

LESSON 5

THE CARDINAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

BACKGROUND READING



We don't often reflect on the staying power that habits have in our lives. Ancient wisdom tells us that habits become nature. We are what repeatedly do. If we do something over and over again, eventually we will do that thing without thinking. For example, if a person has chewed her nails all of her life, then chewing nails becomes an unconscious habit that is difficult to break. Perhaps harder to cultivate are the good habits in our lives. If we regularly take time to exercise, to say no to extra desserts, to get up early to pray, to think affirming thoughts of others, these too can become habits.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines virtue as “an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but also to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions. The goal of the virtuous life is to become like God” (CCC 1803).

We can divide the virtues into two categories: the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues. These virtues act as signposts in the moral life. If we turn these virtues into habits, they will become part of who we are, making us like Christ.

Human or Cardinal Virtues

The four cardinal virtues are human virtues that govern our moral choices. They are acquired by human effort and perfected by grace. The four cardinal virtues are: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. The word cardinal comes from a Latin word that means “hinge” or “pivot.” All the other virtues are connected to, or hinge upon, the cardinal virtues. Without the cardinal virtues, we are not able to live the other virtues.

Prudence “disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it” (CCC 1806). We must recall that our true good is always that which will lead us to Heaven, so that perhaps another way of saying this is that prudence allows us to know the good based on an eternal perspective. Prudence is called the charioteer (or the driver) of the virtues because it guides or directs the other virtues.

Justice “consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor” (CCC 1807). This is a particularly challenging virtue in a society saturated with self-indulgence and the accumulation of goods. The virtue of justice will help us to choose correctly how we

are to use and share the things of this world (including life, respect, freedom, and so forth).

Temperance “moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will’s mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable” (CCC 1809). This virtue allows us to live our lives in moderation so as not to be enslaved to our passions.

Fortitude “ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good” (CCC 1808). This virtue gives us strength against temptation, and helps us to overcome fear, even fear of death, in order to live a moral life.

The Theological Virtues

The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity. These three virtues have God as their object, which mean that they deal with our relationship with God. They are also a gift from God and cannot be earned, but enter our souls through sanctifying grace, which we first receive at Baptism.

Faith is the theological virtue “by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself” (CCC 1814). Another way of stating this is that Faith is the acceptance of God as our teacher. The virtue of Faith allows us to commit ourselves completely to God and act in accordance with our belief.

Hope is the theological virtue “by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 1817). Hope aspires to the promise of eternal happiness. It keeps us from

discouragement, sustains us in times of trial, and keeps our eyes fixed on our eternal goal, which is Heaven.

Charity is the theological virtue “by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1822). Unfortunately, the word “charity” has taken on cold, negative connections. We often think of it as a handout to those in need – not out of love, but out of obligation. The other word often used to replace charity is love. But this too has come to mean anything but what Christ meant when He told us that we must have love. Today love often means a mushy feeling that easily comes and goes in people’s lives. Love, or charity, has nothing to do with feelings; it is a faculty of the will.

This love that Jesus spoke of becomes the New Commandment. In John’s Gospel we read, “As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love... This is my commandment: love one another as I love you” (John 15:9, 12). This would be an impossible commandment if love were merely an emotion. There are too many people in this world whom we could never feel that way about. But when love becomes an act of the will, then no matter how we feel, we can still choose to love. That is why marriage vows are possible to keep: “I will love you in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad, in riches and in poverty, until death do us part.” These vows have little to do with feelings, and everything to do with decisions.

If the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God, then it is clear that virtue must play a major part in our journey toward life in Christ, and in our ultimate goal to spend eternity with God in Heaven.