The Virtue of Hope

THE VIRTUE OF HOPE

How Confidence in God Can Lead You to Heaven

Father Philip Bochanski

TAN Books
Gastonia, North Carolina

Cover design by Caroline K. Green

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019930531

ISBN: 978-1-5051-1418-8

Published in the United States by
TAN Books
PO Box 269
Gastonia, NC 28053
www.TANBooks.com

Printed in India

CONTENTS

I

To Live a Daring Life

Life at the beginning of the twenty-first century can seem challenging indeed. I wonder sometimes how many people still have the courage to read the paper or watch the evening news when the headline and teaser to every story seem to reiterate a very limited vocabulary almost incessantly: *Crisis—Turmoil—Unrest—Violence—War—Poverty—Hunger—Disease—Addiction—Crime.* These realities may not be new (indeed, in many ways they are almost as old as humanity itself, for they are as old as sin), but all too often they affect our daily lives, our neighborhoods, and our homes, and they threaten to consume the little part of the world that belongs to us and to those we love. They leave us feeling overwhelmed, outmatched, even desperate. Small wonder then that during the elections for president of the United States in 2008, one of the most memorable and perhaps most effective political advertisements simply showed a stylized portrait of one of the candidates accompanied by a single word in bold letters: "HOPE."

But it is hardly coincidental that, at almost the same time, Pope Benedict XVI was addressing the universal Church with something much more substantial than a campaign poster, yet centered on the same theme. His encyclical letter *Spe Salvi*, which is translated "Saved in Hope," was written as an attempt to do what Saint Peter exhorts the early Christians to do in his first letter, tucked away at the end of the New Testament—"Always be ready," he says, "to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (1 Pt 3:15). Writing at such a momentous time in human history—full of potential but also dealing with such difficult crises—the Holy Father used this encyclical to reflect on Christian hope and the way that it transforms and fulfills all of our individual, earthly hopes by placing them in their proper context. When we understand the reasons for our hope, the Holy Father seems convinced—when we know where it comes from and where it's leading us—then we will have the strength to persevere along life's road, however difficult our particular path may seem at any given moment.

This book has the same goal as Pope Benedict's encyclical: understanding the reasons that Christians have for hope and how to put that hope into practice. We're going to accomplish this goal in two ways because, as the Holy Father explains, a proper understanding of hope has to include two aspects. Of course, we have to appreciate the theological and philosophical foundation for what we believe about the Christian life and our relationship with God, because hope is a fundamental part of living out this relationship. We'll rely on Sacred Scripture and the

teachings of the Church, especially as we can find them in the *Catechism* and the writings and homilies of the popes. We'll also rely on the work of saintly theologians and philosophers like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, as well as some of their more modern interpreters, and we'll find that we can learn a thing or two from pre-Christian philosophers like Aristotle and Plato as well.

Just as important as this theological foundation, however, is the fact that, as Pope Benedict points out in *Spe Salvi*, "To come to know God—the true God—means to receive hope. . . . Hope ensues from a real encounter with this God."[1] Our pursuit of hope cannot remain something merely theoretical; it has to lead us to a deeper relationship with God, an encounter with the One who loves us and calls us to friendship with himself. As we consider God's plan for us, we are going to see that we are created precisely for this encounter and this friendship—it is our destiny—and that this is the reason that God gives us the virtue of hope in the first place.

Along the way, we are going to examine the lives of men and women—some from the early centuries of Christianity, some from our own day—who encountered God in moments of personal difficulty—sometimes in the midst of extreme crises—and in the process learned valuable lessons about hope. As we hear their life stories, and often their own words, these "heroes of hope" won't just inspire us. They'll also remind us that, as Pope Benedict once told an interviewer, there are "as many" ways to God "as

---

[1] Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Spe Salvi* (November 30, 2007), no. 3.

there are people"[2] and that we, too, may find our way to an encounter with him as long as we hold on to our hope.

Defining Virtue

We should begin our discussion of the virtue of hope by examining what we mean by *virtue*. It's one of those words that we use quite often, without stopping to make sure that everyone understands the same thing when they say it. Sometimes we use it in a half-joking, chiding tone, reminding someone who's about to lose her temper that "patience is a virtue!" At other times, virtue and vice take the form of the tiny comic angel and devil on the shoulders of someone trying to make a decision—and in these depictions, somehow virtue never seems to appear quite as strong or quite as interesting. Whatever our preconceived cultural ideas of virtuous people or virtuous actions might be, we'll find that the classic philosophical and theological definition of virtue is actually quite specific and that each of its various aspects has something important to teach us as we learn how to become more hopeful people.

The notion of virtue can be found long before Christianity in the works of the great Greek philosophers, although they used it somewhat differently than Christians do today. For thinkers like Aristotle and Plato, virtue was equivalent to *aretḗ*, a word that connotes "excellence" in the sense of "being fulfilled" or "living up to one's potential." *Aretḗ* in this sense does not *necessarily* imply anything moral: A

---

[2] Joseph Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium. An Interview With Peter Seewald,* trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 32.

house that is in perfect proportion, symmetrical and beautifully adorned, has the *aretḗ* of a house. The dog that wins Best in Show at the Westminster Kennel Club does so because he possesses the *aretḗ* of his breed. A shoemaker who makes really excellent shoes does so with *aretḗ;* an athlete who wins championships does likewise.

