

November 4, 1984

I suppose it is natural for us to experience a rather sober cast of mind this morning, in spite of the glorious, sunny weather. It has not been easy to read the newspapers this week, with their having brought word of the cruel assassination of yet one more head of state, of the discovery of the body of a Polish priest in a reservoir, and of the opinion polls indicating the drift of public sentiment here in the United States.

All this brings to mind the virtues of faith, hope, and love which are commended to us in Scripture. It is interesting to reflect that as used in scripture the words faith, hope, and love have a somewhat different meaning than that with which we are apt to employ them in daily life.

In ordinary circumstances, when we speak of having faith in someone or something, we usually mean that on the basis of past behavior the person or institution has proven themselves to be reliable, and so we have faith in them on the basis of this experience. However, Scripture commends to us a faith in things which are unproven and unknown. Similarly, in ordinary life, when we speak of hope, we usually mean that a rational assessment of the probabilities in a situation allows us to believe that an outcome will be something to our liking. But in Scripture we are exhorted to hope in spite of all appearances which would lead the strictly rational mind to despair. After all, to be hopeful because the prognosis of things looks good is not to exercise a virtue at all, but simply to have the easiest and most commonplace of human reactions. It is similar with love. In ordinary life, we think of loving people or things because of the natural delight they bring to us, whereas in Scripture, we are asked to love what is not naturally lovable, like our enemies.

How do we find the capacity to practice the Scriptural kind of faith, hope, and love?

I was recently reading about a Father Alfred Delp, a Jesuit who was executed by the Nazi's. Before his death, while in chains and in prison, he wrote a series of reflections about the human condition which exude affirmation and hope. How could he do this while awaiting execution at one of the darkest hours in human history? Father Delp himself acknowledges that this spirit which he felt was not something he could stir up in himself out of his own human effort; it came from somewhere else, it was a gift.

We do know that this gift is more apt to come upon those who attend, in daily life, to those things which affirm the truth of first and last things, no matter what their circumstances. If we are in prison and in chains we can reflect, and possibly write. This gift is also apt to come to those who are silent within themselves, and whose silence has the quality of listening. Despair and anger are not the characteristics of such people of action and of silence. The meek, the humble, the afflicted, the ones famished for justice, the merciful, the clean of heart, and the peacemakers—all those of whom the beatitudes speak—are the ones who find it possible to hope against hope, and, in the words of First Corinthians, to "bear everything, believe everything, hope for everything, endure everything."