



The Good Life, God's Way

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**The Good Life, God’s Way:
An Introduction to the Good Life for Catholics**

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is an introduction to the good life—the *really* good life—for Roman Catholics. Jesus Christ is Himself the Way (John 14:6), and to follow Him means to take up a holy manner of life and to become the kind of wise, strong, pure, and good men and women that God wants us to be.

Almighty God, who made us the kind of creatures who think, means for us to use our intelligence to understand the good life and the ways in which He wants us to flourish in goodness. The goal of this booklet is to help the Catholic reader think clearly about morals and the life of virtue. This is Christ's way, and it leads to a Kingdom.

ONE WAY OR MANY WAYS?

Once upon a time in a small village in a distant country, the people had an honored custom. Every year, on the appointed date, the people would assemble in the town square and hold a lottery. Now this lottery was not a game of chance for money; it was, rather, a game of chance for life—as we shall see. The winner of the first lottery was always a family, whose members then participated in a second lottery to choose the one lucky winner. When the winner was announced, everyone in the town descended upon that “winner,” regardless of age or sex or

disability, and stoned him or her to death. It had to be done, you know. Otherwise the crops that year might be bad. It was all right to stone the person to death; the culture said so.¹

Contending that every society has a right to determine its own standards of right and wrong, of honor and shame, of virtue and vice, is what is known as *cultural relativism*. Under the banner of cultural relativism, every moral decision depends upon time and place; there are no transcendent or absolute values or virtues. To the extent that there is any standard at all for measuring rightness or wrongness of acts, that standard derives only from the customs of the society in question. So in that small village where annually someone is stoned to death, we must say that such a practice is acceptable. For who are we to judge?

Of course, stoning people to death to ensure good crops is hardly good meteorology. But since we allow that some cultures are scientifically illiterate, should we also say that some might be “morally illiterate” as well? Or, regardless of facts, would it be excessively “judgmental” and “intolerant” of us to say so?

The English writer G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936) once remarked that tolerance is the virtue of people who do not believe in anything; consequently, they have no standards by which to judge, which means they can be endlessly “tolerant.” Within any given society or culture, the majority can, in fact be wrong. As Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen (1895–1979) pointed out, in the first public opinion poll, most people picked Barabbas over Jesus Christ (Matthew 27:20, Luke 23:18). Observed Sheen: “Right is still right if nobody is right, and wrong is still wrong if everybody is wrong.”²

MORAL STANDARDS: MAJORITY OPINION OR OBJECTIVE TRUTH?

An act’s rightness or wrongness does not depend upon the number of its supporters. If, for example, in a junior high school math class, most of the students thought that seven times eight was

fifty-five, their mistaken consensus would not repeal the laws of mathematics. Acts that are popular or even laws passed by a legislature are not necessarily moral or ethical. If “everyone” in that small village participated in the stoning, the murder thus committed is still wrong, still evil, still sinful.

We Catholics have a standard by which to judge, not just acts and laws, but whole societies. The standard is Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and for ever (Hebrews 13:8). We believe that Jesus, the Word of God Incarnate, entered human history and stands as the one everlasting standard by which to judge good and evil. The Bible tells us clearly that we are not to judge acts, laws, and cultures only by human standards (Matthew 16:23, John 12:43); rather we are to judge by the standards given to us by God (Matthew 15:8–9, Mark 7:6–8, John 7:24, Acts 5:38–39). As Pope John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *The Splendor of Truth*, “Revelation teaches that *the power to decide what is good and what is evil does not belong to man, but to God alone.*”³

We live in an age and at a time in which many tell us that there is no such thing as matters of truth—but, instead, only matters of taste (2 Timothy 3:2–7). You like chocolate, he likes strawberry, she likes vanilla. By the same token, he thinks abortion is moral, and she thinks abortion is evil. Isn’t it all really a matter of personal judgment, of private assessment, of “taste”? Who is to guide us toward “truth”?

We Catholics answer that question by saying that Jesus *is* the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). There are three sublime questions in the Bible: Pilate’s (John 18:38), Peter’s (John 6:68), and Christ’s. Throughout the ages, human beings have sought truth. Pilate’s cynical question, “What is truth?”—posed to the One who is Himself Truth incarnate—is asked today in societies around the globe, for all of us need to find a purpose, a meaning, a destiny. Is there Truth (one Truth, with a capital “T”); or are there only fragmented, personal “truths”? Christians know the answer to that vital question (John 10:30, 1 John 5:6).

