

# THE THREE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES



The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and love. They are related to the three powers of the soul and also to the three transcendentals.

## Defining

As you know, a virtue is a strength and also it is a habit. So we want to think of faith, hope, and love, as strengths and as habits. Further, we call these three virtues theological virtues, and that means they have to do with our relationship with God. They are habits that strengthen our relationship with God.

There are, by way of comparison, four cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. These are habits that strengthen a right relationship with our material goods (prudence), our personal relationships (justice), our tribulations (fortitude), and our pleasures (temperance.) These four virtues govern our life on earth, and any pagan can say wise things about them if he chooses. (Most pagans ignore one or the other.)

But the theological virtues are not the virtues of pagans; they concern, specifically, a relationship with God.

Of course, like any other words, these three: faith, hope, and love, have multiple meanings, related but not identical; we do often use them to refer to personal decisions, actions, or habits that do not particularly contribute to our relationship with God.

1. In a general way, for example, faith is about believing something that is not proved, or at any rate, believing it before it is proved, and acting on that belief because someone said so. A faithful soldier is in the habit of fighting strongly and without regard for his own convenience – maybe for God, but maybe for his country and in obedience to the general he believes in.

2. Hope is about keeping a happy expectation in mind, or rather, in imagination. When we hope for particular weather, we have a certain happy anticipation, but it is not necessarily related to our search for God or even our search for truth.

3. Love is about delighting in a personal presence, and about choosing and acting in the interests of that presence. Of course it needs no comment that much of love is, in one way or another, contrary to the search for God.

In any case, the common usages of these words may be said to encompass a certain level of natural good health, such that even a pagan might seek to develop habits of faith, hope, and love.

## Theological virtues?

But can we make it theological?

### Digressions...

First, man is a creature composed of body and soul, two principles bound in a mysterious unity, of which “soul” names the actor at depth, one that may seem to contradict a body tangled in the troubles of the world. However that may be, the soul has three powers, intellect, memory/imagination, and will. Some list only two powers: intellect and will; but many list a third power, either memory or imagina-

tion or sometimes phantasy which, spelled with a “ph” refers to both the image-keeping and the image-making power, one depending on the other. Two powers? Or three? We must think about this.

A second digression: the three most commonly named transcendentals are truth, beauty, and goodness. It is not hard to relate these three transcendentals to the three powers of the soul: truth answers the hunger of the intellect; beauty answers the hunger of the imaging power, a composition of memory and imagination; goodness answers to the hunger of the will to choose a first love and highest good, for goodness enables the lover to do his loving and the beloved to be worthy of love.

### Theological...

Now, back to the theological virtues:

With two triads in place, could it be that the three theological virtues take the other triads into fulfillment? Indeed, one would like to think so, for, at this point, anything else would seem trivial. If the three theological virtues are three habits of strength in our relationship with God, what better structure could there be than that they should constitute the turning of the three powers of the soul towards God? And, if there are three fundamental ways of transcending human limitations, and considering the principle that grace builds upon nature, ought not three theological virtues offer to fulfill the three transcendentals?

With that in mind, here are faith, hope, and love:

## Faith

Faith is the virtue by which we cling to God with the mind. The particular doctrines of the Church, which we hold as “our faith,” come to our minds with varying degrees of logical support, partly depending on our education. By definition, what is known to logic is not, as so known, known by faith; but each of the Church’s doctrines has a dimension of mystery which cannot be plumbed by any amount of logic, and the habit of seeking to plumb that mystery is one of the work-habits of faith. It never ends, because the mystery never ends, but also it never ends because our life in the world entails an unending stream of new ideas and new insights that must be integrated into our cosmology and so into the perspective of faith. New ideas, whether about people or about stars or about machines, cause a shift in our thinking, and this shift brings new riches or new challenges to our concept of God or to our sense of his Church or his Incarnation.

If we have chosen to cling to God with our minds, we have chosen to view every treasure of intellect in relationship to the knowledge of God, our Father and Creator, our sanctifier, our Lord and beloved.

On the other hand, new ideas are sometimes thrown at us as challenges – an effort to wreck faith. One old challenge, by way of example, is the assertion that pain and suffering prove that God either does not exist or is not all-powerful. The philosophical answer (short form!) is that we are imperfect and often need correction, which is bound to be painful and is also likely involve others who have not our immediate need for correction. The faith answer is not different from the philosophical, but it involves the mind’s constant effort to maintain the perspective

offered by God, especially the perspective of the suffering of Jesus which expresses God's nearness and his recognition – his incorporation -- of the depth of our suffering. He teaches also that every tear will be super-adequately wiped away. Think of these things.

These habits of thought do not come all at once; they are a work, a deliberate effort of clinging, a daily rejection of thought-paths which lead away from God. Such thought-paths are part of human life, because we do not entirely know God or his plans, and also because not everyone lives by faith, and our relationships with others necessarily involve the consideration of their thoughts, including their faithless thoughts.

The life of faith is a habit of intellectual clinging to God, and therefore also to his revelation, its details, its implications. And we believe that this revelation is Truthful and will therefore be harmonious with all other truth.