Of course, the philosophers did acknowledge a special kind of *aretḗ*, what we may call ethical virtues, that is necessary for human beings who live together in society and therefore must work for the common good. Aristotle said that these ethical virtues were found by striving for the *mean*—the good quality that is the proper balance between two vices, which could be considered opposite extremes. Be neither cowardly nor foolhardy, he said, but find your *aretḗ* in courage; don't be stingy, but don't be extravagant either: the proper measure is generosity. Achieving human excellence, for Aristotle, meant learning to hit this mark repeatedly, which requires deliberate choices and lots of practice because the bad alternatives at either extreme tend to be more attractive and usually require less effort. But when one perseveres in exerting the effort, acquiring *aretḗ* brings great rewards. Not only does it make a person able to contribute to and to do good in the society in which he is living, but, more importantly, it leads to his personal fulfillment and therefore his real happiness.

In his important work called the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle lists a number of ethical virtues that he considered important because they helped a person to do good and to be good in society; they include such things as courage, generosity, gentleness, friendliness, and truthfulness.

A few important things stand out about a list like this. First of all, no one can argue that qualities like these are important to getting along with other people; they are things that everyone ought to try to put into practice to some degree. Although we may be accustomed to associate them with a particularly Christian attitude—Jesus was certainly generous and gentle, friendly and truthful—one doesn't have to be a Christian, or indeed to have any religion at all, to see the value in these virtues or to put them into practice. In a very real sense, they are completely natural—we may simply call them human virtues—and plenty of secularists and atheists practice them, although their motivations may be different from believers who do the same.

There is a second point to be made about these human virtues, however. As natural as they may be, even self-evident and almost inborn, there is always room for development. Remember where we started with this discussion of *aretḗ:* it is related to fulfillment, which implies striving toward a goal. This is clear when we are talking about forms of excellence that are not related to morals or ethics; for example, the *aretḗ* of a musician or a baseball player. Some people are born with a certain measure of natural talent—indeed, some children have so much innate ability that we call them prodigies. Others have to work step-by-step to develop each and every skill. But even inborn abilities only go so far, and neither the "natural" nor the slow learner are getting anywhere near the perfection of *aretḗ* without practice.

The same goes for the virtues. Some people may be more generous by nature; others may find that they have

an innate capacity for friendship. These human virtues come easily to them, to a certain degree. But the nature of a virtue, as we have seen, implies striving toward the goal of human perfection so that whether a particular virtue comes naturally or goes against our inclinations, it must be acquired by deliberate effort, like the musician practicing her scales or the athlete working on his pitch. Perhaps this is part of the reason that the ancient Romans used the word *virtus* to translate the Greek word *aretḗ*. *Virtus* is derived from *vir*, the Latin word for male or masculine, and thus connotes something strong or powerful. It takes a great deal of strength to persevere in acquiring the virtues, and to exercise them day by day.

How are the virtues to be developed, whatever their source? Let's go back to the beginning of our discussion of *aretḗ*—we said that it doesn't necessarily apply only to moral qualities but could connote any sort of excellence. Well, how does an architect construct a building with *aretḗ*? By studying the laws of proportion, learning about building materials and techniques, comparing structures to see what they have in common, and most importantly by trial and error, he eventually moves from building crooked walls to straighter ones, to solid houses and great masterpieces that embody the ideal of what a building ought to be.

How does a champion breeder arrive at a specimen that wins Best in Show, that has the *aretḗ* of its breed? By carefully selecting pairs of dogs; looking for the best, most ideal characteristics in their offspring; setting aside those offspring with less desirable traits; and continuing this

process over several generations with dedicated attention and focus. How does a baseball player develop the *aretḗ* that's equivalent to excellence in his sport? By breaking down complex maneuvers into their basic components and mastering them one at a time, then doing them over and over and over again until the mind and the muscles develop memory and endurance and can carry out the required tasks more and more efficiently.

The same approach is going to apply to the ethical virtues. Although the particular kind of *aretḗ* that we are talking about—courage, for example, or kindness or truthfulness—may not seem as tangible as a pitch or a dog or a house, this shouldn't lead us to think that pursuing these virtues is something simply theoretical, something that's all in the mind. The ancient concept of *aretḗ* makes it clear that even the ethical virtues—maybe especially the ethical virtues—are acquired and perfected in very practical ways; we learn by doing.

A person doesn't become courageous simply by thinking brave thoughts. Rather, he or she has to make an effort to actually be brave in concrete situations that require bravery. This is no small task since the very fact that bravery is required means that the person is probably scared—indeed, that the situation itself is inherently scary. So, like the architect who first builds a few crooked walls before he learns to build straight ones, a person trying to learn to be brave might miss the mark, probably more than once, on the way to learning it. Like the athlete developing his skills, the person acquiring ethical virtues will need to start small and do what's possible over and over,

building both endurance and memory in the process. Like the breeder bringing out good traits and getting rid of bad ones, he'll need to pay close attention over time to what works and what doesn't, trying to hold on to the positive and let it have more and more influence in his decisions and actions. The acquisition of virtue in this way is a process, one that doesn't happen overnight . . . but one that bears reliable results if a person is willing to put in the effort and stick with it.