Believers also know the answer to Saint Peter's question, "Lord to whom shall we go?" Where else is should we go for meaning and purpose in our lives, except to Christ? Do we go to the love of money, to the love of power, to the love of sexual indulgence, to drink or drugs or gluttony? We know, rather, that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6), and that His Church is the holder of the keys (Matthew 16:19), the home of the sacraments (see John 6:22–59, 20:23), and "the pillar and foundation of truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). It is for us to answer the haunting question posed to Peter—and to us—by the Lord: "Who do *you* say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20). Knowing the answer to that helps us to act in that light (1 John 3:18) and thus to be truly free.

FOLLOWING THE WAY OF TRUTH

Our answer to the Lord's question dictates—or should dictate—our response to moral challenges. If Christ is my Lord and my God (John 20:28), then I must accept His Word as my bond. From Sacred Tradition, I can get my moral bearings and determine the right thing to say or to do. Sacred Tradition "is the teachings and practices handed down, whether in oral or written form, separately from but not independently of Scripture. Tradition is divided into two areas: (1) Scripture, the essential doctrines of the Church, the major writings and teachings of the Fathers, the liturgical life of the Church, and the living and lived faith of the whole Church down through the centuries; (2) customs, institutions, practices which express the Christian faith."⁴

The answer to the moral distortion of cultural relativism was powerfully answered by Pope John Paul II in his 1993 encyclical *The Splendor of Truth*: "If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people. Their self-interest as a class, group or nation would inevitably set them in opposition to one another."⁵

This transcendent Truth can sound like something complicated, best left to bishops and scholars, but the Truth is really a guiding light for all of us. This is a point the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. made in his moving 1963 “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.” Dr. King was in jail for leading nonviolent protests against racial discrimination. He wrote the letter to other pastors explaining why he had chosen the course he did, explaining the difference between just and unjust laws. “A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas: an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”

Can there be any doubt that stoning an innocent person to death—regardless of what the culture might say—is clearly and flagrantly evil? Catholics must always remember that, while we are called to be faithful and obedient citizens (Romans 13:1–7, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13–14), we must always put fidelity to Christ first and when there is any conflict “must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

THE TRUTH AND THE CROWD

Continuing on our way, let us consider two more cases that feature a group morality that is at odds with the way of Christ.

Consider a junior high school math class (probably the same one where the students don’t know the product of seven times eight!) where cheating is the norm. We can hear the explanation, “Everyone does it!” But what if they do? If a certain practice is acceptable among, or popular in, one’s circle of friends, is that sufficient reason to accept the practice as moral? The suggestion amounts to ethical relativism, the idea that right and wrong vary in relation to different social settings. If your group acts or thinks in

one way, isn't it OK if you follow suit? In the name of fun, frivolity, friendship, fellowship, and fraternity some monstrous crimes have been committed. Cheating—whether on a spouse, or on tax forms, or in business transactions—is wrong. Always wrong. People learn to cheat (2 Peter 2:1–2)—perhaps in math classes—but they can, with moral formation and God's help, learn to be honest and upright instead.⁶ When the gang or the group (or even the math class) overwhelms one's conscience, or when the individual is left no room for spiritual conviction, truth—and people—are sure to suffer as a consequence.

Cheating in a math class may be a small matter, but Jesus points out that “anyone who is dishonest in little things is dishonest in great” things as well (Luke 16:10-12). Let's consider something more serious.

Suppose that, next week, you're going to have an appendectomy. The surgeon who will be removing your appendix is a practicing alcoholic who gets “the shakes.” This surgeon has badly botched some routine surgeries lately, putting the lives of several patients at risk. One of the operating room nurses, knowing of the doctor's alcohol abuse and of the danger he poses to patients, has even said she might report the surgeon if he doesn't stop operating and get help. But the nurse's colleagues have told her that such reporting would be wrong; it would be “snitching” on a fellow professional, and could ruin her career. Besides, the survivors can always sue the doctor and the hospital: no one will blame the nurse if the doctor makes a fatal mistake. It's all right for the nurse to keep quiet—or so goes popular “wisdom.” Surely it must be OK for her to “look the other way”; the other doctors and nurses, after all, have told her so. Good luck to you, the patient!