## Hope

Hope is the virtue by which we cling to God with our memory and imagination, or, as one might say, with our power of phantasy. Fantasy, with an “f” may mean flight from reality; phantasy with a “ph” has a technical sense of being the use of the combined image-forming and image-holding powers of the soul. Phantasy differs from intellect in that the work of this part of the soul is not about language and logic, but about image and, in the intuitive sense, about metaphor.

We cling to God with our memory when we place each memory in the context of his presence and plan. If we remember happy events, we are grateful; that's simple enough except that we sometimes forget; gratitude is a memory-based habit that takes attention.

If we remember hurtful events, the virtue of hope takes a more circuitous path: our faith (intellect) reminds us that God is with us when sad or evil things take place and that he always maintains a thorough plan for our good. With this idea in mind, our imagination supplies some picture of his presence – as light, as a path in the forest, as a flower pressing through the smallest crack in a stone, or as Jesus of Nazareth, personally present, comforting us, and promising some joy.

Sad or evil events always carry the temptation to imagine harm to those who harm us. This is not hope! At least, we can say that “hoping” someone who hurt us will get hurt is not the theological virtue of hope; it is not clinging to God with the imagination! But then, neither is any kind of Pollyanna-like forcing of “positive thought” an act of hope. These are the wounding and weak images that hope rejects in favor of the image of God's own strong light, perfection, beauty, and presence.

Beauty is very important. It often happens that we do not have the power to think something positive about a situation or to remember good philosophical and theological ideas, but a flower, a sunset, a gentle face, an intricate discovery, or a memory of religious imagery can restore the imagination to its equilibrium. Crepuscular rays, for example, the rays of evening or morning sunshine through the clouds, have a way of suggesting hope, of awakening the expectation of renewal and joy. This is an intuitive suggestion, speaking directly to the imaginative powers of the soul, often faster and more directly than is possible with language.

Hope is the habit of accepting and holding these images so that the soul is always clinging

to God and to his revelation, not just as to a series of ideas, but the life and guiding light of the imagination. We say of Christ our hope, “He is the image of the unseen God.” See: the Image, the Beauty.

## Love

Love means clinging to God with our will, with all our power of decision. This is true goodness, to love God in all our ways, every day, in every choice, with the whole power of the heart.

This theological-virtue-love is the ordering of all our other loves. That is, the love of God as our first love keeps our smaller affections from getting sentimental, foolish, or spiritually dangerous. It protects us from rash expressions of love, always a temptation, perhaps because the power of choice is so simple: yes or no. Having said yes to any affection or friendship, we often find ourselves facing unexpected demands which may be difficult to answer, inappropriate to approve. The demands of our secondary loves may be larger than we expected, and they may be harmful or even evil. The difficult ones God can help with, but the evil ones we must choose against, and without God as our first love, this may seem harsh and unloving; we shrink from the possible breaking of a love. Even in a close relationship with our heavenly First Love, the undoing of another relationship that is becoming harmful is very hard.

When things are hard, good habits help us most. That is why the deliberately cultivated habit of clinging to God with all our heart and in all our decisions, is a theological virtue. It is a particular height of Goodness.

### More about faith

People sometimes talk about faith and reason as if they were opposed. They are not opposed, because they are both about orienting our thought lives around the truth, and both require serious mental exercise.

That said, however, it must be acknowledged that what we know by reason is not, so far as it lies before our reason, known by faith. I do not make too much of this, because my experience is that even if you prove something once, that does not make it accessible to reason forever after, only to memory, and it does not organize your thinking without further effort. This is true even in math. Figuring out the consequences is a long task.

Therefore I am at peace with calling faith a clinging to God with the mind, and talking about it as if it were, in part, a mental exercise. We teach, as Catholics, that faith as a theological virtue is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Fine, but we don't get to just say thanks and sit on it; it imposes intellectual obligations, different for different souls, but never inert.

### More about Hope

The same goes for hope. Yes, it's often about the future, but it's not just an idea of the future; that's from faith. It's something more intangible – or rather, something more tangible: an image, a beauty. And yes, hope is from the Holy Spirit, but the sins against hope have to do with feelings – despair on one hand, or, on the other hand, brash confidence. See, not ideas. The Holy

Spirit gives us hope and we have some responsibility to maintain it, which is done by images, biographies, and whatnot. Even by statues and paintings. Stuff, not argument.

### More about Charity

We speak of charity or love. Both of these words, being humanly important, are used in a thousand shades of meaning, all related to the basic senses of seeking a personal presence, seeking the good of another person, delighting in someone. The permutations and metaphors of these simple meanings are endless; wherefore, every so often, some illiterate whiner suggests that we throw the words out and start over, claiming that would be much simpler.

No, it would not be simpler, and it would last about two weeks, because the new strong words, supposing such could fling themselves into service, would immediately be claimed by other loves. The simple thing is to make friends with the old words, not to try to make new ones out of gibberish. The theological virtue of love is the habit of seeking the personal presence of God, of trying to accomplish what pleases him, and of delighting in his presence and his activities so far as we perceive them. It is, in short, the habit of clinging to him with the third power of the soul, the will.