

# Virtuous Living

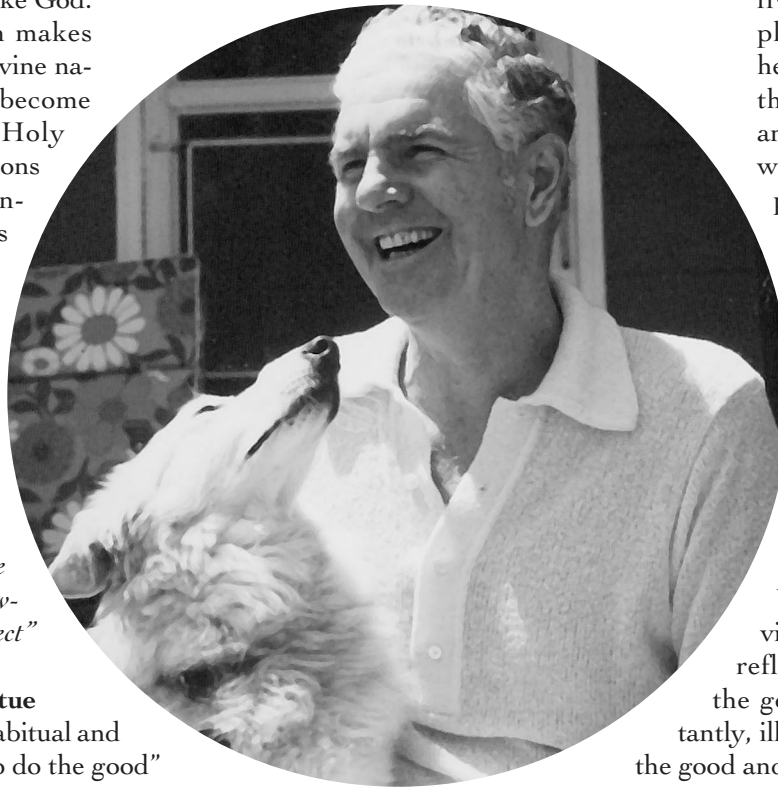
*He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? ~ Micah 6:8*

**V**IRTUOUS LIVING is synonymous with Christian living because the goal of the virtuous life is to become like God. Because Baptism makes us partakers of divine nature, our bodies become temples of the Holy Spirit and our actions acquire the potential to make us holy and perfect like our Heavenly Father. Living a virtuous life in truth and love is the only authentic response to Jesus' words: *"You, therefore, must be perfect, as your Heavenly Father is perfect"* (Mt 5:48).

## Grace and Virtue

A virtue is a "habitual and firm disposition to do the good" (CCC 1803). Such a definition for many is reducible to the equation: a virtue is a good habit. While this is true, it does not offer us the full meaning of virtue. In virtue, the whole person is engaged with all his or her emotions and spiritual powers. To act virtuously is to act creatively and dynamically. In the light of grace and through the working out of faith in love, the Christian perceives the good to be done. In this way, the individual's creativity is put to the service of charity, which is the foundation for virtuous living. This creativity should not be construed as a way of bypassing the moral law as found in Scripture and as taught by the Church. Rather, the moral law serves as a compass to guide us through life. Virtuous living does not at

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any point contradict this law, but to live virtuously means more than simply following the rules.

The analogy between living virtuously and playing tennis may be helpful. One can study the rule book of tennis and become an expert at what is correct and foul play. But such a study is no substitute for practicing the game if one wants to be a player. The moral life is very similar. We must know the rules, and for that we have the Scriptures, Tradition, and the Church. But that is not enough. We must practice the virtues. Virtues not only reflect our knowledge of the good but, more importantly, illustrate that we can do the good and do it well.

## The Human Virtues

*If riches are a desirable possession in life, what is richer than wisdom who effects all things? And if understanding is effective, who more than she is fashioner of what exists? And if anyone loves righteousness, her labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control [i.e., temperance] and prudence, justice and courage [i.e., fortitude]; nothing in life is more profitable for men than these (Wis 8:5-7).*

Human virtues are "firm attitudes, stable dispositions, [and] habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct" (CCC 1804). The human virtues are not dependent upon sacramental graces. They are acquired by human effort, but are aided and elevated

by sacramental graces. These virtues lead us to live good lives. They orient us to the supernatural destiny revealed and made possible by Christ. The cardinal (that is, hinge) virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance are the ones around which all the other human virtues are grouped.