What can be said in a case like this? About forty years ago, the British writer Harry Blamires wrote, “Loyalty in itself is not a moral basis for action. Loyalty to a good man, a good government, a good cause, is a different matter. But in these cases, ...one is standing by

the good.”⁷ Loyalty to friends or to one’s professional colleagues must not be purchased at the price of our commitment to the truth. Indeed, this may be the sense of a perplexing admonition from Our Lord to a would-be follower who wants only time to bury his father before becoming a disciple. “Follow me,” says Jesus, “and let the dead bury their dead” (Matthew. 8:21–22). The meaning is not that our relatives are to be left unburied, but that our commitment to Christ must always be first and foremost (cf. Matthew 19:16–30). Friendship, fellowship, and fraternity—all of these are important—and good in their place. But if the cost of friendship is honor and honesty, the price is too high. And if the loyalty to people is demanded at the cost of commitment to Christ and His Church, it is wrong (cf. 1 John 2:15). To make a god—that is, to accept as paramount the wishes or commands—of our country (as in John 19:15) or our culture or our customs, or of our bosses or our job or our friends, or of our property and possessions, is to commit the sin of idolatry, which is at the heart of all false morality. The First Commandment (Exodus 20:3; cf. Hebrews 12:29) is absolute—we are to worship no one else and nothing else except God. There is the heart of true morality.

Our Catholic faith tells us that, although belief and faith are vitally important (Romans 10:9–10, Galatians 2:16, John 14:6, Acts 16:31), being true to the faith by doing good deeds is also important (Romans 2:6; Galatians 6:7–10; Ephesians 2:8–10; James 2:18, 24; John 14:12). But the key is to do *good* deeds. What are we supposed to do when our city or country, our boss, our friends, or even our spouse tells us to do something we recognize—perhaps regretfully—as wrong?

USING THE RIGHT NAMES

Although this first step may sound peculiar, our immediate responsibility is, in a sense, *to call things by their right names*. For example, to do wrong things is to sin; to do seriously wrong things knowingly and deliberately is a mortal sin, the kind that puts us in

danger of eternal damnation in Hell (1 John 5:16–17). Viewed in this light, the “wrong action” I might take to appease my culture or my friends shows its true colors.

Here is a practical example: aborting an unborn child is killing the innocent (Exodus 20:13, Jeremiah 1:5). As the Holy Father says, “The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behavior and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake.”⁸ Yet many in the popular press defend the murder of unborn children as the “pro-choice” position; those who oppose abortion are labeled as “anti-choice.” The “anti-choice” position is the “pro-life position,” making those who support abortion “anti-life,” but that is not a term we read or hear. By the same token, people who steal talk about “ripping off”; people who cheat “get over”; people who lie describe themselves as “creative”! The second commandment—“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain”—reminds us of far more than not “swearing.” It reminds us that what is holy should be spoken of in holy language. By extension, what is evil should not be excused by euphemism or by shallow or silly talk (cf. Ephesians 4:28, 5:4). We need to call things by their right names if we are going to think about them clearly.

The philosopher Tom Morris wrote recently that many words used to name what he calls ancient goods have been twisted and degraded to name modern counterfeits. Thus wisdom is confused with cleverness, dignity with glamour, truth with expediency, beauty with titillation, goodness with being nice, character with personality, reputation with fame, and respect with fear.⁹ Is it a surprise, therefore, that those who favor abortion are not known neither as “anti-life” nor “pro-abortion” enthusiasts, but as pro-choice progressives? Yet those who oppose stretching the definition of marriage to include same-sex pairs (and, for that matter, why not groups of three, four, or even more?) are called by the nonsense name

“homophobes” and are not called simply “pro-marriage” or “pro-nature.” The labels in circulation are misleading, and they mislead our thinking by concealing the true nature of the thing they name.

THE MEANING AND NATURE OF CONSCIENCE

This brings us to the word *conscience*, a much misused and much misunderstood word these days. Conscience, broken down into its root terms, means “with knowledge” (*con-scientia*). Conscience is not a mere feeling, and still less is it a private preference: conscience is a power for knowing right from wrong in our particular circumstances. It works through sound rules and reasoning.

