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ESCHATOLOGY AND HOPE

ANTHONY KELLY, C.Ss.R.

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The World of Hope

HOPE IN ALL ITS REGISTERS implies a trustful and confident movement toward the future. It is trustful, for it is relying on something or someone for the help that is needed. There is confidence, too: whatever the evils that threaten, hope anticipates an escape or release into a fuller dimension of life. It is always about a movement forward. While it is not always easy to find words for what we are hoping for, at the very least hope is moving from despair to something more positive. It shows a certain defiance: the future has to be more than the present situation of suffering or incompleteness. It might even extend to everything and everyone. In that case, it outstrips what can be controlled and planned for, and senses, however implicitly, that, hidden in the present, there is a promise that can and will be kept.

A GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF HOPE

A Dwindling Hope?

But hope seems to be becoming a nonrenewable resource. The fund of trust and confidence that our different cultures once had has dwindled. There is an oppressive dearth of good news. Our staple media diet is largely one of doom-laden reports and the record of death, violence, and catastrophe of one kind or another. Given the dire predictions concerning the world economy, the ecological well-being of the planet, to say nothing of the intractability of peacemaking efforts in many regions, it is clear that there is no easy path to a promising future.

Basic human experiences that once held their own promise are now far more ambiguous. Marriage and family, for instance, were once the sturdy intergenerational basis of a confident world. But now that life is problematic. There is overpopulation in some regions and increasing sterility in others. The fragility of human relationships is evidenced in divorce and family breakdowns in most cultures. In the West, the aging populations go from retirement villages to nursing homes. A naïve “happy families” view of things is no longer sustainable.

Many entered the professions, say, of education, medicine, law, politics, media, or business with youthful enthusiasm. They were motivated by high ideals of serving and protecting society. Not uncommonly, they now feel trapped in enormous networks of influences. Their confidence in doing something worthwhile for society is undermined. They cannot avoid quite radical questions: Who, or what, am I working for? What possible difference can my contribution make?

In the face of cultural and social dislocation, many, too, are searching for a new sense of community. But in the present culture of pluralism, common moral norms are hard to find. The promotion of human rights remains one of the noblest carriers of hope for a community of justice and personal dignity. Yet even this can be imperiled. A consumerist world favors an endless litigious catalogue of “my rights against all others.” As a result, those who are most defenseless are forgotten.

Refined planning skills can express a great deal of what needs to be done. They can outline a probable future development by extrapolating from current trends. Planning for probable future outcomes is surely a good resource to have. But planning by itself cannot do much about changing human beings. The greater the vision, the more it is faced with the question of how the human heart can be transformed. Despite the good will and intelligence of the participants, no “peace process,” no “Justice and Reconciliation Commission,” is assured of a happy conclusion.

At what point, then, do great human hopes turn to despair? Global or regional peace proves elusive. The term “peacekeepers” is euphemistically attributed to military forces of occupation. Security is tied to superior weaponry. Little wonder that the peacemaking children of God (see Mt 5:9) can be discouraged. When do people begin to despair over the possibilities of justice? When do they begin to accept that social divisions built on power, possession, and privilege are an inescapable reality? When, then, does despair become part of the situation, and the heart freeze into autistic loneliness? If the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, why bother about social justice at all? In the meantime, an anxious intelligence is busy about other things. It devises new techniques of damage control and defense—with weapons of mass destruction targeted on the menacing masses of “those others.”

When societies have been uprooted from any history, the meaning of faith, hope, and deep culture shrinks in a consumerist—and manipulable—present. In one way or another, governments have to cope with the culturally uprooted and disorientated populations of citizens who share no hopes. Drug addiction, violence, and youth suicide are just some of the faces of hopelessness. A liberal social system might promise success and inspire expectations. But on matters closest to the human heart, it cannot deliver what the society

most needs. When the evils are so obvious, the language of hope seems too good to be true. And yet the gods of progress promised so much; but *this* is what they delivered. As a result, the deepest self remains unemployed, lost and wandering in a consumerist world with nowhere to go.

In any number of ways the future has already been shaped by decisions made without any political or moral controls. When the logic of “what can be done, must be done” remains unquestioned, the world of human values limps embarrassingly behind. Its protests are dismissed as recalcitrant conservatism. Moral reflection is caught in a time lag. Pragmatic, short-term decisions make it difficult for those who wish to take time over the whole human good and to build a human moral consensus on the way things ought to be going. Genetic engineering, the production of new and more deadly weapons, the machinations of international business and banking, the unilateral decisions of powerful national states, all these are far from guaranteeing a promising future for the many. Powerful new communications technologies, instead of unifying the world, are used for surveillance and control and a more deadly way of targeting of “the enemy.” In other words, the future is already under the control of agencies equipped with enormous impersonal capacities to manipulate and oppress.

Yet some three billion of the world’s population are living on two U.S. dollars a day. Serious proposals have been put forward to resolve the international debt of poor countries in order to release funds to meet social needs such as health and education. If the amount of international aid for development could be increased from the current 0.2 percent of GDP to the 0.7 percent (as actually agreed upon at the Monterey Financing for Development Conference in 2002), matters would improve. But unless there is a radical change of heart and a more enlightened organizational intelligence, there can be no betterment of the present desperate situation.

