

FAITH AND HOPE AND LOVE

By JOSEPH P. WHELAN

THE FOCUS OF this article, as of those to follow, is hope, but the more precise subject of our concern here is hope in its relation to faith and love, hope as an inner moment of one dense experience. There are wholly adequate reasons for the distinction of faith and hope and love. But the risk is run that we shall separate what we mean only to distinguish. Things may sometimes be separated into their parts with good results. But faith-hope-love is not a thing. It is a life. It is christian life. And while life, as dynamic and historical, has aspects, moments and movement, it does not have parts. It is not a thing. To separate life from itself is to kill it. Further, faith-hope-love is not a problem, which latter may also have parts whose proper arrangements can lead us to answers. Rather, faith-hope-love is a mystery, to be penetrated and experienced. It is alive, a summons to awe and to action – to let it be, let it be so, to let it happen. The task is response, to be sure, but the called-for response is not so much answer as affirmation of what God has said and done, of what he is doing, and the appropriation of his deed as my own. Ultimately, ideally, at the end, *I* am what he is doing. I am God's deed done in Christ whom I become, through their Spirit, in the Church. To separate mystery from itself, to attempt its parts, is not to solve mystery but to impoverish and perhaps to destroy it. So we treat faith and hope and love, together and in their distinction, as the one deed of God, the christian life, which is the mystery of Christ. And not just any Christ. But the one who is alive in the growing body of his resurrection.

Faith and hope and love as a formula for the christian style of life is a characteristically pauline expression. It names the three great charismata which constitute the people of God and which also mark each man as numbered among that people. Paul is well aware that the body of Christ has many parts, a plurality of members, and the hands are not the feet, nor are the eyes the ears. But the body is one and exists from a single principle of life, the holy Spirit. So too among just fellow men and christians. The differences

read more at www.theway.org.uk

are real. The gifts are as wide and as various as the needs and tasks, and as irreducible as the breadth and reach of the human adventure under victorious grace. Yet the adventure is seen finally to occur under *one* grace, one holy Spirit who is the bridal gift of the risen Lord to a Church become the beloved of his own flesh through the gift bestowed. So the many gifts are one gift. And the one gift is faith and hope and love. And finally, just the greatest of these, which is love.¹

Paul can say this last because, both on the part of the initiating God and of responding man, love is the total fundamental act which integrates everything else. Yet as Rahner notices, this love must declare itself in history in a multiplicity of actions distinct though not separate from each other and from love. Faith and hope give love a concrete presence in the world. They test love and are both source and fruit of its growth and strength. And so Paul urges his readers to 'put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation'. He prays for his readers and gives thanks, 'remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ'.²

'In our Lord Jesus Christ'. This brings us to the central statement we shall have to make in this article. Faith-hope-love is a person, Jesus Christ. These three are not just *about* Christ as their source, their motive and their goal – though they are most surely and importantly this too. But prior and more fundamentally, faith and hope and love are the primary grace itself – incarnational, incarnated grace: God our Father's victorious and absolute gift of himself through Christ in the holy Spirit to men. Faith, hope and love are what God is and does. And they are what *we* are, when we become Christ, sons in the Son. And they are what we do, when we do what Christ does, cry Abba! Father, in the Spirit. And they are (but carefully here, for how can man *have* God?) what we have, when we have the mind and heart of Christ, the Spirit himself.³

The mystery deepens when we stress this theme of person, and it reminds us that a life, the life of God, is what Paul haltingly attempts to verbalize when he speaks of faith and hope and love. The words bristle with tension, for they speak properly of at least three inner moments of God the Father's encounter with man through Christ in the Spirit. And each of these moments or levels of the mystery

¹ 1 Cor 12-13.

² 1 Thess 5, 8; 1, 3; and see Rom 5, 1-5; 1 Cor 13, 13; Col 1, 4-5; and compare Heb 10, 21-25.

³ Rom 8, 9-17; 1 Cor 2, 10-13.

reveals in turn the rich overlapping and unity of faith and hope and love.