“Conscience,” Archbishop Sheen once wrote, “cannot come to us from the rulings of society; otherwise it would never reprove us when society approves us, nor console us when society condemns.”¹⁰ “When he listens to his conscience,” the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, “the prudent man can hear God speaking.”¹¹

But what about the imprudent man, or the man who decides there is no need to form his conscience by studying God’s truth and using his intelligence? There is, after all, the popular (and false!) school of “situational ethics.” Instead of asking, as Catholics must, what is the will of God in this case, the situational ethicist asks only, “What do circumstances right here and right now tell me to do?” The Catholic’s dependence on God becomes a hopeless shrug: “It all depends.” It all depends on what? It all depends upon the current state of affairs or surroundings, or upon what’s in it for me, or upon my urges and appetites (see 2 Corinthians 10:12). Situationalists, in their “wisdom” (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:25; 3:19) do not want to make commitments to anything absolute, since circumstances can change. One’s attraction to one’s spouse may diminish, so why be “stuck” in a marriage? Why should any commitment, any vow, be seen as permanent? Devotion is not only “old fashioned,” situationalists argue, but remarkably inconvenient.

Situationalism is very interested in self-indulgence, in “self-esteem,” and in personal pleasures (cf. Isaiah 5:20). A moving song (1969) made famous by Roy Clark contains these lyrics: “Yesterday when I was young, the taste of life was sweet as rain upon my tongue. ...So many happy songs were waiting to be sung, so many wild pleasures lay in store for me, and so much pain my dazzled eyes refused to see. I ran so fast that time and youth at last ran out. I never stopped to think what life is all about. And every conversation I can now recall concerned itself with me and with nothing else at all.” Frank Sinatra made popular a song which exalted one’s own skin as the highest standard of moral appeal: “I did it my way!” In contrast, Catholics are called to do it—that is, to live life—*God’s Way*. This way isn’t just a batch of rules. It is the one way we can be really, deeply happy. It is the way to flourishing according to our nature and God’s design. God’s Way is the way to life.

DOING GOD’S WILL

There are no circumstances in which we are released from our obligation to do all we can to know and to accomplish the will of God. Nor do we want there to be, for we know that it is in God alone that we can “live and move and have our being” (cf. Acts 17:28, Romans 9:16). When we develop our conscience—our moral intelligence—wisely and well by absorbing and applying the truth of the Faith, which is the truth of Christ, then we are becoming truly free (cf. John 8:32).

Genuine freedom is not the ability to do whatever we please; it is, rather, the liberty to be what we really are, which means fulfilling the plan and intention God has for us (cf. Romans 12:2). There is a beautiful Catholic hymn—*Faith of Our Fathers*—which tells us that “Our fathers chained in prisons dark were still in heart and conscience free. And truly blessed would be our fate if we, like them, should die for thee.” We can observe here that Catholic sensibilities lie in complete opposition to situation ethics and self-indulgence; our life of faith is, at its very heart, a commitment to

truth. God and reason assure us that, as creatures and as people of the Covenant (cf. Matthew 26:26–29, Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:14–20; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26), our genuine freedom results from knowing God’s will and doing it. This is why Christ, who expresses and fulfills God the Father’s will perfectly, continually tells us, “*Follow Me*” (see Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 16:24, 19:21; Mark 2:14, 8:34, 10:21; Luke 5:27, 9:59, 18:22; John 12:26, 21:19).

Hence Saint Augustine (354–431) beautifully wrote:

Eternal God, who are the light of the minds that know you, the joy of the hearts that love you, and the strength of the wills that serve you: grant us so to know you that we may truly love you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, Whom to serve is perfect freedom, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

THE VIRTUES: GOODNESS GETS WITHIN

God is not interested in having us merely obey His rules. He is interested in much more than our success in keeping the Commandments and resisting the urge to violate the built-in laws of our human nature. God wants to see us become strong and flourishing men and women, according to His design and the gifts of grace. By His own power, God means not only to bring us to do what is right and avoid what is wrong, but to become the kind of persons who are good—who do what is right easily, promptly, and with joy. He wants us to recognize how good Goodness is, and to be the sort of creatures who rejoice and exult in the Good. For the Good, ultimately, is none other than God Himself.