There is one more thing that we should notice about this discussion of the virtues. So far, with Aristotle, we have been talking about *aretḗ* from the perspective of striving, fulfillment, practice, perseverance, acquiring, achieving. But all of this kind of language leads to one necessary conclusion. If we are striving, we must be striving *for something;* if we are looking for fulfillment, there must be something specific in which we are destined to be fulfilled. In other words, all of this discussion implies that there must be some goal toward which we are meant to be heading, and some standards or benchmarks by which we may measure our progress.

Aristotle says that the ultimate goal of our actions must be "the Supreme Good"[3]; however, he goes on to make it clear that the ultimate good of which he is speaking is the good of "politics"; that is, the good of the society. "For even though it be the case," he explained, "that the Good is the same for the individual and for the state,

---

3 *Nicomachean Ethics*, I.2. 1094a. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes, Volume 19,* trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd., 1934).

nevertheless, the good of the state is manifestly a greater and more perfect good."[4] This is a lofty sentiment, as far as it goes; plenty of systems of ethical thought have been built on similar notions that the reason that human beings should strive for virtue is in order to be good citizens, in order to be able to do good and to be good in civil society. It is a kind of moral philosophy that is readily accessible and readily applicable to any political system, especially secular and pluralistic societies like our own that desire not to promote specifically religious moral codes.

However, this means that for us, the ancient notion of virtue as *aretḗ*, and the "supreme good" as the good of civil society, is only a starting point and not the ultimate answer. Don't get me wrong: the lessons we have learned so far about how virtue works are extremely important as we go forward. But just as important for us to understand is the purpose that underlies our pursuit of the virtues, the reason and the destiny for which we were created and to which we are called by our Creator. In the next section, we'll examine the nature of this call, and we will see that understanding it makes all the difference to the way that we live the virtues.

Called to Communion

We were discussing the fact that the word usually used in classical times to translate *aretḗ* into Latin was *virtus*, a word that connotes power—in this sense, the powers or faculties that belong to a human being—intellect, will, the senses, strength and desire, and other such things.

---

4 Ibid., I.2. 1094b.

This was connected to the idea of the repetitive nature of acquiring a virtue—think of the athlete developing muscle memory by practicing the same motion over and over and over again. He uses his natural powers—his *virtus*—to acquire his skill. You'll remember that we said that the same idea applied to acquiring ethical virtues: to become courageous, for example, a person needed to try to do brave things, and to keep trying even though he missed the mark occasionally. If a person used his powers rightly, the philosophers concluded, over time he would develop them to the point that he could consistently do good and be good in society.

Thomas Aquinas, the saintly theologian and philosopher of the thirteenth century who did so much to shape the Catholic Church's theological mindset, often used a different word to speak of the virtues: *habitus*. This means just what it sounds like: for Aquinas and for the Catholic Church, virtues are *habits*—firm dispositions of the soul that guide a person's decisions and actions. In a certain way, a *habitus* is very much like a *virtus.* Both become effective by being exercised, by being put into practice repetitively in concrete actions. Yet there is a very important distinction. To say that virtue comes from the natural powers or faculties of the person seems to imply that the only thing necessary is enough willpower and strength to get the job done. The notion of habit means something else. As habits of the soul, the virtues act as a kind of supplement and guide to a person's own natural abilities and faculties, leading them in the right direction, keeping them on track, assisting them to accomplish things they can't do

on their own. But it's clear that these habits come not from a person's own strength but from some other source.

There's an important reason that this is true, and it's related to the fundamental reality of what it means to be human. Right from the very start, right from the moment that our first parents were created by God, the Scriptures reveal that God had a plan for the human race—that we are created with a destiny, a call, a vocation. And right from the beginning, it is clear that this vocation is *supernatural*; that is, it goes well beyond our natural abilities to attain it on our own—sometimes even beyond our natural ability to comprehend it on our own. The goal to which God is calling us has always been out of our reach if we were left to ourselves, and God knows that, so he has never meant to leave us to ourselves. Rather, he has provided the virtues and called us to acquire them so that, as Aquinas says, we may follow God more steadfastly, more readily, and with greater joy.[5]

Understanding and appreciating our supernatural destiny makes all the difference in how we live our lives, and whether or not we look for the virtues and put them into practice. To discover what that destiny is, of course, we need look no farther than the first page of the Bible. The stories of Creation that are related at the beginning of the book of Genesis have a great deal to say about who God is and how he works. Through language and imagery that is

---

5 Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de virtutibus in communi*, I. In *Disputed Questions on Virtue [The Hackett Aquinas],* trans. Jeffrey Hause and Clausia Eisen Murphy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 220.

very dramatic and sometimes shrouded in mystery, certain characteristics emerge: God has absolute power to accomplish his will; he is orderly and methodical in the way that he carries out his will; he always works for good, and the various parts of his creation are related to one another in a hierarchy and for a set purpose. Moreover, the Creation stories reveal the place of the human being in the plan and purpose of God the Creator. Placed at the pinnacle of God's visible creation, mankind occupies a unique status as the only visible creature who is created in God's image, and after God's likeness (Gn 1:26).

