

Holy Fear

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*“Brothers and sisters! Do not be afraid to welcome Christ and to accept his power!”*¹

--John Paul II, Homily at the first mass of his pontificate, October 22, 1978.

Introduction: “Do Not Be Afraid!”

The reflections on fear in this essay were occasioned by a recurring theme in John Paul II’s pontificate from its very inception: “Do not be afraid!” Given the prominence and frequency of this call in his preaching and teaching, one might reasonably wonder why John Paul II singled out fear as a moral or spiritual obstacle significant enough to deserve so much attention. While we might agree with him that there is good reason to think fear can be an obstacle to holy living, should we also think, upon hearing John Paul II’s call *not* to be afraid, that Christian holiness involves a life free from fear? Or could there also be such a thing as holy fear? Given the many sorts of fear we could imagine, to which type of fear does his command refer?

On first glance, it might be easy to see fear as something wholly negative, especially since it is an uncomfortable and painful emotion. My own work on the seven capital vices readily confirms fear’s bad reputation.² According to the Christian tradition going back at least to Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.), the seven vices are rooted in the sin of pride—our natural bent to usurp God’s position and power. Further investigation reveals, however, that part of what drives us to grasp after that power, what lures us into these corruptions of human character, and what makes them so insidious, is a deep-seated fear and sense of vulnerability. To find fear beneath so much of our sin is, perhaps, a

surprising discovery. We might have expected sheer cold-hearted selfishness to fuel vices like envy and wrath and greed. Likewise, we might have expected excessive self-love to be at the bottom of vices like gluttony and lust. Although these factors are *part* of the equation when it comes to explaining these vices, recognizing the additional role of fear in the phenomenology makes them seem that much more human, even as it seems to increase our susceptibility to them.

Fear can certainly play a disruptive role in the moral life. That is why, for example, great ethical thinkers like Plato and Aristotle devoted so much attention to the moral virtue of courage and its necessary role in a good human life. But neither of them thought moral goodness required us not to be afraid at all. Rather, the courageous person, in Aristotle's words, "stands firm against the right things and fears the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time, and is correspondingly confident...for the brave person's actions and feelings accord with what something is worth, and follow what reason prescribes."³ That is, to have the virtue of courage is to have one's fears listen to reason, rather than to let fear hold sway.⁴

John Paul II would surely want us to be courageous—his own experience of living under Communist rule is a testimony to the importance of that virtue. But the fears regulated by the virtue of courage do not yet capture the sort of fear about which he was most concerned. His admonitions not to be afraid in fact call us to freedom from another type of fear altogether, a type hinted at in traditional portraits of the seven capital vices. Our examination here of what we are and ought to be afraid will show that we can only obey John Paul II's call *not* to be afraid if we have the right sort of fear—what I will refer to as "holy fear."

Thus, in this essay I will contend that there is something called holy fear. To explain how this type of fear expresses love for God, I need to distinguish fear's holy form from its unholy ones, as well as from the type of fear regulated by the virtue of courage. I will rely on the work of Thomas Aquinas to define holy and unholy fear and explain the relation of each to love and power. Our analysis of holy and unholy fear will enable us to understand the moral significance of John Paul II's call to not be afraid. Moreover, our account of holy fear will show how this theme of John Paul II's pontificate is inextricably linked to the other great theme of his teaching, that of love as a gift of oneself.

A First Look at Fear: Aquinas on the Irascible Passions

Aquinas first discusses fear as a passion or emotion of the irascible appetite. An appetite is a power of the human soul to be moved by something good that we apprehend. There are two sensory appetites: the irascible and the concupiscible. The irascible appetite, specifically, is our power to respond to obstacles, difficulties, and pain when they stand in the way of our attaining something good. According to Aquinas, the irascible passions—or responses of the irascible appetite—include fear, daring, anger, hope, and despair. These five emotions all presuppose a world in which the things we want and need are threatened or blocked, or in which trying to acquire and hold onto good things involves struggle, hardship, and pain. Aquinas thus says the irascible passions have a “complex object.” They are attitudes not toward good or evil simply, but rather evil-as-it-complicates-our-pursuit-of-the-good. This means we cannot understand fear unless we hold both the evil obstacle *and* the good it threatens together in mind.

Moreover, the irascible passions concern an uncertain future—future goods that we may fail to attain, future evils which loom ominously, or goods that we presently have but whose future possession is not secure. Given both the difficulty and uncertainty involved in their objects, then, this set of emotions taps into the deepest realms of human discomfort and anxiety.⁵

How one responds to difficulty or evil depends on what that evil is, of course, but it also depends on one's character. Aquinas, like Aristotle, thus assigns various virtues to direct and perfect the irascible passions. The virtues direct and perfect the expression of these passions in ways that help us to flourish fully as human beings. While Aquinas admits that the passions can interfere with moral goodness and human flourishing when they are not regulated, he nevertheless affirms that a healthy dose of passion is both a good and a natural thing for human beings.⁶ Our emotions can sharpen or warp our vision of the good, and they can aid or hinder our ability to reach it. Thus they are an important part of the moral life in their own right.

But Aquinas also extends his Aristotelian psychology of the passions to another appetite Aristotle did not recognize—the will or “rational appetite.” As appetite, the will is a power of the soul which responds to a good or evil object, but, as a rational appetite, its object is some good or evil apprehended by reason. This extends its range beyond individual, physical things apprehended by sense to include spiritual objects and general goods. So while the sensory appetite can incline us toward the savory food on the dinner plate now set before us, the will can incline one toward the good of friendship or the pleasure of understanding. Aquinas's moral psychology must include the inclinations and movements of the rational appetite, since he takes God—a spiritual good—to be the

ultimate end of human life. If the will is oriented toward the wrong good as its end, the rest of the moral life becomes distorted as well.

