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Talk #10  
*St. Paul on Faith, Hope, and Charity*



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# 10. St. Paul on Faith, Hope, and Charity

In this talk we shall focus on the theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity (love)—as presented by St. Paul in his letters. St. Paul constantly makes reference to faith, hope, and charity as the essence of the new life in Christ.

For example, in 1 Thes 5:8, St. Paul exhorts Christians to “put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” In Rom 5:1-5, the Christian life is shown as moving from faith through hope to culminate in charity:

Therefore, since we are justified by *faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him . . . we rejoice in our *hope* of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces *hope*, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s *love* has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

The three virtues are intimately bound together because faith engenders hope, and faith and hope engender charity. Together they form the fabric and foundation of the Christian life.

Very often St. Paul uses the word faith to encompass all three virtues. For example, in Gal 2:20, he describes the Christian life by saying: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by *faith* in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Clearly “faith” here also is meant to include Paul’s hope in Christ, and his love for Him. Faith can be used to stand for the other two because it is their foundation and presupposition. In Rom 4:18, St. Paul speaks of Abraham’s faith in terms of hope: “*In hope he believed* against hope, that he should become the father of many nations.” Likewise, the faith that justifies the Christian is said to be “faith working through charity” (Gal 5:6).<sup>1</sup>

These three virtues are referred to by theologians as theological virtues for three reasons: (a) because their object is God Himself; (b) because, unlike the natural moral virtues they are caused in us directly by God; and (c) because their existence is known only by divine Revelation.

Each of the theological virtues has God directly as its object, but in three different ways. The virtue of faith has God—insofar as he is the living Truth—as its object, to whom we must conform our minds and give the obedience of faith. The virtue of hope is directed to God as the source and content of our beatitude, to be attained through God’s

grace. Charity is directed to God as the Beloved, whom we are to love above all things for His own sake.

All three theological virtues are pure gifts of God, infused into the soul through the action of the Spirit, as St. Paul frequently stresses. In Eph 2:8, he says: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” With regard to hope, Rom 8:23-24 shows it also to be the gift of the Spirit: “We ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.” Charity, finally, is likewise not something we can acquire for ourselves, but “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). Gal 4:6 and Rom 8:15-16 state that the supernatural love for God our Father, by which we cry “Abba, Father,” is worked in us through the Spirit of God, which has been given to us.<sup>2</sup>

Because the theological virtues cannot be naturally acquired but are infused into the soul directly by God, it follows that they can only be known by divine Revelation and not by philosophy. The classical philosophers knew nothing about them. The *Ethics* of Aristotle treats of numerous moral virtues, with pride of place given to the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, however, are nowhere to be found. The same absence can be observed in the works of the other classical philosophers. The contrast with St. Paul could hardly be greater.

This absence of a treatment of faith, hope, and charity in classical philosophy should not surprise us. The theological virtues belong to the supernatural order and cannot be known by philosophical reason alone, nor produced by human power. They vastly transcend the horizons of human nature, human reason, and even human desire.

In 1 Cor 2:9, St. Paul says: “*Eye* has not seen, nor *ear* heard, nor has it entered into the *heart* of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him.”

What God has prepared for us is heaven: eternal life with the Blessed Trinity. This transcends the reach of human reason and human promises. Hence he says, “*Eye* has not seen nor *ear* heard.” The human intellect cannot conceive the beatitude proper to heaven. It also transcends the horizon of human desire. We all desire perfect human happiness, but the human heart, on its own, would not dare aspire so high as to share in *God’s own* infinite beatitude. But eternal life is a precisely a share in God’s own beatitude. Hence St. Paul says that “nor has it entered

<sup>1</sup> See also 1 Tim 1:14, which speaks of Paul’s own justification through “the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

<sup>2</sup> See Gal 4:6: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”

into the *heart* of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Since heaven transcends human reason and human desire or hope, God needs to expand our powers of knowing and desiring, if we are to be able to direct ourselves towards “the things God has prepared for those who love Him.”