In the first place, God is not man. Here, God as my faith, my hope and my love is precisely what I am not. Distance is experienced and it is real. This God is not given, but proposed. And the self-disclosure says fidelity to a promise of agapeistic love which shall have to re-create my sinful self, my not-self, to new lovable-ness, new being, in Christ. Here, I am invited, summoned. But I am free. Not free to believe and hope and love. That must be given me. That must be done in me, for me, by this Lover who must create my availability and my response. My freedom just here is negative. I may not say yes, but I may say no. I am invited to believe and trust that the Father's powerful love as displayed and offered in the weakness of Christ has utterly altered my hope. Distance is shattered, on God's side, and it is revealed that there is a future for me and my world, which I may risk. For Christ's resurrection in flesh is the declaration of human eternity. Belief in Christ's resurrection creates the hope that I and the world I build may be loved forever. And, in Christ, be worth the love. The distance has been real here and speaks of a journey. But God in Christ present and offered to man in the Church is a journey already taken, and a distance overcome.

The second inner moment of faith and hope and love finds this God who is not man as the God who is in man, the God who is in the world. We may call this grace, but we ought to mean something wonderfully forceful by it, if we do. For we have to mean nothing less than the Spirit of the Son, ardently trusting the Father's old promises massively kept in Christ's resurrection, which now grounds anew this same Spirit's invincible hope that all Christ's brothers and the world Christ loves shall see in their own risen bodies what they may know now in faith and may run toward with most certain hope: their adoption in love. Here once again, faith and hope and love are not what man is, nor are they what man does. Here as before, it is God who is faith and hope and love. Paul is absolutely clear on this. It is the Spirit who groans and prays.¹ We are saved by his hope, by his faith and love.

Yet something new and marvellous, all the same, is afoot. For what was just call and summons and demanding disclosure is now also response. And while the response of faith and hope and love remains of God and by God, it has become nonetheless a human and

¹ Rom 8, 18-26.

worldly reply. For at least as regards our universe, the Spirit, who is love, shall always be a man's love when the never-to-be-discarnate Son tells his Father: I love you. And the Spirit abroad in the world through the Church is a brother's gift to his brothers, a gift won by an almost scandalously human hope. For it was beyond all evidence that Jesus trusted his Father to love him faithfully. In both Jesus and his brothers, then, the summons, the self-disclosure of God as faith and hope and love has a reply. And while it is God himself, the holy Spirit, and not man, who makes, who is that reply, yet the Spirit's yes to the Father through Christ – at this second level of the mystery we are treating – is made in man and for man, and if not by him, yet not without him. For here God has been given to God precisely in history, which makes it a human event. And man's freedom grows. Where before man could only refuse to say no, now a fundamental affirmation occurs. Man does not yet say yes in himself, but the way and the means to that moment are here in the believing and loving, in the ardently hoping Spirit within him.

Here God *is* given, and *because* he is received. The Spirit in man has made men Christ-ian, for the Spirit is the Father's gift of himself, which is Christ. And the Spirit in man has made men sons, for he is in man as Christ's improvident trust and certain hope across death itself of requited love: Abba! Father. If a journey remains to be made, yet the mystery presses to paradox. For this journey is seen now to be a march into the here, with eyes on a future that has come. We move toward death as risen men, in the resurrection of Christ. Hope tumbles over faith now and somersaults before love. For hope is at once source and fruit of trust, and it gives the sharp edge to that love which is desire leading to act. Its certainty produces a patience with respect to him who has not yet come, and at its finest, hope dissolves into the silence of a restless joy, because he who is coming is here.

The third inner moment or level of the mystery of faith and hope and love as the personal encounter of God and man concerns what man is, who he becomes, what he may do, given God's word of disclosure (the first inner moment) and the gift of God himself through Christ in the Spirit (the second). This God who is not man, yet who in Christ has become man, and who by his Spirit indwells men, lets this love affair get out of hand. Out of his hands, and into ours. And we become him, and do what he does. For the humanity of God I share is not just something I have, however gratefully. The humanity of Christ is what I am, it is what I do. And the world with

which he is eternally involved and part of whose matter is forever his flesh, is my world. And my work affects it.

