

# The virtue of the faith in *De Sacramentis christiane fidei* by Hugh of Saint Victor<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

I'm greatly honored to be here and to speak about this subject: the *virtus* of the faith in *De Sacramentis christiane fidei* by Hugh of Saint Victor.

To start with I'd like to give you, in a short introduction, the index of my work which is divided into three main parts (1-3).

The first one is an overall research on the use of the concept of virtue and the possible relevance of the triad of faith, love and hope within the theology of Hugh.

I'd like to point out here that the main object of the study is *De Sacramentis* although we sometimes refer to other works by Hugh, which allow us a more adequate comprehension of his thought.

Here, from the very beginning, I'd like to put forward my thesis openly: faith as a *virtus* is not a key framework concept of *De Sacramentis*, nonetheless we can say that to Hugh it is very important that faith is connected with virtues and, above all, that faith has a *virtus*. In other words, it is able to move man's life from inside and to activate the dynamics of his life.

In the second passage we focus on the theology of faith in *De Sacramentis* specifically on the sacrament of faith. This study will be developed through two steps.

First, we'll present the theology of faith inside the overall theological structure of *De Sacramentis*. This is necessary in order to fully understand this theological structure and grasp the general meaning of the theology of faith.

Secondly we'll analyze the theme of faith directly. We should underline five aspects of Hugh's theology of faith, but this would take up too long. For this reason I'll try to say something about the comprehension of the faith as a spiritual experience and, above all, about the faith as a sacrament

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with its own *virtus*.

Finally we'll produce some conclusions underlining the possible utility – not only theological - of some of Hugh's intuitions for our time.

Now, given the complexity of the subject, here I will only try to highlight some of the main aspects which in this context I believe might be of some interest to you.

## **1. The concept of virtue and the use of the Saint Paul's triad of faith, hope and love**

What can we say about the use of the category of virtue in *De Sacramentis* and in general inside Hugh's thought?

As far as my studies have brought me I think that the reflection about the virtues in Hugh is significant and spread throughout his works and does not involve one only way to deal with them.

Reading the *De Sacramentis* you can perceive how virtue and its quest are positioned in many strategic points: in chapter six of book one Hugh presents the classical description of man created in God's image: *imago* is related to the knowledge of truth, whereas *similitudo* refers to the love of virtues. In the general prologue of this work Hugh uses the same structure to describe both the relation between the various meanings of the Bible and the true restoration of man.

In the work there is a whole section where he describes his general theory of the virtue and a moral section where he deals with *De vitiis et virtutibus*. In other texts he studies the relationship among faith, love and the branching of virtues. Sometimes virtues are presented in connections with faith.

In *De Sacramentis* and other works there are countless passages where Hugh illustrates his theological and spiritual teaching on love as the root of all virtues, on the importance of *ordo amoris*, and the close interaction between love and faith. Also in a recent book 'Preaching the Memory of Virtue and Vice. Memory, images and preaching in the late middle ages' Kymberly Rivers has underlined some aspects of Hugh's reflection on memory connected to virtues and vices.

As far as the presence of the triad of faith, hope, love is concerned, there

are at least two specific references in *De Sacramentis* worth mentioning: a more personal one, and another one regarding the Church. We can not linger on a more specific analysis, but we can state that the idea of theological virtues – as it is being meant in the course of the twelfth and in the thirteenth centuries – involves Hugh's reflection in *De Sacramentis* only in part, even if in his previous work *De Arca Noe* we can notice a more meaningful presence.

Needless to say, Hugh's thought is set within a long term theological process that will lead to an outstanding use of the idea of three theological virtues and to the development of treatises on *De virtutibus et vitiis*. However in Hugh's vision this idea doesn't seem to be used in a such a way as to structure his theology of faith.

In this case we believe that Poirel's and Illich's interpretations about Hugh's writing and teaching are particularly true. Writing and teaching for Hugh are not simply meant to report a self contained thought. They have a heuristic function, they are a meditation in progress. Hugh never stops working on the same theme in different times and contexts. We can then understand how his thought is carried out through different steps, and so, in this case, it is not fully organic and systematic.

