

# Life of the Spirit

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## HOPE AND PRAYER

BY

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THE National Gallery in London possesses one of the most fervently religious pictures ever painted. The last picture which Botticelli left to the world, the 'Nativity', sums up and expresses the religious sentiments aroused in his soul by the preaching of Savonarola, the visions of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, and the spiritual quality of Fra Angelico's frescoes at San Marco. It is the only painting executed by him in the last twenty years of his life, his 'religious' period, and it embodies the fruit of his contemplations as he contrasted the tragic events of that troubled time in Florence with the peace-bearing message of the Incarnation. Under the rough shed projecting from a rocky cave the Mother of God leans in ecstasy over her child, while St Joseph, bent double, sinks his head on his arms, as though overcome in adoration as faith makes known the mystery to his bewildered mind. One can sense the intensity of prayer expressed by those silent figures; but the painter wished to express that which was passing in their souls. The lines of the adoring figures of Mary and Joseph lead the eye to the roof of the shed, where three angels join hands in singing the *Gloria in excelsis*. They are robed in flowing garments of white and red and green; and it seems certain that Botticelli wished thus to represent the virtues of faith, hope and charity, perhaps also the supreme hierarchy of angels, Seraphim, Cherubim and Thrones. In the centre is the Seraph, robed in red, symbolic of the flame of love; at either side kneel the Cherub, whose white garment typifies the light of knowledge; and the Throne, garbed in green to express the vitality and freshness of the life of one who possesses God,

in whom God rests as in his throne. Green is traditionally the colour of hope, for we associate that colour with life, with growth, with reaching out to a higher perfection and more full development, with a straining towards that fullness which one does not as yet possess.

As Botticelli suggests, Christian prayer bears the soul on in a movement of adoration—*Gloria in excelsis Deo*—to the exercise of those three theological virtues. For prayer places one in the presence of God, as a suppliant indeed, as a creature, but as an intelligent creature, before a loving friend who is all-good in himself and who is to man the source of knowledge and of help in reaching up to him. Prayer is not a passive state of inaction in the face of God, but an activity, an exercise of the highest faculties: in its perfect form it is a loving communion with God present in the soul as known by faith and relied on by hope. In this sense prayer is the synthesis of life, its highest form. St Teresa and St John of the Cross speak of the degrees of prayer, but they really treat of the degrees of life and perfection, for prayer is the index and as it were the flowering of the soul. As our spiritual life is, so also is our prayer; they reflect one another. The period of daily prayer sums up the daily life of the Christian. What has been, or will be, scattered and dispersed in the many actions of the day is in prayer drawn to a focus and set on God to the extent to which those actions are performed for God; our life is then seen in its true perspective and its essential trend. If the supernatural forces at work in our life are weak, and if our actions have been too centred on self, our prayer will reflect this, and be rather a communion with self than with God.

The Christian life is essentially the life of grace, expressing itself through the activity of the three virtues; if this life is most intense when all the faculties of the soul are centred on God through prayer to the exclusion of all other occupations, these virtues will then be intensely exercised. It is obvious that prayer is inspired and animated by love, and grounded on faith; it is not obvious, nor is it as often stressed, that the virtue of hope should also be called into play. And yet, since prayer is the reflection of the divine life of the soul, hope must there play the same part as in life; and there, perhaps, its rôle can best be understood.

In the life of the Christian hope makes itself felt and manifest no less clearly than faith and charity. We may daily see its effect in the lives of our friends or of our flock. Some of them seem to be dogged by persistent and terrible misfortune; trials, internal and external, succeed one another almost continuously in their lives, and often they are reduced to a state of poverty and dire want. Humanly speaking, their lives can only be described as miserable. Yet in the midst of such trouble they rise superior to all events, persevering courageously and cheerfully in the pursuit of good works, with a certain serenity and an unshakable confidence in God. The whole-hearted trust of such lives may have moved St Paul to write: 'rejoicing in hope. Patient in tribulation. Instant in prayer.' (Rom. 12,12.) Such lives manifest a divine power and strength, a supernatural energy that enables man to overcome every obstacle and to support every trial. Such cheerful constancy and purposive energy stand out clearly in contrast to the boredom and listlessness of so many who have more of the goods of this world, and yet seem to have no goal in life, no enthusiasm, no real energy and give way so readily to depression and sadness. The immovable trust of the true Christian can never be confused with the superficial optimism of so many others, and is totally opposed to the cynicism and despair that have seized on a world that has rejected God. Only where there is hope is there true life in its fullness, in the fruitfulness and freshness so aptly signified by the colour green. He who is hopeful acts with zest, energy and enthusiasm. He has set himself an ideal, clearly known as realising his perfection; he strains towards it, knowing that it is lofty and difficult of attainment, yet that it is possible for him to reach it, either by his own power or by the help of another who will not fail him. The help on which the Christian relies, through the virtue of hope, is that of God himself; the strength and power manifested in his life, so devoid of human means, are divine. His goal or ideal is eternal life, and he knows that God in his goodness and mercy wishes to bring him to heaven, and is able to do so. It is this divine help, or rather God himself in so far as his omnipotence is the source of our help, that immediately terminates the movement of the will in hope, thus giving it its character as a theological virtue. By faith one shares in God's knowledge, by charity in

