

LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., DIRECTOR

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A SEASON FOR MARY

As we look at the liturgical calendar we realize that a great deal of it is devoted to honoring the Blessed Virgin. We celebrate her feasts, of course, and we consider October and May to be "Mary's months." But at these times our devotion to Mary is something added onto the Church's existing schedule of prayer.

As we enter Advent, however, we encounter a liturgical season that is altogether suffused with Mary's presence – indeed, each day of Advent invites us to identify ourselves more and more closely with Mary, whose quiet example gives the entire season its special character of listening and waiting.

Mary provides the example for our lives at all times; this is nowhere more evident than in the days leading up to the birth of Our Savior at Christmas. Mary shows us what it means to listen to God's word – not merely "to hear," but truly to listen, with attention, love, and a willingness to act. Her quiet dialog with the angel Gabriel allows God's Word to enter her heart, and there to take flesh.

As the Advent season unfolds, Mary continues to equip God's Word with the qualities we recognize in the human Jesus. She provides the flesh and blood, and the human voice that will save the world. But she is not alone in this undertaking. Each generation calls Mary blessed because Mary calls each generation – each of us – to act as she did, and to present the world with the human face, and the human love of God's Son.

Mary's reward, of course, is her bodily Assumption, which allows her to enjoy now what the Virtue of Hope enables us to look forward to in the future. At first glance, we may be puzzled to consider the Assumption during Advent; the Assumption, after all, is the reward for a life of perfection, and Advent is a time of beginnings. However, if we look at our lives as a whole – and particularly at Mary's life – we see that the beginning and end are inseparable. Mary's saying "yes" to the angel sets in motion the actions that will be crowned by her Assumption.

With this issue of "Light and Life" we have the good fortune to encounter Mary through the eyes of Dominican



THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION

theologian, Fr. Paul Connor. His essay, "The Feminine Genius," has been part of our Advent reflections for the past two years. That reflection comes to an end with this issue of our newsletter.

THE FEMININE GENIUS, III by Fr. Paul M. Connor, O.P.

The fourth glorious mystery of the Rosary, Mary's Assumption body and soul into heaven, is another avenue to appreciating the unrepeatable gift God has given to women. It is a much greater gift than those given to those few who have become masters of word, melody, or art, architecture, science, or governing. Such peak human achievements have certainly enriched the lives of succeeding generations, but women have been given the gift by God to tend to human life in crucial ways men do not and cannot. This is a signature feature of their unique genius.

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THE ROSARY LIGHT & LIFE

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Theological Virtues, III: Hope

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

God is the source and object of the faith, hope, and love we call the Theological Virtues. Because God is infinite, we will never be able fully to comprehend the habitual dispositions – or virtues – that lead to Him. Nevertheless, in the virtue of Hope we find a great deal that speaks to us on a human level, making this virtue one of the more accessible.

The dictionary defines hope as *“the feeling that what is wanted can be had, or that events will turn out for the best.”* We reasonably expect this definition to change somewhat as we apply it to our spiritual lives, and to those dispositions we call virtues, but St. Thomas Aquinas’ definition of hope remains extremely easy to grasp, *“...a future good, difficult but possible to attain...by means of the Divine assistance...on Whose help it leans”* (ST II-II, 17.1).

St. Thomas also calls hope *“a movement or stretching forth of the appetite towards an arduous good.”* If we think of the many things we long for, this physical image of “stretching” to achieve a good is one we can easily understand. Robert Browning describes this longing quite aptly when he writes, *“Ah! But a man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s a Heaven for?”* The effort we are willing to expend is proportionate to the good we seek. The “highest” good we hope for, of course, is everlasting happiness in God’s presence. This is worth quite a stretch, indeed!

