

HOW TO HAVE CONFIDENCE IN GOD

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I.

Early in our childhood, in catechism class, we learned that there are three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. The second of this set of three virtues has been selected as the subject of this pamphlet, namely, the theological virtue of hope.

When we were children in catechism class, we could snap off the names of the three theological virtues quite briskly and expertly, but perhaps we had only a hazy idea or picture of what was meant by a theological virtue, or even of what was meant by the name of each of the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity.

Now that we are grown up, we should like to tell ourselves: “Surely, I *must* have some definite idea of what is meant by faith and hope and charity. I *must* have some idea of what is meant by a theological virtue. Above all, I am sure that, as a Catholic, I must be *practicing* the virtues of faith, hope and charity in some way or other.”

That is true. It is impossible to live a good, genuine Catholic life without faith, without hope, without charity. We practice the virtue of faith when we believe what God has told us and tells us through His Church and live according to our belief, because we rely on the truthfulness of God, Who cannot deceive us.

We practice the love of God or charity when we live in His friendship and prove our friendship by keeping His commandments.

But where does the theological virtue of hope fit into our life?

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I remember that, when I was a boy, it was customary to give the boys who were receiving their first Holy Communion a little cluster of emblems, to be worn on the coat lapel — a cross, an anchor and a heart: the cross for faith, the anchor for hope and the heart for charity or love of God.

It may help us in our effort to discover what part hope plays in our life to remember that hope was represented in this group of emblems by the anchor, which the sailor drops into the water, so that it may go down deep into the bottom of the sea and fix itself there firmly to steady the ship against the winds and waves of any storm.

But our hope is an anchor which we throw upward, into the skies of heaven, so that it can settle firmly in the faithfulness of God, Who will never abandon us—God, Who will give us the help and strength and security we need against the winds and waves and storms and trials that we meet on our voyage to heaven—God, Who will, at last, guide us safely into the harbor of salvation and into His arms in heaven.

We use the word “hope” often and freely in our daily speech. We say, “I hope we’ll have good weather tomorrow.” At the end of a letter we say, “Hoping you are well..... . . .

Do we really know what hope is?

A mother hopes her bright little boy will some day be, if not president, at least a great man. We hope sometimes, when we are very tired, to be able to sleep for three days without interruption. We hope there will be onions on the hamburgers the hostess is passing around to the crowd for a snack.

None of these things has anything to do with hope; they are only desires —not hope. Desires reach out for the little things which are not so hard to get. Hope reaches out for the great things which *are* hard to get.

But even this kind of hope that reaches out seriously for some great good, away out in the future, is not a virtue; it is an appetite or inclination of human nature—a natural inclination. This inclination, if nourished, this human hope gives us strength and courage and enthusiasm and makes us capable of almost any effort if we believe that our work, our trying, will be rewarded with success.

The hope of once more seeing home and loved ones bears up the soldier in time of war. The hope of a bountiful harvest gives strength to the farmer in his heavy labors. The hope of being well again encourages the sick man to swallow bitter medicines or to undergo a serious operation.

In all these things we see the *natural* hope of man, the human inclination to reach out into the future to get

possession of some great good and to be willing to face and overcome great difficulties to get the good for which he is reaching.

This *natural* hope inspires strength; it converts a wish into expectation; it rallies our listless energies with the warm breath of courage and enthusiasm and makes us capable of the greatest efforts.

But the kind of hope we are discussing is something more than this natural inclination, more than this natural hope.

The theological virtue of hope is something *supernatural*, which, according to the word, means that it is something which is above our human nature to have as its own. It does not *belong* to us as human beings; it is not something which we can *do* as human beings, like talking, or seeing, or hearing.

This kind of hope is called an *infused virtue*, because it is communicated or poured into us by God and resides in us as a habit and not merely as a momentary act.

This kind of hope is called a *theological* virtue to signify that it turns us habitually toward God.

This virtue of hope enables us to trust firmly that God, Who is all-powerful and faithful to His promises will in His mercy give us the things He has promised us, namely, eternal happiness and all the helps we need to reach eternal happiness.