To be created in the image of God means to exist as a *person*: as a subject who is self-aware, as a "someone" who can know himself and can communicate himself to other persons. To be a person, therefore, is to be capable of *relationships*. Along with this tremendous privilege—and it is a privilege: even the highest animals do not have the personhood that we possess—comes a great responsibility. For to be created in the likeness of God means that our relationships must be *like* the relationships that exist among the persons in the Trinity: among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These relationships are always a total gift of love: so complete a gift of self-giving, in fact, that the three persons exist as only one God, with one Heart, one Mind, one Will, one Being. Although we cannot hope to achieve that kind of infinite love, we are made to imitate as much as we can the generous self-donation of God who creates us to be like him.

So, as persons created in the image and likeness of God, we may say that we are *created for loving*

relationships—that it is our destiny and our vocation to love. More than that, we are created for one another: in the very same verse that reveals that the human being is created in God's image, the Scripture says that "male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27). A later verse teaches us that God made man and woman for each other because "it is not good for the man to be alone" (2:18); here again we see that we are made for relationships with one another based on the love that we see in God and that we have received from him. This reality is so true and so fundamental to human dignity and human identity that the Second Vatican Council insisted that "man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."[6]

Aristotle said that the reason we should acquire the ethical or moral virtues was because we were pursuing what he called the "supreme good"—though by this he meant the "political good," the good of the civil society in which we are living. Christian moral theology has a different goal in mind. We also pursue the virtuous life in response to the Supreme Good, but for us, this Good is not a "what" but a "Who"—we strive to acquire the virtues in order to respond to God who created us according to a plan and in order to be able to live in conformity with that plan. To live virtuously still means to do good to others and to be good for others, but our motivation for doing so runs much deeper than simply a sense of fairness or even self-satisfaction. Rather, to live virtuously, to do good and

---

6 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

to be good in all of our relationships is to live in accord with our human dignity and our human identity. It is to do what we were created to do. We won't be complete, we won't be fulfilled, until we learn to do it.

Now, since the time that the first human beings were created and entrusted with this destiny, several significant—we might even say game-changing—events have occurred in the history of humanity. Our first parents were created perfectly good and in a perfect relationship with God and with one another. Then, as the Scripture relates, "by the envy of the devil, death entered the world" (Ws 2:24), when the Evil One tempted the first human beings to commit the Original Sin. This betrayal of trust in God led to the wounding of every relationship—with God, with one another, with the natural world, between the body and the soul—and the effects of this sin and the wounds it caused continue to spread in every human generation. But it was also the occasion for God to make his first great commitment to the human race: the promise that the Original Sin and its consequences would not be the last word and that he would send a Savior to set the world free from sin and the death that it had brought about.

"When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman . . . to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption" (Gal 4:4–5). When the Son of God became incarnate in Christ Jesus, he provided a new context for the virtuous life. "In all of his life," the *Catechism* says, "Jesus presents himself as our model. He is 'the perfect man', who invites us to become his disciples and follow him. In humbling himself, he has given us an

example to imitate, through his prayer he draws us to pray, and by his poverty he calls us to accept freely the privation and persecutions that may come our way."[7]

At the Last Supper, Jesus makes it clear that the example he sets for us is not to remain something theoretical but is meant to be taken to heart and put into practice. "This is my commandment," he says to his Apostles, "Love one another as I have loved you." The next day he was going to show them, and us, just what that love meant, as he laid down his life on the Cross to save the world. To love like this is not easy, but, as we have already seen, God commits himself to assisting us to carry out his commandments. "Christ enables us to live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives it in us," the *Catechism* says. "We are called only to become one with him, for he enables us as the members of his Body to share in what he lived for us in his flesh as our model."[8]

So, whereas the ancient philosophers saw the moral virtues as something focused on the needs of the society, and acquired by individual desire and effort, Christian moral philosophy roots our understanding of the virtues in our God-given vocation to form loving relationships and insists that the way to grow in virtue is to attend to the example of Christ Jesus and to rely on his assistance. "The moral virtues are acquired by human effort," the *Catechism* acknowledges, but it does not stop there. When

---

7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 520; quoting Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 38.

8 Ibid., 521.

the virtues are "acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts," it goes on, they "are purified and elevated by divine grace."[9]

The virtues "are the fruit and seed of morally good acts,"[10] the *Catechism* continues. This remark is related to something that we have already seen: the fact that virtues require practice. In the case of moral virtues, the more that a person makes good moral decisions "under the influence" of one of these virtues (so to speak), the more solidified and ingrained the virtue becomes. As we learn by doing, the virtues can be the "fruit . . . of good acts" because the more consistently we choose the good, the more second-nature the virtuous choice becomes. "With God's help," the *Catechism* continues, the virtues "forge character" and become the seed of future good acts.

Of course, the kind of character we are trying to forge is very specific. I mentioned earlier that for the ancient philosophers, there were all sorts of more or less self-evident moral virtues that still apply today, no matter a person's particular faith (or lack of it). It is possible to be truthful or generous or industrious, or to practice any number of other virtues, from a purely secular, societal perspective. We have a different rationale, however; one that Saint Paul summed up rather well in his letter to the Philippians: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any solace in love, any participation in the Spirit, any compassion and mercy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing. Do

---

9 Ibid., 1810.

10 Ibid., 1804.

nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each looking out not for his own interests, but [also] everyone for those of others. Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:1–5).