We cannot – or should not – wish anything other than this happiness, so the virtue of Hope allows us to place the many good things that surround us in a proper order. Once we place our eternal happiness at the top of the list, everything else should fall into place. Of course, this is not a step we can take all at once; even good habits take time to develop. Nevertheless, as we progress in the spiritual life, and our life with God emerges more clearly as the best thing we can desire (and, therefore, the prize worth the most effort), other goals, which may once have seemed highly desirable, assume their proper character and seem much easier to achieve.

Because Hope is the habit by which we long for our eternal salvation, it is a very personal matter. However, when we come to consider the virtue of Charity in our next reflection, we shall see how loving God enables us to love God’s creation. This includes loving ourselves, of course, but also loving our neighbor. Thus, we may properly identify a social dimension to the virtue of Hope, whereby we long not only for our own salvation but for that of others. Our *Catechism* teaches, *“Buoyed up by hope, [an individual] is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity”* (1818). As we saw when we considered the virtue of Faith, a gift is

not given just to enrich the individual who receives it. The virtue of Hope encourages us to embrace a selfless love that reaches out to all of God’s creatures.

We began this reflection by observing a peculiarly human dimension to the virtue of Hope, and here we might reflect that Hope can only exist in beings who have not yet achieved the goal they seek. It is, thus, always concerned with something in the future. The angels, and the souls in heaven, have no need of Hope, for they enjoy God’s eternal life as an ever-present reality. Similarly, the souls of the damned have no Hope, although for a far different – and quite frightening – reason. Those condemned to Hell are aware their punishment is everlasting. Because they cannot escape this state to attain happiness of any sort, they have nothing to hope for.

We have all heard the expressions “to give up” or “to lose” hope. In everyday life this ordinarily means concluding that some good thing is beyond our reach. Such a conclusion is unquestionably disappointing and painful, but usually, after a time, we are able to leave behind the pain and disappointment. However, when we consider the state of the damned (those souls which, by definition, are without Hope) we see that giving up or losing theological Hope is a far more serious matter.

St. Thomas teaches, *“the true opinion of the intellect about God is that from Him comes salvation to mankind and pardon to sinners....”* (II-II, 20.1). The habit of Hope leads and encourages us to embrace this truth, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, *“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful”* (Heb. 10:23).

This is a comforting and compelling message, but the freedom of our will always allows us to reject it – to our peril – either by imagining that God refuses pardon to repentant sinners, or to believe that God does not turn sinners to Himself by means of grace. This error (and here we must remember that theological error is not simply a mistaken notion, but rather a denial of truth) is the sin of despair. It is an extremely serious sin, because its consequences can prove fatal to our hope of everlasting life. Despair denies God’s justice by refusing to believe God will remain faithful to His promises. It also denies God’s mercy, refusing to acknowledge that God wants us to enjoy everlasting life with Him. St. Paul offers an antidote to these temptations, encouraging us to surrender to *“The Holy Spirit...He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by His grace and become heirs In hope of eternal life”* (Titus, 3:6).

Despair consists in denial, but one can also sin against Hope by over-affirmation; this sin we call presumption. Presumption is the error by which one imagines that eternal life is a goal within his unaided reach or by which he places too little value on God's justice, imagining God's mercy to be so great that an individual need not repent of sins he has committed.

In each of these sins we encounter a lack of moderation, an absence that can seriously harm our spiritual life. The remedy, by which one maintains a virtuous middle course, is fear. When we considered the virtue of Faith we determined that one of the first effects of Faith is to comprehend what happens if we turn away from God. This understanding results in fear, the fear of punishment, and – more important – fear of separation from God. Our faith allows us to see God's infinite goodness, and it also makes us realize how much we sacrifice if we separate ourselves from this goodness. Indeed, Faith allows us to understand that separation from God is the greatest evil we can suffer.

The virtue of Hope enables us to see life with God as a goal possible – if difficult – to attain. We cannot fear the God who is goodness itself. However, we may reasonably fear the just consequences of our sins against Him, and if our fear is purified through love, we will reasonably fear offending God by sin. The fear of God's justice is called "servile," because it is based in a desire to avoid punishment; the fear of committing a fault against one we love is called "filial" fear, the fear a child feels at the prospect of offending a loving parent.