Therefore, with regard both to the intellect (symbolized by the “eye” and “ear”) and to the will (the “heart”), “something needs to be supernaturally added to man to order him to a supernatural end.”<sup>3</sup> The intellect needs to be perfected by the habit of faith in order to know the end to which we are ordered and the means by which to arrive. The will or heart needs to be ordered to that end in two ways.

First, it must tend to that end as to something possible to attain, for no one can intend to reach an end deemed to be impossible. In the case of our supernatural end, this is given by the virtue of hope.

However, this intention in itself is insufficient to fully order the will to the vision of God, because nothing tends to something that is not similar to itself, and God in His inner life is maximally dissimilar to us. For this reason, the will needs to be perfected by a certain conformity or union with the end to which it is ordered. This conformity with God in His inner life is produced by the spiritual union of charity. It follows that we need three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Faith perfects the intellect, and hope and charity perfect the will.

As St. Paul states in 1 Cor 13:13: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.”

### ***Faith According to Heb 11***

Let us look first at the virtue of faith. The key text on this virtue is Hebrews 11. Although the authorship of the Letter to the Hebrews is disputed, I will assume here that it reflects the ideas and theology of St. Paul, if not his accustomed style.

A brief and enigmatic definition of faith is given in the letter to the Hebrews, 11:1: “*Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that are not seen.*” We can believe only in what is not directly seen, and belief provides a certainty and assurance about such things, despite their being unseen.

It is of the essence of faith that its object not be seen in any way. First and foremost, the object of faith is not seen by the eyes or senses. God cannot be seen because He is Spirit and not a body. But in a still deeper way, the object of faith is *not “seen” by the reasoning power of man*. The things of faith are ultimately mysteries that transcend the capacity of human reason and philosophy.

It is true that we can demonstrate God’s existence and some of His attributes through reason alone. Neverthe-

less, *who* God is remains unknown and unseen even by philosophy’s loftiest heights. Reason does not enable us to *see God in His personal reality*, and so the things of God are things *hoped for and not seen*, about which there can be faith.

Because of the fact that divine faith is of things unseen, it requires a fundamental conversion of the whole person, who must turn from the primacy of this sensible world to the primacy of the unseen God and the demands of His love. This conversion requires a certain kind of death to self to live for God. The great models of this conversion of faith from the visible to the invisible mystery hidden in God are Abraham and Mary.

In order to better understand supernatural faith, let us look at the nature of faith in general. Faith is a *firm assent of the mind to things unseen*: “*the evidence of things that are not seen.*” It is an act of the mind characterized by firmness, on the one hand, and by an unseen object, on the other. If either one of these two ingredients are lacking, we cannot speak of faith. Another way to say the same thing is to define faith as *the assent of the mind to truths, not motivated by their intrinsic evidence, but motivated rather by a firm impulse of the will, based on the testimony of a witness*.

Why do we make the act of faith? Why would we give firm assent of our minds to an unseen object? What could justify the firmness of our assent, when we cannot see what we are affirming? The answer is that the firmness of our assent is motivated by the *witness* of another who can see or has seen what we affirm, and whom we perceive to be *worthy of trust*. The trustworthiness of the witness provides the “evidence” for things unseen. The firm assent of faith is not arbitrary or without reason, but is motivated by the authority of a witness whom one has reason to trust.

We make the act of human faith every day of our lives, and no one could live without doing so continuously. For example, we know the identity of our own parents, especially our father, by human faith. And such faith is frequently a moral duty. We all learn primarily by human faith. We trust in the authority of teachers, books, the media, public opinion, and friends. This is not to say that we cannot also grasp truths in a scientific way, but nevertheless, the truths grasped in such a way are not as numerous as one would like to think. And until we grasp the demonstration, we know what we have been taught by virtue of human faith in our teachers.

