

## Bringing Light to the World

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### THE METAPHYSICS OF LIGHT

Of all the things that we are aware of in the physical world, light is the least thing-like! It seems to hover between the physical and spiritual orders of being. We can't touch, smell, taste or hear it, and many have doubted that we can even see it, because it always directs our gaze away from itself towards what it illumines. And this is because it is the necessary condition for us to be able to perceive *everything else* in the world. In this respect we can feel the gesture of light to be entirely selfless. It dedicates itself to illuminating other things, but not only illuminating them, for through its benevolent presence plants grow, birds sing and human beings rejoice. In this benevolent selflessness of light, through which all of creation is gifted with life, we sense an intrinsic moral quality. We can feel that light in its purity conveys to us an experience of unsullied goodness.

According to Plato, such a feeling would be entirely justified. In the *Republic*, he tells us that the light we experience with our senses has its originating source in the inherently luminous principle of goodness, which he calls the Idea of the Good.<sup>1</sup> Just as in Greek mythology, the sun god Helios was the child of a more interior deity named Hyperion, so Plato describes the physical sun as the “child” or “offspring” of the Idea of the Good. In declaring the Idea of the Good to be the spiritual origin and progenitor of light, Plato was pointing to a more profound truth concealed in the images of ancient myth (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup>



*Figure One*  
*The sungod Helios.*  
*2nd century AD mosaic. Archaeological Museum, Sparta.*

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Republic*, VII.517b.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Republic*, VI, 508b-c. According to the Neoplatonic philosopher and emperor, Julian, the sun can be conceived in three ways: first as the transcendent principle of goodness, second as the god Helios, ruler of the “intellectual gods”, and thirdly as the visible sun. See his “Hymn to King Helios” in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*, vol.1, translated by Emily Wilmer Cave Wright (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), §132-133, pp.359-361.

According to Plato, we benefit from the inherent luminosity of the Idea of the Good not just in our experience of physical light, but also when we experience the illuminating power of thought, especially when our thinking activity is deepened to contemplative insight (*noêsis*). Then it enables us to know what is true and to distinguish the true from the false and illusory. It enables us also to perceive the difference between what is right and what is wrong, and again to recognise what is beautiful and how beauty differs from ugliness.<sup>3</sup> In other words, our ability to gain true knowledge, to develop a reliable moral orientation in life and a spiritually refined aesthetic sense, requires that we enter into an inner relationship with this luminous principle of goodness. In Plato's conception, the Idea of the Good is the Spiritual Sun that both inwardly enlightens human consciousness, and is also the originating source of the light we experience outwardly in the sense-world.

In the early centuries of Christian metaphysical reflection, this view of light was widely upheld. A good example can be found in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite (5th to 6th centuries) who said:

*"Light comes from the Good, and light is an image of this archetypal Good. Thus the Good is also praised by the name 'Light', just as an archetype is revealed in its image."*<sup>4</sup>

For Dionysius, the archetype (or spiritual essence) is *revealed in its image*. The image (in Greek, *eikon*) is not to be understood simply as a representation, or as a likeness, but rather as the outermost *expression* of the archetype, which manifests through it. In physical light, therefore, we meet the outermost manifestation of the principle of goodness. This understanding of the status of physical light rests to a large extent on the relationship that was believed to exist between image and archetype. And this understanding continued into the Middle Ages. In Latin the word *imago* does not simply mean a representation of something else, but rather that it shares or participates in the essence of the original.<sup>5</sup>

So, when Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of sense-perceptible light as being an image of spiritual light, we are dealing neither with metaphor nor simile, but rather, with a real connection between these two manifestations of light – outer and inner.<sup>6</sup> For Aquinas, the light of our understanding is just as truly "light" as the light that illuminates physical objects and gives life to plants, for both kinds of light originate from the same source.

It is important for us to grasp the enormous implications of this perspective, for it asks us to stretch our conception of light in an inward direction, and to understand that the light we experience in the sense-perceptible world belongs to the outermost edge of a spectrum of qualitative *degrees* of light.<sup>7</sup> What we experience as belonging to the outer world is therefore inwardly connected to what occurs within human consciousness. And this inner connection consists in the fact that what is illuminated in the sense-perceptible world by physical light receives a second illumination within human consciousness when we grasp the archetypal idea or organising principle that constitutes its essence.

