleasure vice can offer, whatever thread of material security human institutions can provide. The world has lost its heart for virtue. It no longer strives for the reward that can fulfill the longing of the human heart. It has abandoned all hope of perfect happiness. And this is despair.

THE WORLD WITHIN MAN

That the world should walk the path from presumption to despair is understandable since it does not have the great gift of hope, but that Christians could wander off in the shadow of the world should give us serious reason to pause. Yet it is true. There are many Christians who build a little world within themselves based on false presumptions and, like the old man in the opening allegory, find the Christian life an intolerable burden. There are two types of presumption that tear the heart out of Christian living and lead inevitably to disillusionment, to discouragement, and possibly to despair.

The first presumption is that man can live constantly on the fringes of paganism and not be overcome by its poisonous fumes. Some Christians think they can enjoy all the comforts and pleasures of the sensuous world and escape the trials and troubles of constant Christian effort. They want to live an easy Christian

life, and still, in spite of themselves, be saved by God. They want perfect happiness with God forever in heaven, but they want it on their own earthly terms. They presume on the mercy of God. The second type of presumption is far more subtle, yet on analysis reflects the presumptions of the world. It is the presumption of those who sincerely wish to live a virtuous life, but fail mainly because they do not understand and practice the virtue of hope. They are attracted by the beauty of the Christian life, and though they have only a specious notion of its nature, they decide to live it most perfectly. They plan to walk the path of virtue by their own power. They dream of a Christian life in which all will be sweetness and light. They imagine the path will be strewn with the blossoms of every possible success, and even fancy that they will rival the deeds of the saints. Both types of presumption spur men onto the path of life with a gay and carefree heart. But their high hopes are only presumptions and presumption leads to despair.

Reality has a way of brushing aside such unfounded presumptions and fanciful dreams and reveals, on the one hand, the great difficulties of Christian living and, on the other, the terrible weaknesses of the human being. So he who presumes to live on the fringes of sin soon learns that the temptations are greater than he thought and that he is weaker than he imagined. He will find it difficult to maintain so precarious a balance. The duties and obligations of Christian living become a burden, so that even what is good in his life wearies the soul, and the enticements of sin and self indulgence become all the more appealing. The fall of such a man is easy and the rise is hard, very hard, for there remains no taste for better things, no incentive to rise and to lift the burden once again. Such a man might easily give up hope in the mercy of God. And this is despair.

The one who presumes to walk the path of virtue by his own power soon finds that the constant effort necessary for virtuous living steals some of the sweetness of meager accomplishment, and most of the energy for more perfect attempts. When old faults and failings reappear in the enervated soul of such a person he soon realizes that he is still a rather weak and helpless creature in the face of determined Christian living. He knows the saints far outstrip his puny efforts. His dreams of a self made sanctity begin to fade and with his dreams, his hope. He might give up the valiant fight of the saints and may even decide to be satisfied with himself just the way he is. Disillusionment and

discouragement can tear out his heart for virtue. He may soon be dragging it along the road to despair.

THE WORLD OF HOPE

Our Lord said, "My yoke is sweet and my burden is light" (Matt. 11, 30). He meant what He said. But He meant it for those who truly hope in Him. Only those who practice the supernatural virtue of hope can enjoy the fullness of the Christian life here on earth. The virtue of hope, however, does not change the world outside, it changes the heart of man. Hope does not change the duties and obligations of Christian living, but it does lift up the heart to God to find support in His omnipotent care. God, in His eternal wisdom, designed the virtue of hope for men whom He knew were weak in order to help them live a life which He knew was difficult. Of its very nature hope reaches out to a good that is difficult to attain. For this reason hope makes no presumptions. It does not cause men to dream vain dreams of an easy life, nor does it create any illusions of man's natural goodness and strength. Rather, hope is a strong and realistic virtue that helps man in full view of his own weakness and in the teeth of greatest difficulty to adhere to God as the source of strength and happiness. This world, where everyone will inevitably face trials and troubles, sorrows and suffering, temptations and failings, where everyone must recognize his own weakness and inadequacy, this same world is the world in which men can become saints. This world, where many beguile themselves with presumptions and betray themselves with despair, this same world is the world of true and strong and holy hope.