### The Cardinal Virtues

**Prudence** causes our intellects to perceive our true good; it directs what is to be done or avoided in the

are called to seek the common good and work toward greater justice for all. Notwithstanding these obligations, the Christian is called to *preferential love* for the poor because they are especially in need of justice. Justice perfects the love of neighbor and is essential for the promotion of good order and equality.

**Fortitude** provides the strength to accomplish good actions in the face of difficulties. Many times, a great enterprise is begun for a good cause but soon is abandoned when problems arise. This virtue helps

*“The virtues work in harmony toward the attainment of our ultimate goal and perfection.”*



pursuit of that good. In this respect, prudence can be considered chief among the virtues because it shapes and guides all aspects of our living. Scripture says, *“In everything a prudent man acts with knowledge”* (Prv 13:16). For the Christian, this knowledge is both that which comes through the natural light of reason and that which is revealed through the supernatural gift of faith. A Christian who is enlightened by faith can discover greater ways to accomplish good actions through the exercise of prudence.

**Justice** governs our relationship with others. This virtue helps promote equality between persons and is the foundation for any society. All people in society

one overcome fear, resist the temptation to quit, and remain in pursuit of the good. Inspired by charity, fortitude enables the Christian to risk great things, even his or her life for the sake of a greater good. The spiritual gift of courage reinforces fortitude in the face of danger and helps overcome our fear of death. Scripture says, *“forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 3:13-14).

**Temperance** is the virtue of moderation. Natural pleasures are part of God’s creation and have been placed in our path for our enjoyment. Howev-

er, these pleasures must be ordered to what is good. Because of our fallen nature, these passions are not ordered properly. With the help of temperance, the Christian learns to properly balance his or her desires and avoid the excess that conflicts with true happiness. Such a balance in moderation is not achieved overnight but is achieved slowly as the Christian matures in the faith. Such growth produces freedom and purity of heart and mind.

Part of the Christian experience is accepting this struggle with what Scripture calls *the desires of the flesh* as a way of carrying the cross that leads to holiness. God has sent the Spirit of holiness into our hearts and his presence elevates and purifies the virtues. Scripture exhorts us to live “*sober, upright, and godly lives in this world*” (Ti 2:12), and God has given us the means to do that in the virtue of temperance.

### Theological Virtues

The three theological virtues are faith, hope and charity. Their presence makes possible a real participation in God’s own life. They are given in seed form so we have to cultivate them. We do this by seeking God. It is by **faith** that we commit our entire self to God; by hope that we eagerly await the joy of eternal life and the fullness of God’s Kingdom; and by charity that we love God above all other creatures and things for his own sake. The virtue of faith is essential for salvation. Jesus said, “*every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in Heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in Heaven*” (Mt 10:32-33). The virtue of **hope** sustains our joy and keeps us from becoming discouraged. The *Catechism* explains that the Christian, “buoyed up by hope, is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity” (CCC 1818). The virtue of **charity** is the greatest of all the virtues. Jesus revealed the depths of charity when he opened up his arms on the cross. His love is a redeeming love and one that he calls us to imitate. Charity is the source and goal of the Christian life and of the next life be-

cause “*he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him*” (1 Jn 4:16).

### Unity of the Virtues

The practice of the virtues and their cultivation is fundamental for living well. Since human beings are called to more than a purely natural destiny, happiness with God in Heaven, God must provide them with the means to go beyond their natural virtues and attain a higher level of perfection than would ordinarily be possible: “*In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths*” (Prv 3:6). For although

men and women continued to be themselves after the fall of Adam and Eve, that sin-tainted existence can hardly be said to be “natural” for those created in the image and likeness of God. Men and women were not intended to live apart from God’s life (that is, grace). God rectified our “sin problem” that keeps us from him by redeeming us from sin and by providing the opportunity to grow in grace. Virtues grow in strength with cultivation and practice, but they diminish with lack of use. Prayer

increases them, but they are lost by repeated serious sin.

The moral life is, itself, spiritual worship, “*present[ing our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God*” (Rom 12:1). The virtues work in harmony toward the attainment of our ultimate goal and perfection. The cardinal virtues are taken up into the supernatural life when the theological virtues are at work. This transformation does not destroy the integrity of human nature but perfects it. This implies that we were indeed created for God. Therefore, the cultivation of virtue is essential to our life here and prepares us for the life to come. In this life many times the trials and struggles we experience are the result of our own weaknesses and sins. Cultivating virtue is as much an answer to our sin problem as repentance. Virtuous living transforms us as fallen creatures into redeemed and divinized ones ready to behold God in his unspeakable holiness and light.

(CCC 1803-1832, 2031)

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