To go further and farther. Love is creative of itself in another, for love is a gift of being and being of act. And so the Spirit of Christ abroad in the flesh of the brothers of Christ creates an aftermath and a future which is me and what I may thus hope to become. The Spirit is memory of promises made, believed on, and kept. And he is the future, my hidden Lord hoped on and well on the way. And the Spirit is also that joy, or often fierce peace, that grapples these two in the present possession of love. And these three are mine, are who I am, what I do. It is I who believe and hope and love. The Spirit has come (the second inner moment of the mystery) and has made all things new. And this last is the third inner moment, the new creation, which I am, which I do. For if, with Paul, it is not I but Christ who lives and acts in me, so too again with Paul, it is I who live and act in him, uttering through him in the Spirit the great Amen of my faith and hope and love.¹ God divinizes me in Christ, God's word is deed of me in Christ. For it is not so much that God gives himself to me in Christ, as that he gives me to himself in Christ. With all the richness of its ambiguity, man is a gift of God.

Mary of Nazareth found words for the deed of God which was, in direct proportion to its being God's, her own. Her history gives flesh to the three inner moments of faith and hope and love, where grace and human freedom rise together. And the movement issues in the pride of a superb, legitimate and fully human exaltation, whose roots are the most awesome creaturely humility. Her sinlessness and virginity are God's own work: an availability – which she does not refuse – for a possible encounter which is entirely up to him. 'Let it happen to me'. And so the Spirit is within her, giving that reply to the Father which is Christ. And then it is that the gift of God which is yet a human, worldly accomplishment occurs. *Because* God has done mighty things in her, *she* shall do a deed the generations will remember: a woman, and not God, is the mother of God. Christ here is a worldly achievement and the foundation of christian secularity. Faith, hope and love coalesce to the stillpoint of a passivity which is wholly in action: God, given by God to man, in Mary's virginity, becomes the God-man given by man to God and men through her motherhood.²

We have here the image of the Church as bride, as body and as

¹ Gal 2, 20; Acts 17, 28; 2 Cor 1, 20.

² Lk 2.

mother. Because the Church has received Christ, she may become him and give him to men – and to God. The Church too is faith and hope and love on the three levels we have been treating: God as summons and demanding self-disclosure: the Lord of the Church; the Spirit constitutive of her unfailingly holy response: the Lord within the Church; and the fruits of the Spirit which, even as they measure the scandal of her sinfulness, also become the flesh of her mission to the world and her human achievement in building the larger body of Christ's resurrection against the Day of his Father.¹

What does this Church, what does christian man hope for? He hopes for faith, which of course he already has if his hope is christian at all, but yet which though given remains gift on the way, an object of hope, something and Someone approaching or, better, moving forward ahead of man, beckoning him on into a world of movement and growth. Man hopes to believe what the future will show Christ to be. He hopes to trust this Other who enters his present to lead him beyond it. And he hopes to greet this encounter with love.

Rahner suggests that New Testament hope is ultimately the intersection, on the one hand, of God's love become human history in Christ and, on the other, the confident response of man who awaits, with the certainty of faith, the final consummation of that love, which is the coming of Christ. Man hopes then in God, in love, and in nothing else. But he hopes in God's love as revealed in God become history, Christ, and as revealed in the history of the total, the corporate Christ, where resurrection is for the moment mediated in passion, and life is the meaning of death. So man hopes in the world and in his brothers and in the promise to be kept which is himself. Hope here is the product of a faith that his corporate history, which is still man's becoming, already exists in Christ. And hope here is the edge on man's love, impelling him to make Christ's history his own. Fr William Lynch wisely warns against the disastrous and unchristian consequence of hoping for the impossible. It is to skirt the definite and to fly the real. It is gnostic, and it invites despair. God given to God by man. Absurd? Impossible? Pelagian? That depends on just how far man's Lover wants to go and to what prodigal extent his love has wilfully got out of hand. The love of God for man in Christ must be the christian measure of the possible. Here once again, faith gives the dimensions of realistic

¹ 1 Cor 15, 24–28.

hope, of what man may hope to love. The love of God revealed to faith in the Father's entire gift of himself in Christ suggests the size of the reply that man and his world may hope to make to the Father through Christ in the Spirit.

There is a dialectic and tension throughout. Christ has died once and for all, putting sin to death. And his resurrected life is communicated in the human history which is his Spirit abroad in the Church and in the world of men through baptism. And yet man sins. And if Christ's death was not for a while to be the end of death, but the creation of the possibility of christian death, yet man does die. He hopes to be with God in a risen life he does not yet have. Man hopes for what he does not wholly have. The last times are here, and are yet to come.¹ Where then is the centre and the focus of the hope man ought to have this day?