This supernatural gift of hope enables us to have absolute confidence that heaven and the perfect joy of seeing God face to face are within our reach, and that while we are here on earth, God will give us the help we need to get to heaven; that He will grant us the forgiveness of our sins, the grace to resist temptations and to perform good actions deserving a reward in heaven; that He will grant all these things to us if we do what He asks of us—— if we pray, keep His law and avoid the dangers of sin.

And all this hope and confidence rests on the faithfulness of God, Who has promised us all these things, Who never breaks a promise and Who never can or will deceive us.

Yes, hope is the anchor which we throw up into the skies of heaven so that it can settle firmly in the faithfulness of God, Who will never abandon us, so that we may find strength and security against the winds and waves and storm and trials of life that we meet on our voyage to eternity.

II.

So far we have been trying to get some kind of understanding of what we mean when we talk about the theological virtue of hope—of what we mean when we talk about hoping in God.

It is good to have some clear, fundamental ideas about the virtue of hope, but it is much more important really to understand how to make use of this virtue of hope in a practical way.

We can learn our first lesson from the man we meet in the fifth chapter of the Gospel written by St. John. This man was lying beside a wonderful pool of water. From time to time, an angel of the Lord came down and stirred the water, and the first sick person who stepped into the pool after the stirring of the water was cured. This man had been lying there for thirty-eight years without being cured, because he had no one to help him and could not move quickly enough by himself; and someone always got to the pool ahead of him.

In all those years many came and were healed at the stirring of the waters. They went away joyfully with their friends, and laughter sounded in his ears from a distance. What years and years of waiting!

But one day a stranger stood beside him, looked at him and asked: “Do you want to be cured?”

The sick man looked up. He did not know Jesus.

“I have nobody to help me. I have no one to let me down into the pool when the water is stirred,” he answered.

And there was that stranger, his Lord and God, standing at his side, ready to help him!

What happened? Our Lord, even without being asked, made the sick man well again.

It does not take many years of life to realize how weak and sick in soul we can become. How often we feel the reproach of our conscience for the past and tremble when we merely think vaguely about the future! Word comes of the death of a relative or friend, and we cannot help wondering, “How will it be with me when my turn comes?” Oh, if there were only *someone* who could assure us, help us, steady us— how happy we would be!

How blind we are! How foolish!

Where is that anchor of hope that we are supposed to throw up into the clouds to fix itself firmly in the faithfulness

of God? That anchor of hope which helps us firmly to trust that God, Who is all-powerful and good and faithful to His promises, will in His mercy give us eternal happiness and the helps we need to get eternal happiness in heaven? Where is that anchor? All kinds of baggage piled on top of it? Chain on the anchor all rusty and weak-looking? Too heavy to throw up into the clouds?

But look! You don't have to go around throwing actual heavy anchors into the clouds. Look, I said. Look! Look with faith! There is God standing besides you all the while. He is not only far away in heaven. He is not only up in the clouds. He is right there beside you. He is within you! "After all," says St. Paul, "He is not far from any one of us; it is in Him that we live and move and have our being. For, indeed, we are His children."

All we need do is lift our trembling, tired hand, and He will grasp it as he clasped the hand of St. Peter, when he grew afraid and was being swallowed by the waves.

And He asks us: "Do you want to be helped? Do you want to feel secure? Do you want someone to comfort you? See, I am willing to help. Trust in Me. Keep your hand in mine, and we shall go safely on together."

"I believe. I *do* believe!" we say. "I do hope. I want to hope. I want to have confidence. But I still feel as though I am looking at God as I would look at a stranger, with unrecognizing eyes. I still feel myself just shrinking together in my loneliness, and I am afraid that I am just wasting my time in being afraid."

Well, I won't tell you, "Don't worry about that. It's all right. Forget it." No. But I will say this: if that is the way you feel about hope and confidence and trusting in God and worrying about the future and eternity, then you have a lot of company — you are not alone.

Even the great Doctor of the Church, St. Alphonsus Liguori, was tortured by discouragement and anxieties and scruples. When these fears came upon him, he would make a fervent act of faith and say: "God is all-powerful; He *can* help. God is good; He *wishes* to help. God has pledged His word, and He is faithful to His word; therefore He *will* help."

But how often he had to renew this act of faith and hope!