The Stirring of Hope

Still, the times are ripening for a deeper exploration of the meaning of life in its whole mystery. As people of planet earth, we can sense how our hitherto different and often conflicting histories are now being woven together. A sense of one-world history is not the result merely of a sense of common threat—be it ecological, economic, or political. It is powered also by a new aspiration to a new global common good. It dares to suggest the possibility of a new, truly human future in which past enmities can fall away and millions of the forgotten poor can come to share in the still abundant resources of the earth.

Moreover, we can now recognize our existence within the womb of an

immense planetary and cosmic history. Fifteen billion years have gone into our making. Within that vast cosmic process, there have been the three and a half billion years of life on this planet. This has led to the emergence of the human race over the last million years or so, from primitive hominids to the *homo sapiens* of today. Each one of us who breathes the air of planet earth can look at the night sky in the realization that there shine in our own galaxy some hundred billion stars the size of our sun—in a physical universe of perhaps a hundred billion galaxies.

We are always part of a larger story.¹ The genetic scripts written into our brains and our bodies, into our land, into our earth—all depend on elements brewed in exploding stars billions of years ago. Unimaginable dimensions of time bring us to this present moment of wonder. The spiritual calling of humanity in the universe expresses itself in thanksgiving and hope on a cosmic scale. Hope is formed in a world of many gifts and many givers, and of some gifts that only the Source of all can give.

If some despairingly have come to accept that the whole emergent reality of life is the result of blind and unfeeling chance, then any hope for something more is pure illusion. On the other hand, if we feel that there is meaning and purpose to life, then the uphill battle begins. We have to keep reclaiming the heights already occupied by the martyrs, saints, mystics, and the great throng of good people who have insisted that there is something worth living and dying for. Despite any number of unfavorable circumstances, a hopeful energy keeps moving us on. For many it can be as matter-of-fact as getting up in the morning and going to work, or addressing the agenda of yet another meeting—and the daily round of leisure and work, study and social interaction.

The eminent Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, in his monumental work *The Principle of Hope*, presents hope in creative terms.² Hope manifests itself as the dream of the New, the *novum*. It animates all the efforts of freedom to bring a new society into being. As a hunger for the not-yet, it keeps history moving. The restless imagination of hope calls into question the status quo. In doing so, it inspires an awareness of hidden possibilities within the situation. It brings into being what is waiting to be realized. In this manner, hope is an active and realistic anticipation of new forms of a just society. It envisions a “new heaven and new earth” to be realized in human history. Hope is the forward thrust of time. Its energies keep the human journey through history

1. See Denis Edwards, *Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), 7-15; David Toolan, *At Home in the Cosmos* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001), 127-55.

2. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).

moving through its many exiles toward its true homeland. Yet Bloch remains a Marxist atheist; “God” is the cipher for the as-yet-unrealized possibilities of human freedom, the indeterminate symbol of the good society attracting human history on its forward course.³ The value and limitations of this view will be treated in the next chapter.

But whether we speak of hope in a non-religious or specifically Christian sense, it is as well to bear in mind the following points.⁴

Features of Hope

First, hope differs from optimism. To the detriment of genuine hope, these two notions are often confused. Optimism is no bad thing in itself. It is a kind of implicit confidence that things are going well in the present situation. Optimism may be simply a feature of temperament expressing itself in a spontaneous logic: we can manage and cope in a world that is reasonably predictable. Optimism is happy enough with the system. In contrast, genuine hope is always “against hope.” It begins where optimism reaches the end of its tether. Hope stirs when the secure system shows signs of breaking down. Hope is at home in the world of the unpredictable where no human logic or expectation is in control. It rejects any easy assurances of pretending to manage what in fact intrinsically resists management. It relies on something that comes from outside the system. In this respect, it is never far from humility, for it acknowledges that in birth and in death, in the wonder of life and in the intimations of art, human existence is never a realm of total control. We are not the center of the universe that has brought us forth, and the ultimate reaches of destiny are beyond human planning and control. This humility gives rise to a subversive irony on the hollowness of any cultural pretensions to deliver what in the end can come only as a gift. Genuine hope has no use for idols.

Second, hope operates in a world of meaning and values. It has a conscience and an intelligence that mere optimism lacks. Hope looks beyond self-regarding satisfactions to the transcendent values that alone can nourish life and give it direction. Nor does it repress inconvenient questions. Illusions or lies are no long-term solution to anything. To speak technically, the energies of hope nourish the self-transcending dynamism of our existence. Hope refuses to see the ultimate meaning of life as simply more of the same. It is a

3. *Ibid.*, 3:1298.