Theology, like any science, allows us draw a vast number of conclusions. As we study the virtues in themselves, our conclusions allow some very sophisticated distinctions. However, we must never forget the practical aspect of virtue. Virtues are the everyday habits by which we strive to attain eternal happiness. Hope is a very practical virtue, the disposition of wayfarers: individuals on a pilgrimage that will only end in heaven.

At some point we may be moved to ask how we manifest the virtue of Hope. As we look at our lives, we can tell very clearly when we are acting with faith, and we have no problem discerning whether we are acting charitably. Hope, however, may remain somewhat elusive. We can avoid the extremes of presumption and despair, but does this guarantee we have embraced the virtue of Hope?

Our *Catechism* tells us that prayer is one sign the virtue of Hope is at work in our lives. Why? Because both prayer and Hope are concerned with the future. "Prayer is an indispensable condition for being able to obey God's commandments," the *Catechism* teaches, so prayer is an all-important element in our quest for the salvation for which we long. Prayer enables us to align our will with God's, so prayer brings us one step closer to the everlasting life that is the goal – possible, but difficult – of the virtue of Hope.

We who are living experience Hope because grace enables us to perceive everlasting life as a reward we

may attain. The souls in Purgatory, who rejoice in an imperfect happiness, experience Hope because they understand that no matter how long they must endure the temporal punishment due their sins, they know they shall, at last, be admitted into God's Kingdom. Hope encourages us to pray for the souls in Purgatory, that they may speedily enjoy the state of rest we look forward to.

In the gospel we read, "[we] ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Lk 18:1). These words assure us that our Hope is not in vain. And if we look for examples, individuals who demonstrate most clearly what Hope enables us to accomplish, we need look no further than our ancestors in faith. In the Old Testament we find a model in Abraham, strengthened by Hope to surrender to what must often have seemed God's incomprehensible demands. In the New Testament, of course, we find the Virgin Mary, humbly looking toward a future in which all God's people will recognize the blessedness that is the reward of her fidelity.

We have also the example of the saints. In what is practically our own day – slightly more than a hundred years ago – we encounter St. Maria Goretti, a girl of twelve, and a victim of what we would today call a sexual predator. We draw this reflection to a close with the words Pope Pius XII preached at the canonization of St. Maria Goretti. "Sustained by divine grace," the Pontiff said, "and the response of the firm resolution of her will, she laid down her life and preserved her glorious virginity."

He continued

Let those who are in the happy days of youth learn not to waste their energies on the transient empty pleasures of self-indulgence...Rather may they strive vigorously to form their character in the way of Christian living, hard and rough though the way may be. For this perfection can indeed be attained through personal determination, helped by the grace of God, prayer and perseverance.

These sentences sum up everything we believe about the virtue of Hope: that it is God's gift, sustained by God's love. That it is a way of life, built on prayer and practice, and that – although fidelity to the virtue may not always be easy – it leads to an everlasting goal God will enable us to grasp. The *Catechism* teaches that our worship of God sets us free. The virtue of Hope allows us to revel in this freedom, for the possibility of everlasting life in God's kingdom encourages and enables us to look beyond the lure of the present, and to reject the many idols we encounter each day. ■

THE FEMININE GENIUS III (Continued from page 1)

The women who live out this gift are living persons. And persons are immortal beings. Women alone can bear them with love, bring them into the world, nourish them, and attend to every need with the delicacy of maternal instinct, care, and sacrifice. Women give human persons their first steps into life, and their first features of character. Women educate them at the irreplaceable levels of self-discovery,

personal responsibility, and pursuit of right and good and avoidance of wrong and evil. Women cultivate in children wholesome family and social interrelating. More than men, it is women who teach persons how to communicate, to play, to share, to pray. Mothers are always forgiving if they can but influence their child to true self-realization and achievement. What mother will not comfort her offspring, at whatever age, and attempt to heal, inspire, and encourage? What mother ever gives up hope for her children, or does not pray for their welfare? What woman will forget the life that God has let her conceive and bring up to reach for its destiny?