Faith in general is an act midway between scientific or demonstrative knowledge, and opinion. The essence of faith is that one *does not directly see* with certainty the intrinsic reason or necessary cause for the truth of a given proposition. In this sense, it is like opinion. However, faith differs from opinion in its certitude. *Opinion* is the assent to a proposition *with the fear or doubt* that one perhaps is

3 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa of Theology*, I-II, q. 62, a. 3.

in error and that one's opinion is false. It is an act *without firmness and certitude*.<sup>4</sup> In the act of faith, however, one sees clearly that the proposition merits firm assent on account of the authority of those who teach it, even though not on account of its own intrinsic evidence. Thus it is held as *certain*. *Opinion or doubt then cannot coexist with faith, for they are mutually exclusive*. A religious opinion—which admits a deliberate fear or doubt that we are in error—is *not* an act of religious faith in the proper sense of the word.

Divine or supernatural faith is distinguished from human faith on account of the authority of the witness in whom we believe. If the authority of the witness is divine, our faith is divine or supernatural. In other words, faith is supernatural when it rests on the testimony of the Word of God.

Supernatural faith is a supernatural virtue by which we believe firmly in the truths that God has revealed to us. It is the firm adhesion of our spirit, moved by divine grace, to the truths revealed to us by God, based on the veracity of God, who can neither be deceived nor deceive.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, divine faith has a certainty greater than that of all other certainties, even that of the first principles of reason, because it rests directly on the omniscience of God. Our reason can know some natural truths with metaphysical certainty, but nevertheless, our reason is also weak and fallible, as evidenced by the gross errors of many schools of philosophy. God, on the contrary, is the Truth itself and the source of all truth. Thus it is eminently reasonable to submit one's own judgment to the judgment of God. In fact, this is the most reasonable thing a man can do, and it is utterly unreasonable to refuse to do so in order to jealously guard the autonomy of our weak reason.

Human faith can certainly err, just as human reason can err, but divine faith cannot be subject to error any more than God can err (because it is divine faith only insofar as it is belief in what has actually been revealed by God Himself). When a Christian, or an Orthodox Jew, believes something false, it is not because of his supernatural faith, but rather because of a human faith in some heresy or false interpretation, which is mistaken for the divine revelation. He has believed something out of negligence or ignorance that he ought not to have believed.

When ought we to believe? *We ought to believe when the witness who vouches for a certain truth is known to be trustworthy*. We certainly ought not to believe everything that is told to us by others, but only when there are reasons for thinking that the witness is worthy of trust.

The same thing applies to the Jewish and Catholic faith. This faith concerns what is unseen: God, heaven, His plan of salvation in history, the coming of the Messiah, grace,

our adoption as God's children, the Incarnation, etc. Why should we believe in these unseen objects? The only morally compelling reason to embrace this faith in an unseen object is the trustworthiness of the witness. Who is the witness who vouches for this unseen object? The witness can ultimately be none other than God Himself. The firmness of our faith and the moral obligation of believing come from this, that our faith is based on the witness of God, Creator of heaven and earth, who can neither deceive us nor be deceived.

In other words, we do not believe in religious truths because we *see* that they are reasonable, but rather because we *hear* them as the Word of God. This is expressed in the great text of Dt 6:4: "*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. . .*" Israel was not told to *see* for themselves, but to *hear* the Word of Revelation. The same is true in the New Testament. St. Paul says (Rom 10:17): "So faith comes from what is *heard*, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ."

The great difficulty, however, is to determine *where God has spoken*. Reason must first grasp the reasonableness of belief in His existence. And once God's existence is somehow grasped, it is not hard to show that He is worthy of supreme trust, if He deigns to speak to mankind.

But how do I know that God has actually revealed Himself to men, and that this Revelation is contained first in the faith of Israel, and then reaches its fullness in the Catholic faith? Here too we must trust the witness of others, beginning with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Isaiah and the other prophets, all of whose words are transmitted to us by the witness of the Jewish people and their inspired Scriptures. We also base our faith on the testimony that reaches us through the New Testament: that of John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, culminating in Jesus, whose deeds and words are transmitted to us and guaranteed by the Apostles.

*Recognition of the trustworthiness of all of these witnesses is the work of reason*. It would be irrational to believe if reason could not show that God Himself has spoken in human history. *Reason is indispensable in this task*.