All of those human virtues that Saint Paul lists in this passage—humility, generosity, compassion, mercy—find their motivation and their completion in the last line I've just quoted: he wants the Philippians to have the same attitude as Christ Jesus, to learn to imitate him. This is the reason that we acquire the virtues, and it makes a difference: we strive to be humble because Christ was humble, and therefore we can learn to be humble in the way that Christ was humble. And, as we have already seen, when this is our motivation and guiding principle, we can be sure that Christ is helping us to accomplish our goal.

Up to this point, we've been talking about the human virtues in general, using mostly examples from the kind of virtues that Aristotle wrote about. Within this generic category, though, there are some specific types of virtues that are worth mentioning. One group is called the "cardinal virtues." This term doesn't come from the bird or from the bishops dressed in red—instead, the name for the virtues (and for the bishops) comes from the Latin word *cardo*, which means a "hinge," like the tool that keeps a door in place. Both ancient philosophers and Sacred Scripture identify these four virtues as essential; the book of Wisdom says that "nothing in life is more useful than these" (Ws 8:7). The cardinal virtues are *prudence* (making choices in accordance with right reason), *temperance*

(using pleasurable material things in moderation), *justice* (giving what is due to God, neighbor, and society), and *fortitude* (spiritual courage in the face of adversity).

The other category of virtue is one that we might call, unofficially, "relationship virtues" when we apply them on a purely human level to human relationships. We've seen already how it is fundamental to our identity and our destiny that we are capable of and called to make loving relationships. But certain virtues, certain habits of soul are required if real relationships are going to be possible. First of all, we can't be in a relationship with anyone unless we know who that person is, and that is not possible unless we have an ability to believe what that person tells us about himself or herself. Over time we develop an ability to accept what the person is telling us and to reveal more and more of ourselves to the other. Gradually we grow in our ability to trust and our willingness to be loyal and stick with somebody . . . we grow in what we might call *human faithfulness*.

Another necessary quality to human relationships is the ability to trust in another person's intentions and to believe that things will turn out well. No relationship can grow if one or both parties is always suspicious of the other's motives . . . there can be no cooperation, no real intimacy, no trust. Friends look for indicators that the other person has their best interests at heart, that the relationship is "going somewhere," and they give their friends the benefit of the doubt when things don't go exactly as planned. Little by little, *human trust and hope* develop in a relationship and are reinforced each time someone

proves himself trustworthy by keeping his promises and following through.

Of course, the foundation of any relationship must be love. This is so much more than a feeling, however—it has much less to do with flowers and chocolate boxes and valentines and much more to do with the Cross and self-sacrifice and patience. For love, ultimately, is a choice, and like any virtuous choice, it is one that must be made and remade over and over and put into practice in countless concrete ways over the course of a relationship. But underlying all those little virtuous acts of love is a fundamental choice to make all of one's little choices based on a simple but demanding calculus: "What is best for the person that I love; even when that does not equal what is easiest or most pleasant for me?" In general, this virtue of *human love* is something that flourishes when it is reciprocated—concrete acts of love pass back and forth between friends, or spouses, or family members, and reinforce one another in the process. Love that comes closer and closer to being unconditional is heroic virtue indeed.

So, we are made for relationships, and in order to form and live relationships with one another that are based on sincere gifts of self, we have need of all of the human and moral virtues, but especially human faith, hope, and love. Still, of all the wonderful human relationships we may have during our lifetimes, even the most passionate, the most committed, the most Christlike, will pale in comparison to the one relationship for which we were ultimately created, and in which we will ultimately find our

true fulfillment and our real happiness: eternal communion with God himself.

It is usually easy for us to see how the "vertical" relationship that we have with God can inform us about our "horizontal" relationships (i.e., those we have with other human beings). Because God is good to me, I ought to be good to others; because God has forgiven me so much, I must try harder to forgive others. But we don't often stop to think about how often our "horizontal" relationships can teach us about our relationship with God . . . after all, who created the human person, the human mind and heart and soul, and even human society, but God, who knew that he would become incarnate himself some day? And if we look closely, we see that most of the same "rules" that apply in our human relationships are applicable in our relationship with God.

Let's stop for a moment, though, to consider exactly what it is we're saying. We've spent a lot of time so far talking about our relationships with one another, and that's fine—we've got an instinctive sense of how they're supposed to work, and we're all in this together. And we talk about a relationship with God rather freely because we're accustomed to doing so. But we must not underestimate just what an incredibly dramatic thing it is—an almost disproportionately impossible thing, in fact—for us to say with a straight face that the all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present Creator of the Universe—who has angels and principalities and powers under his command, who created the heavens and the earth and the seas and all that is in them, who has planets and stars and protons and

electrons to keep in order—that almighty God actually desires a relationship, a real friendship with us poor creatures. Yet that is in fact what we're saying—and what he is saying, over and over—and much more. And that gives context and purpose to everything that we do, and is the reason that we can hope and that we must hope. In the next section, we are going to consider the kind of relationship God is inviting us to and the way in which we can and should respond to him.