We find one example of Aquinas's extension of a sensory passion to the will in his account of sadness, in which feeling oppressed by a physical evil—for example, pain or injury—becomes, by way of analogy, “sorrow” in the will. Sorrow applies when the will's inclinations and power of movement are dampened by an evil only the reason can apprehend—for example, betrayal by a trusted friend. As we will see in a moment, Aquinas will do the same for fear, for,

to whatever the irascible and concupiscible power can be moved, the will also can be moved and to many other things as well...; and therefore all the movements that are in the irascible and the concupiscible power with passion, such as love, joy, hope, and the like, can be in the will, but without passion.⁷

Locating a type of fearful reaction in the will of course only heightens the applicability of moral appraisal and the need for virtue.

Of the five irascible passions, Aquinas treats hope and despair as a pair, and likewise, fear and daring. I'm going to discuss both pairs because in them we find a pattern that will be important to understanding the moral significance of fear.

First, then, hope and despair. Both hope and despair start with desire, a term which Aquinas contrasts with “delight” or “joy” to indicate a good which is wanted but not yet possessed. Possession of it is thus a future good; desire is yearning that is forward-looking.⁸ Unlike simple desires for something pleasant and good, like a nap or a warm shower, the passion of hope is what we have when what we desire becomes hard to get. A warm shower is usually easy to get. An article of publishable quality, on the other hand, may be an object of hope. Writing a good paper requires mental work and

intellectual difficulty, work that is made even more difficult by external obstacles or difficulties—for example, if one is battling a severe head cold, or if one is a parent of small children who interrupt one’s sleep on a regular basis.⁹ Fulfilling the desire to publish articles of excellent quality is, in this example, not easy to achieve. We should also note that researching and writing while physically exhausted or during an illness are not things anyone would choose for their own sake. We choose to endure these difficulties and evils, in Aquinas’s words, “only for the sake of obtaining the end.”¹⁰ Hope has both these obstacles and the good in its sights. Hope reaches out for an object which is good, but the attainment of which is arduous, hence Aquinas’s name for its object: “an arduous and future good, difficult but possible to obtain.”¹¹

Whether we respond with hope or despair turns on just how arduous we think attaining that good is. If the good we seek seems possible to get, even with great effort and struggle, then we feel hope. We are motivated to undertake the struggle, or to struggle on, because the good is within reach. We feel despair, on the other hand, when the difficulty seems too great to overcome, and the good, therefore, does not seem attainable. This is why having the energy to take on difficulties is a sign of hope, while resignation and inactivity are characteristic of those who despair. There is no point to making an effort if the project is doomed or the desired end is impossible. The balance tilts from despair to hope based on our perception of possibility and the power we have at our disposal.

Aquinas notes that hope can come in two forms—a sense of possibility based on our own skill or power, and a sense of possibility based on the knowledge that we have help from others who are able to do what we cannot do on our own. His concept of hope

does not therefore make a moral virtue of autonomous independence or an individualistic sense of power. The resources one has, or believes one has—everything from finances to friends—will often make a great deal of difference when it comes to fostering or maintaining one’s hope.

In *ST IaIIae.40.2*, he distinguishes two senses of hope, based on these two sources of power available to us:

A thing may be possible in two ways, namely by one’s own power, or by another’s. Accordingly when one hopes to obtain something by one’s own power, one is not said to wait for it, but simply to hope for it. Properly speaking, one is said to await that which one hopes to get by another’s help as though to await (*expectare*) implied keeping one’s eyes on another (*ex alio spectare*)... Therefore this movement of hope is sometimes called expectation.

Aquinas means to include divine help in the category of “another’s help,” as he makes clear in *ST IIaIIae.17.1* on the theological virtue of hope: “Now a thing is possible for us in two ways: First, by ourselves, and secondly, by means of others, as stated in *EN* iii. Therefore, insofar as we hope for anything as being possible to us by means of the divine assistance, our hope attains God himself, on Whose help it leans.” Thus, the form of hope that relies on the power of another finds its highest expression in the theological virtue of hope, in which we rely on the assistance of God to reach our ultimate end.¹²

While hope and despair have an arduous future *good* as their object, fear and daring focus on an *evil* that is difficult to withstand or overcome.¹³ Fear and daring are, roughly, our “fight or flight” responses.¹⁴ Their object, as irascible passions, is complex: both passions are prompted by an evil that we believe threatens some good we have and care about. As with hope and despair, the key difference between fear and daring is the agent’s sense of possibility. “Daring is aroused by things that make us think victory is

possible,” according to Aquinas.¹⁵ Daring causes us to fight against whatever is threatening us because we believe we can get rid of it or hold it off; as our desire to fight off or attack the evil in question, it depends on this judgment.¹⁶ Fear, on the other hand, makes us run, because we judge that whatever we face is something we cannot handle. In Aquinas’s words, “Fear regards a future evil that surpasses the power of one that fears, so that it is irresistible.”¹⁷ Daring makes us want to fight because we think we can win, then, while fear instinctively inspires flight to cut our losses. Again, our calculations of possibility are key. Is it in our power to escape, ward off the danger, or conquer the difficulty? Aquinas notes that here as with hope, judgments about power and possibility can also include the help of others. Which evils we judge possible to overcome often depends on how many allies and resources we can mobilize in our defense.