After this necessary and only introductory survey on the presence of virtues and the triad in *De Sacramentis* we will shift to the reflection on the theology of faith, that, unlike the previous one, can boast a higher level of explicit organization.

## **2. The theology of faith in De Sacramentis**

Faith is described in chapter ten of book one; it belongs to the fundamental structures of *opus restaurationis*. As we said before, this reflection is developed in two steps.

Before studying the presentation of faith and its *virtus* in *De Sacramentis* it is better to question the relationship between the section about faith and the theological frame of *De Sacramentis*. Needless to say, an influential scholar like Stephan Ernst has suggested this approach in *Gewißheit des Glaubens. Der Glaubentraktat Hugos von St. Viktor als Zugang zu einer theologischen Systematik*: the theology of faith of Hugh cannot be grasped

without being set in the overall structure of his masterpiece, and vice versa *De Sacramentis* can be better understood if we appreciate Hugh's approach to the practice of believing.

What's the reason for this structural link?

Well, on the one hand we have the frame of *De Sacramentis* with its presentation of the two *opera Dei*: *opus conditionis* and *opus restaurationis*. In other words, the history of creation and the history of man's redemption.

On the other hand we have the faith that, according to Hugh, is the way to live one's own being creature and to welcome salvation. Both *opus conditionis* and *opus restaurationis* are a kind of appeal to man who will answer in faith.

Not only that. Creation and above all redemption are dotted with sacraments. For Hugh this complex category is fundamental. In *De Sacramentis* we can see an unprecedented effort to unify the sacred doctrine around the category of sacrament. His way of reading the Bible helps him to organize his attempt to build up a *compendium* and a *summa* of Christian faith. He wants to give a guide to those who address themselves to the allegorical reading after the historical approach. Hugh doesn't want to leave the reader without *intentio* or direction in approaching both the Bible and the Christian faith.

In this way he carries out a double task: he sets the incarnation as the central event of the whole sacred history told by the Bible and of the Christian faith: *ipsum est quasi sacramentum sacramentorum*.

From the beginning to the end the sacraments characterize God's works and are a constant feature of the whole history, in each of the three different times: the time of natural law, the time of written law, and the time of grace. The history of *opus restaurationis* is in a way the history of sacraments, which are the concrete accomplishment of God's medical care.

In this frame it is remarkable that the faith itself is set among the sacraments of *opus restaurationis*. As a matter of fact, Hugh holds that three are the necessary remedies to salvation: faith, the sacraments – acts with a salvific meaning and effect –, and good deeds or in other words love.

Faith belongs to what God creator and savior has devised for man's salvation and it is a sacrament just in its being practice of believing on

man's behalf.

*Opus restaurationis* is not meant as a simple item, but as a gift and a promise bound from the origin to raise man's free commitment to love and faith.

Recently Neuheuser has held that the perspective fully developed in *De Sacramentis* is already present in *Didascalicon*: faith is the adequate access point to the holy Scripture and to the sacraments and these three are closely interwoven.

Now we may wonder: what is Hugh's theology of faith and what is the strength - in the sense of *virtus* - of faith?

It is obviously almost impossible to step into Hugh's refined analysis, which deals with the following contents: the relationship between *manifestatio Dei* and faith, his proposal of a definition of faith based, ultimately, on his spiritual teaching and experience, the study of the fundamental components of believing - *cognitio* and *affectus* -, a survey on their growth and development in the individual history and in the history of the Church, a presentation of the essential Christian contents of faith and of the problem of unity of faith itself along the history of salvation *ab Adam usque ad finem*.

In this context it seems to us that the description of faith as a sacrament is meaningful. Hugh deals with *sacramentum fidei* on the basis of an interpretation of 1 Cor 13, 12, where the faith corresponds to the reflected image in a mirror, while the direct vision of what is reflected in the mirror corresponds to the immediate vision of contemplation (12). Hugh, who often understands man and the practice of believing through the sight, uses Paul's quotation to show that the sacrament of faith lets the sinner start off a path of restoration leading to the vision of God. (13)

The sacrament of faith is a remedy to the *aversio* typical of the sin: the practice of believing ties up the personal relationship with God again and slowly heals the man who averted from God's face.