THE EYE HATH NOT SEEN

Every Christian must walk in this world of human misery. There is no other way. Hope must be a constant companion of the wayfarer in order to overcome the onslaughts of the world, the flesh, and the devil and to overcome the powerlessness of nature to cling to God. The fact of fallen nature is indeed a strong argument for the necessity of the supernatural virtue of hope. Human nature, fallen in Adam, is quick to give up the struggle for eternal happiness which seems so far away and inclined to seek the temporal wealth, honor, glory, or pleasures which are close at hand. But through the supernatural virtue of hope man can adhere to God as his greatest good. Despite the allurements of sin he can draw closer to eternal happiness; not that he can

actually hold eternal life in his hands, but his heart can hold fast to the hope of beatitude. Knowing that God is near to help him through all difficulties and temptations, knowing that such Divine aid makes the crowning glory of perfect happiness possible to him, the wayfarer can reject all that would separate him from God. To keep the hope of eternal happiness with God always close to the heart is a necessary remedy for fallen nature.

The sublimity of eternal beatitude is a more fundamental reason for the necessity of hope in this life. Man by his natural powers cannot attain perfect happiness with God. Even if man did not have the evil inclinations of fallen nature, even if human nature were perfect man would still be unable to achieve the friendship, the companionship, the sharing in, and participation of the divinity. The final, glorious union with God is beyond reach of all human effort. The powers of the human mind alone could not reveal the beauty of the intimate life of God. Man could have no part in the endless joy of divine life. He would be at best only an outsider, a stranger unable to understand the Divine wisdom, unsuited to share the Divine love. The heart of man must be lifted up by a supernatural virtue in order to seek God as its greatest good. This supernatural quality that elevates and sustains the heart in expectancy of eternal beatitude is the virtue of hope that is given to us by God. This is the reason man cannot hope in his own power and goodness. The object of hope is simply beyond the reach of human virtue. "The eye hath not seen, nor the ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man what things God has prepared for those who love Him" (1 Cor. 2, 9).

MEASURE OF HOPE

Though no man by his own natural power or by the goodness of natural virtue can merit to enter into the holy presence of God it is made possible to Him through the power of God. The infinite distance between man and his goal of union with God can only be traversed when God, out of the abundance of His goodness, bends down and draws man up to Himself. "No one comes to me unless the Father who sent me to draw him, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6, 44). The measure of Christian hope, then, is not the strength and goodness of the creature but the power and goodness of God. St. Thomas teaches that hope should be measured "according to the immensity of His omnipotence and loving kindness" (I II, 64, a. 4). Christian hope, then, should never rise and fall on the estimate of one's own power, but should

continually grow with deeper faith in God's omnipotence and love for His creatures.

God as the source of perfect happiness is the object of the virtue of hope, while the omnipotence of God is the measure and motive force for making hope a vital influence in life. In order to enjoy the full benefits of hope, the Christian must realize not only that perfect happiness is possible of attaining sometime in the future, but that the omnipotent hand of God is at every moment offering the means, the strength, the grace to make every step in time a step toward eternal happiness. The Christian does not struggle alone. The omnipotent and loving hand of God is always ready to give strength to the struggling wayfarer. Until the Christian recognizes and utilizes the aids divine omnipotence offers he will not know the meaning of Christ's words, "My yoke is sweet and my burden is light." It would be well then to consider more carefully the meaning of omnipotence and how it is made manifest in Christian life.

THE OMNIPOTENCE OF GOD

Man is inclined to think of the power of God in much the same terms as the power of nature. He stands awestricken in witnessing a volcanic eruption, a hurricane, or flood. The power unleashed in such disasters is measured by the violence with which it strikes and the amount of destruction it leaves in its wake. Perhaps man's ordinary notion of power always contains some reference to violence because he is so accustomed to see the tyranny with which his fellow men use power for destruction. But it is a mistake to measure the power of nature solely by its violence and destructive force. The great powers of nature also work constantly and quietly to produce the beauty and delicacy of the flower, the life sustaining fruits of the field, the tranquil majesty of a mountain. Similarly, it is a mistake to measure a man's power simply by the intensity of his passion, violence, and destructiveness, for greater powers of mind and will can guide and control the passions and produce a deep understanding and prudent determination that builds rather than destroys. But above all it is a mistake to think of God's omnipotence in terms of tyranny, violence, and destruction. God's power is infinitely more effective than all the powers of nature and man combined. He is indeed All-Powerful. God can do all things, but He can do all things without being a tyrant. He can accomplish anything He wills, but without becoming violent. God is absolutely free in

all that His power effects, but His works are never arbitrary. This is true simply because all that God accomplishes by His power is directed by His wisdom and actualized by His love.

St. Thomas speaks of power in this fashion, "Power is predicated of God not as something really distinct from His knowledge and will . . . inasmuch as power implies a notion of principle putting into execution what the will commands and what knowledge directs" (I, 25, a. 1, ad. 4). The power of God, then, can never actually be separated from His wisdom and love. His power is wise and loving; it is creative power.