Aquinas also notes that the accuracy of our judgments and calculations can be an important factor in determining our fearfulness. In regards to both hope and daring, he mentions (but does not endorse!) drunkenness as a way to increase one’s inclination to face problems and difficulties. Thus, an excess of the passions of hope and daring in the face of real danger may signal a moral flaw—even the vices of presumption and rashness¹⁸—instead of a virtue: “Hope abounds in young people and drunkards,” he argues, because “through inexperience of obstacles and of their own shortcomings, [young people] easily count a thing as possible,” while drunkenness makes one “heedless of all dangers and shortcomings.”¹⁹ Our grasp of the difficulty or evil that threatens, our knowledge of ourselves and the depths and limits of our resources, and our conviction about the value of the good we strive to achieve or protect, will all be crucial to handling fear and daring well. Part of our power to deal with difficulty therefore lies in the power

of good judgment. In Aquinas's accounts of the moral life, a supernatural or theological perspective in these areas will make a crucial difference to our calculations of possibility.

Fear, Vulnerability, and Power

In his discussion of the irascible passions, it is striking that Aquinas spends *four* questions analyzing fear—far more than any others (for example, he treats hope and daring together in a single question).²⁰ One of the four cardinal virtues—courage—also primarily concerns the passion of fear.²¹ And when Aquinas treats the virtue of hope, the gift of the Holy Spirit associated with it is the “gift of fear,” a subject Aquinas spends no less than twelve articles discussing, devoting as much space to fear as to the entire discussion of hope.²² Why the preoccupation with fear? Do we as human beings have a serious problem with fear? And if so, what is at the root of it? We must either be afraid of things we don't need to be afraid of, or we must be too afraid, because the command—as John Paul II repeatedly reminded us—is “*Don't be.*”

The most morally salient feature of Aquinas's analysis of fear is that it expresses our vulnerability. We are afraid because the evil or difficulty we see coming has the power to harm us, and we are not confident of our power to handle it or ward it off. What makes fear fear is that the evil we see threatening “is [something] difficult or arduous, *as to be almost unavoidable.*”²³ And “fear regards a future evil that surpasses the power of one that fears, so that it is irresistible.”²⁴ The constant refrain in the questions on fear is that “[F]ear is of an evil *that is not in our power*” to avoid or ward off.²⁵

What *are* we afraid of? Our fears most likely arise when we feel powerless. Our fears track our vulnerabilities. We always feel better when we can *do something* about a

problem, or deal with a threat on our own terms. This is often part of why those with terminal illnesses find the option of suicide more appealing than the endurance of unpredictable suffering for an uncertain duration. Even more than the evil itself that we face, then, fear brings us face to face with our own inability to control what comes our way. Death, of course, is the limit case.

Herein lies the link with the vices I mentioned earlier. Each vice manifests the way we instinctively compensate for perceived vulnerabilities with an attempt to take control. When we are afraid we won't get what we need, or worry that we won't have enough, it makes sense to spend our energy on constant acquisition, pursuing abundance in order to achieve self-sufficiency—and this is the vice of avarice. When we are afraid that justice will not be done or we won't get our just deserts unless we personally take charge of doling out vengeance in the way *we* see fit—then the vice of wrath takes hold. When we are afraid that we will not be accepted by others, that we won't fit in or live up to others' expectations, and thus do our best to hide behind a falsely inflated reputation—this is vainglory. When we are afraid we are not worth anything unless we are better than others, and we are afraid we can't compete with them, so we engineer their downfall—this is envy. When we are afraid we will always feel empty and needy, so we overfill ourselves with pleasures we can supply for ourselves—this is gluttony. When we are afraid we are unlovable, so we use people to gratify ourselves without ever giving ourselves in return—this is lust. When we are afraid of the effort loving others will cost us, so we hold everyone, even God, at arm's length in indifference—this is sloth.

If fear lies beneath the surface of each of the capital vices, then we can begin to see the significance of John Paul II's emphasis on it. N. T. Wright put the point this way:

“[W]e eat, sleep, and breathe fear. We emerge from the warmth of the womb into the cold of the cosmos, and we’re afraid of being alone, of being unloved, of being abandoned. We mix with other children, other teenagers, other young adults, and we’re afraid of looking stupid, of being left behind in some race that we all seem to be automatically entered for. We contemplate jobs, and we’re afraid that we mightn’t get the one we really want and that if we get it we mightn’t be able to do it properly. We contemplate marriage, and we’re afraid both that we might never find the right person and that if we do marry it may turn out to be a disaster...And these are just the big ones. ...So you see why this command, ‘Don’t be afraid,’ is one of the hardest of all to keep....Can you imagine living without fear?”²⁶

There is a deep sense of vulnerability in the human psyche that can easily be twisted into many forms of sin and moral failure. In Robert Adams’s words,

Why don’t I want to hear God if he is telling me to follow [a given] course of action? Quite possibly because I am afraid. Perhaps the course of action is one that would risk offending people whom I fear to offend....[W]hy am I afraid [of that]? Don’t I believe that God will bless my obedience if I sincerely try to do his will? Don’t I believe that he can bring greater good out of any disasters that befall me? Don’t I believe that there is greater happiness to be found in venturing for God than in playing it safe for myself?²⁷

Acknowledging the significant role of fear in the moral life, however, still leaves us to sort out fear’s ambiguous character. What makes some fears symptoms of vice and other symptoms of virtue?

All fear is characterized by shrinking back from the possible loss of some good. Because fear has a complex object, we can’t understand it unless we also know something about the good threatened. When we analyze the vices, we find that there are at least two ways of going wrong in our love of the good. First, we can inordinately love certain good things. In Augustinian terms, this is a sort of idolatry—that is, replacing God’s role in our fulfillment with some temporal good, and using that good to manufacture happiness for ourselves. Because they involve trying to fill an infinite desire

with a finite good, this set of vices typically takes the form of excess. In gluttony, for example, an absorption with present pleasure drowns out concern for one's bodily and spiritual wellbeing, not to mention real communion with others. While eating and being filled are genuine goods and genuinely pleasurable, gluttony's mistake is to love these goods too much, at the expense of other, greater goods.

