

2018

# A Hermeneutic of Hope – and Faith and Love: A Thomistic-Liberationist Rule

Ross W. McCullough

George Fox University, [rmccullough@georgefox.edu](mailto:rmccullough@georgefox.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>

Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

McCullough, Ross W., "A Hermeneutic of Hope – and Faith and Love: A Thomistic-Liberationist Rule" (2018). *Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies*. 340.

<https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/340>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Christian Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - College of Christian Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact [arolfe@georgefox.edu](mailto:arolfe@georgefox.edu).

# A Hermeneutic of Hope—and Faith and Love

## A Thomistic-Liberationist Rule

ROSS MCCULLOUGH

Yale University

**ABSTRACT** | The early church bequeathed us two rules for interpreting Scripture: the rule of faith and the rule of love. This paper argues that these should be complemented with a rule of hope. It uses Thomas Aquinas to suggest how a hopeful reading might complement a loving and a faithful reading, and it suggests that we see this sort of reading in contemporary liberation theologians.

**KEYWORDS** | rule of faith, patristic exegesis, hermeneutics, hope, theological virtues, liberation theology, Oscar Romero

The two great rules inherited from the early church for interpreting Scripture are the rule of faith—that interpretation should accord with “the faith preached to men, which comes down to our time by means of the successions of the bishops”<sup>1</sup>—and the rule of love: “whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”<sup>2</sup> As the Second Helvetic Confession says, “We hold that interpretation of the Scripture to be orthodox and genuine which is gleaned from the Scriptures themselves . . . and which agree with the rule of

1. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.2. Translated by Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, from: Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885).

2. Augustine, *De Doctrina*, 1.36.40. Translated by James Shaw, from: Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).

faith and love, and contributes much to the glory of God and man's salvation."<sup>3</sup> What has received less attention is the hermeneutical role of the third theological virtue, hope. As Augustine goes on to say: "these are the three things to which all knowledge and all prophecy are subservient: faith, hope, and love . . . [And if one] is bent upon making all his understanding of Scripture to bear upon these three graces, he may come to the interpretation of these books with an easy mind."<sup>4</sup> Since Augustine himself does not go on to explicate the role of hope in any detail, I want to outline here how it might operate as part of a hermeneutic of the theological virtues—especially, following Thomas Aquinas, its place relative to the other theological virtues and, following some liberation theologians, its renewed salience in contemporary theological hermeneutics. My contention will be that a certain kind of theological conservatism, in its emphasis on the church fathers and scholastics, leads us to expect a prominent role for hope in the interpretation of Scripture, and that we see this role fulfilled in a certain kind of liberal theologian, the kind of liberal who is a kind of liberationist. And one upshot of this contention will be that terms like conservative and liberal are not particularly helpful when talking about this sort of conservation and this sort of liberation.

Why should we expect hope to have a central place in a theological hermeneutic? Briefly, because the interpretation of Scripture is a theological act in the sense that it is a graced participation in the life of God, and as such it should be governed by the virtues that are theological in just this sense—of which hope is one. That is, first, the interpretation of Scripture requires not just our natural hermeneutical capacities but the work of the Holy Spirit in us; second, this work does not simply establish a set of rules for decoding the meaning of specific passages but transforms us into the kind of people who can hear the Spirit speaking in these passages; and third, this transformation involves the infusion of all three of the theological virtues traditionally associated with the indwelling of *the Lord and giver of life*.

I will for the most part take the first two of these points as premises, but the third point is worth some attention. Why is hope considered necessary for enumerating the transformation that the Holy Spirit works in us? Here is Thomas on the difference between faith, hope, and love:

A virtue is said to be theological from having God for the object to which it adheres. Now one may adhere to a thing in two ways: first, for its own sake; secondly, because something else is attained thereby. Accordingly

3. Second Helvetic Confession, ch. 2. From: Arthur Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Westminster Press, 1966).