As every sacrament, faith consists of a visible aspect and an invisible one, and it lets the believer see an image which is not God's invisible face, yet. However, between the visible image and the invisible *res* there is a *similitudo*; consequently man begins to grasp something of the true God in faith. The knowledge of faith is not just an allusion to God, but a

sacramental relationship with God as he is truly.

At this stage Hugh wonders: how does the sacrament of faith act? In other words, how can *virtus* of the faith restore knowledge and love?

The writer answers such questions by deepening the link between *imago* and *res*, by reading the *sacramentum fidei* through the categories of *sacramentum* – which is visible – and the category of *res et virtus sacramenti* – which is invisible -. This analysis is carried out thanks to an interpretation of the words *speculum* and *aenigma* in 1 Cor 13, 12. Hugh reads *per speculum* as a reference to man's heart, underlining that faith purifies the mirror of the heart where the visible image of the sacrament lies. Therefore, the very image – which is the visible aspect of the sacrament - consists in the practice of the faith in man's heart.

On the other hand the *aenigma* is the Bible, with reference to its *obscura significatio*. In this perspective the Bible is set within man's experiences: daily does the holy scripture follow the believer's life. Advancing in Christian life leads to a better grasping of the mysteries of the Holy Scripture, which, at the same time, influences such advancing. This is an application of the well-known axiom of Gregory the great: 'sacra scriptura crescit cum legente'.

The Bible is seen as a text full of *magnae profunditates*. In this way Hugh shows how the *ordo* of the different meanings of the Scripture, *littera-allegoria-tropologia*, not only organizes its organic understanding but also combines an attention to the objective contents of the Christian faith with an attention to the subjective experience of the believer. The comprehension of the allegorical meaning allows, on the one side, a right building up of the theological structure and on the other side it marks the progress in the life of faith of the believer and of the church. Namely, the progress of the faith of the individual plays a meaningful role in the church.

Hugh, consequently, can describe the itinerary of faith towards contemplation as closely connected to the reading of the Bible: faith lives on the relationship with the Scripture which results in a synecdoche, where a part of the existence in faith is seen as the 'whole' of this existence.

In a recent articles Berndt states: "Hugo bindet die Kraft des Glaubens an die Quelle, der er entspringt. Je tiefer ein Mensch die Heilige Schrift

versteht, um so profunde ist sein Glaube. Der Glaube wächst in Maß des Schriftverständnisses". So, faith is not described as an abstract generic relationship between man and God, but it consists of a concrete relationship with the Bible.

Getting to the end of part two of my presentation, we can say that the practice of faith is the visible aspect of *sacramentum fidei*, whereas the invisible aspect — the *res et virtus sacramenti* — lies in future contemplation.

The *res* of faith and the *res* of contemplation are not separate realities but they are the same *res* that can be experienced according to two different ways – a sacramental way and a fully unveiled way -.

This identity is the basic foundation of the effectiveness of faith: the sacrament of faith prepares man to fully welcome the *res* at the end of his life.

Hugh states: *Restauratio secundum incrementa fidei crescit dum homo et per agnitionem amplius illuminatur ut plenius agnoscat et inflammatur per dilectionem ut ardentius diligit.*

So Christian life is a life in faith, he starts with faith. Believing creator's and redeemer's love is the foundation of Christian life. Man is gradually restored by faith in all his aspects of knowledge, love, intelligence and sensitivity. Also the moral life of the believer starts from faith. God's love on self communicating never lets man's situation the same, but tends to enlighten, purify and change those who open themselves to God.

Thus faith is *principium restorationis*. Restoration is devised by God through the triple *remedium* including *sacramentum fidei*, *sacramenta fidei* and *charitas fidei*.

A last remark: the use of the same theological category for *sacramentum* of faith and *sacramenta* shows they are not two juxtaposed remedies but they share a structural analogy based on the symbolic mediation between visible and invisible. According to Hugh, the impossibility of seeing God immediately but only through different mediations is a basic condition of the faith. In fact the sacrament of faith, with reference to its *res*, lies in a condition of unveiled vision.