Secondly, however, we can inordinately love ourselves and the control we have over acquiring and holding onto what we think is good. We cling to these goods, not just because we love them excessively, but also because they represent our hopes of providing and maintaining happiness *for ourselves, on our own terms*.²⁸ If they are things within our power to get for ourselves, then we have control over our own fulfillment. This second description will be our focus here, because it captures the link between the seven capital vices, the fear that lies behind them, and pride.

What fears do these vices reveal? Ostensibly, many different ones—fear of want, fear of dishonor, fear of loneliness, fear of not being loved. But behind them all, perhaps, a single fear. The lack of control—the feeling of powerlessness—that itself scares us. All seven capital vices are rooted in pride, according to the Christian tradition. And what is pride but a desire to be God—to have his power, and all the possibilities of designing and implementing our own conception of happiness for ourselves? Pride thrives on power—at least *assumed* power, our *own* power. Aquinas says that whatever is entirely subject to our own will and power cannot be an object of fear (*ST IaIIae.42.3*).²⁹ To be like God—who is all-powerful—can thus be our attempt to be free of fear altogether. What better antidote than pride, then, to fear's sense of powerlessness and to the fear of powerlessness itself?

The main trouble with our overcompensatory grasping for control is that a life in which all is safely under our control is a life that is not open to receiving gifts, to stumbling across unanticipated joys, to the surprising peace that comes only with letting go. Adams describes our “lust for control” this way: “I would like to be able to plan my life and have it go according to plan. Or if I want to have some room in my life for the unplanned, the spontaneous and surprising, I would like the spontaneity to be my own caprice, and the surprises of the sort that please me.”³⁰ But what we miss most of all in our grasping for power is the gift of love. It must be received—the love of another cannot be forced, molded to our will, shaped by our own agenda—it must be accepted and welcomed as a gift. The more fear drives us to seek refuge in prideful control, the more it closes us off to love, the only thing that can really bring us joy.

The other difficulty with this strategy is that it is doomed to fail. Disappointingly, taking matters into our own hands and extending the range of our control tends to make things worse, not better. As Boethius famously argued in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, our fears and anxieties are ratcheted up a notch when we insist on taking ultimate responsibility and relying on our own power alone. As afraid as we are of letting God have control of things, we might find ourselves even more anxious with our own hands on the steering wheel, with the power to make or break our own attainment of the good.³¹ It takes a good dose of self-delusion to make a life devoted to fixing our own problems and meeting our own needs feel really satisfying. If we choose the way of vice, then, we have to live in fear of the truth, which can shatter our carefully crafted illusions and the life we have built upon them.

The Gift of Fear

For all the temptations to pride fear reveals and expresses, however, I want to argue that fear is not always a bad thing. It is a reaction to evil, and often a healthy, even holy, one. What *should* we be afraid of? What sort of fear *should* we have?

Both what we do fear and what we should fear reveal our conception of the good. “Fear is born of love, for we fear the loss of what we love.”³² Aquinas quotes this line from Augustine repeatedly every time he discusses fear.³³ We fear because we love. We are vulnerable to threats, and pain, and difficulty, because we care about something good that is threatened. The loss is counted a loss because we love something and it pains us to see it ruined or taken away. The more some good feels like our own, the more fear we must face when it becomes vulnerable to loss.

When Aquinas discusses the virtue of hope, he links it to a gift of the Holy Spirit called “the gift of fear.” His general discussion of fear as a response to loss of goods of any sort now narrows to cases in which fear “makes us turn...to God or away from God.”³⁴ This is the context in which he explains the distinction between holy and unholy fear. Aquinas here distinguishes three types of fear, on the basis of the good which is both loved and threatened in each case.

The first type—“worldly fear”—is the sort of fear felt when we base our happiness in the finite goods of this life and some evil threatens us with their loss.³⁵ Our undue attachment to worldly things as if they were ultimate—this disordered love—is the root of worldly fear.³⁶ As our look at the capital vices above showed, when we give certain temporal goods God’s place as the source of happiness, fear of their loss can

dominate our lives. Take money, for example. It may be prudent to invest for retirement, but to stake one's security and happiness on one's stock performances betrays the very motto printed on our currency, "In God we trust." If our loves are ordered thus, our fears may hold us back from trying a new, less lucrative career path on God's leading. They may even lead us to hard-hearted hoarding in the face of others' great need. In short, worldly fears turn us away from love of God and love of others. Or, to take another example, we may stake our happiness on our own physical health and beauty, going to great lengths to keep up appearances with exercise, dieting, and cosmetic enhancements. But if this is happiness, then our fear of aging, born of our vanity, will drive us to spend billions on the cosmetic industry while neglecting adequate health care for the aged.

Worldly fear, as Augustine famously argued, is a sign that we have invested eternal hope in the ephemeral. Thus, these hopes will always be disappointed, and our anxieties and fears will never be put to rest, because temporal things are *always* vulnerable to loss.³⁷ As Aquinas notes, this type of fear is always a sign of disordered love, usually one that cuts us off from relationship with God altogether.

By contrast, the other two types of fear—"servile fear" and "filial fear"—apply within the context of a possible relationship to God. As Aquinas puts it, both servile and filial fear involve a fear of evil that can "turn [us] to God" so that we "adhere to him."³⁸ Distinguishing these last two types is crucial to understanding fear's relationship to both love and power, and marking a subtler difference between holy and unholy fear.