Visiting almost any bookstore these days, we can find all sorts of books on virtue. In name, at least, virtue is in style. Browsing bookshelves from “Religion” to “Business” to “Self-Help,” you can find a number of books which will tell you about the virtues you need to be a better businessman or investor or coach or traveler or lover. Properly understood, however, virtue is not about selling more products or winning more games. Rather, virtues “are firm

attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good.”¹²

Besides the three “theological virtues” of faith, hope, and charity (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:13), the virtues given directly by God in order to let us know and love Him in a supernatural way (a way beyond our natural power), Catholics—and the Western tradition in general—speak of four moral or “cardinal” virtues as well: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. These are called cardinal virtues because the whole moral life hinges on them: “cardinal,” here, is just an adjective drawn from the Latin word for hinge. These four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance—were studied by ancient pagan philosophers like Aristotle, and are mentioned in the Bible as resulting from intimacy with divine Wisdom (see Wisdom 8:7). The medieval theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) left us an unparalleled study of the virtues in his writings, and drew together various strands of tradition to show how the virtues are related and how they fulfill right reason and the law of our human nature (the natural law).

In sacred Scripture God tells us to “make every effort to supplement [our] faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love.” If the virtues are ours “and increase in abundance, they will keep [us] from being idle or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Bible goes on to assure us that without the virtues we are in serious trouble: “anyone who lacks them is blind and shortsighted” (2 Peter 1:5-9).

PRUDENCE: THE VIRTUE OF WISDOM

“Be careful how you think; your life is shaped by your thoughts. Never say anything that isn’t true. Have nothing to do with lies and misleading words” (Proverbs 4:23-24).

“The beginning of wisdom,” the Bible tells us, “is the fear of the Lord” (Proverbs 9:10; cf. Sirach 1:14). But there is more: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, on your own intelligence rely not; in all your ways be mindful of Him, and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6). Wisdom is the understanding that, ultimately, there is an Ultimate. When we understand that God exists (cf. Psalm 53:2), and that He gave us His Son (John 3:16) and that the Son, sacrificed, is the one mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5), we have learned a fundamental truth of our Catholic faith. We have been bought at a great price (1 Corinthians 7:23), the price of Christ’s passion and death. In fact, we are not our own; we belong to Christ (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). In that understanding is the profound wisdom of the Church.

Once we know that all we are and all we have is from God, then we ought to be able to apply this knowledge to the affairs of everyday life. It is the cardinal virtue of prudence that “disposes practical wisdom to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.”¹³ Prudence is the virtue by which we see the good and the right way to go to it.

Prudence, which we might call wisdom, is not a penny-pinching, cowardly, cunning, or crafty approach to life’s problems. Rather, authentic prudence consists in seeing temporal or temporary matters in the perspective of the infinite or the eternal. For the Catholic, prudence means seeing everyday things and everyday deeds in the way that God sees them—in the light of eternity. “In whatever you do,” Scripture tells us, “remember your last days and you will never sin” (Sirach 7:36; cf. 28:6). One of the reasons that the Church gives us sacramentals such as blessed medals and crucifixes is because such physical reminders, by being present to us,

help us to remember Christ. This way we are able, in a practical and real manner, to be “rooted in Him and built upon Him,” so that we will not unwisely be deceived by “empty, seductive philosophy according to human tradition, according to the elemental powers of the world and not according to Christ” (Colossians 2:7-8; cf. Ephesians 4:14).

We are too often persuaded that the answers of the world are wise when, in fact, what the world counsels us is often only an appeal to our pride or to our greed. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

JUSTICE: THE VIRTUE OF TRUTH

“Do to no one what you yourself dislike” (Tobit 4:15; cf. Matthew 7:12).

We live in an age which tells us that euthanasia is mercy, that suicide is creative medicine, and that abortion is freedom of choice; all three, of course, are murder.

We live in an age that tells us that marriage is outdated as an institution, that divorce is not only frequent but often desirable; that opposition to same-sex marriages is bigoted and intolerant. Adultery and sodomy, however, are still sins. “Anyone who is so ‘progressive’ as not to remain in the teaching of the Christ does not have God; whoever remains in the teaching has the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

At the heart of all sin is pride, the pride that makes itself the arbiter of right and wrong. As the Holy Father wrote in his powerful encyclical *The Splendor of Truth*, man’s “history of sin begins when he no longer acknowledges the Lord as his Creator and himself wishes to be the one who determines, with complete independence, what is good and what is evil.”¹⁴ When we puff ourselves up with pride, we drive out God. “Do you not know that to be a lover of the world

means enmity with God? Therefore whoever wants to be a lover of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4). To be sure, Saint Paul recognized this in writing that “knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up” (1 Corinthians 8:1). Tragically, the hallmark of modern man is his conviction, not so much that God doesn’t exist (for modern man rarely explores that question), but that God, whether He exists or not, is irrelevant. To modern people, God is not a serious proposition. God has not abandoned us, but we have abandoned God.