his love, and by hope in his omnipotence.

If prayer be the synthesis and highest form of life, hope will be active in it as in life and will animate it with the same divine power. For prayer also has its trials, its periods of anguish and dereliction, its aridity and its temptations. How often is one tempted to give up, to neglect prayer, to despair of ever raising the mind to God or of ever receiving that for which one asks? It is hope that strengthens the soul manfully to continue, in blind faith, in spite of such difficulties. To the simple desire of gaining God it adds in the face of obstacles a firmness and determination that make one persevere and tend towards him with an even greater tenacity than before. We know that God will help us to pray, and wants us to pray, hope fills us with confidence in that help and nerves us to continue. The virtues of patience, perseverance and fortitude are likewise called into play, especially with regard to natural obstacles, such as distaste, weariness and weakness; but hope sustains us in the face of temptations, above all in the terrible trial of feeling we are already condemned, that heaven is forever beyond our reach. Hope is the divine antidote to that depression and melancholy that from time to time sweep over the soul of even a saint, and may become acute at the time of prayer, when the soul shudders at the sight of its sins in contrast to the holiness and goodness of God. As in life despair dries up all the energies of the soul and undermines its resistance to trials and temptations, depriving activity of all its zest and fullness, so too, when hope is lacking, prayer becomes impossible, and one can only long for the deliverance of death.

Our Lord is, in prayer as in all things else, our model; and in prayer he too was sorely tempted. He had not the virtue of hope, since he was in full possession of that beatitude for which we hope; yet, beside the passion of hope, he possessed all the perfection of the virtue: the complete reliance on the power of God and the certainty of his aid, of his benign will and infinite mercy. In the triple agony of the garden, as he prayed he was assailed in turn by weariness, by fear and by sadness; his comfort and strength were restored in conforming his human will to the loving and omnipotent will of his Father. Instead of the temptations of the fallen angel during his fast in the desert, he is consoled in the garden by the ministering

angel sent from heaven with the assurance of help from on high. And in the agony on the cross, his supreme prayer, he was tried by that most dreadful of all afflictions, the torment of feeling abandoned by God. To pray under such circumstances calls forth the highest exercise of the virtue of hope or of the perfection corresponding to it. In that torment he uttered a verse of a psalm that speaks beautifully of hope and is full of confidence in God, to make known the victory his soul had gained over desolation and dereliction: 'into thy hands I commend my spirit'. (Lk. 23, 46.) It is the psalm that begins, in the Vulgate version, with the words: 'In thee, O Lord, have I hoped; let me never be confounded' (Ps. 30), which so wonderfully express the need of hope in those who follow our Lord in prayer from Gethsemani to Cavalry. And it is worthy of note that in the psalms, which form such an important part of the official prayer of the Church, the continuation of the prayer of her Head, sentiments of hope are over and over again repeated under a great variety of forms and images. Especially is this true of those psalms which the Church has selected for recitation at the night office of Compline, as a preparation for sleep, that sleep for which the Christian is an image of the sleep of death. The Church bids us to be strong and manful in hope as we gaze in prayer beyond the grave; the watchword of such prayer might be taken from the last verse of the first psalm of Sunday compline: 'for thou, O Lord, singularly hast settled me in hope.' (Ps. 4, 10.)

No one follower of our Lord could adequately represent the infinite depths of his holiness nor fully share in all his mysteries; all those perfections that are united in a miraculous synthesis in him are divided out among his members, in his Body, the Church, so that the variety of functions and graces of all his members thus corporately united might make him more fully known to the world. 'So we being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members of one another. And having different gifts, according to the grace that is given us. . . . And God indeed hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly doctors, after that miracles, then the graces of healings, helps, governments, kinds of tongues, interpretations of speeches.' (Rom. 12, 5, 6; 1 Cor. 12, 28.) All, however, whatever their particular vocation, are called to

follow Christ in bearing the cross, and some chosen souls seem destined to follow him particularly in the desolation and sadness of Gethsemani and the dereliction of the cross. They are continually tempted through sadness, fear, and weariness, especially at prayer; they are haunted by the fear of damnation and obsessed by a profound sense of unworthiness. Their prayer is one long struggle against depression and despair. They, no less than those whose lives are a continual struggle against adversity, are called on to show forth the power of hope, to imitate our Lord in his agony in the garden, and to make reparation with him for the sins of despair and presumption of so many others. In them the virtue of hope is being steadily purified, as they are drawn thus painfully to cast themselves from the abyss of their own nothingness entirely upon the sustaining and unfailing help of God alone.