A Hopeful Response to God's Friendship

We've already seen that the book of Genesis tells us that God has something special in mind for us: that we are created in his image and likeness and called to imitate his love in our relationships with one another by making sincere gifts of ourselves. The moral virtues, especially the cardinal virtues, assist our human faculties and allow us to do good and to be good in all of our relationships so that we can live up to our human dignity and answer this call. Most importantly, our ability to trust both what people are saying (we might call this human faith) and their motives and actions (we could call this human hope), as well as our willingness to choose what is best for them out of sincere love, are fundamental for building real relationships. We learn to do all of these things by practicing them in concrete circumstances, and God blesses and purifies our efforts, strengthening us to do his will.

If this were all that it meant to be human—that God gave us the ability and the assistance to love in his name—it would give us great dignity among his creatures. But the

Scripture goes much further: after it relates the creation of man, it immediately tells us that God begins communicating with the first human beings. He blesses them and their relationship with one another, calling them to be fruitful and to share with him in bringing forth new human life (see Gn 1:28). He assigns them tasks to perform as stewards of his creation, to tend the good things of the world and to bring them to their fulfillment (see Gn 1:28; 2:15; 2:19–20). He provides for all of their physical needs with an abundance of food (see Gn 1:29; 2:9; 2:16) and shares his presence with them (see Gn 3:8). In short, he treated them, not simply as creatures, nor even as servants, but as friends.

The *Catechism* affirms this truth about human nature. "The first man," it says, "was not only created good, but was also established in friendship with his Creator and in harmony with himself and with the creation around him."[11] Our first parents were filled by God with all the blessings that they would need to be able to know, love, and serve him—what the *Catechism* calls "an original state of holiness and justice"[12] that included an innate desire for God and an ability to come to a knowledge of God through his natural faculties.[13]

Sadly, this state of friendship with God in which the human race was created did not last long. The Original Sin was a breaking off of the relationship, a denial of God's friendship, and the breach lasted a long time—indeed, we

---

11 Ibid., 374.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 27, 35.

still feel the effects of it, as we each inherit a human nature that is wounded and inclined to sin. But immediately—even at the scene of the crime, so to speak—God promised our first parents that the Original Sin would not be the final word, that the broken relationship would not stay broken. As we have noted already, God promised to send a Savior, who in the fullness of time made his appearance in the Incarnation of the Son of God. And on the night before he laid down his life to pay the price for the Original Sin and for the sins of all human beings of every time and place, Jesus Christ told his Apostles, "I no longer call you slaves. . . . I have called you friends" (Jn 15:15).

The New Testament goes on to teach us that even this friendship was not all that God had in mind for the human beings he created. When he writes to the Church in Ephesus, Saint Paul begins with a hymn of praise and thanksgiving for all of the blessings that God the Father has bestowed on the world through Jesus Christ, and insists that these have been part of his plan from "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). It was then, Saint Paul says, that God "chose us in [Christ] . . . to be holy and without blemish before him," and that "in love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:4–5). He expresses this truth to the Galatians as well, with words that are reminiscent of Jesus's own words at the Last Supper: "You are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God" (Gal 4:7).

So now we come to an ever deeper, more intimate level of communion with God—not content to leave us merely creatures nor slaves, not even simply his friends, he calls

us rather to become his sons and daughters through fellowship with his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. The Church calls this reality *filial adoption* since we become God's children, and brothers and sisters to Christ, not by nature but by God's own choice and initiative, by God's *grace*. The *Catechism* explains that this adoption "gains us a real share in the life of the only Son, which was finally revealed in his Resurrection."[14] Saint Paul tells us that the "proof that you are children" of God is that "God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts," and that the Holy Spirit cries out to the Father from within us, using words of tender love, "Abba, Father!" (Gal 4:6). Saint John concurs with him on this, writing in his first letter that "we are God's children now. . . . This is how we know that we remain in him and he in us, that he has given us of his Spirit" (1 Jn 3:2; 4:13).

Hopefully we now have a sense of just how marvelous is the gift that God is offering to us, for no other reason that his own free choice, on his own initiative—we don't deserve it, we can't earn it, we can't pay for it. But "God . . . wants to communicate his own divine life to the men he freely created, in order to adopt them as his sons in his only-begotten Son," the *Catechism* insists. "By revealing himself God wishes to make them capable of responding to him, and of knowing him and of loving him far beyond their own natural capacity."[15]

Such a marvelous gift demands a response, and God makes us capable of making a response to him. We've seen

---

14 Ibid., 654.

15 Ibid., 52.

that being in a relationship with any human being requires certain moral virtues: trust on the level of both the intellect (to judge information) and the will (to judge motives and actions), as well as the fundamental movement of the will towards the good of the other person that is the basis for real love. These are the bare essentials for any relationship, and they are difficult and demanding enough to acquire no matter who the other person in the relationship happens to be. But when we are talking about a relationship with God, the problem is compounded. Even before the Original Sin, it would have been very difficult: our human faculties have always been finite. But now that we are affected by sin, both Original and personal, it is all the more difficult to believe, trust, and love God the way that we should. So, as usual, God has taken the initiative and solved the problem himself.