4. For a good analysis, see James R. Averill, G. Catlin, and K. K. Chon, *Rules of Hope* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990).

patient openness to what is and must be “otherwise.” Hope refuses to rest in anything less than the truly meaningful and the genuinely good. It increases the scope and momentum of human intelligence in its quest for the fullness of life. Genuine hope radically affects our commitment to the great values of peace, justice, and personal dignity. It breathes the conviction that what is deepest in our aspirations is not ultimately worthless or self-defeating. To this degree, hope is a dimension of the fundamental spirituality of the human person. It allows for the sacred indefinability of who we are. It refuses to be reduced to some form of materialistic determinism.

Third, and more specifically, hope focuses on what is truly important in terms of personal fulfillment. To live in hope is to recognize that we do not live by bread alone. What we most need is not something we can ever simply grasp and possess. It reaches beyond the consumerist imagination. When hope begins, a conversion is happening at the heart of our being. We are not meaningless and worthless phenomena in an absurd universe, but creatures of eternal value. Consequently, hope inspires a personal sense of calling and destiny. It nourishes a feeling of being part of something greater, further, something more human and lasting.

Fourth, hope is not mere *wishing* for something more. It is a conduct of life. It is a mode of living and acting. For this reason it is called a virtue, a *virtus*, a capacity to act well. For hope inspires action. It gives vigor and buoyancy to intelligence. It engenders a deep moral sense and points in the direction of a more passionate self-involvement in the making of the world. Hope’s imagination and deepest feelings resist all forms of cultural depression. It enables one to risk even life itself for the greater good of oneself or others. It is capable of taking a stand with the hopeless. Hope anticipates a future fulfillment that is yet to be given. Hoping is therefore not simply wishing. For hope acts in such a way as to bring into the limitations of the present some anticipation of what it ultimately envisions. In acting, it can also pray. To praise the giver of all gifts is an act of hope. It expresses thanksgiving for what is already given. It maintains a receptive openness to what is beyond all imagination and control. Hope for oneself expands to hope for others. The most precious fruit of this is intercession for all who, in life and in death, are our companions in the light and shadow of the history we share.

Deeper Questions

The human “system” is one form of biological life on this planet. Like all other life forms, it unfolds in time and is limited by death. But in contrast to

the instinctive life of animals, human beings know time and death as explicit and even dreadful realities. In human memory, there have been times of peace and times of war. Today we are aware of time as threatening ecological destruction and planetary suicide through atomic and bacterial weaponry. Our science knows time as leading eventually to cosmic collapse.⁵ History informs human memory with the recollection of empires, oppression, and interminable conflict. While history can recall times of grace, prosperity, social progress, scientific achievement, and religious and artistic inspiration, its memories include a miserable catalogue, personal and social, of grief, guilt, greed, and violence. In the meantime, the aeons roll on. Is this vast fifteen-billion-year cosmic process emptying the present of any personal value? If there is no abiding value in the human person, there can be no resting place, no homecoming. There is only an endless movement onward . . . to what and to where? The force of such radical questionings may make us feel that everything we most treasure is thrown into the lottery of a blind evolutionary advance toward what is both beyond our ken and outside our control. Time appears demonic, an obscure, unfeeling force that in fact has no time for the human or the world as we know it. Death, individual and social, historical and cosmic, is the end.

The question of hope emerges in a new way. Is there any sense in which we can have hope for time itself? What can save time from meaninglessness? Is death its absolute and universal limit? These are deeply disruptive questions when heard in the cultural systems that shape our lives. It must be admitted that there is nothing within the system that can save it. Of itself, religion can offer its obscure consolations by denying the significance of the world of time and by deferring everything to another world, another time, and another place. Meanwhile, we are here, now, in this time and in this place, in the company of these people. Some may opt to work the system for what it is worth. They are the true “survivors.” They calculate the odds and look to the main chance. If to survive means sacrificing others, or even our best selves, that is the price to be paid. If death is the end, then life to the full means living now, even if such living may mean a more or less violent exclusion of others as competitors or threats. When victory belongs to the strong, hope appears to be the virtue of the weak. Hope is nothing but a reckless abdication of power and self-assertion. It is built on the illusion that somehow we belong together, and that there is something or someone who has a care for our common destiny.

5. For a many-sided treatment of the issues involved, see George F. R. Ellis, ed., *The Far-Future Universe: Eschatology from a Cosmic Perspective* (London: Templeton Foundation, 2002).

Genuine hope will, of course, contest such a crude ideology. Hope is intent not on the “survival of the fittest,” but on the fittingness of all finding life’s fullness and fulfillment. Nonetheless, to be human is to know the passage of time and the reality of death. And in such realism, hope offers its anticipation of the future and learns to rely on what alone is trustworthy. It inspires a journey through time and history. To be human is always to be “on the way”—as in the title of Gabriel Marcel’s book, *Homo Viator*, to which we refer in the next chapter.⁶

DESPAIR AND DEPRESSION

When it lacks any hope for anything beyond itself, a culture manifests the symptoms of depression. This pathological state is characterized by a feeling of isolation. It shows a tendency to “totalize” its failures and indulge in unreal expectations. It manifests a generalized apathy and incapacity to act. Hope begins with a new ability to imagine a larger sense of life and community. Here an outstanding reference is still William F. Lynch’s *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*.⁷ I will briefly indicate how hope inspires a larger imagination and points the way to recovery, and thereby pose some questions relevant to the cultural situation. The sufferings of the individual suggest an analogy for any larger culture that has lost hope.

