

Becoming Hope

Louis Riverin, FMJ (Famille Marie-Jeunesse)
louis.riverin@marie-jeunesse.org

Hope is a virtue for which we have great need in navigating through the various challenges that we are facing these days, in the Church as well as in our communities. However, are we always aware of the beauty that our experiences of hope open up to us? All that is required is that we accept to go beyond what we hope to catch sight of the horizon that hope opens up to us.

One Can never Hope too Much

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches us that hope, as a theological virtue, has God as its object: it is not, therefore, governed by the doctrine of the mean that characterizes the other virtues. For example, the virtue of courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness. It means you can never hope too much, nor is it possible for you to believe too much or to love too much! The object of virtue is God, who is infinite, “so that we can never love God as much as He ought to be loved, nor believe and hope in Him as much as we should.”¹

Perhaps we too often see hope as a necessary evil, an evil from which we will be healed as soon as possible by attaining the object of our hope. It is not comfortable to be reaching-out for that which is not within our grasp... And yet, it is not this tension, this extension beyond ourselves that is the most important part? That is what St. Augustine asserts:

Suppose you are going to fill some holder or container, and you know you will be given a large amount. Then you set about stretching your sack or wineskin or whatever it is. Why? Because you know the quantity, you will have to put in it and your eyes tell you there is not enough room. By stretching it, therefore, you increase the capacity of the sack, and this is how God deals with us. Simply by making us wait he increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul, making it able to receive what is to be given to us.²

Therefore, it seems that it is not the abundance of God that might be lacking, but rather our “capacity to receive!” This widening or stretching of our hearts is certainly uncomfortable ... but it is through him that we pass from our small, very limited hopes to the great hope, in God. This may lead us to find ourselves in the same situation that St. Paul and his companions found themselves, “subjected to every kind of hardship, but never distressed; we see no way out but we never despair.” (2 Cor 4:8, NJB translation)

Hoping for All

To remain in hope also opens our hearts to the men and women who are our companions of hope, perhaps those whom we have not seen up until now. It is not the fact of having too many desires that closes us off from the other, but the fact of not having any! That is why Scripture reproaches those who shut themselves away with their riches to be “nations

¹ Even if, for us, hope must be appropriate to our “condition” and in this sense consists in a mean, “there can be no excess of hope in comparison with God, whose goodness is infinite.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia, IIæ, Q. 64, a. 4, rep. and sol. 3)

² Saint Augustine, *Commentary on the First Letter of John*: we can find this text in the Office of Readings for Friday of the 6th week of Ordinary Time.

without shame” (Zeph 2:1) that crush the poor and cause them to say, “We have had our full share of scorn of those who are at ease, of contempt of the proud.” (123:4, NRSV)

To hope, not only for ourselves, but also for all! “Too often,” in fact, “we conceive of hope in a way that is too individualistic,” whereas in reality it “concerns the salvation of all humankind — and it is only to the extent that I am drawn together with others in community that it concerns me.”³ For my brother and sister, this support and communion can be a reason to hope and so, for any given person, I become hope.

Being Transformed by Hope

Becoming hope is also letting oneself be transformed. For hope is not first and foremost an attitude on our part, but rather a (Divine) Person, it becomes “the hope which is stored up for you in heaven” (Col 1:5). It is already present; it is Christ among us, “the hope of glory!” (Col 1:27).

Hoping does not leave us unscathed... and it is precisely this point that is the purpose of the exercise. We are called upon to let ourselves be stretched to the dimensions of an ever-greater hope, towards a horizon of which Thomas Aquinas speaks about to us so admirably.

When we have attained perfect happiness, it will not only be the desire we have of God that will find its rest, but also rest will come for all our other desires. The joy of the blessed is therefore absolutely full, and even more than full... However, since no creature is capable of a joy of God worthy of him, it must be said that this absolutely perfect joy is not contained in man, but rather it is He who penetrates, according to this passage in St. Matthew (25:21): “Join in your master’s happiness.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Ila Ilae*, q. 28, a. 3)

For further reflection:

Have I ever had experiences of hope that have transformed me?

Am I capable of hoping with the poorest, to recognize myself in their hopes, and to recognize them in mine?

³ Jean Daniélou, *Essai sur le mystère de l'histoire*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1953, p. 340.