This thought was widely accepted during the medieval period, due as much to the influence of Aristotle as to Plato. In his treatise on physics, Aristotle declared that the path of knowledge lies from that which is more immediately accessible to the senses to that which is *intrinsically more*

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<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Republic*, VII.517b-c.

<sup>4</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *Divine Names*, 4.4, 697c.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1. q.35, a.1: "An image not only resembles its original in species or in something characteristic of its species (shape, for example, in bodily things), but it also *originates from it*." See also *op. cit.*, 1, q.93, a.1: "An image not only resembles, it expresses."

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 8.2, §142: "Sense-perceptible light (*lux*) however is a certain image (*imago*) of spiritual light."

<sup>7</sup> We are considering here a "vertical", and qualitatively differentiated spectrum, in contrast to the electromagnetic spectrum, which is "horizontal", quantitatively determined and therefore measurable.

*luminous*. By this he meant the ideas or forms of the things that we perceive with our senses when we grasp them in thought.<sup>8</sup> Through grasping them in thought we bring to them a second illumination, through our participation in the universal creative light of the divine mind that sustains them in existence. What Plato conceived as the Idea of the Good, Aristotle understood to be a cosmic consciousness – not so much an Idea as the thinking activity of the Divine Mind. It is this that we participate in when we grasp the essences of things with our thinking. And thereby, the object illumined by our thinking achieves a certain completion, by being returned through us to its spiritual principle.

This understanding of how human consciousness imparts to things a second illumination was taken up in the Middle Ages by (amongst others) both Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, who each had a strong awareness of the significance of human knowing for the cosmos.<sup>9</sup> The capacity of human beings to grasp in thought the archetype or spiritual principle of things was understood as being due to a light inherent in the human mind, which derives from the universal light emanating from the Divine Mind. It belongs to the very nature of the human mind that it is able to bring this inherent light of understanding to the world, thereby endowing the world with meaning.

The illuminating power of thought, which enables us to apprehend meaning and to uncover truth, was referred to in the medieval period as the “natural light” (*lumen naturae*) of the mind. It is “natural” because it belongs to us as our birthright, but we nevertheless still have to work at it if we are to refine it into an instrument of knowledge and insight. Depending on how successful we are in this activity of refinement, the natural light of the mind can bring us into a more conscious relationship with the divine source of light.

Beyond the natural light of the mind, a further degree of inner light was also held to be accessible to human experience, and this was referred to as the light of grace (*lumen gratiae*).<sup>10</sup> It does not belong to us as our birthright, in the way that the natural light of the mind does, but it is a gift that is bestowed on us by the spiritual world, and whether we are able to receive it depends greatly on how open our hearts are. By the word “heart” was meant, in the writings of the Church Fathers, something both broader and deeper than personal feeling or sentiment. It is the sacred centre of the human soul. It is where our conscience dwells. It is the Holy of Holies within us, our point of contact with the divine.<sup>11</sup>

So, if we are to be able to work consciously with the light of grace, it is this heart-centre that we need to be grounded in. This requires the cultivation of inner stillness, and the practice of bringing ourselves back to the centre. Only then can we recognise that what flows into us by way of intuition, inspiration and inner prompting is a gift which the conscious mind cannot rightly claim as originating in itself, but issues from a transpersonal source, to which due thanks should be given. In this way we cultivate a dialogue between ourselves and a higher order of reality that lies beyond the boundaries within which we tend to locate the self.

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<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Physics*, I.1.134a,17-21.

<sup>9</sup> For Aquinas, see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1957), p.215. For Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises*, Vol.2, Sermon 56: “All creatures enter my understanding that they may be illumined in me. I alone prepare all creatures for their return to God.”

<sup>10</sup> In Western Christianity, a third degree of light, the light of glory (*lumen gloriae*), was also identified, which is experienced in mystical union with the divine, for which see David L. Whidden, *Christ the Light: The Theology of Light and Illumination in Thomas Aquinas* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), pp.22-34. This further degree of light has not been recognised by the Orthodox Church, and it is not necessary to consider it for the purposes of this essay.