Servile fear, first of all, has as its primary focus a relationship of power. Its name is meant to invoke the image of a master-servant relationship. In servile fear, we fear God's power to punish us when we do something to offend him. Just as hope regards as

good both the object we want to attain and the person who has the power to help us get it, servile fear applies to the evil of punishment and the person (God) who has the power to inflict it. Servile fear, strictly speaking, applies when “the punishment is feared as the greatest evil, which is the case with one who is devoid of charity.”³⁹ A similar fear can also serve as a propaedeutic to a right relationship, as when we initially obey God out of fear of being punished, but as a result of many obedient acts, gradually acquire good habits and come to know and love God. In this case, the threat of punishment, while still feared, is not feared as the ultimate evil. Instead, it turns us toward obedience and a relationship with God, and therefore can be consistent with charity, which loves God as the greatest good.⁴⁰ In this latter case, Aquinas is reluctant to call it “servile fear” proper, but rather fear of punishment or even “initial fear,” an imperfect form of filial fear.⁴¹ The key feature of servile fear for our purposes is the motivation to avoid the evil of punishment inflicted by a God more powerful than we are.

In filial fear, however, the relationship is primarily characterized as one of love between two persons. In this case, we do not so much fear the punishment due our offense but rather the offense’s damage or diminishment of the relationship to one we love. Even if we are still assured of God’s love and forgiveness, our sin offends him and damages the communion between us. Fear of this damage Aquinas names “filial fear” after the parent-child bond, which he takes to be primarily a relationship of love. Filial fear marks the love relationship between God and his children that Aquinas calls charity.⁴² The parent is certainly more powerful than the child, but the child’s relationship to the parent is founded on love and affection, not fear of the imposition of punishment. The child is not therefore primarily responding to an external threat from

someone more powerful than she is, as with servile fear. Rather, her filial fear arises from an internal inclination to love that binds two people together.⁴³ Her love for God is freely given [and “natural”—charity makes us like-natured to God via HS], in stark contrast to servile fear’s external compulsion. The one with filial fear shrinks from anything that she could do that would undermine the love between herself and her beloved parent. While they can both motivate obedience, then, servile fear thus involves wanting to maintain a safe distance from God, in virtue of his power to punish, while filial fear results from not wanting to do anything that would distance oneself from him.

Both fears involve facing a threat to something loved. Both arise because we are invested deeply in something and we see the damage or loss of that good as a threatening evil. But what we fear, what sorts of evils we are willing to endure, and why we are afraid are very different in each case. Servile fear loves and seeks to protect the self. Grounded in a recognition and respect of the difference of power between the two parties, it is characterized by a self-protective stance.⁴⁴ Servile fear seeks above all its own good; self-love is its ultimate motivation.⁴⁵ Filial fear, on the other hand, loves and seeks above all else to protect the relationship; this is why charity, or friendship with God, is essential to it.⁴⁶ Because it is grounded in a freely given love that brings two people together, it is characterized by an openness to the claims of the other. The good to be protected is one that both parties share—the relationship of love itself.

Holy Fear and Self-Giving Love

It is not, then, a moral requirement that we never experience fear. Love that tracks the true good will yield the right sort of fear and the right degree of fear. This rootedness in well-ordered love makes fear a virtuous and holy emotion.

We can see fear operating on several levels in the treatise on courage, where Aquinas defends martyrdom as an exemplary act of this virtue. The martyr's act of endurance shows how a courageous person must stand firm against her fear of bodily pain or death. In her act of courage, the martyr endures death in order to remain loyal to the truth of faith.⁴⁷ Her endurance of death by itself cannot be the whole story about courage, for Aquinas says that there is nothing about enduring suffering or death that is choiceworthy or virtuous in itself. Thus it is essential that the martyr's love for God and the loyalty her love inspires is the end for the sake of which she endures bodily persecution and death. She prefers the preservation of her relationship with God to the preservation of her own life. In this her love is rightly ordered: the intensity of her love for God, the greatest good, enables her to endure the loss of the good of her own life.

One fear the courageous martyr must face, therefore, operates at the level of the irascible passions: she must stand firm against her fear of losing the good of her own bodily well-being and even her life. Aquinas calls death the greatest of all temporal evils on the grounds that life is necessary for enjoying all other temporal goods. The martyr's natural and healthy fear of losing this great good, however, must be overcome or withstood. Fear functions at this first level as an obstacle to a morally good act; hence, she needs courage to follow reason's judgment about the good in spite of her fear. Her love of her own life would become disordered or selfish if it trumped the love of greater

goods—including her love for God, the requirements of fidelity to him, and her own spiritual and eternal well-being.

On another level, however, the martyr is also motivated by filial fear, for she is unwilling to endure the separation from God that would come with the sin of denying the faith. This fear is not one that she must stand firm against or overcome, but rather one that aids her act of courage and expresses her greatest love. In this case, her love for God makes her fear damage to her relationship with him more than anything else. Her filial fear aligns with her greatest love, in contrast to the case of the irascible passion, above, where fear operates as a potential obstacle to attaining the good. Aquinas says, “There are certain things, viz. sinful deeds, which no fear [—even a natural fear of death—] should drive us to do.”⁴⁸ The martyr’s filial fear prompts her to avoid sin over death because the former and not the latter will estrange her from the God she loves. What the martyr sees, through the eyes of love, is that the greatest good at stake is the preservation of her relationship with God, and this she rightly desires above all else. Her holy fear makes her shrink from anything that would interfere with that good.