### **Motives of Credibility**

How do we evaluate the trustworthiness of the witnesses to God's Revelation? In order to believe in a divine testimony it is certainly not necessary that God appear to us directly, in person. God ordinarily speaks to us through intermediaries, such as the Prophets and Apostles, who are entrusted with a divine mission of being mediators and instruments of God's Revelation. However, when God speaks through intermediaries, it must be possible to recognize that they truly have a divine commission. Otherwise

4 See St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 1, a. 4.

5 See First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, chap. 3, DS 3009.



it would be extremely imprudent to believe, for we could be deceived by any charlatan or honestly deluded person into believing all kinds of absurdities, which indeed we can observe all around us in the multiplication of religious beliefs and sects (New Age, etc.). Therefore, prophets and apostles must come equipped with divine credentials. These divine credentials are *motives of credibility*.

These motives of credibility are supernatural signs that show the action of God by transcending the power of all natural causes. We generally call such signs miraculous; they are signs of God's intervention above the natural order of things.

The motives of credibility are principally three: prophecies, miracles, and the witness of the People of God in the Old and New Covenants: Israel and the Church.

With regard to miracles, St. Paul cites the Resurrection of Christ, witnessed by the Apostles and by over 500 disciples, most of whom are still alive at the time of his first letter to the Corinthians.

### ***The Interior Aid of the Grace of the Holy Spirit in the Act of Faith***

Coupled with the external signs of Revelation, God also aids us interiorly through his grace. These two causes must always go together: motives of credibility and interior grace. Without the divine impulse of actual grace, it is impossible to make the act of supernatural faith, precisely because it is supernatural. There are many testimonies to this effect in the New Testament. For example, Jesus says: "No one can come to me [in faith] unless it is granted him by the Father" (Jn 6:65). When Peter makes his confession of faith in Christ as the Messiah, Son of the living God, Jesus says: "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 16:17). St. Paul teaches the same in 1 Cor 12:3: "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit." In Eph 2:8, he writes: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." This necessity of the aid of grace for the act of faith has been infallibly defined by the Church against the Semi-Pelagian heresy, and it was recently restated by the Second Vatican Council: "To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving 'joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it.'"<sup>6</sup>

Reason is insufficient (although indispensable), and divine grace is necessary to make the act of faith, because the fruit of faith is supernatural. Faith enables us to participate in the mind and truth of God beyond the power of reason. A supernatural cause is necessary to produce a supernatural result. The human mind cannot properly assent

to supernatural truth (with purity of intention) without the supernatural aid of God, who gently and invisibly inclines our will to it. We, of course, can resist and block this gentle aid, but we cannot believe without it.

### ***Faith Is the Foundation of the Spiritual Life***

Faith is the foundation of the spiritual life and the beginning of salvation. Hebrews 11:6 states this with great clarity: "Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him."

No one can move towards God unless he first believes that God exists and is the source of beatitude. We cannot have a relationship with God unless we believe His word. Hence St. Paul frequently quotes Hab 2:4: "The righteous man shall live by faith."<sup>7</sup> The primacy of faith in the spiritual life comes from the fact that God must take the initiative in establishing a relationship with us. He does this by speaking to us and revealing the secrets of His will and His love. We, however, must begin by believing His word and allowing ourselves to be educated by Him, so as to be brought to hope in Him and to share in His love.

Hebrews 11 goes on to describe the faith of the Patriarchs (and matriarchs): Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets. All of these lived by faith and looked forward in hope for "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:10).

### ***On the Existential Importance of Hope***

Heb 11 establishes an intimate link between faith and hope. The object of Christian faith includes the object of Christian hope. Hence faith is the "substance of things hoped for" (Heb 11:1). Faith gives us the certainty of the truth of God's promises, which leads us to hope. If we believe that God "rewards those who seek Him" (Heb 11:6), this faith tends by its very nature to engender hope for that "reward," communicated to us in faith, which is the promise of eternal life.

The virtue of hope is absolutely essential for life. This is a truth that Pope Benedict has greatly emphasized in his second encyclical, *Spe salvi*. In the introduction, he writes: "Hope, by virtue of which we can face our present: the present, even if it is arduous, can be lived and accepted if it leads towards a goal, if we can be sure of this goal, and if this goal is great enough to justify the effort of the journey. . . . Here too we see that a distinguishing mark of Christians is the fact that they have a future. It is not that they know the details of what awaits them, but they know in general terms that their life will not end in emptiness. Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well. . . . The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Denz. 1791.