It is not surprising that prayer should call forth a continuous exercise of the virtue of hope, since prayer is an act of the virtue of religion, and this virtue has a certain affinity with hope. Religion is based on man's condition as a creature; it inclines him to worship God as his Creator and last end, as the source of his being, on whom he utterly depends, and so to recognise the supreme excellence and majesty of God. Prayer sets man before God in this his primary condition as a creature, and through acts of the mind strives to acknowledge that excellence by praise and adoration, and that dependence by humble petition. By petitioning God in prayer, we thereby praise him, in recognising our need and his power and majesty. 'We pray', says St Thomas, 'not that we may inform God of our needs and desires, but that we ourselves may realise that in need we must have recourse to the divine help.' (II-II, 83, 2 ad 1.) Prayer thus leads on to hope, which attains to God himself as helping us, to that omnipotence which places within our power an object altogether exceeding the power of any mere creature to attain. Hope, on the other hand, fosters religion in relying on those divine attributes of power, goodness and mercy which enter into our concept of the majesty of God, so that St Thomas can say quite simply, 'hope rests on the supreme majesty of God'. (*Q. Disp. de Spe*, a. 4, ad 14.) And again he says that 'hope attains God, the supreme rule of human acts, both as he is the first efficient cause, in so far

as it relies on his help; and as he is the ultimate final cause, in so far as it awaits happiness through the fruition of him'. (II-II, 17, 5.) We distinguish these aspects by saying that God as our supreme beatitude is the object of hope, whereas his divine help is its motive. The affinity with religion is clear, but religion is not a theological virtue, since its object is the divine worship, and it regards God as the source of our being; but 'hope makes us cling to God in so far as he is to us a source of perfect goodness: that is, in so far as we rely through hope on the divine aid to obtain happiness'. (ibid., a. 6.)

From another point of view, hope and prayer are intimately connected, in so far as the virtue of hope includes prayer within the extent of its material object. Just as faith regards primarily the truths which God makes known about himself, yet extends also to those natural truths which he has revealed, and as charity, tending primarily towards God as the supreme good, loves also his creatures in so far as they are related to him, so too hope, having our supernatural beatitude as its principal object, extends also to the secondary objects of our happiness, such as the glory of the risen body, the company of the saints, and to the means by which God's help comes to us on earth to enable us to reach heaven. This secondary or accidental object of hope may briefly be described as the region of prayer, since it includes all that one may pray for or desire to obtain from God. In this sense prayer has been called the interpreter of hope (II-II, 17, 2 ad 2), for we hope to receive from God that for which we pray, just as we may pray for all that we may legitimately desire. Prayer thus reveals to us that for which we may hope, particularly those favours for which the Church asks in her official prayers. To the extent to which such goods are desired in relation to our eternal happiness they form part of the object of hope, for they are then regarded as means by which God grants us his aid. These divine aids, or instruments of hope, include all that may help us towards heaven: the humanity of our Lord, our Blessed Lady, the sacraments, the prayers of the saints, even our own prayers and merits. Hope can thus raise our prayer beyond its natural dignity as an act of religion, to bestow on it something of its own theological dignity, by regarding it as an instrumental means towards the fulfilment of hope, as a practical realisation of God's unfailing

help granted to the soul in prayer itself and in the graces which it both begs and merits.