We cannot be just or truthful in our business, in our politics, or in our personal lives unless we are children of the light (John 12:36, 1 John 1:5–6)—that is, unless we know and “do” the truth. What sounds like convoluted philosophy is really quite simple: We do what we are, and we are what we do. Anyone who routinely lies becomes a liar; one who routinely steals or cheats becomes a thief and a cheater. What underlies the acts of lying and cheating and stealing is the sinful notion that the unjust person has a “right” to act unjustly, that somehow the rules and standards do not apply to him, that he can be exempt from the law. The same thinking applies to politicians who honor, not the eternal and natural law (Psalm 146:3–4, Sirach 10:3), but the whims and wishes of people whose god has become their appetites and urges. We know, as President Abraham Lincoln once told us in one of his favorite Bible passages, that a house divided against itself cannot long stand (Luke 11:17). Neither can a society in deep moral denial long stand. When a society turns into a structure of sin, moral collapse and disintegration will follow.¹⁵ We know Who Truth is (John 14:6), and we know that the truth will set us free (John 8:32), provided we accept the Truth and make it the core of our life. Justice is the virtue that lets God be God, and treats all things in the way that is right and consistent with the Truth. Justice is the moral virtue “that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor.”¹⁶

In this age, only rarely do we hear of anyone who openly repudiates God. We call upon His Name in political councils, in business conventions, before meals. And then we ignore His commandments, His justice, His truth—because they are politically unpopular, or commercially unprofitable, or personally embarrassing to us (cf. Mark 8:38). But then we read this scripture: “So, because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth” (Revelation 3:16), and we remember, with at least temporary concern, that God will not be mocked (Galatians 6:7) and that our saying we love God must be matched by our doing God’s will: “Whoever says, ‘I know Him,’ but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4).

FORTITUDE: THE VIRTUE OF COURAGE

“I die the king’s good servant, but God’s first.” (Last words attributed to Saint Thomas More, who was beheaded for refusing to acknowledge the English King Henry VIII as head of the Church.)

So often today when we think of courage, we are reduced to images from Hollywood. Genuine heroism—risking and enduring hardships and even death for the sake of the Good—seems increasingly unknown. [The 2001 attacks on the United States have, in the midst of tragedy, given us new examples of heroism from which we can hope and pray to relearn the nobility of this virtue.]

Beyond human examples, we find—if we remember it—the supreme example of the courage of Christ. Although his death was horrifying, throughout history many have met deaths equally terrible. We know that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13). But only one person in history gave His life that all might be freed from the burden of sin. Christ’s passion—the agony in the garden, the scourging at the pillar, the crowning with thorns and the mocking he endured, the carrying of the cross, and the crucifixion itself—was done in eternal love even for

those who tortured and killed him. The eternal love of Christ manifested itself in the courage to live, to die, and to rise from the dead so that we, all of us, might have eternal life with Him. His Blessed Mother, similarly, showed courage beyond our understanding as she watched her divine Son suffer and die for people who ridiculed and tortured Him. Here Mary, as Pope John Paul II put it, “is the radiant sign and inviting model of the moral life.”¹⁷ How many times have we had the opportunity to speak for Him, but have refused out of embarrassment or lack of moral courage? How many times have we had the chance to serve Him and His poor but have refused (cf. Matthew 25:40, 45) because it was inconvenient?

Some of our Christian brothers and sisters are physically suffering and dying for Our Lord as I write and you read these words. Such will not be the fate of most of us, who will die in our beds, attended by medical personnel, and perhaps in the company of members of our family. While we live, we have comforts beyond the imaginings of millions around the world. Still, we so often lack the courage to speak the truth in His name to those who need it (one of the Spiritual Works of Mercy is to “admonish the sinner”; cf. Sirach 12:3-4) or to fulfill the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Fortitude “ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy to the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. ...It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause.”¹⁸ But we are called, very rarely, to die with and for Our Lord. We are called, daily, however, to live with and for Him. Can we muster the courage to do that?

TEMPERANCE: THE VIRTUE OF FREEDOM

“Lead me in the path of your commands, for that is my delight. Direct my heart toward your decrees and away from unjust gain. Avert my eyes from what is worthless; by your way give me life.” (Psalm 119:35-37)

My father once told me that the sins of many people are obvious to others (as is true with gluttons, who become fat), yet the sins of many of us are not readily apparent. His point was that we should not be too quick to judge others who suffer from physical problems we attribute, perhaps mistakenly, to their lack of moderation with drink, food, and the like.