<sup>11</sup> This understanding goes back to the Hebrew conception of the heart as the seat of the soul. See Aelred Squire, *Asking the Fathers* (London: SPCK, 1994), Chapter 14. See also Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979), p.115: “The heart signifies not simply the physical organ in the chest, not simply the emotions and affections, but the spiritual centre of man’s being, the human person as made in God’s image.” This is certainly St. Augustine’s usage of the word in *The Confessions*, 1.1.

Aquinas explains that the meaning of the word “grace” – in Latin *gratia* – is double, for it signifies not only a gift or favour bestowed on us (freely given, or *gratis*) but also our gratitude for it, as for example in the grace of thanksgiving before a meal.<sup>12</sup> These two meanings belong together: it is because we recognise that we have received a gift that we respond with gratitude. And this response of gratitude is a response of the whole heart, embracing intellect, emotions and will.<sup>13</sup>

To live in gratitude and thanksgiving is what enables this interior light of grace to flow more freely into us and through us into the world. In his book, *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer*, the Benedictine monk, Fr. David Steindl-Rast, points out that to live prayerfully, in focussed attentiveness and openness to spirit, is also to live gratefully.<sup>14</sup> And through gratitude and thanksgiving, the light of grace finds a pathway through us into the world.

Cultivating gratitude and living prayerfully are the foundations for opening ourselves to this interior light of grace and, as it were, making a space for it to shine within us and from us. But the degree to which the light of grace is able to find a home within us is also closely aligned with the degree of our Faith, Hope and Love, for we need the light of grace if we are to live by these so-called “theological virtues”, and to the extent that we live by them the light of grace shines in us.<sup>15</sup> The theological virtues might better be referred to as “divine energies”, for they bring us into a deeper relationship with the divine. They should be thought of as transcendent, grace-filled, luminous powers that lift our consciousness above the “merely human” level of functioning, to a much more purposeful and awake mode of being (fig.2).



*Figure Two*  
*Sophia the Martyr with her daughters, Faith, Hope and Love.*  
*16<sup>th</sup> Century Russian icon.*

<sup>12</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 2ae, q.110, a.1.

<sup>13</sup> Fr. David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), pp.14-19.

<sup>14</sup> Steindl-Rast, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Whidden, *op. cit.*, pp.27-29. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke, 1957), p.235.

The theological virtues are resources of inner strength, which Aquinas describes as literally “surpassing human nature”, for through them we are enabled to participate in the divine order of being.<sup>16</sup> We could think of them as empowering us with the possibility of self-transcendence. They allow us – through rising above ourselves – to fulfil our deepest human potential. Each of them are precious gifts, which most of us neglect terribly and scarcely give a thought to, but which – if we work consistently with them – have the power to help us towards standing on firm spiritual ground. The philosopher, Josef Pieper, in his study of the theological virtues, says the following concerning how we should regard them:

*“Theological virtue is an ennobling of man’s nature that entirely surpasses what he ‘can be’ of himself. Theological virtue is the steadfast orientation toward a fulfilment and a beatitude that are not ‘owed’ to natural man. Theological virtue is the utmost degree of a supernatural potentiality for being. This supernatural potentiality for being is grounded in a real, grace-filled participation in the divine nature, which comes to man through Christ.”<sup>17</sup>*

Each of the three theological virtues should be understood as empowering us to transform a fundamental aspect of our soul-life, so it becomes spiritually illumined. And, in being so illumined, it becomes a portal through which the light of grace can stream into the world. For it is the nature of light to shine and spread itself outwards. In the Gospel of Saint Thomas, one of the sayings of Christ declares:

*“There is a light within a man of light, and he lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, there is darkness.”<sup>18</sup>*

In dark times, the three theological virtues can be thought of as three ways of lighting up the world.

## FAITH

In his *Letter to the Hebrews*, Saint Paul defines Faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen”. For Paul, there is no doubt that “what is seen is made out of that which is unseen”.<sup>19</sup> Through Faith we turn towards that which we do not perceive with our senses, intuiting that it is in the non-sensory realm that we must locate the originating cause of what occurs in the sensory realm. This applies in the first place to the phenomena experienced by sense perception, which according to traditional metaphysics are not ultimately caused by other sense-perceptible phenomena but rather arise out of the realm of archetypes, which we cannot perceive with our senses. It also applies to occurrences in life through which invisible forces of karma, destiny and providence are at work. There is, in other words, a spiritual order of being that lies behind, or within, the sensory world, and it is towards this spiritual order of existence that Faith directs our attention.