Once it is understood that the power of God is not characterized by destructive tyranny and violence, but rather by creative wisdom and love, it is easy to see why the omnipotence of God is the motive of a living hope. For in His wisdom God knows what is best for His creatures, by His love He wills what is best for them and by His power God is constantly effecting what His wisdom directs and His love demands. This is the power upon which Christian hope is based. Since all things are subject to the power of God the Christian can everywhere find the trace of divine wisdom and the touch of divine love that leads to eternal happiness. To those who look with the eyes of faith the world is full, teeming with the manifestations of God's omnipotent care. And each manifestation of His power is a reason for a deeper, truer, more holy hope in Him.

MANIFESTATIONS OF OMNIPOTENCE

Since the power of God is exercised in wise and loving care for His creatures, we should not be too surprised to find that the omnipotence of God is especially manifested in showing mercy. The Church turns our minds to this thought in the prayer of the Mass for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost. "O God, Who dost especially manifest Thine Almighty power by pardoning and showing mercy, multiply Thy mercy toward us, that hastening after Thy promises, we may be made partakers of the treasures of heaven." In commenting on the opening words of this prayer St. Thomas says, "God's omnipotence is particularly shown in sparing and showing mercy because in this is it made manifest that God has supreme power, that He freely forgives sins . . . and . . . because by sparing and having mercy upon men, He leads them on to the participation of the infinite good which is the ultimate effect of divine power" (I, 25, a. 3). If we would seek to know the greatest manifestation of God's omnipotence, then,

we would not search history for the greatest display of destructive force, but rather for God's greatest display of His most tender mercy.

THE REDEMPTIVE INCARNATION

The Redemptive Incarnation is at once the most perfect act of God's omnipotence and the most perfect act of mercy. St. Thomas teaches that especially through the Incarnation our hope is strengthened and he continues by quoting St. Augustine, "Nothing was so necessary for raising our hope as to show us how deeply God loved us, and what could afford us a stronger proof of this than that the Son of God should become a partner with us of human nature" (III, 1, a. 2). The gentle manner in which God's omnipotent power is revealed on earth will become evident by a brief consideration of the principal events in the life of Christ.

The Annunciation. When the angel announced that Mary was to be the mother of Jesus, she asked, "How shall this happen since I do not know man?" and the angel answered and said to her, "The holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee!" Reassuringly, he told Mary that Elizabeth, who was called barren, had also conceived: "For nothing shall be impossible with God" (Luke 1, 32-38). Mary uttered her incomparable *fiat* and the omnipotence of the Most High accomplished its most powerful manifestation in the inviolate tabernacle of Mary's womb. The Word was made Flesh. The Son of God became man. The infinite distance between divinity and humanity was traversed when the Word assumed a human nature from the flesh of Mary. Indeed Mary could say to Elizabeth, "He that is mighty hath done great things to me" (Luke 1, 49). Yet so wonderfully did the power of the Most High effect the Incarnation, so gently was this tremendous power activated that in conceiving Mary remained a virgin.

The Birth of Christ. The prophecy of Isaias was fulfilled: "A child is born to us and a Son is given to us, and the government is upon His shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, God the Mighty, the Father of the world to come, the Prince of Peace" (Is. 9, 6). How regal a birth—this birth of Him upon Whom the government of all things rests, Who is called God the Mighty; yet so humble a birth—this birth of the Christ-child in the stable. How strong a birth—this birth for which God raised up a nation chosen from among nations, saved

from captivity, and preserved through wars that this day might be fulfilled; yet how gentle the birth for even after childbirth Mary remained a virgin.

The Public Life of Christ. Through the miraculous works of Christ the divine power was made manifest on earth. Again that power is shown forth in mercy. Not by the violence of the surgeon's knife but simply by His word and the touch of His hand the sick, the lame, and the blind were comforted and healed. At the call of His voice the daughter of Jairus, the son of the widow at Naim, and the beloved Lazarus rose from the dead. But even more strikingly did Christ manifest the divine power when He forgave sinners for their offences against the Divine majesty.

The Death of Christ. Finally Christ's death fulfilled the loving design for man's redemption. The God-Man died for our sins. He conquered. But He did not conquer with a violent show of force, but by submitting to the will of the Father. "In Him it hath well pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell—And through Him to reconcile all unto Himself making peace through the Blood of the Cross" (Col. 1, 19-20). The wisdom and love and power of God is revealed to us in so humble a way that faith alone can tell us that here on the Cross is the consummation of God's omnipotent care for fallen man.