Hope has a memory and a dream. It lives from the past and draws on the future for a present task and a work at hand: love. Hope remembers, and this is its faith: the eternity of God and the resurrection of Christ. As simple as that. But as Fr David Stanley notices, New Testament memory is never nostalgic, never harking back to the good old days. The Church's hope is the risen Lord, present even as he strides ahead of us, and yet who is coming soon: *maranatha!*² And this last is the dream of hope, its future: the Lord who is coming very soon. And this dream is as idealistic as the love of all the lovers who ever hoped to be one forever. But the dream of christian hope is not sentimental. Rather it is brutally realistic, creating the future out of the past facts of a very certain faith. Christian hope is a phoenix born of a bloody death and an empty tomb eleven apostles died for. And yet they did not die for a death and an empty grave, but for a resurrected Christ.

And this leads on to love, love which is always of the present, engaged with the One who is, and who is here. Out of the memory and the dream which is its faith, hope structures the content and forges the *élan* of present love. Hope gives love brilliance, and patience, and the heart for suffering. It gives to love love's other name: joy, the possession of hope's own expectations. Hope gives love the truth to be loved in faith.

Man ultimately wants, he is ultimately made for, nothing but love: to love and to be loved, worthily, with fidelity, and forever. This is christian man's hope, for which he can give good account.³

¹ See 1 Cor 15, 19.

² 1 Cor 16, 21; Apoc 22, 20.

³ 1 Pet 3, 15.

His hope is an anchor¹ sunk deep in the ground of Christ's resurrection, and it is also flung into the future of his own resurrection and life that is already present in the Lord who is coming soon, man's own resurrection and life which, in the Spirit, is emphatically here, made present and real in faith. Eternal life is in history. Man's salvation by faith is made present in hope.

And man loves accordingly, *now*. Hope is to act in love *now* according to the full dimensions of easter faith. It is to love my brothers now, to love this world now, and to be loved, now, as they and I shall be, because in faith I know we now are, already risen in Christ, truly lovable and loved, already hidden with Christ in God.² It is only the glory that has yet to be revealed. Hope is to treat my brother, as he appears now, according to what my faith says he shall one day be and, in Christ, already is.

And all this is the eucharist, born of a past made present in faith, pledge of a future hope that is already here as suffering and celebration in the deeds of men who love.

We had sung to us, not so long ago, a song of *Yesterday*, when 'love was such an easy game to play. All my troubles seemed so far away. Now I need a place to hide away. Oh I believe in yesterday'. Here, man believes only the evidence, which is to have no faith at all and no foundation for risk. And the evidence is death, which is the end of hope. For love has died. And the memory of love is memorial only, a locket for our loss. Memory here is not a sacrament, and so there is no eucharist. It is a wise song and realistic, whose hope is at one with its faith. It is the *sperabamus*, the 'we were hoping' of the two disciples whose footsteps are dogged toward Emmaus.³ Man here is being toward death. Love is phosphorescence and hope has no dreams, but only a memory of life, and the evidence of death. It is nostalgia, which in its pure state, however languidly and sentimentally devised, is the inverse of hope, having the structure of despair.

Yesterday. If Christ is not risen, then he is only yesterday. He is not today and forever, and we are still in our sins.⁴ We are men without hope who have no God in the world.⁵ And ultimately there will be no one to love.

But if I believe in Christ's past resurrection from the dead, then he is alive today and forever for me, not just as value or milieu, but

¹ Heb 6, 18-19.

⁴ Heb 13, 8; 1 Cor 15, 17.

² Col 3, 1-4.

⁵ Eph 2, 12.

³ Lk 24, 21.

as Person.[¶] And my hope may summon out of the future which already is in him, the *entire* mystery of Christ. I move toward my own death and my own risen life, and that of my brothers, and of the world too, as coming and as present in him. My hope has seized upon the entire expanse of what faith says history is and shall be – I take the risk of what this history shall turn out to be, in faith that it has occurred in him, and so is available *now* for my response. And so I may love now; even as I serve their weakness, my already risen brothers; I may love now, even as I strenuously build, our already re-created world – risen and re-created now, if hiddenly, in the present if hidden Lord of glory. Hope makes present the whole Christ whom faith makes real, and offers his final beauty to the present service of man's love.