Faith is often confused with “belief” – belief in a worldview, a political ideology or a religious creed. But the gestures of belief and Faith are quite different from each other. The gesture of belief is one of closing the mind down as it attaches itself to a dogma, whereas the gesture of Faith is a gesture of openness to a realm of being, the existence of which we have an intimation, but which we do not fully comprehend, and which we seek to relate to more closely.

Dante describes Faith as an *intention* (in Italian, *intenza*), by which he means a specific directedness of the mind towards the spiritual. Elaborating on Paul’s definition of Faith as “the

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<sup>16</sup> *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 2ae, q.62, a.1: “These theological virtues surpass the nature of man (*excedunt hominis naturam*)... and thus, after a fashion, man becomes a partaker of the Divine Nature.”

<sup>17</sup> Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), pp.99-100.

<sup>18</sup> *Gospel of Thomas*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> *Hebrews*, 11: 1-3.

substance of things hoped for”, Dante says: “Faith is substance by intention”.<sup>20</sup> In other words, that towards which Faith reaches out is invested with substantive reality, precisely by Faith’s act of reaching out towards it. The unseen takes on more substantive form for us through our Faith. So, through our intention of reaching out towards it, the unmanifest world is able to clothe itself in substantiality. Faith provides the meeting place between the world of spirit and human consciousness directed towards knowledge of that which is inherently imperceptible to the senses.

Does Faith then simply deal in illusions? No, it is rather that different rules apply when we are relating to the world of spirit. The poet, Rumi, tells the following story:

*One night a certain devotee was praying aloud, when Satan appeared to him and said:  
“How long will you cry, ‘O God’? Be quiet, for you will get no answer.”  
The devotee hung his head in silence.*

*After a little while he had a vision of the prophet Khidr, who said to him:  
“Ah, why have you stopped calling on God?”  
“Because the answer ‘Here I am’ did not come” he replied.*

*Khidr said: “God has ordered me to come to you and say this: ‘Was it not I that summoned you to service? Did not I make you busy with my name? Your calling ‘O God!’ was my ‘Here I am’. Your yearning pain was my messenger to you. I was the cause of all those tears and cries and supplications, and I gave them wings.”<sup>21</sup>*

The most striking thing about this story is the paradox that it is just when the devotee’s Faith fails him that the spiritual world responds, and reveals to him the deeper truth of how Faith actually works. God’s message to the devotee is: “Your calling ‘O God!’ was my ‘Here I am’.” This is not to say that the devotee has blindly persisted in pursuing an illusion, but rather that through his persistent efforts the object of his devotion draws ever closer to his consciousness.

The test of Faith always lies within each person’s experience of “holding out” at the very edge of their mind’s capacity to know, and not surrendering to the doubts that can come crowding in to undermine their intention. This is an effort of devotion, which involves not just the mind and will but also the imagination. Faith requires the courage to imagine what we cannot directly perceive. This, too, is part of its substance, for it is by means of the imagination that we orientate ourselves towards the unseen reality of the world of spirit, and it is likewise through the imagination that the unseen can take on form and reveal itself to us.<sup>22</sup>

In his *Letter to the Hebrews*, Paul mentions several Old Testament figures whom he regards as good exemplars of Faith. The underlying quality they share is their unwavering trust in the benevolent presence of the divine. Referring to Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Paul says that “he persevered, as if seeing the one who is invisible”.<sup>23</sup> We are to understand that even though he did not see the one who is invisible, he persevered *as if* he did (fig.2). Again, this might seem like the deliberate cultivation of an illusion, but it is actually pointing to something else that we are called upon to practice in order to anchor ourselves in a greater truth. And this is that we develop an unshakeable trust in our own innate sense of the reality of the spiritual order of existence and the recognition of, as Plato put it, “the messages handed down to us from a divine source”.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Dante, *Paradiso*, 24:75.

<sup>21</sup> Rumi, *Masnavi* 3.1. Adapted from E. H. Whinfield’s translation of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Masnavi I Masnavi* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1898), p.114.