When we apply these three qualities—the intellectual trust which is faith, the trust of the will that we can call hope, and, of course, love—to our relationship with God, they take on an entirely new significance. Up to now, we have been talking a great deal of *acquiring* the various virtues—of making deliberate acts of the will to practice a certain virtue in order to develop and strengthen the good habit. It is possible to acquire a new moral virtue like this in various ways, even from "scratch"—to say to yourself one day, "I want to be more _____," and, through prayer and dedicated hard work, to accomplish the task over time.

Faith, hope, and love—when we are speaking about them in reference to God—are not like the other virtues.

They are literally "in a class by themselves," categorized as "theological virtues" because they pertain to our relationship with God himself (the Greek word for God is "*theos*") and because they are given to each person freely by God along with the gift of sanctifying grace. For this reason, the Church says that the theological virtues are *infused* rather than *acquired*—God provides them right away because without them we could not know him at all, and therefore couldn't be in a relationship with him.

These virtues are also called theological because of the way that they "work," so to speak; that is, because of what Saint Thomas would call their object. The best way to explain what I mean is to compare them with their human counterparts. I mentioned before that in every human relationship, we are constantly faced with choices as to whether or not we will believe what someone is telling us; whether we will put any degree of "human faith" in a particular person—be he a friend, a family member, a colleague, a teacher, a news reader or weather forecaster, or a stranger on the street. Typically, we make these choices based on a variety of factors: how long we have known the person, whether he or she has been known to be truthful before, whether the story makes sense and fits with what we are certain is true. As we get to know a person over time, these judgments become more and more automatic—we are growing in the virtue of human faith—but if a person should prove at some point to be unworthy of trust, then we may reevaluate our decisions.

It is not the same with our relationship with God. Here we are talking about a partner in the relationship who is

fundamentally unique from anyone else we know. We do not primarily "decide" to believe in the truths of faith because they make sense to us; rather, as the First Vatican Council explains, we believe "because of the authority of God himself who reveals them, who can neither deceive nor be deceived."[16] So the theological virtue of faith is a habit, a stable disposition of the soul, that guides us to do two things: to believe in the truths that God reveals to us and, more importantly, to believe in God who reveals them.

The other theological virtues work the same way. "In this is love," Saint John says, "not that we have loved God, but that he loved us" (1 Jn 4:10); therefore, the theological virtue of love enables us to love God who first loved us, and to love our neighbor because God loves him and out of love for God. And the theological virtue of hope has the same two-pronged approach. Day by day there are many things that we hope for—some healthy, some not; some helpful, others distracting—in the various phases and dimensions of our lives. Hope as a human virtue strives to attain these things when it perceives them as good; hope as a theological virtue purifies our aspirations, organizing and prioritizing them relative to our ultimate happiness: union with God forever in heaven. Theological hope enables us to strive for this eternal beatitude as our main goal, our top priority, and to see it as something attainable and tangible. At the same time, we know that, by definition, eternal life and communion with God is not within our natural ability to grasp on our own. So theological

---

16 First Vatican Council, Constitution *Dei Filius*, 3.

hope enables us also to put our trust in God and to be confident that he will always, continually provide the help that we require in order to reach the goal that he has set for us.

To Live a Daring Life

I feel like I'm repeating myself an awful lot; how many times can I say that the life God has chosen for us goes beyond our natural ability? But there it is . . . it's a fact, and there's really no getting around it. How are we to react to it? There is, I suppose, the cynical view. We could resent the whole thing—say that God is essentially unrealistic or, worse, just likes messing with his creatures and has set us up to fail. We could pout and refuse to participate, yell about how the game is rigged and there's no sense in trying, since the deck is stacked against us anyway.

I suppose there's actually more than one possible cynical answer. We could also say that there's really no plan, no reason to worry about God's expectations or our abilities, because everything is predetermined anyway and there's not anything that we can do to change our lot in life. We can complain that freedom is an illusion and that all this talk of plans and invitations is only meant to make people feel better but doesn't mean anything in the long run.

Or we can take the Scriptures completely seriously and buckle our seatbelts—because the invitation to friendship with God, to adoption as his sons and daughters, to communion with him and life that lasts forever, has all been offered to each one of us—and answering that invitation, living that life, starts here and now.

Several times already I've had occasion to mention the saintly philosopher Thomas Aquinas. We'll hear more from him throughout this book, and we'll also benefit from the insights of one of his excellent modern interpreters, Josef Pieper, a German scholar and professor who has written numerous books, including works on the theological and cardinal virtues. In an essay "On Hope," Dr. Pieper notes that the call that we have received from God—the call to which theological hope is helping us to respond—requires another virtue; namely, magnanimity, or "greatness of soul": "Magnanimity, a much-forgotten virtue, is the aspiration of the spirit to great things. . . . A person is magnanimous if he has the courage to seek what is great and becomes worthy of it. This virtue has its roots in a firm confidence in the highest possibilities of that human nature that God did 'marvelously ennoble and has still more marvelously renewed.'"[17]

Dr. Pieper describes magnanimity as a prerequisite for exercising theological hope. If we consider what we have been discussing so far, I think we can see his point. The Scriptures tell us that we are chosen and called by God to be adopted as his children—surely this qualifies as a call to greatness, and this is the object of our hope. If we are not willing to seek what is great, if we are unwilling to become worthy of it, then we have little left to hope for, at least in a theological sense. On the other hand, if we have even a tiny bit of courage—enough to open our hearts up to the possibility of seeking and accepting what God is

---

17 Josef Pieper, "On Hope," in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1997), 101; quoting the *Roman Missal*.

calling us to—then the virtue of hope will take us the rest of the way.