Hope begins to stir when the depressed begin to rediscover themselves not as isolated, unreachable and beyond all help but as belonging to a larger community of care. Typically help is represented by the true friend, the counselor, pastor, physician, or spiritual director. These helpers challenge the isolation of the depressed with what amounts to an invitation to rejoin the human race. By allowing themselves to be helped by these “others” who represent the promise of healing, the hitherto depressed begin on the road to recovery. In the presence of the helper, the sufferer begins to imagine things differently. The frozen isolation of depression is melted. Life recovers its momentum. Marcel wisely observes that hope most arises when it comes closest to despair.⁸ By defying the temptation to give up, the self ceases to be an isolated, defensive ego. It admits the presence of the other. It finds that existence can be realized only in co-existence with others. For every

6. Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. E. Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 7.

7. William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965).

8. Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 30, 32, 36, 41, 45.

human being needs the help of others. Hope thrives on mutual assistance, cooperation, and compassion. It inspires the necessary humility and patience if the promise of life is to be kept.⁹

Both the isolation of despair and its accompanying totalization of evil and failure are destructive illusions. Despair lacks all sense of proportion. It thrives on depression's exaggerated imagination of suffering, guilt, failure, or disgrace. In this depressive state, we might feel that we are nothing but a sum of negativities. But at that bleak point, hope begins when we start to imagine matters in a larger sense of proportion. Life is in fact going on. The feeling of "total" worthlessness begins to meet up with the possibilities of healing, repentance, conversion, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Love and wisdom reveal what had hitherto been hidden. The totalization of personal worthlessness and failure is relativized. Depressed persons begin humbly to rejoin the human race. They find themselves in the company of those who know that the evils we suffer—or inflict—need not be the whole story. It may be that the past has had its say and delivered a crushing judgment on our failures. But agents of hope point to the possibilities of forgiveness, reconciliation, repentance, and the expiation of past evils. The past delivered its verdict, but the future has made no such ultimate and total judgment. The destructive totalization that has been in control yields to a more healthy and gracious sense of proportion.

Without wishing to trivialize the evils that have led to depressive despair, hope introduces a note of humor and irony into the human situation. Given the wonder of existence and the immensity of the mysterious universe, it is possible that we have been taking ourselves too seriously. We have all along been trying to live life without wonder and mercy.

When despair isolates the depressed and exaggerates their problems, it encloses them in the illusion of hopelessly unreal expectations. These have led to a doomed attempt to measure oneself, others, and the larger world against unreachable ideals of perfection. Inevitably, then, despair inhabits a world of endless frustration. The original problems are intensified. Censorious idealism has never learned the saving grace of humility. To the degree that we see ourselves occupying the moral center of the universe, we take on the rather large burden of universal judgment. Depression is born out of conceit and pride. There is no room for patience. If I try to dispense with the long haul, if I reject the need to take time—whatever time it takes—to achieve the goal, then failure is inevitable. To demand some instant outcome is to become locked in unreal time. Energy is first frustrated and then exhausted.

9. *Ibid.*, 36.

When patience runs out, despair enters in. And with it comes the depression of living in a world in which everything takes too much time, and everyone, including oneself, is revealed as incapable of delivering what my unreal expectations impatiently demand.

Again, it is easy to see that the dawning of hope is the recovery of a more humble and patient imagination. We are members of a community. We live in a network of dependence. An immense variety of factors and conditions affect our existence. I am not the center of the universe, even though the universe has time and a place for my unique existence. To the degree that we begin to live with humility and the gratitude that comes from it, the way of hope has begun. It grows strong in the recognition that, while there might be instant coffee, or instant communication, or instant meals, there are no instant people. Unless we resist being duped by the consumerist instant, we cannot enter into the multidimensioned “now” in which hope lives.¹⁰ In the patient acceptance of time with all its seasons come both healing and hope.

Yet there is a further aspect of depressive despair. It shows itself in impotence and apathy. The depressed have been deflected from reality. Problems totally determine their world. Isolation is an englobing experience. Life has become a complete disappointment. In such a state, I can stop wanting anything. Desire dies in the heart. Love for anyone or anything presents too big a threat. It will make me vulnerable to further grief and frustration. It is better not to want anything so as to avoid a further letdown. As a result, I cannot permit myself feeling, wanting, desiring anything outside the frozen autism of my depressed state. Sympathy for other sufferers is beyond me. There is another side to this sad state. It can show itself in a blind kind of lashing out at anyone or any group that invites me into a larger world of living and loving. The other is experienced only as invading the privacy of my depressive despair and must be rejected. Life has left me alone and disappointed, and I want nothing of it. A listless inability to act is the result. I can neither do anything about my sorry state, nor do I want to.