At all levels of Aquinas’s moral psychology, then, fear is a sign of love. If one never cares about anything or anyone, one will never feel threatened or fearful about the loss of those goods. Aquinas thus calls love the disposing cause of fear and the martyr’s act “proof of the greatest charity.”⁴⁹ Both courage and holy fear manifest an unwillingness to let anything interfere with attainment of the good. Thus both are grounded in rightly ordered love. But while in cases of courageous acts, fear poses a threat to the good and must be held in check, in holy fear, the greatness of one’s fear *increases* in proportion to one’s love.⁵⁰ At the first level, great love for God overcomes

great fear; at the second level, the greater our love for God, the greater fear that love inspires.

We are more familiar with the type of fear encountered in acts of courage. As difficult as the martyr's sacrifice is, there is something reassuring about this and other acts of courage. The martyr's inner strength, born of love and empowered by grace, is able to resist capitulating in the face of multiple threats. Why? Because if love for God is one's greatest love, then one has as one's ally and friend the most powerful defender of the good. What the martyr shows us is that, empowered by the promise of divine assistance and ultimate victory, love can conquer fear. Love for God gives us power and possibility beyond our own imagining, even in the face of the worst sort of fear. Great love can conquer great fear. Love is power.

Holy fear, on the other hand, is both less familiar and less reassuring. For love also insists on making us vulnerable. In fact, there's an important sense in which love exposes us to *greater* vulnerability. This is the other side of understanding love as a disposing cause of fear. And this is the theme we consistently find in John Paul II's teachings about fear: "Do not be afraid to meet Jesus...Do not be afraid to open your hearts to Christ...Do not be afraid to welcome Christ and accept his power...Do not be afraid of this love that places clear demands on people...Do not be afraid of what he may ask of you...Do not be afraid of life...Do not be afraid to set out on new paths of total self-giving."⁵¹ The curious thing here is that he makes it sound like embracing God's love for us is what we're really afraid of. How can *that* be?

In a previous article on the vice of sloth, I have argued that this vice is not about laziness, but about resistance to the demands of opening ourselves to the transforming

power of God's love.⁵² We want the comfort of being God's own, but are reluctant to give up our old familiar habits and loves and risk being changed into the people that God wants us to be. One is reminded of Augustine's struggle with lust: "[Lord,] I prayed to you for chastity and said, 'Grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.' I was afraid you might hear my prayer quickly, and that you might too rapidly heal me of the disease of lust which I preferred to satisfy than suppress."⁵³ Or as Adams puts it, "The fears that are obstacles to my [trusting God] are not only fears of being let down by God; there are also fears of the frustration of my sinful desires. Perhaps to some extent I do not want to trust God because I sense that that threatens some idolatry that I have been cherishing."⁵⁴

I believe our slothful tendency to hold love's demands at arm's length is often rooted in fear—fear of the sinful loves that we have to give up—and it is *this* unholy fear that the Pope has his sights on. Our fear of letting God recreate us is rooted in our love of our old sinful natures, with all of their comfortable familiarity. From this perspective, loving God wholeheartedly and letting his power change us could be a terrifying prospect, a major risk. The slothful person takes seriously the great hymn text, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all," and refuses to accept the demands of a love that requires, in John Paul II's words, "a total gift of oneself."⁵⁵

The surrender required by this love, whether it requires bodily surrender—as in the martyr's case—or a surrender of the heart and will, brings us back to the love of control discussed earlier. We are afraid to let God have control over our lives, and it is fear of losing power over ourselves and our happiness that lies behind our clinging to our sinful nature and its practices. Who can imagine what love of God will require us to give up? Adams suggests that "the lust for control" is chief among the motives behind our

lack of trust in God, and “the supreme threat to our control...is God himself.”⁵⁶ To accept the power of God’s love means giving up our own claims to power, however weak and illusory they in fact are. Paradoxically, to claim the power of love requires vulnerability and the willingness to relinquish power over our own lives.

Even more than facing an external threat, then, confronting this internal threat is how unholy fear, rooted in a unholy love of self, presents itself as a moral obstacle. Overcoming our fear of dying to self is the spiritual analogue of the martyr’s act. It stands in contrast to the holy fear that would risk anything rather than face separation from God and his love. In fact, the martyr’s act of giving up her bodily life is a sign of a deeper surrender of self. Adams enables us to draw a connection between the two levels of the martyr’s act:

God demands of us the greatest trust, the acceptance of the most complete dependence. In death [God] confronts each of us with a total loss of control over own destiny...But in relying not on ourselves, ‘but on God who raises the dead’ (II Corinthians 1:9), St. Paul and many other Christians testify that they have experienced [God’s] love and power in a way that they would not give up in exchange for control over their own destiny.⁵⁷

The martyr has not only surrendered her bodily life, but is willing to give herself completely to God—to give him full control over herself and her good.

And so we return again to the link between pride and fear. Pride is an inordinate love of self, asserted against a wholehearted love and submission to God. In his *Disputed Questions on Evil*, Aquinas thus describes the “gift of [holy] fear [as] the contrary of pride.”⁵⁸ If love means self-surrender, self-giving, self-sacrifice, then pride will clearly prompt fear of it. Aquinas initially defined fear as withdrawal from threats to ourselves and our good. Fear is designed to serve self-preservation. Self-preservation and self-

protection are certainly good things, rightly desired. But when it is a sinful self we are protecting from the transforming power of God's love, our very instincts to self-preservation are the real threat. Our prideful fear of giving ourselves wholly to God and our unholy self-love must be replaced by holy fear and the full, free gift of ourselves to God in love.