4. Ibid., I.37.41, 40.44.

charity makes us adhere to God for His own sake, uniting our minds to God by the emotion of love. On the other hand, hope and faith make man adhere to God as to a principle wherefrom certain things accrue to us. Now we derive from God both knowledge of truth and the attainment of perfect goodness. Accordingly faith makes us adhere to God, as the source whence we derive the knowledge of truth, since we believe that what God tells us is true: while hope makes us adhere to God, as the source whence we derive perfect goodness, i.e. in so far as, by hope, we trust to the Divine assistance for obtaining happiness.<sup>5</sup>

Hope is a necessary complement to faith and love, then, because it attains to God under a different aspect. Thomas does not apply his threefold distinction to the reading of Scripture, but its application is fairly straightforward: the virtue of charity disposes us to read Scripture as a means to adhere to God for his own sake; the virtue of faith disposes us to read Scripture as a means to adhere to God as the source of truth; the virtue of hope disposes us to read Scripture as a means to adhere to God as the source of happiness.

This already suggests a question: should not faith alone be the virtue that governs interpretation? After all, interpretation is concerned first with truth and therefore with God as the source of truth, whatever else may follow from that. Even Augustine's hermeneutic of love is interested in right *understanding*, and with building up love only as a measure of right understanding. But this is to mistake Thomas's distinction. The question that divides these virtues is which is for the sake of the other: are we loving God and neighbor in order to understand, that is, for the sake of our own appreciation of the truth; or are we understanding in order to love, with our own appreciation of the truth pursued for the sake of God and neighbor? It is not the case that one of these is bad and the other good—both have their place in the ascending gyre of the Christian life—though of course the latter is more perfect. The first case is one of faith, the second one of love; and as Paul says, love is the greater. This is why it so naturally becomes the focus of Augustine's hermeneutic: to interpret Scripture is in the first place to come to some understanding, but this understanding is not for its own sake so much as it is for the sake of God. But love is not the only virtue, nor does it represent the only way in which our understanding can be ordered. Thus with a hermeneutic of hope, its immediate object is a kind of understanding, but this understanding is for the sake of our happiness. Of course, it is also

5. *Summa Theologica* II-II.17.6c (translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Second and Revised Edition, 1920). The general features of this distinction were shared by the Scotists as well; compare Scotus's account in *Reportatio* 3, d. 26, where hope and love are mapped onto the *affectio commodi* and *affectio iustitiae* respectively.



good to understand for its own sake, and this is why there is a virtue of faith, but that is not the only reason the saints will want to understand things, and in particular it is not the only reason they will want to understand the Scriptures.

A second question, then: how well does Thomas's division map the two patristic rules mentioned above? And especially, is there a need for some additional hermeneutic of hope, or is it already implicit in one or other of these rules? Two things make this difficult to answer: on the one side, what count as the patristic rules are not precisely defined, and the rule of faith in particular receives many different formulations.<sup>6</sup> On the other side, the theological virtues do not operate independently of one another, and love in particular is necessary for the proper working of faith and hope. Thus what is generally meant by the rule of faith is not something that operates without love; it is not a rule of what Thomas would call dead faith but a rule of living faith, of faith formed by charity. The rule of faith looks at the whole of what the church has held to be true in order to understand any given passage; that it is for the sake of understanding the passage is what makes it particularly appropriate to faith. But its examination of the tradition is as much an act of love as an act of study; it as much requires *sentire cum ecclesia* as it requires a sociology; and its *sententiae*, like all acts of the church, are ultimately ordered to God and not just human understanding. So also a rule of hope is not a rule of purely selfish hope, as if we could hope virtuously without loving Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for their own sake. But faith and hope are real virtues because our happiness (and our understanding) is also something worth pursuing, though not of course in the same way or to the same degree as God. To use another famous image from *De Doctrina*, faith and hope are, in a sense, virtues of use whereas love is a virtue of enjoyment: though faith and hope direct us toward God, they do so in a way that directs God back towards our own good. And this is finally only beneficial if our own good is in turn directed back toward, used for, God—that is, it is only beneficial if faith and hope are ultimately governed by, and do not themselves govern, love.

Still, it is true that the twofold love of Augustine's hermeneutic, love of God and love of neighbor, begins to capture something of a hermeneutic of hope, inasmuch as it is concerned with the happiness of the neighbor. But two caveats apply if we are to understand it as an anticipation of a full-fledged hermeneutic of hope: first, the happiness of our neighbor is a matter for the theological virtue of hope because we are considering God as the means to her happiness and not, as Augustine tends to do, because we are considering our neighbor as

6. See, e.g., the various versions collected in August Hahn, G. Ludwig Hahn, and Adolf von Harnack, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der alten Kirche* (Breslau: Morgenstern, 1897), 1–12.

the means to God's glory. This latter Augustinian consideration fits the love of neighbor into charity as opposed to fitting it into hope—which of course is not wrong, and is in fact better, but is not quite the same thing.

