
COMMENTARY - THE VIRTUES TO BE REDISCOVERED AND LIVED/5

HOPE (THE TREASURE ROOM)

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Our civilization faces a scarcity of an important resource, hope. Hope is certainly a virtue, but behind this great word there are many things hiding, some greater and some lesser than the virtue itself. Like any ancient and noble word, hope is like those stratified cities that over the centuries have witnessed many lives and different civilizations. There is, in fact, a **first layer of hope** - which shows instantly because it is very superficial - that is **not a virtue, but an vice**.

It is the hope that Greek mythology places in Pandora's Box (the jar that contained all the spirits of evil) and that, mysteriously and ambiguously, does not escape from it along with the other evils to flood the world, but remains trapped in the vessel. This is the **hope** that St. Paul calls "vain". It is often used by the powerful to invite people to hope for imaginary economic boom and a better future while they do nothing, or too little, to improve the living conditions of the present. This is the hope of winning the lottery or scratch cards. It is also the attitude of those who, when faced with a problem, say: "let's hope for the best," a phrase that concludes something is worth no time or energy (and is without value), which marks the end of that meeting and does not initiate a responsible commitment to find a concrete solution together. This is the **'opium of the people' type of hope**, which often has become and still becomes an **instrument of domination, especially of the poor**, who are victims of illusions created on purpose to keep them in their poverty and misery. This hope is evil because it can cause us to live, or at least survive, without committing to becoming the protagonists of our own happiness, waiting passively for salvation to be delivered by chance, by the gods or by the state. Greek philosophy and then, undoubtedly, **Christianity waged battle against this vain and illusory hope** to free people from malicious and deceitful hopes, and so opened the way for hope that does not bring disappointment. We have to admit that this battle was **ultimately lost** as we look at how many illusions and false hopes our consumer society and TV based culture produce (the data on hours spent in front of the TV - in a time of ever-increasing loneliness - are shocking: we have now returned to the highest levels of the '80s).

If we dig deeper, we find a **second layer of hope**, which is **already more of a real virtue**. It is the spiritual and moral **attitude** that leads one to **find real reasons for hoping that the near future will be better than the present** and to take action so that this hoped-for "not yet" becomes "already". It's **this type of hope that drove past generations** to struggle against the poverty of their present and, even though they were lacking in welfare and rights, to build a better future for their children and grandchildren. It was this hope that made the work of many of our grandfathers and grandmothers bearable, sometimes even pleasing, as they worked almost like slaves in fields and in mines. Behind their struggles and tears they glimpsed future diplomas, degrees, and houses - quite different types of struggles and fields. It is the hope of girlfriends, wives and mothers. Led by it many sharecroppers and artisans became entrepreneurs, not mainly for love nor money, but in search of a better future with dignity and freedom.

But there is also a **third layer of hope** that, once reached, begins to reveal the traits of an ancient city that is very noble and beautiful. This is the hope of those **who have struggled to the extent that they dedicated their lives to building a better future for everyone's children, not only their own**. This hope is civil, social and political, and has moved thousands of workers, trade unionists, politicians, co-operators, citizens, men and many (unfortunately forgotten) women, people who wanted and knew how to spend their lives improving their world. **It is this hope that has moved and still moves the boundaries of all that is human forward**, and it supports all the virtues by refreshing them, giving them courage, meaning and direction. And it is this hope that we have to exercise daily and relive again today; we must do this together to re-enter the world of politics, markets, and companies so that they don't despair for long. We need to increase virtuous acts and exercise hope, which have to be taken out from under the bushel and

shared with each other, amplified by the media, because hope is contagious, even more than discouragement and social despair are.

The discovery of the dimensions of hope, however, does not stop at the third high and noble level. **There is indeed a fourth form of hope** that is found at a great depth and is **different from all the others** because it is no longer contained within the semantic register of the word virtue. **It cannot be reached** (unlike virtue) **through exercise**, discipline or commitment. This hope is, **simply, a gift or granted, charis**. When it appears, it always surprises us and takes our breath away. It is the encounter with the treasure room. This hope can be neither calculated nor anticipated, only waited for and desired; when it arrives it is a great joy, paradise, like the return of a long-awaited friend from far away who, one day, finally and unexpectedly, returns to us. **There is a deep connection between this hope and waiting**. The Portuguese and Spanish languages reveal this about it - there is only one word for hope and wait: *esperar*. And there is perhaps something of this hope in the mysterious finale of the Count of Monte Cristo: *"All human wisdom is contained in these two words: "Wait and Hope."* It is waiting for the groom with your lamps lit with hope. This hope arrives, as every true and great gift, without notice and without asking permission when we run out the usual resources of hope, finding ourselves in circumstances without reason to hope, not even in Paradise. Yet it arrives after the announcement of a serious illness, after a serious betrayal, after endless loneliness and **when you least expect it**; it blossoms delicately in the soul, like a light breeze, so **that you can hope again**, hope and wait in a different way. We feel that **we are given a new chance**, a new reason to hope really that is not for comforting self-deception, because the strength to hope is born in us again, taking us beyond despair. And so having submitted the books in court, after yet another illusory promise of bank credit and the thirtieth failed job interview it still, with eyes still shiny, flourishes deep inside us, hope. **It surprises us and gets us to start the race again and continue the fight**. This hope is not generated by ourselves: it just comes and is therefore a gift. The Christian tradition knew this well and called hope a 'virtue', adding to it the adjective 'theological' to emphasize its dimension of gratuitousness, the surplus with respect to any merit and that it cannot be stolen by any sadness and despair of the present. If this fourth (or n-th) type of hope were not present on earth, life would be unbearable; it becomes such when this hope does not arrive, or you cannot hear it because of the too many noises. Life would be unbearable, especially the lives of the poor. But they, just like Fellini's *Cabiria*, manage to get back on the path, to smile, to dance and to hope again notwithstanding their misfortune. This is the hope that, even today, motivates thousands of workers, entrepreneurs, social workers, politicians and public officials to get back on their feet, *spes contra spem* (hope against hope), and move forward because, every now and then, they experience this type of hope. And so they restart running their and our good race.

Translated by Eszter Kató