Conclusion

As evil and threatening as the world may be, therefore, we may find that the greatest threat and our greatest vulnerability lie within. What are we more afraid of—offending God, or giving up control of our own lives? Losing God's love, or relinquishing our attachment to our own dearly loved sinful self? This is the challenge John Paul II set before us: "Do not be afraid, then, when love makes demands. Do not be afraid of what [God] may ask of you." We're very comfortable with the thought that God will rescue us from evil and difficulty with his great power, that he can help us overcome our fear. It's ironic that his love for us can cause even greater fear than his power can assuage. The very love and holy fear that is the antidote to fear of any external threat is the love that perhaps we fear most. Choosing self-giving love over self-protecting pride brings its own risks—the threat of having to die to self—the sort of martyrdom to which all are called. Only holy fear can face this sort of death.

Whatever the obstacles, evils, or difficulties we face, and the responses of fear they trigger, the moral difference will be made, ultimately, by what love we place at the center of things, and whether we love God enough to trust him with everything—even ourselves. When we face more than we can handle, when the odds are overwhelming,

when difficulty and pain undermine our fragile hold, then our sense of possibility has to be larger than ourselves and our own power. But the gifts of God’s power and love require the relinquishment of our own desires for control and the free gift of ourselves in return. Accepting God’s love and power will require letting go of worldly and prideful fears—fears of being lauded and loved by those with the wrong kind of power, fears of not fitting in or not being successful or happy on our own terms, fear of surrendering control over our own life, fears of not being everything that *we* wanted to be. A total gift of ourselves in love will require, instead, nothing less than holy fear. John Paul II’s great challenge—“Do not be afraid!”—is, then, really a command to love God, if we dare.

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¹The quotation is from Pope John Paul II’s homily at inaugural mass of his pontificate, section 5. The original text is in Italian: “*Fratelli e Sorelle! Non abbiate paura di accogliere Cristo e di accettare la sua potestà! Aiutate il Papa e tutti quanti vogliono servire Cristo e, con la potestà di Cristo, servire l’uomo e l’umanità intera! Non abbiate paura! Aprite, anzi, spalancate le porte a Cristo!*” “Brothers and sisters! Do not be afraid to welcome Christ and to accept his power! Help the Pope and all those willing to serve Christ, and with the power of Christ, to serve man and all of humanity! Be not afraid! Open wide the doors to Christ!” My thanks to Robert C. Miner for the translation. I would also like to express my gratitude to my colleagues in the Calvin College philosophy department, and especially Terence Cuneo, for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

² The seven capital vices are also commonly (but less accurately) referred to as the seven deadly sins.

³ *EN* iii.7, 1115b15-20 (trans. Irwin, 2nd edition [Hackett, 1999]).

⁴ See my “Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 (2003), pp. 147-180.

⁵ Anger’s object is a present evil, seen in light of the future possibility of vindication. Later in the paper it will become clear that “holy fear” applies only to the present life, when the complete and final attainment of God is not yet realized. Fear also applies when some good one has can be lost—in these cases, its possession in the future (and the security we take in that assurance) is the good that is uncertain and/or not yet attained.

⁶ He thus takes the Aristotelian position against the Stoics; see, for example, *ST* IaIIae.24.2.

⁷ *Q. D. de Malo* VIII.3.resp.

⁸ *ST* IaIIae.40.1. Socrates, in his conversation with Agathon, makes this point in Plato’s *Symposium*. Desire is for a good which we lack and want to possess. He also argues that when we do possess some good we can still desire it, for our desire is to have the good as our own “forever”, and we still lack—in the present—the future possession of this good (Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff [Hackett 1979], 199D-200E, 206A).

⁹ The evil in question can either be intrinsic to the activity or good sought, or accidental to it.

¹⁰ *ST* IaIIae.25.3.ad 3.

¹¹ *ST* IaIIae.40.1.

¹² *ST IIaIIae.17.1.*

¹³ Hope has the difficulty in hand, but wants to strive for the good which is still far off. Fear has the good in hand, but desires to keep some evil that threatens it far off. Both are therefore defined by their ends.

¹⁴ Another phenomenon that does not fit neatly into these two categories is paralyzing fear—the state in which one wants to flee but is unable to respond at all. This sort of emotional withdrawal might, with some further explanation, be subsumed under “flight.” However, since that argument would take us too far afield from the present discussion, I will leave aside here.

¹⁵ *ST IaIIae.45.3.*

¹⁶ One might wonder what distinguishes hope and daring from optimism. Although I cannot argue for it here, a Thomistic reply would be optimism is a matter of natural temperament, while daring and hope can be both passions (momentary) and habits (deliberately cultivated by habituation). That said, it may be easier for an optimistic person than a pessimistic person to develop the right habits of judgment and feeling that constitute the virtue of hope. My own sense is that ordinary language often blurs the distinction between optimism and hope as a virtue. This reply is Thomistic, rather than Aquinas’s own, because his own account of the virtues includes on the theological (and therefore infused) virtue of hope (*ST IIaIIae.17*), and *not* an acquired form of the virtue, unless one counts magnanimity (*ST IIaIIae.129*)—and I have argued elsewhere that this virtue also appears to require grace (“Aquinas’s Virtues of Acknowledged Dependence: A New Measure of Greatness,” *Faith and Philosophy* 21:2, April 2004).

¹⁷ *ST IaIIae.41.4.*

¹⁸ According to *ST IIaIIa.127*, recklessness is an excess of daring, and thus opposed to fortitude, while *ST IIaIIae.130* and 21 name as presumption an excessive estimation of what is in our own power or in God’s power, in contrast to the virtue of magnanimity and the theological virtue of hope, respectively. Aquinas does not question God’s omnipotence in Q.21, but rather notes that it is a mistake to assume that God will forgive us even when we are unrepentant of our sin—this is to presume on his mercy without taking account of his justice.

¹⁹ *ST IaIIae.40.6* and 45.3.ad 1.

²⁰ Aquinas treats hope and despair together in *ST IaIIae.40*, fear in QQ.41-43, daring in Q.45, and anger in QQ.46-48).