St. Alphonsus, without doubt, made use of every means to make sure of his eternal salvation, as though the success of this great affair depended entirely upon himself. His life was a continual prayer, a constant effort to advance in the path of perfection—a constant devotedness to the glory of God and the salvation of souls. Nevertheless his confidence was built not on his good actions but upon the goodness of God, the merits of Jesus Christ and the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Over and over again he would repeat, "My Jesus, You are my hope! Mary, my Mother, all my confidence rests in you!" And then he adds as a lesson to us, "When temptations attack us, we have no other recourse than to abandon ourselves into the hands of God. All other means are deceitful."

One of the members of his congregation tried to quiet St. Alphonsus one day by reminding him of the multitude of the good works he had accomplished during his life. "What good works?" the saint said, interrupting him. "What good works, I ask you? Oh, no! Jesus Christ is all my hope and after Him, my good Mother Mary."

Two years before he died, St. Alphonsus called the lay brother, who took care of him, and told him to write: "I, Alphonsus Liguori, profess that I am certain to die in the grace of God." He had the paper taken to his director for approval. Then he signed it and kept it on the table near him, and in his anxieties and doubts he read and re-read these words until his fears were calmed.

Well! Alphonsus was a saint, and still he had his troubles—and plenty of them! See how he had to struggle against them and how he had to repeat his acts of hope and confidence over and over again. And we—such weak and toddling children on the rough road to heaven! Shouldn't we expect trials and troubles, too? Then don't forget that anchor of hope that we must throw up into the skies to rest securely in the faithfulness of God. Don't forget that *Stranger*, Who is our God, standing at our side, asking, "Do you want to be helped? Place your hand in Mine, and we shall go safely on together."

We need courage in our life and work, and for courage we need hope. We must persevere to the end, and for perseverance we need prayer—but there will be prayer only if there is hope, only if there is confidence in the power of God to help us.

III.

What is the foundation, the solid rock upon which all our hope and confidence must rest? We don't have to guess. The rock on which confidence rests is love—not the love which we have shown toward God in the past, but the love which He has shown toward us.

Open the Scriptures, and on the pages of the Old Testament we see how God loves us and asks for our confidence. He tells us that as a father he would take us upon His knee. As a mother—and if she should forget her child, yet He will not forget us. As a bride and bridegroom, so the soul and He.

In the pages of the New Testament we learn how our divine Saviour used all His wisdom in explaining and assuring us of the truth of the doctrine which He taught. But His love for His sheep — His love for the one sheep which has not been an especially good sheep—is repeated over and over again.

The shepherd brings the flock of sheep home to the fold in the evening. He counts them one by one as they enter the gate. 97-98-99.....One is missing! He does not say: "All right, Number 100! You bad little sheep, you can stay where you are. I'm too tired to go out looking for you. Besides, you had no business separating yourself from the flock. You knew better. You can look out for yourself now."

No! The shepherd locks up the ninety-nine good sheep and goes out to seek the straying one. No matter how long the search; no matter if his feet are torn by thorns! His heart is torn with love for the one that is lost. And when he finds it, does he drive it back before him with bitter words of blame and reproach? No, He takes the lost sheep in his arms lovingly and *carries* it back with him. And what joy does our Lord speak of them:

more joy for the one that was found than for the ninety-nine who were safe and sound in the fold!

Do you remember the story of the Prodigal Son? He comes back to his father after squandering his inheritance; but he comes back repentant and seeking forgiveness. That was all that mattered to the heart of the good father. And the prodigal is embraced by the loving arms of the father and welcomed home with joy and high festivity.

Do you remember the story of the good shepherd and the hireling? The wolf comes, and he is hunting, not for the whole flock, but for the one sheep that is lagging behind the rest. That is the sheep which the good shepherd guards and loves. For that one silly sheep the good shepherd is willing to die.

Now our Lord was not just telling beautiful stories when He told us about these things. He was trying to tell us how much He loves us and how much He will do for us, and how much He wants us to expect of Him.

But that is not enough. Our Lord is not satisfied with telling us of His love for us. He leaves His heaven; He comes to earth to take human form so that we may see love in human eyes and hear it from human lips and feel it in the throbbing of His heart. He puts Himself in pain, on the cross, scourged and crowned with thorns and lets His heart be broken open to prove that He loves us and how much He loves us, to show us how much He wants us to trust in Him. How can anyone refuse?