Obviously the voice of hope would gently insist on the necessity of learning to desire and to love again, in whatever tentative form. As a beginning, it might suggest the healthy possibilities of tending the garden, looking after a pet, making a phone call or writing a letter to friends or relatives too long ignored. Friends would probably suggest, in one way or another, the need

10. On “the sacrament of the present moment,” see the eighteenth-century classic by Jean-Pierre de Caussade, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence*, trans. Algar Thorold (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1948). In a more current and broadly spiritual idiom, a useful work is Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Novato, Calif.: New World Library, 1999).

“to get out of yourself.” Of these, the more philosophically minded might say that your listless state of self-enclosure has to recover the dynamics of self-transcendence. The hitherto isolated, depressed existence must begin to move again. Wisdom may well suggest the healing possibilities of learning from other sufferers and beginning to think of those “less fortunate than yourself.” More sensitive advice might point to the advantages of joining a support group made up of people who have been through something of the same dark night. In an atmosphere of sharing and compassion, the long, but not impossible, journey back into life, step by step, can begin. The inspiring examples here are those who are facing the problems of long-term addiction or dependency. Yet the aim here is not to replace one form of dependency with another. For the goal of such therapy groups is to help their members to regain freedom and, with it, the ability to desire what is truly valuable and meaningful in human life.

In each of these instances, hope is experienced as a gift coming from outside the depressive system altogether.¹¹ How this hidden grace might be best named will provoke philosophical, psychological, and theological responses. So far, we have merely indicated an experience readily identifiable in most human lives. Hope is the experience of transition. It is expressed in the movement of imagination, taking us beyond feelings of isolation and the totalization of problems. It steps out of the unreality of false expectations and the apathy that desires nothing. What this hopeful movement leads to is a mysterious “other dimension.” It is manifest in a new way of imagining our participation in the human community and a deeper, wider appreciation of the promise hidden in our common human experience. The hard, cold, lifeless “heart of stone” is on the way to becoming a “heart of flesh” (Ezek 36:26).

DIMENSIONS OF CHRISTIAN HOPE

The Witness of Christian Hope

A cultural form of depression results from living in a social milieu that tends to negate a hopeful sense of self. But just as a dispirited culture can have an adverse effect on hope, a community alive with the energies of hope affects both the individual and the cultural aspects of our lives. Hope is a social virtue. It enables the individual to join or rejoin the human race with confi-

11. On this point, see James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 173-77. See also *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998).

dence and freedom. The hope of each one needs to be sustained by a helping community. If that community is to be a milieu of hope it too must be able to renew itself by drawing on other and deeper resources if it is to bring healing and confidence into any depressed situation. Here we have the beginning of a theology of the church as the community of hope. It has been called into existence by God's grace and mercy. Its life is centered in Christ, the embodiment of divine compassion. As the crucified and risen One, he is in person the divine offer of healing and freedom at the point where human beings most encounter the problem of evil—in themselves, in others, and in the world at large.

The Spirit of hope disturbs the depressed society with other possibilities. Society is more than a loveless collective. The seeds of communion in eternal life have already been planted within it. As the First Letter of John has it,

. . . this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things that your joy may be complete. (1 Jn 1:2-4)

This gift of eternal life triumphs over the blind forces of time and death. It redeems time of its lifeless weight and emptiness. The gift that makes all the difference has been given into the hopelessness of the system. For any depressive system freezes our capacity to relate, to desire, and to act. God's gift in Christ means a new way of relating to others. For all are called to the one communion of life. It means, too, a new way of desiring. The Spirit of hope plucks out the heavy, lifeless heart of stone to give the liveliness of a heart of flesh (Ezek 36:26). Desire now awakens to the imperative of loving God with one's whole heart and soul and mind and strength, and of loving one's neighbor as oneself (Mk 12:29-31). Love and hope inspire new capacities to act. Patience, kindness, and the courage to endure what must be patiently suffered become possible. All such activity is sustained by entrusting one's life and destiny to Christ and the workings of his Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 13:4-7).

The life of Christian hope lives by surrendering to the creative and redeeming mystery of love working in time, at every moment in life and death throughout the whole of creation. The divine gift is being given. It precedes all our beginnings. It is more ultimate than any "last thing" that either hope or despair can imagine.¹² The God-given future is finally conditioned not by

12. Zachary Hayes, *Visions of a Future: A Study of Christian Eschatology* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1989), 73.

personal failure and social oppression but by the irrevocable promise of life to the full.¹³ Christian hope is always more than the catalogue of particular hopes, for it looks to an incalculable fulfillment in terms of what can never be fully expressed.