<sup>7</sup> This is quoted in Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; and Heb 10:38-39.

who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life” (nos. 1-2).

Human experience shows us that we cannot live without a goal to motivate our action. Without a goal we drift and fall into depression. The Jewish psychologist Victor Frankl observed during his time at Auschwitz that people who lost all hope were the first to die. He writes:

Any attempt at fighting the camp’s psychopathological influence on the prisoner . . . had to aim at giving him inner strength by pointing out to him a future goal to which he could look forward. Instinctively some of the prisoners attempted to find one on their own. It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future—*sub specie aeternitatis*. And this is his salvation in the most difficult moments of his existence, although he sometimes has to force his mind to the task. . . . The prisoner who had lost faith in the future—his future—was doomed. With his loss of belief in the future, he also lost his spiritual hold; he let himself decline and became subject to mental and physical decay. Usually this happens quite suddenly, in the form of a crisis, the symptoms of which were familiar to the experienced camp inmate: . . . Usually it began with the prisoner refusing one morning to get dressed and wash or to go out on the parade grounds.<sup>8</sup>

When the Gospel was first proclaimed in the ancient world, it was announced, and perceived, as a message of radical hope in a world marked by pervasive despair. St. Paul speaks of the new Gentile Christians at Ephesus as previously having being “without hope and without God in the world” (*Eph 2:12*).<sup>9</sup> He says: “Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ.” Similarly, in 1 Thes 4:13-14 he tells the Thessalonian Christians not to grieve for the dead “as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep.”

8 Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. by Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 81-82.

9 See Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 2: “Paul reminds the Ephesians that before their encounter with Christ they were “without hope and without God in the world” (*Eph 2:12*). Of course he knew they had had gods, he knew they had had a religion, but their gods had proved questionable, and no hope emerged from their contradictory myths. Notwithstanding their gods, they were “without God” and consequently found themselves in a dark world, facing a dark future. *In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus* (How quickly we fall back from nothing to nothing): so says an epitaph of that period. In this phrase we see in no uncertain terms the point Paul was making. In the same vein he says to the Thessalonians: you must not “grieve as others do who have no hope” (*1 Thes 4:13*).”

The state of mankind today is very much like that of the pagan world when the Gospel was first proclaimed. St. Paul contrasts life “according to Christ” with the life of the pagan peoples under the dominion of the “elemental spirits of the universe” (*Col 2:8*). Polytheistic religion was essentially a cult of these elemental spirits or powers of the universe. The modern age, insofar as it is abandoning faith in the living God, is returning to this dominion “by the elemental spirits of the universe.” Even though man would like to think that he can dominate the laws of nature, the fact remains that he too is under those laws. If there is no God of love who is the author of natural laws, then man is ultimately a *prisoner* of impersonal elemental forces.

Jewish and Christian faith, on the other hand, set us free from this impersonal dominion, for God has revealed Himself as a Person: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As Pope Benedict writes: “It is not the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, which ultimately govern the world and mankind, but a personal God governs the stars, that is, the universe; it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love—a Person. And if we know this Person and he knows us, then truly the inexorable power of material elements no longer has the last word; we are not slaves of the universe and of its laws—we are free” (*Spe salvi*, no. 5).

The very center of both the Revelation to Israel and the Gospel is a message of hope: the promise of eternal life, while sharing in the beatitude of God Himself. The very word Gospel means “good tidings.”

The promise of eternal life corresponds to the aspiration of the human heart, which naturally desires unlimited goodness and love. The human heart hopes for definitive and perfect happiness, which no finite thing can produce. We naturally seek to be immersed in beauty, but no finite beauty satisfies this aspiration. We naturally seek to love and be loved, but again, no finite love will satisfy. We naturally desire to understand the ultimate reason and meaning of all things, but no finite understanding will satiate the mind. We naturally seek justice, and ardently desire to see it established, but no finite and temporary justice will do. Nevertheless, what God has prepared for those who love Him surpasses even the boundless aspirations of our hearts, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor 2:9: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love Him.”