²¹ See *ST IIaIIae.123.6.*

²² He treats the virtue of hope in a total of twelve articles (*ST IIaIIae.17-18*), and the gift of fear in another twelve (*ST IIaIIae.19*).

²³ *ST IaIIae.41.2*; my emphasis.

²⁴ *ST IaIIae.41.4.*

²⁵ *ST IaIIae.42.3* ad 3; my emphasis.

²⁶ N. T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (SPCK 1994), pp. 67-68. Wright also notes here that fear is the most frequent command given in Scripture.

²⁷ Robert Adams, “The Virtue of Faith,” *Faith and Philosophy* (1:1, Jan 1984), pp. 9-10.

²⁸ See S. MacDonald, “Petit Larceny, the Beginning of All Sin: Augustine’s Theft of the Pears,” *Faith and Philosophy* 20:4 (October 2003), p. 108, for an Augustinian articulation of this point.

²⁹ If we take “entirely subject” strictly here, then only God could be free from all fear, for from a point of view that acknowledges creation and providence, there is nothing that is completely subject to human control. Aquinas’s own comment comes, notably, in the context of the *prima secundae*, in which he is discussing the role of human agency in the moral life (see *ST IaIIae*, prol.—human acts as subject to our own power), not the *prima pars*, where God’s acts of creation and governance are explicitly under consideration.

³⁰ For a similar point, see “The Virtue of Faith,” pp. 11.

³¹ *Consolation of Philosophy*, Book III.Prose 5.

³² *ST IIaIIae.19.3.* Love is a disposing cause, not a cause *simpliciter*, because fear arises only under conditions when something we love is under threat.

³³ There is some theologically disputed territory here, perhaps even between Augustine and Aquinas, on whether our love of God—the ultimate and perfect good—disposes to fear. Augustine argues that our love of God, unlike our love of our friends, is protected from loss and grief (*Confessions* IV). The inference can be drawn that our relationship with God is a good that, once possessed, cannot be lost. Aquinas thinks that our relationship with God (in the form of charity) is a good that can be lost in this life through mortal sin. However, even those who do not admit the possibility of mortal sin can understand “loss” in terms of a

threat of damage to or loss of closeness within the relationship, even if total loss of the relationship itself is not possible. Aquinas would frame this secondary kind of loss or damage in terms of venial sin.

³⁴ *ST IIaIIae.19.2.*

³⁵ This idea is implicit, for example, in Augustine's critique of the philosophers' views of happiness in *City of God*, Book XIX.

³⁶ The wrong kind of fear "arises from worldly love as an evil root" (*ST IaIIae.19.3*).

³⁷ *City of God* XIX.

³⁸ *ST IIaIIae.19.2.*

³⁹ *ST IIaIIae.19.4.*

⁴⁰ *ST IIaIIae.19.4.* This distinction parallels the effects of an Aristotelian civil education, in which the sanctions of the law are meant to supplement parental power to enforce conformity to virtue in action. The hoped for end is that habituation in acts of virtue (initially motivated by fear of punishment) will eventuate in the formation of moral character in the one subject to power and punishment such that that one will reflectively endorse the intrinsic worth of those actions, now doing them from virtue as the virtuous person would do them, rather than just doing them with external conformity. As Aristotle notes, however, sometimes this works, and sometimes it doesn't. In the latter case, the citizen remains motivated to act in conformity to virtue only out of fear of punishment. See M. Burnyeat, "Aristotle on Learning to be Good" (in A.O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* [University of California Press, 1980], pp. 69-92), and *EN.10.9.*

⁴¹ *ST IIaIIae.19.2 ad 4, 19.8.*

⁴² Aquinas himself uses the parent-child analogy to describe filial fear: "it becomes a child to fear offending its father" (*ST IIaIIae.19.2*).

⁴³ *ST IIaIIae.19.4.*

⁴⁴ *ST IIaIIae.19.2 ad 3.*

⁴⁵ *ST IIaIIae.19.6.*

⁴⁶ God is loved for his own sake in charity, although love of oneself is also included in charity, since by charity one loves all that God loves, including oneself—see *ST IIaIIae.19.6* and *ST IIaIIae.25.4* and 12.

⁴⁷ *ST IIaIIae.124.5.*

⁴⁸ *ST IIaIIae.19.3.ad 3.*

⁴⁹ *ST IaIIae.43.1; ST IIaIIae.124.3.*

⁵⁰ *ST IIaIIae.19.10.*

⁵¹ Address to the Catholic youth at Bern, Switzerland, June 5, 2004; Homily on John Paul II's visit to Cuba, January 23, 1998; Homily on the 25th Anniversary of John Paul II's election to the pontificate, October 16, 1993; Apostolic Letter *Dilecti Amici*, March 31, 1985; Address to youth in Auckland, New Zealand, November 22, 1986; Address to French and Roman youth, March 20, 1997; Third World Meeting with Families, October 14, 2000; World Youth Day XIX, April 1, 2004.

⁵² "Resistance to the Demands of Love: Aquinas on the Vice of *Acedia*," *Thomist* 68:2 (April 2004).

⁵³ *Confessions* VIII.vii, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford, 1991).

⁵⁴ "The Virtue of Faith," p. 11.

⁵⁵ Isaac Watts, 1701. As far as I am aware, the "gift of self" is first discussed at length (primarily in the context of sexual love) in Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility* (Ignatius, 1981), pp. 95-100. 249-255, but like the challenge to "Be not afraid!" it is a recurring theme in his teachings as Pope as well.

⁵⁶ "The Virtue of Faith," p. 11-12.

⁵⁷ "The Virtue of Faith," p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Q.D. de Malo* VIII.3.