I TO MY BELOVED AND MY BELOVED TO ME

In His birth, life, and death Christ has manifested to man the power of God. Yet so gently and lovingly did that power flow through His life that we must look with the eyes of faith to perceive that it is power at all. Even as faith reveals the working of divine power in the life of Christ, so too it can reveal the continuation of the divine power working strongly yet with the same gentleness and mercy in our everyday life. When the hand of a priest is raised in absolution before a penitent there is a manifestation of divine power sparing and showing mercy. Sin is destroyed and the burden of eternal punishment is cast off. A soul that was dead lives again. When a priest bows over the host and chalice and whispers the words of consecration, a wafer of bread and the wine of the cup become the Body and Blood of our Lord and Saviour. Only the omnipotence of God could effect this change. Yet how gently that power is brought to bear through the whispered words of a priest. The design of infinite wisdom and the touch of infinite love is never more manifest. The whole Christ, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity is present on the altar

and the Sacrifice of Calvary is renewed without violence in the unbloody Sacrifice of the Mass. The silent presence of the Eucharist within us through Holy Communion tells us something of divine wisdom and power and love. The God-Man becomes our spiritual food, our strength, our nourishment in the strong yet gentle sacramental union.

HE WHO IS MIGHTY

Certainly every Christian who has been given the faith to believe in the power of the Redemptive Incarnation, who has knelt in the tribunal of Penance, who has assisted at Mass and received the Holy Eucharist has reason to say with Mary, "He that is mighty hath done great things to me" (Luke 1, 49). For every Christian there is abundant reason to hope for eternal happiness through the omnipotent help of God. "His Divine Power has granted us all things pertaining to life and piety" (2 Peter 1, 3). His power never ceases to grant all that is necessary for salvation. With the greatest wisdom and tenderest love God offers at every moment sufficient grace to overcome all human weakness, to bear all sufferings, and finally to accomplish His holy will. "My grace is sufficient for thee, for power is made perfect in infirmity. Gladly will I glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may dwell in me—For when I am weak then am I powerful" (2 Cor. 12, 9). Though man may not always feel the touch of love, though there may be no sensible manifestation of the power of God, still he can put his trust in God for the "Lord is good and giveth strength in the day of trouble and knoweth them that hope in Him" (Nahum 1. 7). In all things, then, whether trials, sufferings, or sorrows, the Christian can hope in the omnipotence of God either to relieve the burden or give sufficient strength to endure it, whichever He, in His wisdom, knows will bring us most quickly to His love.

CONCLUSION

The virtue of hope, then, brings peace and joy to the soul even in the face of difficulties, not because of confidence in man's own power or goodness, but because it enables him to cling to God as his greatest good and most powerful support. The measure of hope is not what man can accomplish of his own power, but what God can accomplish through His power and love for man. As the Christian grows in faith and perceives more and more the omni-

potent hand of God at work in this world of turmoil and trouble, at work in his own life, guiding and guarding, sustaining and leading him by means of sacramental graces and the actual graces of every moment, the deeper and stronger and more holy the virtue of hope should become. As the Christian grows in faith and perceives more and more that "it is God who worketh in you both to will and to accomplish, according to His own good will (Phil. 2, 13), the more he should distrust himself and hope in God. "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in the time of visitation, cast all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you" (I Peter 5, 6-8). Those who under the light of faith are attentive to the power and graces of God can say with St. Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who according to His great mercy has begotten us again, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead unto a living hope—unto an incorruptible inheritance—undefiled and unfading reserved for you in heaven. By the power of God you are guarded through faith for salvation" (I Peter 1, 3).

If anyone look carefully at the bitterness of our times, and if, further, he consider earnestly the cause of those things that are done in public and in private, he will discover with certainty the fruitful root of the evils which are now overwhelming us, and of the evils which we greatly fear. The cause he will find to consist in this—evil teaching about things, human and divine, has come forth from the schools of the philosophers; it is crept into all the orders of the State; and it has been received with the common applause of very many. Now it has been implanted in man by Nature to follow reason as the guide of his actions, and therefore, if the understanding go wrong in anything, the will easily follows. Hence it comes about that wicked opinions in the understanding flow into human actions and make them bad. On the other hand, if the mind of man be healthy, and strongly grounded in solid and true principles, it will assuredly be the source of great blessings, both as regards the good of individuals and as regards the common weal. (Encyclical of Leo XIII, pp. x-xi)