### **St. Paul on Charity (1 Cor 13)**

Just as faith engenders hope, so faith and hope together engender charity. Faith reveals to us the goodness and love of God, and “His precious and very great promises” (2 Pt 1:4), in which we hope. Faith and hope reveal God to be our Father and great Benefactor, who has loved us first and given us everything in His Son. This naturally serves to

excite our love for God, not just because of the eternal life He promises, but simply because He is our loving Father.

This love of God, above all things, for His own sake, is referred to in the New Testament with a special term: *agape*, which is translated into Latin as *caritas*, and *charity* in English. Charity is thus the love we have for God precisely as Father, for He who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

If we love God for His own sake, then it follows that we should also love all those *made in His image and likeness*, precisely for God’s sake. Charity thus extends to all the sons and daughters of God—to every human person. Charity is defined as “the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1824).

It is true that in everyday language we speak of charity as if it were something natural: the natural virtue of generosity or friendliness. True fraternal charity, however, differs greatly from natural generosity in its motive. True fraternal charity is always motivated by love of God above all, and directed to our neighbor as a beloved child of God. Someone who fails to see his neighbor as a creature loved immensely by God cannot love him with supernatural charity, although he can be very generous to him. Charity in the proper sense of the word thus always presupposes faith and grace. Charity elevates natural generosity and directs it, as grace elevates nature.

Charity is our English equivalent of *agape*, and it means a *love of friendship with God*, and, for His sake, a love of benevolence for the children of God.

This is a teaching that is very profound, although very simple. The love that God commands us to have for Him is a love of *friendship*, a love directed to a Person. It includes rejoicing in the fact that God is who He is, and in His infinite goodness; and it includes the desire to give ourselves to Him and belong to Him entirely in a spousal and filial way.

It is a mutual love. God has loved us first. Furthermore, like all friendship it is based on a sharing of life, although it may seem hard to understand. The life that is shared between God and his adopted sons and daughters is the life of sanctifying grace. By giving us grace, God has given us a certain sharing in his own inner inter-Trinitarian life. It follows that the virtue of charity can only exist in those who are made adopted children of God by sanctifying grace. Charity flows directly from sanctifying grace, and is inseparable from it.

Precisely because it is love of God for His own sake, charity is the highest of all the virtues, queen of the virtues. Charity is the act by which we essentially realize the end for which we were created, and by which we come to

share most directly in the inner life of God, and are made like unto Him.

It follows that charity is the life of the soul and the essential element of sanctity. It is the virtue without which there is no sanctity nor salvation.

St. Paul treats charity in 1 Cor 13, the hymn on charity. He begins by proclaiming the preeminence of charity over all other virtues, including faith, and over all good works:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Cor 13:1-3)

Charity (supernatural love) is the principle of all meritorious works. If charity is lacking, no other virtue or work is meritorious for heaven.

By the way, it can be seen from this text that we are not saved by faith *alone*. Without charity, faith is dead and we are still “nothing.” Faith is beginning and foundation of salvation, but it needs to be completed by charity to achieve its end.

St. Paul then goes on to explain the properties of charity:

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (1 Cor 13:4-7)

Charity is the greatest of all virtues because it is the ultimate motivation for every good work. Charity alone is not ordered to anything else but God. Even faith and hope, on the other hand, are ordered to our own perfection. Faith is ordered to our perfection in knowledge, and hope is ordered to our ultimate beatitude. Charity alone is directly for the sake of God loved above all. By charity we give ourselves and all that we have to God as our beloved.

Hence, saving faith is faith that is motivated by charity; saving hope is hope that is moved by charity. For this reason St. Paul says that love “believes all things” and “hopes all things.” Love should be the ultimate motive for all of our acts of faith and hope, as well as all the other virtues. Love is the ultimate motive for martyrdom, and it is what makes martyrdom meritorious: “love endures all things.”