What would lead us to resist this call to great things? Dr. Pieper describes a kind of spiritual sadness, which the monks of the early Church called *acedia*, as "a lack of magnanimity." In a rather chilling analysis, he describes some reasons why a person might avoid responding to God's call:

> [*Acedia*] lacks courage for the great things that are proper to the nature of the Christian. It is a kind of anxious vertigo that befalls the human individual when he becomes aware of the height to which God has raised him. One who is trapped in *acedia* has neither the courage nor the will to be as great as he really is. He would prefer to be less great in order thus to avoid the obligation of greatness. *Acedia* will not accept supernatural goods because they are, by their very nature, linked to a claim on him who receives them.[18]

Sad to say, it seems that many people neglect or even reject God's invitation precisely because it is so great, because what he is offering to us places so many demands on us. Perhaps there are a few people reading this thinking, "This is sounding like a lot more than I signed up for; I'm not quite sure what I'm getting myself into." The truth is, acquiring virtue *is* difficult—it always has been, because it takes focused, repeated effort, usually over a long period of time. And the theological virtue of hope is

---

18 Ibid., 119.

no exception; Saint Thomas says that "the object of hope conceived broadly is a future good that is demanding but possible."[19] But we may find it easier to trust that it is possible if we keep a few things in mind.

First, we are not meant to arrive at the destination of our hope all at once, and we are not there yet. The fulfillment of our hope has been promised to us by Christ, but we are still on our way to attaining it. Dr. Pieper insists that this fact—that we are "on the way" to the fulfillment of our goal—is the most important thing to grasp, not only if we are to understand hope, but if we are to understand our own human nature. "It is astonishing," he says, "how many basic concepts of theology have a meaning in reference to the state of being on the way that is different from their meaning in reference to the state of total possession";[20] that is, of having achieved our goal. For one thing, being "on the way" is a constant reminder to us that there *is* a goal toward which we are tending: that our lives are not aimless but are heading in a direction that is defined by God's will and implicit in our created nature. As long as we are "on the way," we have opportunities to repent and receive forgiveness, we have opportunities to keep trying and to succeed with God's help, and for these reasons, we must not despair. As long as we have not yet reached the definitive conclusion, we have no

---

19 Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de spe*, iv. In *Disputed Questions on Virtue* [The Hackett Aquinas], trans. Jeffrey Hause and Clausia Eisen Murphy (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010), 220.

20 Pieper, "On Hope," 92.

right to rest on our laurels but must rather keep working with perseverance and striving to grow, and thus must not give into presumption or fall victim to spiritual sadness. And the thought of the eternal future that lies ahead of us, which we hope to attain and in which our hopes will be definitively fulfilled, is rejuvenating. "Youth is a cause of hope," Dr. Pieper says, quoting Saint Thomas. "For youth, the future is long and the past is short."[21] He continues, "Supernatural hope . . . gives man such a 'long' future that the past seems 'short' however long and rich his life. The theological virtue of hope is the power to wait patiently."[22]

Although the complete fulfillment of our hope is only to be found in eternal life, Pope Benedict, drawing again on the Scriptures—"Faith is the *hypostasis* [substance] of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen"—insists that even now we possess "something of the reality that we are waiting for" in hope. "Faith draws the future into the present," he writes, "so that it is no longer simply a 'not yet.' The fact that this future exists changes the present. . . . Faith gives life a new basis, a new foundation on which we can stand."[23]

"A distinguishing mark of Christians," the Holy Father writes, 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. . . . The one who has hope lives differently; the one who

---

21 *Summa Theologiae,* Ia-IIae.xl.6.

22 Pieper, "On Hope," 110–11.

23 Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 7, 8.

hopes has been granted the gift of a new life."[24] We know, as a matter of theology, as a matter of faith, that we have been granted the theological virtue of hope as an unmerited gift by virtue of our having been baptized. We've got it. Whether we understand it, whether we are practicing it, exercising it, developing it, or not, are different questions. What is obvious is that it is extremely difficult to live in the modern world with any semblance of serenity—perhaps even difficult to live here with any great degree of sanity—unless we learn to use well the theological virtue of hope which has been entrusted to us.

Above all, we must remember that we are not alone. In the remaining chapters, we are going to consider various aspects of the Christian life—conversion, vocation, suffering, prayer—in which we need to be able to exercise the virtue of hope in order to stay focused and make progress toward our goal of communion with God. We will benefit by listening to the stories and hard-won wisdom of holy men and women who learned firsthand that God is trustworthy and keeps his promises. They will give us, by word and example, an explanation for their hope. Reassured by their experience, we will draw new strength to persevere, full of hope, on the way together.

---

24 Ibid., 2.