Second, the happiness of our neighbor is not the only happiness that matters for the theological virtue of hope, for ours does as well. This is significant as we turn to liberation theology, for part of what emerges when thinking from the place of the poor is the importance of one's own flourishing and one's own rights, the importance of a kind of self-concern in one's interactions with the world.<sup>7</sup> The self-concern here need not be purely individual, it can be a kind of collective concern. But the emphasis is less on overcoming a preoccupation with oneself in order to focus on something beyond the self, as it is with Augustine, than on ensuring that the self, both individual and collective, is being appropriately valued by the world around it. In a sense, the distinction between self and others is de-emphasized in favor of the distinction between our misery and our happiness, our oppression and our liberation. And one consequence of this is that hope, construed in this Thomistic way as concerned with our happiness, will have a more prominent role than it does in Augustine, whose focus on the distinction between self and others leads to a consistent preoccupation with love.

And, indeed, this is what we find. Thus Oscar Romero, in a homily from the thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time (November 18, 1979), calls hope "the key for true liberation." And his definition of hope is almost a restatement of Thomas's, in more biblical language. Romero expresses Thomas's generic terms—we hope *in* God, *for* our happiness—in more robustly Christian language: we hope *in* the liberation of Christ *for* the coming of the kingdom.<sup>8</sup> (Thomas of course would have no issue with identifying "perfect goodness" or happiness with God's kingdom—provided it is clear, as it is with Romero, that this kingdom consists above all in our enjoyment of God and of proximate political and social goods inasmuch as they are ingredients in that—no more than he would dispute that God accomplishes this kingdom through the liberation of Christ.) Similarly, with the vices opposed to hope, Romero sounds a Thomistic note. "There are two forms of reaction: some are passivists who wait for everything to come from God. They are saddened by the situation and cry but they do nothing. On the other hand, others are activists who say: God is far from us and so we will fix things ourselves. As a result of this attitude we find all the manifestations of violence. All forms of activity are undertaken but the presence of God

7. Part of what is in the background here is Valerie Saiving Goldstein's famous article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100–112.

8. "Homily on Thirty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time, November 18, 1979," [http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies/189/189\\_pdf.pdf](http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies/189/189_pdf.pdf).



is never considered.”<sup>9</sup> This might as well be a gloss on the *Summa*: “hope has no mean or extremes, as regards its principal object, since it is impossible to trust too much in the Divine assistance; yet it may have a mean and extremes, as regards those things a man trusts to obtain, in so far as he either presumes above his capability, or despairs of things of which he is capable.”<sup>10</sup>

Of course, this is to say nothing of hope as a specifically hermeneutical virtue. On this point, liberation theologians have tended to emphasize the importance of hope in reading history, and especially reading present circumstances, more than its role in reading Scripture. The Catholics in particular have taken up the call to read the signs of the times. Thus Gustavo Gutierrez: “Liberation theology tries to offer a hermeneutic of hope . . . It is important to discern in historical events what we refuse and what we accept, and it is important to discern the signs of the times.”<sup>11</sup> But as *Gaudium et Spes*, the inspiration for this turn, makes clear, the interpretation of the signs of the times itself proceeds from and with an interpretation of Scripture. “The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them *in the light of the Gospel*.”<sup>12</sup> The point here is not to fall back into debates over correlationism or the relative positions of Christ and culture. The point is only, at its weakest, that if hope is an important hermeneutical virtue in reading the signs of the times, and if reading the signs of the times is in some way bound up with a reading of Scripture, we should expect hope also to be an important hermeneutical virtue for reading Scripture.

The point at its strongest is that Christ in the Gospels does not just give us the phrase “signs of the times,” he also gives us a model for discerning those signs. In particular, he indicates the sort of sign given to his and indeed all time: the sign of Jonah, the destruction of the temple and its raising in three days. This is the sign for an adulterous generation, and have our adulteries ever gone away? If Christ instructed his generation to read their history in the light of that shadow, should we not even more read the shadows of our history in his great light? And if hope is the virtue whose distinguishing concern is the coming of the kingdom, then shouldn’t its distinct hermeneutical role be to discern in all things that which inaugurates the kingdom—the incarnation, and within it especially the death and resurrection, of the Lord? If the weaker point is that hope is hermeneutically relevant given its role in reading the signs of the times, the stronger point is that a hermeneutic of hope is given its content by

9. Ibid.

10. *ST II-II*.17.5ad2.