As hope sustains us in prayer and is exercised in prayer, prayer likewise disposes us to grow in hope. It has its own impetratory value; it obtains favours for us, not through our merits alone, but through God's mercy and goodness. It thus makes known those divine attributes in a vivid and practical way, just as it also makes us realise our need and our nothingness by placing us in the presence of God. The central object of prayer must be God, in himself and in his attributes, in his merciful dealings with his creatures, in the power and goodness which they so strikingly proclaim. With this deepening consciousness of our need and of God's power to supply it, the desire to possess God will also grow, the longing to be united for ever to him whose beauty and majesty slowly unfold themselves to the devout mind. So to centre the mind through prayer on the object and motive of hope is to dispose oneself to receive an increase of hope from God, and this in turn will enable one to pray more perfectly. Prayer does not properly praise God nor obtain its desired effect unless it be trusting, unless it be sustained by a lively hope in the will and the power of God to grant what is desired. When confidence is lacking, prayer, if it be made at all, is listless and mechanical. How often do we not meet people who have ceased to pray because they have lost all confidence and feel that God pays no heed to their prayers? One cannot pray or praise God if in practice one doubts his goodness, his providence, his merciful help. Our Lord stresses the need of hope in prayer in the second petition of that prayer which he has left us as the pattern of all others. In asking that the kingdom of our Father may come we include the petition that it may come to us individually, that we may gain the incorruptible heritage that belongs to us as his sons, thus professing our trust in his power to lead even us sinners to the home of our Father. St James echoes this teaching of the Master when he exhorts us to 'ask in faith, nothing wavering; for he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea, which is moved and carried about by the wind'. (James I, 6.)

The soul may be tossed to and fro on the waves of temptation and buffeted by the winds of adversity in prayer no less than



in life; in such trials hope serves to rivet the soul to God as an anchor holds the ship safe and firm in its moorings. 'We may have the strongest comfort, who have fled for refuge to hold fast the hope set before us, which we have as an anchor of the soul, sure and firm.' (Heb. 6 : 18, 19.) Such sureness and firmness show themselves in that certainty which is shared from faith to hope as a sense of security, as an irresistible tendency towards God, an unshakeable confidence in his all-powerful help and in his will to save all men. The absolute certainty of faith reassures the soul regarding the motive of hope that neither God's help nor his mercy can fail. Man, indeed, in his frailty, may fail; it is always possible that he will not avail himself of the means placed at his disposal by God. The certainty of hope leaves room for such fear, and this necessary imperfection of hope is to some extent compensated for by the gift of fear through which the Holy Ghost moves the soul to act in a divine manner. Such filial fear moves one to flee from sin in so far as sin is an offence against our loving Father and separates us from him; it is the creature's fear of not resting in his proper order before God, of not remaining subject to him. It thus naturally includes a deep sense of reverence towards God, whose majesty and eminence demand the loyalty and recognition of his creatures. Filled with such sentiments of reverential fear, the soul becomes docile and mobile under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, who thus gradually eliminates the natural imperfection of a too human manner of exercising the virtues. While this gift increases distrust of self and the dread of losing God through our inherent weakness, it carries the soul on in a divine movement to throw itself, in utter reliance and abandonment, on the infinite mercy and power of God, and thus wonderfully increases the inborn tendency of hope to rely utterly on God. Such mistrust of self and complete reliance on God will be most evident and actual in prayer, when fear and hope blend most perfectly, fear of self and hope in God, in that activity by which we profess our need, our subjection to God, and his divine majesty and eminence.

The spiritual writers of the past loved to liken the rôle of the three theological virtues in the spiritual life of the soul to that of the main parts of a building. Faith provides the founda-

tions, hope the walls, and charity constitutes the roof (cf. *Q. Disp. de Spe*, a. 4, ad. 14.) We may carry on the metaphor by regarding the life within those walls as the life of prayer, springing from grace and bending in its activity the influence of faith, hope and charity. Perhaps Botticelli had this also in mind when he represented the three virtues as angels joined in exultant prayer on the roof of the shed that sheltered Mary and Joseph bowed in loving adoration over the divine Child. The wall of white rock in which the cave is set may well typify the strength and endurance of hope. The shed seems to be ringed around by a line of graceful trees set in a green meadow and pointing their leafy green branches upwards towards the sky. We may see in this a symbol of the upward striving of the soul drawn towards God by hope, and of the abundance and fruitfulness of life that flows from hope. For under that roof was born he who is the life of the soul, whose coming to save us is the clearest evidence that our hope is well-founded. We may well take the place in the picture of the oncoming shepherds and pilgrims who are welcomed and led in by embracing angels—so similar to those of Fra Angelico who welcome the blessed into heaven—to cast themselves at the feet of our Lord, there to join in the prayer of Mary and Joseph. They too were ‘looking for the blessed hope and coming of the glory of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ’. (Titus 2, 13.)



## PRAYER<sup>1</sup>

BY

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**I**N prayer we have to manufacture our own prayer. ‘Prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God’—not *the* mind and heart but *my* mind and heart; it is personal—at least, it should be. It is an art like anything else is—an art to be learnt, not some special gift given to one and not to another. We all have it; some have it and don’t use it. Take any other gift—memory, reasoning, will-power—we all have them to a certain

<sup>1</sup> From notes taken at a conference.