Mary has lived to the full every aspect of God's gift to humankind that John Paul II named the "*feminine genius*." The Holy Father repeatedly appealed to women throughout the world to follow Mary by searching the core of their being to come into touch with their genius and to live it out in our times. He thought that Western civilization especially has become much too masculinized, and that it needs desperately the counterbalance of genuine feminine influence in every walk of life. He forecast that women could change the world unbelievably for the better if each one embraced the core of her being, her feminine genius.

If, the Pontiff said, under severely negative circumstances, each woman refused to surrender her gift and calling to tend the human lives within and around her, the world would become humane, trustful, honest, respectful, even loving. When they cannot change circumstances, women have the capacity much more at their bidding than do men, the Pope said, to accept unjust burdens and suffering for the good of persons dear to them – even of those who cause their suffering. Their "yes" imitates Mary's "*fiat*." It is the love in the hearts of women that guides them into selfless giving to help human life survive and thrive.

The feminine capacity is on full display in the Gospel passage the Church uses for Mary's Assumption and other Marian feasts.

Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste, to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice ..., 'Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.' ...And Mary said, 'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.'

The passage ends with Luke's observing, "*Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home*" (Lk 1:39-56).

In this passage both Mary and Elizabeth personify the genius proper to their gender. Notice, for example, how selfless each is in her focus on others. Mary herself is pregnant, yet she travels – most likely on foot – over 90 miles of hilly, thief-infested countryside, to help her kinswoman in her more advanced pregnancy. Elizabeth does not bask in this singular respect and love, but

instead voices her awe and wonder that Mary should do this. Elizabeth has realized that Mary has become the Mother of God. Far from turning in on themselves, both women turn their attention and energies to the good of the other and to that of the children they bear. Mary goes further, responding to Elizabeth's praise by crediting God in such profound acknowledgment and gratitude that the Church finds no equal in all of Scripture. Through the centuries, the Church has concluded her evening prayer with Mary's *Magnificat*.

It is a great mystery of human sinfulness today that, especially in Western countries, so many women are not offering their true genius to the world. Untold numbers deny themselves and human history the gift of new life and its enrichment. Beyond contraception and abortion, women join men in trivializing love meant for marriage – and even in abandoning marriage itself. There are many reasons for these ills: neglect, disrespect, abuse, ignorance, and weakness. But in every woman's heart, deeper than injustice, cultural pressure, and self-seeking lies God's gift of the feminine genius and its tending to life, no matter the cost.

It cost Mary a great deal to open her being so widely to life that the Author of Life could enter her womb and beg her care. It cost her much more to tend that Life into adulthood and beyond, finally to standing in union with Him at the cross, which claimed His life and caused her the utmost pain. But how much more did it cost to accept the Father's plan to widen her heart to embrace all sinners until the end of time, with that maternal love that longs to forgive, to comfort, to heal, to inspire? With Mary, each of us who treasures the feminine genius must pray for women to discover their gift, and to activate their selfless giving to all the human life they encounter.

Finally, do take note of the wonderful surprise of "secret" of fulfillment that Mary's genius and her Assumption reveal. By not seeking self-satisfaction, but by giving herself totally to the life with and around her, Mary let God give her fulfillment, not only day by day, but ultimately in heaven.

Contemplating the fourth glorious mystery of the Rosary can help anyone see the meaning that Mary's genius and Assumption hold for us. That her entire being, body and soul, is sharing life with God and God's family is not only Mary's – but also our destiny. This ultimate fulfillment is the conclusion God wishes for each of our life's journeys. Each of us can learn from Mary to respond to the Father's providential events in our daily lives, and to the Spirit's prompting to live out our feminine or masculine potential fully. God will surprise such self-giving with personal fulfillment – not only day by day on earth, but forever in heaven. ■