Since charity is a love of friendship with God, it is clear that it is absolutely incompatible with mortal sin, which always involves preferring a creaturely satisfaction to God’s Law, and thus despising God in comparison with the satisfaction that one desires over God. Charity, therefore, must always include contrition for the grave sins that one



has committed. Charity, in fact, will include *perfect contrition* for sin, which is sorrow for offending God, not only because one will be punished or go to hell, but principally because it offends God whom one loves above all things. Without contrition for sin, there can be no communion of life with God.

Faith and hope, on the contrary, can exist in a person who is in a state of mortal sin, as long as the sin is not directed against faith and hope.

Finally, St. Paul shows the preeminence of charity by showing that it alone continues in heaven, while faith and hope pass away as they are replaced by something better: the beatific vision:

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. . . . For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Cor 13:8-13)

Of the three theological virtues, charity alone remains in heaven, for faith and hope presuppose that we do not yet see or possess God. The blessed in heaven do not have faith because they see God face to face, and faith is in things unseen. Similarly, the blessed do not have hope, because hope is a desire for a difficult good that is not yet possessed, and the blessed have already attained to perfect union with God. Charity, alone of the three, does not imply any intrinsic limitation. There will be no faith and hope in heaven, but charity lasts forever and will be the very form and content of beatitude in heaven.

A beautiful interpretation of this chapter of St. Paul is given by St. Therese of Lisieux in her autobiography, *Story of a Soul*. She describes how she was gifted with great desires for sanctity, which manifested itself in desiring to share in the works of all the saints. She wanted to be martyred with the martyrs and in all the different ways one could be martyred,<sup>10</sup> to teach with the Apostles, to be a missionary in the Far East, to penetrate the secrets of theology with the Doctors of the Church, to fight for the defense of the faith with the crusaders, etc., etc.

<sup>10</sup> See *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., trans. John Clarke (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996), p. 192: “Marydom was the dream of my youth. . . . But here again, I feel that my dream is a folly, for I cannot confine myself to desiring one kind of martyrdom. To satisfy me I need all. Like You, my Adorable Spouse, I would be scourged and crucified. I would die flayed like St. Bartholomew. I would be plunged into boiling oil like St. John; I would undergo all the tortures inflicted upon the martyrs. With St. Agnes and St. Cecilia, I would present my neck to the sword, and like Joan of Arc, my dear sister, I would whisper at the stake Your Name, O JESUS.”

Tormented by the vehemence of these desires, she sought light in the New Testament, and opened the Bible to the twelfth chapter of the first Letter to the Corinthians:

During my meditation, my desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters 12 and 13 of the First epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that *all* cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, etc., that the Church was composed of different members, and that the eye cannot be the hand at one and the same time. The answer was clear, but it did not fulfill my desires and gave me no peace. But just as Mary Magdalene found what she was seeking by always stooping down and looking into the empty tomb, so I, abasing myself to the very depths of my nothingness, raised myself so high that I was able to attain my end. Without becoming discouraged, I continued my reading, and this sentence consoled me: “*Yet strive after THE BETTER GIFTS, and I point out to you a yet more excellent way.*” And the Apostle explains how all *the most PERFECT gifts* are nothing without *LOVE. That Charity is the EXCELLENT WAY that leads most surely to God.*

I finally had rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by St. Paul, or rather I desired to see myself in them *all*. *Charity* gave me the key to my *vocation*. I understood that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church *had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood it was Love alone* that made the Church’s members act, that if *Love* ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that *LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES. . . IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL!*<sup>11</sup>

In virtue of the virtue of charity, all the members of the Mystical Body are bound together in communion. Charity makes the merits of the more heroic members of the Body to be shared in common by all those who love them in the Lord. “Little souls” who excel in love are not little, for they share in the glory of the Apostles and martyrs. Indeed charity makes the infinite merits of Christ to be shared by the entire Body. Hence St. Paul speaks of charity as that “which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:14).

In summary, the supernatural life of the Church is a life woven together by faith, hope, and charity: “That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being

<sup>11</sup> *Story of a Soul*, pp. 193-194.



rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:17-19).