It is the adequate way of relationship with God, who always shows himself as 'hidden' in the history and in the world and as a promise trusted

to human freedom.

Hence, faith is not only a sacramental *remedium* for man's restoration, but it is the most adequate way, given by God himself, to enable a truly free love-relationship between man and God.

### 3. Final remarks

In the third part of my paper I'd like to show how Hugh's reflection on the practice of faith and on its *virtus* in the believer's and the Church's life is important not only from the historical-theological point of view, but it can also give meaningful contributions to the theological and anthropological contemporary research. Obviously, here I will only give a few suggestions:

a. It is this complex method of reading the Bible which makes Hugh's theology possible, also in its systematic dimension. Nonetheless, the aim of this theology is not just to build up a consistent doctrinal system, but also to help believers and the Church grow up in Christian life. This involves also the practice of virtues, but the starting point it is actually faith. The *De Sacramentis* – read as guide to the sacraments of Christian faith and to the reading of the Bible – ultimately aims to the personal *reformatio* of the believer and of the Church *universitas fidelium*. In other words, a theology without the spiritual experience or without the reformation of the Church does not reach its goal.

b. Dealing with Christian faith means dealing with the believer's itinerary: faith does not exist outside the man, who actually believes through answering *manifestatio Dei* and through accepting *opus restorationis*. The Christian is the person who, as a believer in the God of Jesus Christ, seeks the truth with all himself and not with a halved or mutilated self. For Hugh the contents of the Christian faith are bound to raise the bond of faith which involves man in his complexity and unity. This is why the reflection itself on the experience of the believer is so important to understand some aspects of the content of faith. As Hugh wonders (19): *Quomodo enim de iis quae credenda sunt fide bene sentire*



*possumus, si de ipsa fide male sentimus?*

Hence, if a theologian skipped the historical dimension of the Bible in his studies, he would produce empty science - *quorum scientia formae asini similis est* - but at the same time if he skipped the historical personal dimension of the believer he would, likewise, produce a donkey's knowledge - *scientia formae asini* -, that is based on nothing.

c. Faith can be symbolically represented by a man reading the Bible. This image highlights an important aspect. According to him the sacrament of faith is practised both concretely and symbolically by reading the Bible. In *Didascalicon* Hugh shows how the basis of each spiritual progress towards the contemplation is rooted in *lectio*. Even recently Poirel and Mews have pointed out how that reading is fundamental in Hugh's thought. Actually, man is called to read: the Bible, of course, but also, at the same time, the book of one's own heart and the book of nature. Creation itself is a book written by God, as is the incarnation. Reading is complex research leading to interpreting reality in its various levels and inviting to act virtuously in it. Believing is consequently seen as a concrete way of interpreting reality and setting oneself in it. Hence, at the basis of virtues there are faith and love. The love itself is called *charitas fidei*. According to this idea, faith cannot be described as a passive acceptance - it is not simply an act of faith - of a perfectly self-contained *depositum fidei* but rather a progressive growth where God's action and man's life are deeply interwoven.

d. One last remark: the timing of *opus restorationis* is a fundamental frame within the *De Sacramentis*. Salvation has its own times. Faith itself is set in time and in history. The basic content of Christian faith are historical facts. Not only that. The history of salvation itself keeps open. In Hugh there is the fullness of time, but not the end of time. Everything is related to Christ, but Hugh's idea about who and which are the holy writers shows that history of salvation is not over, yet. It carries on in the life of the Church, in the life of the believer and in the life of the world, as Sicard states: "toute l'histoire était ainsi promue au rang d'histoire sainte". Hence, faith is set in that special time that is the time of grace. Faith is lived in a special time span: after the Christ/Messiah but still in the flood of

history. In order to grasp the *virtus* of the faith in history it is necessary to understand the quality of that special time within which the faith lives. I think we can say that the Christian faith has a messianic dimension. I believe that a study on the quality of time in its relation to faith, its effectiveness and its position at the basis of Christian life would be revealing. But this would be the matter of another paper. Thank you very much for your attention.