The church exists in history to be the space of hope in the world. As that part of the world that has awakened to the plenitude of the divine promise, it expresses not only hope in the world but an unconditional hope for the world. In this regard, the church is the community of those who have a sense of a future so full of promise, so absolute, that nothing and no one is excluded. Christians, as people of God, are the people of hope. They are called to witness to the great transformation now afoot which promises the liberation of all human hopes to their fullest dimensions. Yet it is not as though Christian hope occupies some deathless standpoint, untroubled by the agonies of the world and invulnerable to its sufferings. The life of hope is not a matter of watching in armchair comfort a replay of the highlights once “our team” has won. For in this case the team is everyone, and the game has not yet been played to the end. The followers of Christ are not passive spectators, once or twice removed from the agonizing contest of history. Immersed as they are in the great human and cosmic drama, Christians still have to confront the many faces of despair in themselves and others. Hope must arise and grow in the midst of inexplicable suffering, inevitable death, humiliating failure, meaninglessness, guilt, and fear in all its forms. It is ever up against the sheer power of evil in all its virulent manifestations. Whatever the joy and peace inherent in the gospel of hope, it offers no complacent, passive preview of things. Our hope is called to share in the patience of God. Only in the loving patience of God can the promise latent in the unfolding of human time and the meandering history of human freedom be finally kept and revealed. Because it lacks this final evidence, hope is always being refashioned. Whatever the unpredictable turns of history, whatever the mysteries of the cosmos yet to be discovered, hope is always open to new dimensions of Christ, moving forward with “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Despite the unseen goal, and because of the intimate joy and anticipation, Peter urges the early Christian community,

[I]n your hearts, sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make a defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is within you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (1 Pet 3:15-16)

13. Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary*, trans. K. Farrer (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976), 74-75.

Somehow words have to be found to give an account of what we hope for. It is a continuing challenge in every age, beginning all over again as the different contexts of Christian life through history unfold. Yet in Christ something radically hopeful has already happened. An ultimate love has appeared in our history. Through the resurrection of the Crucified, the deepest aspirations of our race from below are blessed and fulfilled by God's inexhaustible gift from above. In Christ, history is already moving to a divinely guaranteed future. Through him, a new kind of hoping has entered the world. As the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch remarked, "Christianity seems like a final emergence of what religion is—a total hope and an explosive one."¹⁴

Hope and Time

As Christian hope brings its distinctive vision and energies to the world of hope, it reaches beyond any quick solution to what an infinite love is bringing about. And here it must take time. For hope insists that God has time for the whole of creation and everyone who is part of it. Inevitably, hope is sorely tested when the God-intended future seems to be indefinitely deferred. A more just social order, a more informed ecological responsibility, the achievement of peace and reconciliation, are all long-term projects. Indeed, it is often the case that those who hope and work for such causes will often not see the result of their efforts.

Hope, then, must not only have time for all God's creation, but must have time for time itself. In one perspective, time is simply the measure of waste and slow decay. The passage of time means the erosion of everything we are. It leads eventually to the collapse of the whole physical universe. But hope discerns a blessing hidden in the movement of time. It contains a promise that will be kept. The seed of eternal life will grow and bear fruit. Still, hope must take its time as God has taken time, in patience and waiting.

But there is another angle. Even if we hope for the future, dare we hope for the past? It contains the numberless dead, victims of violence and greed, casualties of progress and conquest, mostly unknown and unacknowledged. They lived, suffered, and died, finally laid to rest in the inescapable finality of the grave. Some were heroic witnesses to another way. Yet all were subject to the same mortality. In this present, they are our past. More dramatically, every history, personal or social, contains a memory of unresolved conflicts,

14. As quoted by John Macquarrie on the frontispiece of *Christian Hope* (London: Mowbray, 1978). See also Bloch, *Principle of Hope*, 3:1125-31, 1256-74.

violent conquests, unsleeping hatreds. Can hope look back and not lose itself in the history of such defeat and failure? This cannot but be experienced as a strange question. Still it leads into the deepest dimensions of Christian hope. Whatever the theological explanation, hope must allow for the reconciliation even for those who knew one another in life, or in the longer span of history, only as enemies and aggressors. Can the mercy of the Redeemer of the world outwit, in the end, the human capacity for violence, dissension, and oppression of the weak? As we shall see, hope can positively long for a purgatorial fire that burns only with the love that can change enmity to compassion. Hope can even desire the existence of hell, not to pass any ultimate judgment on anyone, but in the expectation that all the self-vaunting powers of evil will be reduced to nothing and be revealed in their absurdity. Most of all, hope envisages a heaven of ultimate reconciliation in which Christ will join together what human history has set apart (see Eph 2:13-22). In short, hope prays for the last judgment, which, even as it exposes evil and casts the mighty from their thrones, will be a revelation of infinite mercy.

The vision and longing of Christian hope can never exclude such considerations. Hope can never be limited to a particular theology. For it is wholly intent on what only God can do and the manner in which an infinite love can bring it about. But this kind of hopeful thinking does suggest how hope looks forward and looks back to the totality of God's redemptive design.

"INTER-HOPE" DIALOGUE

One of the great signs of hope today is the many levels of interfaith dialogue taking place. All who represent the deeper places of the heart and the higher reaches of the spirit, play a part in the ecology of a global human culture.¹⁵ Such meeting and collaboration cannot but make the world more hospitable to the values of peace and justice, compassion and human dignity. Eminent missiologists recognize the eschatological or hope-oriented aspect of this dialogue.¹⁶ It is focused on the Kingdom of the God and "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). Theology predictably oscillates between two polar considerations. There is the universality of God's saving will, as when God so loves *the world* (John 3:16a). But

15. Hans Küng, *Eternal Life? Life after Death as a Medical, Philosophical and Theological Problem*, trans. E. Quinn (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 44-70.