11. Gustavo Gutierrez, “Hermeneutic of Hope” (Occasional Paper No. 13, The Center for Latin American Studies, Vanderbilt University, 2012), 9.

12. *Gaudium et Spes*, 4, my emphasis.

Christ's reading of the signs of the times. And this content lies above all in discerning the paschal form of events, the way in which the kingdom is breaking into history even or especially in the midst of suffering and injustice, and then enacting that. The goal of hope is the kingdom, and the content of this kingdom must be discerned in Scripture and in history in order to be anticipated in our prayer and our politics and everything else. This is the rule of hope, then: that *that interpretation is to be favored which discloses and enables us to participate in God's establishment of the new creation within the old, of eschatology within history*. I leave it open whether our participations are themselves means to this final establishment or simply signs pointing to its ultimate realization by that act at the end in which God makes all things new. Either way, this rule, like the rules of faith and love, is less a matter of following some algorithm and more a way of being, a capacity to discern and act – in a word, a virtue. And it will be a virtue that bears both on our reading of Scripture and our reading of history. Indeed, the virtue will lie in how well we can read our story within the story of Scripture, to echo Hans Frei's famous concern<sup>13</sup> – or, better, in how well we can write our story within the larger story of Scripture. If Paul Blowers is right that “the Rule [of faith], being a narrative construction, set forth the basic ‘dramatic’ structure of a Christian vision of the world, posing as an hermeneutical frame of reference for the interpretation of Christian Scripture and Christian experience,”<sup>14</sup> then hope here takes the measure of these interpretations not just by how well they fit the larger biblical narrative but by how well they enable us to conform ourselves and our times to that narrative. It thus does not operate without some sense of salvation history established through Scripture; it does not operate without understanding or without faith; but it also does not rest satisfied with mere understanding. It is the practice of resurrection.

In this, in the emphasis on the paschal form of present experience and its importance for action, I am not so much extending liberation theology as articulating its practice. Here for instance is James Cone:

Black religion and its emphasis on hope came into being through black people's encounter with the Crucified and Risen Lord in the context of American slavery. In their encounter with Jesus Christ, black slaves received a “vision from on high” wherein they were given a new knowledge of their personhood, which enabled them to fight for the creation of a world defined by black affirmations. Their hope sprang from the actual

13. *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).

14. Paul Blowers, “The Regula Fidei and the Narrative Character of Early Christian Faith,” *Pro Ecclesia* 6 (1997), 202.



presence of Jesus, breaking into their broken existence, and bestowing upon them a foretaste of God's promised freedom.<sup>15</sup>

Or again, Oscar Romero, with the poignancy of one actually martyred, provides a paradigm of what a hopeful reading looks like:

Therefore, let us listen to these words, for they are the result of accepting the reality of redemption and seeking baptism: Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. The gospel continues: Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there also will my servant be. The Father will honor whoever serves me. These eight words are spoken for us! They are not simply the story of something that occurred twenty centuries ago! This is the Paschal Mystery incarnated in the Body of Christ and we are that Body of Christ today—the community of baptized persons living in 1979! To each one of us Christ is saying: if you want your life and mission to be fruitful like mine, do as I do. Be converted into a seed that lets itself be buried. Let yourself be killed. Do not be afraid. Those who shun suffering will remain alone. No one is more alone than the selfish. But if you give your life out of love for others, as I give mine for all, you will reap a great harvest.<sup>16</sup>

This combination of emphases, on a forward-looking praxis and on the paschal form of history, means that a hermeneutic of hope involves traditional figurative exegesis of all three spiritual senses, but especially the moral. Its readings

15. *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Orbis, 1997), 117. This is also the fundamental point of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (New York, NY: Orbis, 2013), that African-American experience is read through cross and resurrection. I have emphasized the centrality of the paschal mystery here because of its centrality in the New Testament, in the church fathers and Thomas, and in liberation theology; but of course there are liberation theologians who dispute the focus on the cross because it ends up glorifying death and the focus on the resurrection because it ends up calling attention to the cross—notably Dolores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (New York, NY: Orbis, 2013). For responses to Williams that are broadly sympathetic while retaining the centrality of the cross and resurrection, see JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood? The Cross in the African American Experience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005) and Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 247–73.