<sup>22</sup> Henri Corbin, ‘*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal’ in *Swedenborg and Esoteric Islam* (West Chester, Pennsylvania: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> *Hebrews*, 11: 27, as translated in *The New American Bible* (Washington DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Plato, *Philebus*, 16c.



*Figure Three*  
*Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt.*  
*13th century manuscript illumination.*

Faith should best be understood as akin to the Platonic *anamnêsis*, or remembrance of a deeper knowledge that *we already possess* because it is lodged in our own spiritual experience, even though it may not be as readily accessible to us as the experience of what is immediately sense-perceptible. According to Rudolf Steiner, Faith is not after all based on our *unknowing* but on our knowing:

*“Knowledge is the only foundation of Faith. ... In our soul we must have what enables us to look towards the super-sensible world, and makes it possible for us to turn all our thoughts and conceptions in that direction.”*<sup>25</sup>

If it were just a surrender to wishful thinking, then it would not be Faith. The foundation of Faith is in the end not our *lack* of knowledge, but rather our recognising that we actually know much more than we dare to admit. Faith might then be characterised as knowledge that is on the way to becoming fully conscious experience.

## HOPE

Just as Faith is not the same as belief, so Hope is not the same as the shapeless optimism that is conveyed by phrases like “being hopeful” that things will turn out for the best. Neither is it the same as the vague wish that we so often express regarding someone else’s wellbeing or about meeting them at some unspecified time in the future. Hope is more accurately described as an

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<sup>25</sup> Rudolf Steiner, “Faith, Love, Hope”. Lecture given on 2nd December, 1911, translated by Violet E. Watkin, *The Golden Blade* (1964), p.9.

active response to the circumstances that confront us, which involves taking positive steps to bring about the change that we long for.<sup>26</sup> True hope is always goal-oriented. It galvanises us to clearly visualise in our imagination what we seek to achieve, and pro-actively to do what we can to bring it about, even if the forces opposing us seem insuperable, and our actions apparently ineffective.

Difficulty of achievement is always part of Hope, for it is the virtue we draw on in times of trouble. According to Aquinas:

*“Hope denotes a movement or a stretching forth of desire towards a good that is difficult to achieve.”*<sup>27</sup>

Hope, then, involves actively defending and sustaining the vision that we want to realise, with the result that we free ourselves from the spell of the negativity and despair that can so easily paralyse us in the face of adversity. In William Blake’s *Jerusalem*, the character Los, who represents the creative imagination, does not give up despite being overshadowed by his “spectre”, or demon of negation. Blake’s tribute to Los is that “He kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble” (fig.3).



*Figure Four*  
*Los, who “kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble”.*  
*William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 95.*

Hope infuses our mood with a defiant positivity, and the strength to overcome our personal sense of disempowerment so that we don’t allow ourselves to be deterred by the difficulties, both inner and outer, that stand between us and the realisation of our most deeply held aims. The more insurmountable these difficulties seem, the more this theological virtue comes into its own. For it is just when we feel trapped, overwhelmed or defeated by the obstacles we are facing, and the seeming impossibility of the situation we are in, that we must summon up Hope. Like Faith, Hope dwells at the threshold where we come up against the limits of our powers, and must call on inner resources that actually lie beyond these limits.

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<sup>26</sup> Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), p.37.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a, 2ae, q.17, a.3 where “a good difficult to achieve” translates *bonum arduum*.



Through Hope, we access a strength of purpose from the transpersonal level, which imbues us with a new energy that raises us above ourselves. Aquinas saw Hope as a turning of the heart towards the spiritual order of existence, just as surrendering to despair is a turning away from it, and for that reason he regarded despair as a sin.<sup>28</sup> Hope is a theological virtue because it opens the heart to the uplifting energies that are sourced in the divine, for Hope affirms that what may be impossible for human beings is nevertheless possible for God, as the angel Gabriel says.<sup>29</sup> If we can open ourselves to receive the help that flows towards us from the spiritual world in the form of inspiration, guidance and enthusiasm, then we can become beacons of Hope, radiating light of encouragement to others.

Like each of the theological virtues, Hope helps to promote us towards the fulfilment of our human potential, which is to live in a more conscious union of companionship with the divine presence within the soul. In so far as we are able to live in Hope, we regain our orientation towards becoming what humanly we should be; whereas in so far as we succumb to the darkness of despair, we lose our connection with the luminous divine source and so drift away from our own foundations.