Even in our own day He comes back into the world, showing Himself to us, letting His heart be seen on fire with the flames of love and marked with the cross and crown of thorns, gently complaining that this is the heart which has loved men so much and which is not loved in return.

We are children of God. He holds His arms stretched out to us. Can we refuse to find strength in the strong arms of the Sacred Heart Who is begging for the alms of our love and confidence?

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And even now, even after all this, we may still be inclined to think: "When I look at the crucifix, I find it easy to see how He died for all men in general. But for ME? I am like a drop in the ocean; like a leaf in the forest; like a grain of sand in the desert. And He died for ME?"

And so we stand and look at the crucifix just as one of the crowd and say, "Yes, He died for us. *We* adore Thee, O Christ, and *we* bless Thee, because by Thy holy cross Thou hast redeemed the *world*."

But let us suppose that we say the words of the little girl, who always looked at the crucifix during holy Mass and said over and over—ungrammatically but very correctly theologically: "It was me that did it!" If we can say that—and we do find it easy to say that—then why can't we say, "It was for ME that He died?"

We know that our divine Saviour loved little children; that He loved the sick; that He loved the poor; that He loved sinners. Yes, we can understand His love for all. But look at that crowd of children around Him. Could you point to

any ONE of those little children and say, “He did not love *that* child.” Of all the sick who were brought to Him and cured, of all the sick in the land who never saw Him, could you point to ONE and say, “The Saviour did not love *that* sick man or that *sick* woman?” Of all the poor in the land, of all the sinners of city and countryside, would you dare to point to ONE and say: “Christ did not love *him*?”

Then why do we fail to apply this lesson to ourselves? Think of all the children in the world today; all the sick; all the poor. Can I point to any one of them and say, “Christ does not love him—Christ does not love her?”

And when we begin counting off the great crowd of sinners that He loves even today, and my own turn comes to be counted, and I see my finger pointing to myself, dare I even think of saying, “Christ does not love me?” Ah, no! I forget that I am one of millions of sinners. I remember only this: that I *am* a sinner and that Christ loves ME!

And then I can say, “Now at last I know, at least in some small way, that He suffered for me and for my sins; that He was scourged and crowned with thorns and fell on the way of the cross and was nailed to a cross and died on it for ME and for MY sins. It was me that did it to Him! And it was me for whom He died. I adore Thee, O Christ, and I bless Thee, because by Thy holy cross Thou has redeemed *me*. O Sacred Heart of Jesus, I put *my* trust in Thee!”

IV.

When Jesus loves, He loves eternally. He does not stop giving proofs of His love.

During the lifetime of Christ not many persons were granted the privilege of receiving Him into their home; only a chosen few had that privilege. But who is there today who cannot receive a much greater proof of His love in Holy Communion? For in Holy Communion we receive Him not into our homes but into our souls; and when He comes to ME, I need not share Him with anyone else. He gives Himself completely to me. His love found this way to prove that He loves ME.

And will He wait for me as He did for the Samaritan woman at the well? Will He grant me the opportunity — even hours, if I want them — for conversation with Him, as He did to Mary and Joseph and to His friends? Oh, yes! His heart still calls to me from the tabernacle, “Come to Me...and I will refresh you!” And there I find Him at any time of the day or night, waiting with a big welcome for ME.

Will He die again for me? Will He offer Himself again for me as once He offered Himself upon the cross? Yes—His love has found a way. When was that Sacred Host consecrated, under the appearance of which He gave Himself to you the last time you received Holy Communion? It was consecrated during the holy sacrifice of the Mass, in which He offered Himself for you in a deathless manner as He once gave Himself in death upon the cross. In this way He will offer Himself for you as often as the holy sacrifice is offered throughout the world.

Jesus loves me! What a mighty truth to give strength to my living; to give beauty to my loving; to give courage to my doing! He loves me whether I am alone or with others; at work or at prayer; tried by temptation and discouragement or happy and at peace. Then how much I can love Him in return—not merely loving Him from the midst of the crowd, not only giving myself with the crowd; but forgetting all else except Him, I can look at *Him* face to face—and trust in Him—and give myself to Him—because He loves ME!