16. Standard references here are the comprehensive Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), and the much-discussed Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001).

this is held in tension with the culminating particularity of Christian revelation. God so loves the world “so as to give *his only Son*” (John 3:16b). The universality of God’s love and the particularity of the divine self-giving in Christ are necessarily interconnected in any adequate theology. The respective emphases of various theologies of the church’s mission to the world give rise to a wide range of missiological approaches. Here I would like to suggest that the language of hope is of special relevance.

In fact, for our present purposes, I would suggest replacing the usual term “interfaith” dialogue with “inter-hope” encounter. There is a certain advantage in looking beyond, say, negotiations regarding civil collaboration and democratic freedom, or beyond theological agreement on a number of themes or doctrines. A new openness or sympathy comes into play when the encounter between different faiths and spiritualities is set within a horizon of hope and its expectation of an ultimate communion in eternal life. Inter-hope dialogue would highlight the unimaginable “otherness” of eschatological fulfillment. It looks beyond what is, to what is to come. While there is continuity between the present apprehensions of all faiths and eternal life, there is also the discontinuity that only humble adoration dimly discerns. What is hidden will, in the end, be made clear. Dialogue between various religious and spiritual traditions reveals, of course, quite complex differences regarding the meanings of the self, God, and the character of eternal life, to say nothing of different understandings of the life of the dead and the place of ancestors, and even the meaning of time.¹⁷

Yet it remains that the future is what we have in common. At the point where all are united in looking forward to a hoped-for future, Christian hope can be especially creative. For the Christian can turn to each revered partner in dialogue and express an unconditional hope for the gift of eternal life for each and every one. If Christians must never give up hope even for their enemies and persecutors, there is surely a lot that can be said—or left unsaid in the necessary darkness of our present perceptions—regarding the ultimate reconciliation of all in eternal life. There is a breadth and length and height and depth of the mystery (Eph 3:18) that can be disclosed only to hope. The love of Christ “surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19). Our trust in this love includes all in whom the Spirit of love and hope is moving. This is not an instance of subtle Christian imperialism. For Christian hope waits on the

17. On the relevance of John 4 to this question, see Anthony J. Kelly and Francis J. Moloney, *Experiencing God in the Gospel of John* (New York: Paulist, 2003), 97-114. See also Keith Ward, “Cosmology and Religious Ideas about the End of the World,” in *The Far-Future Universe*, ed. Ellis, 235-48. For an early attempt at a more global theology, see N. Smart and S. Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991).

unfathomable freedom of the One “who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine” (Eph 3:20). Interfaith dialogue must continue to work for greater mutual comprehension and collaboration among all peoples of faith as they turn toward one another in reverence. Inter-hope dialogue is more a matter of all looking toward a promised future of communion in eternal life. If such a view is criticized as being too specifically Christian, at least it will be criticized for the right reasons—for having too much hope—in the Other, for all others, rather than too little. The other is essentially welcomed into the communion of ultimate life, and is no longer subject to the distance and fragmentation of our historical differences. Christian hope forbids any imperialistic religiosity. It rather gives us the confidence to take the last place in the service of the world, to act as a force for reconciliation and as a witness to ever-expanding hope for the hopes of the world (Luke 14:1-14).

CONCLUSION

Hope as a Theological Virtue

In formally theological terms, Thomas Aquinas, along with Christian tradition generally, understands hope as a God-given virtue. It is the capacity to act by relying on divine help in order to attain our final end in God. Hope relies on God to achieve what faith reveals and charity most desires.¹⁸ Because of its God-given and God-directed character, hope is classified among the “theological virtues.”¹⁹ Hope figures in the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as a middle dimension of three interweaving God-wrought and God-ward activities. Hope without faith would be blind. It would not know who it was trusting or what it was hoping for. Yet faith without hope would be closed in on itself. It would tend to imagine the future looking like a mere repetition or copy of the present. Restricted to the range of images and ideas dealing with the present, the God-determined future would seem to be simply an extension of present, untroubled by any sense of judgment or transformation in the light of the infinite Other. Certainly, faith points the way, but hope drives us forward in an open horizon of trust. Likewise, love without hope would atrophy. It might so settle for union with the beloved in the present as to forget that the other is still to be fully revealed. Yet hope

18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae, Pars Prima Secundae*, question 62, article 2 (hereafter *STh* 1-2, q. 62, a. 1).

19. *STh* 1-2, q. 62, a. 1.

without love would be stunted and self-centered. It might veer toward vengeance and retribution in forgetfulness of what the last thing really is.