All religions know of the divine companion who is the inward source of Hope. In the Bhagavad Gita it is the figure of Krishna, in the Sufi tradition it is referred to as “the inner friend of the soul”, in Christianity this inner companion is Christ. Jung discusses the significance of the dawning awareness of this greater figure who dwells within us in his essay *Concerning Rebirth*, where he says this new awareness can be experienced as an inner birth. What is born inwardly is the “hidden immortal” within the mortal human, who is “that other person who we also are and yet can never attain completely”.<sup>30</sup>

This bringing to birth of something new – a new spiritual impulse – is implicit in Hope. On the archetypal level, Hope’s symbolic image is of the mother in labour, giving birth to the spiritual child. Hope may be bestowed upon us as a grace, but – like Faith – it does not come to us without much striving on our part. Essential to the image of the birth of the spiritual child are the forces of opposition that gather to prevent the child from being born. This powerful image can be found in ancient Egyptian esoteric texts, such as *The Book of What is in the Underworld (or Am Duat)*, where the rebirth of the solar principle in the dark Underworld is opposed by the cosmic serpent, Apophis. It is also found in the ancient Greek story of the birth of the solar god Apollo, whose mother Leto is pursued by the serpent Python. In the Christian tradition, *The Book of Revelation* presents the picture of the celestial mother and her solar child, menaced by a seven-headed dragon (fig.2).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a, 2ae, q.20, a.1.

<sup>29</sup> *Gospel of Luke*, 1: 37: “For with God nothing will be impossible.”

<sup>30</sup> C. G. Jung, *Concerning Rebirth*, in *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, CW9.1 (London: Routledge, 1991), paras 217-218 and para 235.

<sup>31</sup> *Revelation*, ch.12. For the birth of Apollo, see H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London: Methuen, 1964), p.115. Commenting on the rebirth of the solar principle in the *Am Duat*, Erik Hornung states: “The rekindling and self-generation of the young light is a moment of great danger. Therefore, we now encounter all the powers of evil that try to bring the course of the sun (and thus the existence of the cosmos) to an end, to prevent any further progress of light...” See Theodor Abt and Erik Hornung, *Knowledge of the Afterlife* (Zurich: Living Human Heritage Publications, 2003), p.90.



*Figure Five*

*The woman clothed with the sun, and her solar child, threatened by the seven-headed dragon.  
The Book of Revelation, Chapter 12. Cloisters Apocalypse, fol.21. 13th century.*

Whenever we face difficulty, opposition and adversity, we should look towards what new spiritual impulse is seeking to be born. This archetypal image of the nature of Hope has been well expressed by Patriarch Athenagoras I of Constantinople in the following words:

*"The world now stands at a moment when all values are being put to the test. Scientific discoveries and advancing technology, space travel, rapid social change, spiritual upheaval... create a confusion never known before. And, in this confusion, we are often tempted to lose heart. But we must not give in to this temptation, even for an instant, or abandon ourselves to despair. The state of the world is that of childbirth, and childbirth is always accompanied by hope. We contemplate the present situation with immense Christian hope and a deep awareness of our responsibility for the kind of world which will emerge from this childbirth." <sup>32</sup>*

Patriarch Athenagoras could have made this statement yesterday, but in fact he spoke these words in 1969. The image of the spiritual child is an eternal image radiating the light of Hope: it conveys to us the need to take up both the labour of bringing to birth, and of protecting and nurturing, the spiritual impulse that brings light in dark times.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Olivier Clement, *On Human Being* (London: New City, 2000), p.107.

## LOVE

Just as we misunderstand the meaning of Faith if we confuse it with dogmatic adherence to a belief in some ideology or creed, and we misunderstand the meaning of Hope if we think of it as nothing more than a vague wish that things will turn out for the best, so we need also to guard against misunderstanding the theological virtue of Love. It should not be confused with feelings of affection or sentimental attachment, or equally with the experience of passionate desire. Love is a much-overused word, and covers a great many different meanings and nuances of meaning. To focus on the theological virtue of Love is not to claim that this is the only “true” meaning of love, as if other forms of love should be disparaged or ignored. It is simply that Love, *as a theological virtue*, has a very specific meaning that we need to be clear about.

