

The difference between Hope and Optimism

“But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” Rm 8:25

Advent is a season of hope. There is a profound connection between hope and waiting. In fact, in Spanish the two words are the same. The word “esperar” in Spanish may be translated “to hope” or “to wait.” We wait in hope for the coming of the Lord.

True hope is a theological virtue, and it is essential for the life of every Christian. But I think it is important for us to make a distinction between the theological virtue of hope and the human virtue of optimism because they are not the same though they are often confused.

It is nice to be around optimistic people. They are usually joyful and do not let the disappointments of life overwhelm them. The same is true for people who are enriched with the virtue of hope. They are joyful and do not let the disappointments of life overwhelm them. The theological virtue of hope and the human virtue of optimism are different. In many circumstances they may appear the same, but their root and flower are grown in a different soil.

Imagine a person who is experiencing terrible misfortune in their life. They have a terminal illness; they have lost their job; they have no one to help them and there is no evidence that things will get any better, rather, it is certain that things will still get worse. If that person is still optimistic, they are probably suffering from delusion. There may be a psychological disconnect with the outside world and their internal reasoning. We call them pollyannish. Now imagine a second person who is experiencing all the same problems as the first but instead of simply being an optimistic person, they are someone who has the theological virtue of hope. This second person can have optimism but does not suffer from psychological delusion. They are not pollyannish, rather, they understand that true optimism is based on the virtue of hope.

You see optimism and hope are related but only in so far as hope informs optimism to desire those goods which are eternal rather than earthly and material. A person with the virtue of hope knows that everything may end terribly,

but that it won't matter because their hope is not based on the transitional experience of material goods. They can sing with St. Paul in moments of suffering: “All things work for the good for those who love God.” Rom 8:28. This is because their hope is not based in this earthly realm, but in the kingdom.

We are called not just to be optimistic but rather hopeful. The optimistic person and the hopeful person may look the same in normal circumstances but the person with hope has a joy which is much deeper and eternal than the person who merely lives with the human virtue of optimism. This is because hope is a theological virtue. It is infused into our soul as a gift at the moment of baptism - along with other theological virtues of faith and charity. According to the Catechism hope is “the confident expectation of divine blessing and the beatific vision of God” (CCC 2090). The virtue of Hope allows us to believe in the promise of salvation despite my own personal sins. It says, “I believe that God will save me, despite the awareness of my own unworthiness. The two sins against hope are presumption and despair. Presumption ignores God's justice and despair ignores God's mercy.

Presumption is the sin that says, “I don't need to repent. I know that I will make it to heaven even if I don't really care.” It is the sin wherein a person presumes upon his own capacities to be saved or presumes upon God's mercy without true contrition for his sins. It is opposed to the true virtue of Christian Hope.

Despair is the opposite, but also offends against the virtue of hope. The sin of despair says, “I am too horrible, and I can never be saved. What's the use of trying?” This sin denies God's mercy and the infinite power of grace.

True hope, on the other hand, rejoices in weakness. It believes in the power of God and fills the human spirit with a true optimism that produces the fruit of joy.

Holy Spirit as we wait for the coming of Jesus, our Savior, give us the virtue of true Christian hope that we may be joyful in adversity and expectant in our time of waiting.

In Christ,