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1 Corinthians 13:13—“Theological Virtues” and the Names of Saints

In 1 Corinthians 13:13, the apostle Paul writes, “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” The same triad of virtues is mentioned near the beginning and the end of 1 Thessalonians:

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1:2–3)

But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. (5:8)

See also Galatians 5:5–6; Colossians 1:4–5; Hebrews 10:22–24.

The KJV used the word “charity” in place of “love” in these passages.

In Elizabethan English, “charity” did not have the sense it has acquired in our modern day, but simply meant “unselfish love.”

Theological Virtues

Faith, hope, and charity were identified early in church history as “the theological virtues,” because unlike the classical virtues (prudence,

temperance, fortitude, and justice) they were said to have God as their formal object.

The virtues are supremely practiced when one has faith *in God*, hope *in God*, and love *for God*. As such, they constitute spiritual perfection, with ensuing moral implication.

So Augustine (345–430) writes, “Thus a man supported by faith, hope, and charity, with an unshaken hold upon them, does not need the Scriptures except for the instruction of others” (*Enchiridion de fide, spe, et caritate* 3–4).

Names of Saints

During the reign of Hadrian (117–138 CE), a Roman matron named Sophia (Greek for “wisdom”) had three daughters named Pistis (“Faith”), Elpis (“Hope”), and Agape (“Charity”). She and her daughters were martyred and the daughters were canonized as Saint Faith, Saint Hope, and Saint Charity. For six hundred years, pilgrims visited their tomb in the crypt of St. Pancratius Church on the Aurelian Way.

At a later time (the date is uncertain), another woman named Sapientia (Latin for “wisdom”) is said to have been martyred along with three companions who were named Spes, Fides, and Caritas (Latin for “Hope,” “Faith,” and “Charity”). They were buried near the tomb of Saint Cecilia in the cemetery of Saint Callistus on the Appian

Way. While they were not canonized as saints, their tomb did become a pilgrimage site.

Skeptics have thought it unlikely that two groups of martyred women would have borne the same names—much less, names so fraught with biblical meaning. But some scholars point out that these were common names for Christian women in the early centuries, making the coincidence a tad less incredible.