When Saint Paul spoke of love, describing its qualities in his famous *Letter to the Corinthians*, (“Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude...” and so on) the word he used was the Greek word, *agapê*.<sup>33</sup> In Latin, *agapê* translates as *caritas*. Unfortunately, this can be another source of misunderstanding, because *caritas* is often translated as “charity”. If by “charity” we understand “giving money to those in need”, then this would be far too narrow an interpretation of the theological virtue of Love. As we saw earlier, theological virtues should be thought of as divine energies that empower us with the possibility of self-transcendence, and allow us – through rising above ourselves – to fulfil our deepest human potential. In Paul’s letter, one feels his description of Love is a description of the perfected human being, who through the empowerment of Love has overcome all tendencies to egotism, and is dedicated to pursuit of the Good:

*“Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, has Faith in all things, has Hope in all things, endures all things.”*<sup>34</sup>

The love of *caritas* is a divinising power, which raises us above the merely human level, promoting us towards the realisation of that potential we bear within ourselves which, as Aquinas says, “surpasses our human nature” and enables us to become “a partaker of the Divine Nature.”<sup>35</sup> One of its most important characteristics is reaching out beyond self-centred attachments, fears and desires in order to bring to another being (human or non-human) the warmth of our attention and understanding. It involves setting aside our sense of separateness from others as we embrace the other as part of ourselves, and likewise see ourselves as part of them. A wise monk has called this expansion of the sense of self the recognition of our “interbeing”, because in reality no being exists in isolation.<sup>36</sup> The concept of interbeing calls on us to acknowledge the complete interdependence of all beings on each other, and to see that our experience of separateness from others is really an illusion.

The gateway to this experience is imaginative sympathy, when our heart opens to another’s suffering, and we feel their pain as if it were our own. Like each of the theological virtues, Love draws on the imagination. If Faith draws on the imagination as a way of orientating ourselves towards the unseen world of spirit, and Hope draws on the imagination to envision conditions quite different from those that surround us in our adversity, then Love draws on imaginative sympathy for another being’s suffering. This precious ability to actively imagine ourselves into another’s experience leads to an awakening of the heart. The sympathetic entering into the suffering of another, and feeling it as if it were one’s own is the compassion (which means literally “suffering with”) that is the bedrock of Love.

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<sup>33</sup> St. Paul, *I Corinthians*, 13: 4-5.

<sup>34</sup> St. Paul, *I Corinthians*, 13: 5-7.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 2ae, q.62, a.1.

<sup>36</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1988), pp.3-5.

It is perhaps the greatest conundrum of all the world's conundrums that Love, which is born out of compassion, arises in us because the world is so steeped in suffering. Oscar Wilde grappled with this conundrum in his essay, *De Profundis*, written when he was in prison, and came to the conclusion that the very meaning of suffering lies in its giving rise to Love:

*“Now it seems to me that Love of some kind is the only possible explanation of the extraordinary amount of suffering that there is in the world. I cannot conceive any other explanation. I am convinced that there is no other, and that if the worlds have indeed, as I have said, been built out of Sorrow, it has been by the hands of Love, because in no other way could the Soul of man for whom the worlds are made reach the full stature of its perfection.”<sup>37</sup>*

Wilde perceived that the full stature of human perfection can only be achieved through a Love based on compassion. Just as Hope arises in the face of seemingly insurmountable difficulty, so Love arises in response to the suffering of the world, for the love of *caritas* springs from the awakened, compassionate heart.

In Latin the word for compassion is *miser cordia*, which means literally “tenderness of heart”. Compassion is a softening of the heart that allows us to identify with another's distress, and to feel a kinship with them that spurs us to do what we can to help them.<sup>38</sup> Whereas the weight of compassion rests in feeling with and for another's distress, Aquinas surprises us in insisting that Love is not a disposition of the feelings but “a disposition of the will.”<sup>39</sup> This is because, as we previously saw, the heart is not just the centre of feeling, but is also the locus of our most interior thoughts and the spring of our deepest resolves.<sup>40</sup> And so, for Aquinas Love is not just something we feel, but is an *activity* we engage in with both understanding and fullness of intent. The encounter of Saint Francis and the leper illustrated in Figure Six, below, beautifully conveys this combination of tenderness, compassion and strong intent in the soul of the saint.