The adjective “theological,” when applied to faith, hope, and charity, is used to point the contrast to what is within the natural scope of human action. Hence, in line with Aquinas’s description, theological hope is for *the good*—in fact, the supreme good of God.²⁰ Yet it is a *future* good, since we are not yet united to God in the face-to-face vision of eternal life. In this regard, hope deals with a *possible* good, since eternal life is exactly what God has promised. Nonetheless, hope is concerned with a *difficult* good. To desire the good that is promised as the supreme goal of our existence is a choice. It involves what is experienced as a risk. It means choosing the greatest good over lesser goods, and this choice is made in the context of a certain tension. An idolatrous bias toward the attractions of power, pleasure, and possessions has radically affected the history of which all are a part. Hence, the theological virtue of hope sustains the courage necessary to rely on God alone for the fulfillment of the divine promise.

A Pauline Description (Romans 5:1-5)

The theological realism of Thomas’s account of hope as a virtue for the uphill, long-haul journey of Christian existence resonates with Paul’s account. For the Apostle, hope is not a theoretical matter but an energy formed in the core of our being:

Justified, then, by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we *boast* in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that we boast even in our *sufferings*, knowing that suffering produces *endurance*, and endurance produces *character*, and character produces hope, and hope that we have will not let us down, because *God’s love* has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us. (Rom 5:1-5)²¹

Paul presumes that the gift of faith gives from the start a kind of ecstatic delight in a new horizon of life. Believers look forward from a position of

20. For a concise, culturally relevant, and deeply Thomistic treatment of hope, Joseph Pieper, *Hope and History*, trans. Richard Winston and Clara Winston (London: Burns & Oates, 1969) is outstanding.

21. For commentary, see Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1996).

peace and grace to a sharing in God's own glory. But this first "boasting" leads to the realism of the long haul. Our "sufferings" show that our full liberation is not yet realized. The end is not yet. Our existence is grace under pressure. It awaits the fulfillment that will come only in God's good time. The tension of waiting is paralleled in the petition "lead us not into temptation." This is perhaps best translated as, "do not let us crack under pressure," given the apocalyptic conflict of good and evil in human history.

Yet we can still "boast." There is the assurance of moving in the right direction, even though a radical tension is felt through the whole of creation (see Rom 8:18-21). For the Apostle sees our struggles as forming "endurance" within us. This is the "long-suffering" patience characteristic of Job and the great martyrs of the Old Testament. Interestingly, too, it is a feature of the Book of Revelation. The final book of the New Testament has no word for hope, but speaks constantly of "patient endurance" (e.g., Rev 1:9; 2:2-3, 2:19; 3:10). The pressure bearing down on believers brings a new experience of time. Our temporal existence is one of waiting. It is a matter of exercising faithfulness to the end, whenever it will be. Such endurance means standing strong against all temptations to hurry time. It resists all efforts to escape from the particular place and time given to the believer in this moment of the history of God's saving activity. The sufferings involved produce endurance as the readiness to undergo what has to be borne. It rises to the challenge of embracing what each believer is called to undertake and undergo in the all-inclusive providence of the divine plan.

This kind of endurance produces "character." The meaning of God's saving grace is stamped into our inmost being. The good news of God is crystallized in our minds and hearts. It is embodied in the person that each of us is. Christian identity takes definitive shape. Its character is shaped by surrendering to the grace of God and its future unfolding.

"Character produces hope." From this tried and tested character, hope in its full reality arises. It is unconditional, irreversible, all-enduring in its surrender to what only God can bring about. At this extreme point when everything is risked, hope "will not let us down." It is sustained by an unconditional and inexhaustible gift. Hope draws its deepest energies from the love of God permeating the inmost dimensions of our existence. The Spirit, moving through the whole creation, works within each believer. From the Spirit comes that awareness of love without which hope would be vulnerable to the fragility and scandals inherent in our existence in the world. Yet the Spirit aids us in our weakness. The divine Spirit leads hope to its full range and inspires prayers worthy of what we are called to (Rom 8:26-28). The Spirit "groans" in the "groaning" of our hope, just as our hope participates in the "groaning" of all creation as it awaits its deliverance (Rom 8:22, 23, 26). Paul

insists on the resolute character of hope as he writes, “but if we keep hoping for what we do not see, then we wait with endurance” (Rom 8:25). Our waiting lives with the conviction that all things are working for the good of those who have stepped into the universe of God’s love (Rom 8:28).

Followers of Christ can boast of the grace, faith, and peace inherent in their calling. But as the church reaches out to the world of hope and hopelessness, it proclaims the gospel to those who have “no hope and are without God in the world” (Eph 2:12). The Christian community learns to boast of inevitable struggles that its mission demands. Such suffering brings about the patient endurance that engagement with the world exacts. It takes shape in the special character formed in a long experience of history and its conflicts. This, in turn, expresses itself in hope. The soul of all hopefulness is the love that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Cor 13:7). At a time when “all things” appear all too much, Christian hope opens to the ever greater dimensions of abundant redemption.²²

In the next two chapters, we will sketch the particular theological expression of hope that is called “eschatology.”

22. For a profound historical reflection, see Christopher Dawson, “Christian Culture as a Culture of Hope,” in his *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture, A Way to the Renewal of Human Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 60-68.