16. "Homily on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, April 1, 1979," [http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/len\\_to\\_prepare\\_paschal\\_covenant.pdf](http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/len_to_prepare_paschal_covenant.pdf). Cf. also, among many others, "An Assassination That Speaks of Resurrection: Funeral Mass for Fr Octavio Ortiz Luna, Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, January 21, 1979," [http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/an\\_assassination\\_that\\_speaks\\_of\\_resurrection.pdf](http://www.romerotruster.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/an_assassination_that_speaks_of_resurrection.pdf).

will involve the anagogical in finding anticipations of the future in the narrative of the past; they will require the allegorical in reading Christ's death and resurrection as the type of which other events are the shadow; but they will above all consist in the tropological, in taking that type as a plan of action today. Its concern will be the individual and social conditions of living the resurrected life today, not to the exclusion of God but precisely as the constituents of leading a life worthy of the Lord (Col 1:10): a life that is revolutionary by its straightness, that effects change by its fixation, that aims at the end that upends the world (Acts 17:6). The sign of Jonah is not just to be discerned but lived, and it is hope that asks, what great beast has swallowed our prophets, and how do we disgorge them? What great cities must be called from their violence, and what princes brought to fasting and lamentation?

This is, then, as much a rewriting as a reading of the signs of the times. Here the instinct of the liberationist may begin to come apart from the instinct of the liberal, for the emphasis of much that is merely liberal in the places of prestige has been on the normativity of the times, as the emphasis of much that is merely conservative has been on their irrelevance. But that prestigious sort of progressivism is only to beg the question of what in our times is cross and what is resurrection. At its worst, it is to ignore those whom the front edge of the wheel of history is crushing as it turns; it is to assume indeed that the wheel of history is what will bear our chariots into heaven. But it is fire that assumes Elijah, and it is fire that consumes history, for it is fire that lights the wheels of the throne of the Ancient of days, and that he casts upon the earth.

Neither future nor past escapes that judgment; even Thomas's writings can be held in no higher regard than the straw he saw them in the end to be. But they have this virtue, that they point neither to what is merely future nor to what is merely past but to the past that is to come, to the future that we remember. Indeed they in some manner instantiate what they point to, and in this they are matched by the writings of someone like Oscar Romero and surpassed by his life, and death, and life again. If I began suggesting a dissatisfaction with terms like "liberal" and "conservative," this is at least a part of its ground, that the whole sweep of history—future, present, and past—is kindled with that fire that will someday consume by consummating it. We anticipate this consummation now, we enact it in history, and this because it has already been anticipated and enacted—and if our fires do not themselves come together into that final conflagration, they at least light the way.

It is not just coincidence, then, that we see a continuity between the figures we would conserve and the figures by which we would be liberated. This continuity is itself a product of God's work in history, and in particular, it is a product of that hope that God works in us, by which we repeat in our times the signs of his Son. That is to say, hope is not just one of many *loci* where this continuity

can be evinced but is the virtue by which this continuity is effected, by which the sign of Jonah keeps showing up as the sign of our times. To talk of liberals and conservatives is to court all the dangers of imprecision and all the dangers of misinterpretation and all the dangers of re-inscription that cause the wary to avoid the terms in writing and (less successfully) in thought. But I advert to them here, if only as theological instincts and not theological schools, because it is precisely the activity of hope that troubles them as Christian categories. The form of this paper, moving from the promise of Thomas to the fulfillment of certain liberationists, has suggested that such categories would prove inadequate on the subject of hope, and its matter suggests finally that hope is itself the reason they are inadequate. For it is hope that effects the folding of history back onto itself and above all back onto that moment when it was for a short time more than itself; it is hope that aims at the realization of that state named exodus, conquest, nationhood, kingdom, restoration, resurrection, new creation, depending on where in salvation history one is reading, and where one is living; it is hope whose hermeneutic reads the ribs of the whale that surrounds us, and recalls the words of the Psalms that sustain us, to exclaim: "the waters closed in over me, the deep was round about me . . . yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God."<sup>17</sup>

17. Jonah 2:5–6, RSV.