*Figure Six*  
*Saint Francis and the Leper, by Greg Tricker. Tempera and pencil on wood (2004).*

<sup>37</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works* (London: Collins, 1966), p.921.

<sup>38</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God*, IX.5.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a, 2ae, q.24, a.1.

<sup>40</sup> See page 4.

Love is the work of valuing, affirming and devoting ourselves to the interests and wellbeing of others. It is *work*, because it demands constant effort to overcome our own self-centredness and egotism, for which we need to draw on a power that lies beyond the ego. That is when we may experience the reality of the suprapersonal power of grace, for without it we are not likely to get very far.

Through Love, as with the other theological virtues, we have to reach across the threshold of our own limitations towards the transpersonal, spiritual order of existence. In Christian terms, this reaching across the threshold is towards the indwelling “hidden immortal” or Christ, who resides in the innermost sanctuary of the human soul. But where Love differs from Hope is in its awakened consciousness of Christ’s presence not only in ourselves but also in every human being who bears the divine image. And furthermore, Love perceives that every creature with whom we share the planet also harbours the divine presence.

We may therefore think of the theological virtue of Love as a third way that we can bring light to the world. While Plato conceived the source of this light to be the Idea of the Good, and Aristotle as the divine Mind, from the Christian perspective it is the Being of Love, who is the interior sun or “light of the world”, who has also taken up residence within the human heart. “As the sun gives light” says Aquinas, “so is Love instilled and preserved in us by God”.<sup>41</sup> According to Aquinas, this leads to an “enlargement of our hearts”, as the indwelling Christ becomes the standard and model, the source and instigator of our resolves and our deeds.<sup>42</sup>

There is, then, a source of light within us, which we can open our hearts to receive and nurture. Each of the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Love can become a portal through which this light can shine within us and emanate from us, illumining both our own lives and those of other beings, both human and non-human, whose existence we touch. As this essay has drawn greatly on Aquinas’s elucidation of the theological virtues, it seems fitting to conclude by reflecting on a remarkable portrait of him by Benozzo Gozzoli, *The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1471). It shows Aquinas seated in the centre of the picture with Aristotle to one side of him and Plato to the other. At his feet lies Averroës, whose philosophy Aquinas refuted during his lifetime. Above this scene, Christ appears like Helios, within the orb of a cosmic sun, but now surrounded by angels, and with evangelists and saints kneeling before him. What draws our attention most strongly, however, is a second golden sun shining in the region of Aquinas’s heart. The artist, in this way, presents us with an image of Aquinas as the enlightened human being whose heart, having been enlarged by the virtues of Faith, Hope and Love, radiates the divine light of grace into the world (fig.7).

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a, 2ae, q.24, a.12. For Christ as “the light of the world”, see *John*, 8:12: “I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

<sup>42</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a, 2ae, q.24, a.7: “The capacity of the spiritual creature (*creaturae spiritualis*) is increased by *caritas*, because the heart is enlarged (*cor dilatator*) thereby.”



*Figure Seven*  
*Detail of 'The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas', by Benozzo Gozzoli (1471).*

**Illustration Sources**

1. The sun-god Helios. 2nd century AD mosaic. Archaeological Museum, Sparta.
2. 'Sophia the Martyr with three daughters, Faith, Hope and Love'. 16<sup>th</sup> Century Russian icon, Tretyakov's gallery, Wikimedia Commons.
3. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt. 13th century manuscript illumination. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms 5211, reserve, fol 30r.
4. Los, who "kept the Divine Vision in time of trouble". William Blake, Jerusalem, Plate 95.
5. The woman clothed with the sun, and her solar child, threatened by the seven-headed dragon. *The Book of Revelation*, Chapter 12. Cloisters Apocalypse, fol.21. 13th century.
6. Saint Francis and the Leper, by Greg Tricker. Tempera and pencil on wood (2004). Greg Tricker, *Francis of Assisi: Paintings for our Time* (Totnes: Green Books, 2005), p.77.
7. Detail of 'The Triumph of St. Thomas Aquinas', by Benozzo Gozzoli (1471). Tempera on panel. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Wikimedia Commons.