We know that God has created only good things; it is our abuse of them that is a matter of evil. Food, drink, drugs, sex, sleep, and possessions are all good in themselves, and we can use them all in a holy way that pleases God and is for our own good. Unfortunately, through weakness, confusion, bad habits, and our own arrogance we often chase after and use material things (one thinks of money) in ways that work against us rather than for us.

Scripture tells us that those who arrogantly misuse the good things of this world are committing an act of idolatry: “Their end is destruction. Their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. Their minds are occupied with earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:19-20). This is true even of good things like sleep and rest, which we need—and for which we were given the Sabbath! Sleep and rest too little and you may be a “workaholic”; sleep and rest too much and you are falling into the vice of sloth or laziness. Exercise is desirable, we know. Exercise too little and you are likely to grow fat and flabby; exercise too much and you may easily wander into vanity and pride. (Some who exercise hours every day might profitably spend some of that physical exercise time “exercising” their souls instead—praying the Rosary, reading the Bible, or doing other spiritual devotions.) Television and other electronic entertainment can be good, if used in a way that is restrained and really fruitful; but visits to a library to learn the truth about things—and especially the truth about God—is much more to be commended.

There is a form of temperance very rarely addressed in comments about that virtue. All of us need a temperance of the mouth. “Don’t you fence in your property? Don’t you lock up your

money? Well, be just as careful with what you say. Weigh your every word, and have a lock ready for your mouth” (Sirach 28:24–25; 5:15, 6:5). “A gentle answer,” Proverbs tells us, “quiets anger but a harsh one stirs it up” (15:1, cf. 17:14). One is reminded of the powerful comment found in the New Testament that “no one has ever been able to tame the tongue. It is evil and uncontrollable, full of deadly poison. We use it to give thanks to our Lord and Father and to curse our fellow-man, who is created in the likeness of God” (James 3:8–9). A trip to the movies today painfully reminds us, usually, of the Bible’s instruction that “No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it might impart grace to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29; cf. Colossians 3:8). The tendency and temptation to use the power of speech to “get even” is wrong, of course, if we bear false witness (Exodus 20:16) and also if we give in to foul language.

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.”¹⁹ This virtue, which requires humility in practice, is described in the Bible when we read that those who belong to Christ “have crucified their flesh with its passions and desires.” And—as opposed to the many evils of the flesh—the Christian will have the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:18–24).

LIVING THE GOOD LIFE: HOW TO GROW IN VIRTUE

We know that all of us are sinners (Romans 3:23) and that, therefore, we are all somehow inadequate in living the life of the virtues. But we know that we are called to develop these virtues fully, as Our Lord has told us (Matthew 5:48). The ancient philosophers told us that if we wanted to be brave, we must do brave acts; that if we wanted to be just, we must do just acts. We become what we routinely do. The Apostles and their successors, handing on the

Gospel of Jesus Christ, add that, to overcome sin and become like the Lord, we need the purifying and transforming action of His grace. Moreover, we need a certain amount of learning and study to enlighten our minds—it is easier to love and to do good when you have a clearer understanding of what those words mean.

We know that Our Lord is with us to the end of time (Matthew 28:20), that when we ask as we ought to we will receive (Matthew 7:7, Luke 11:9, James 1:6-8, 4:3), so we know we are not alone and that grace is ours if we will pray as we should. Christ's Church tells us that to develop the cardinal virtues, there are a number of things we must do:

- Regularly attend Mass
- Receive Holy Communion and Confess our sins frequently
- Develop a personal daily devotion (rosary, bible reading, daily meditations, etc.)
- Read good Catholic spiritual books
- Perform good services and charitable acts
- Make personal and professional decisions in the light of eternity

“Whoever claims to abide in [Christ] ought to live just as he lived,” we read in 1 John 2:6. Christ is not a model just for priests and religious; He is not a model just for our neighbors or for the other people in the pew; He is a model for *you* (and me).

The world, the flesh, and the devil—these are our adversaries. They tell us relentlessly through bad teaching (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3–4), through depraved movies, through debauched politics, and through evil practices that *if* God exists, He doesn't matter; that Church is at best a human club and that all churches are the same; that Church teachings are outdated, biased, or irrelevant; that we can be our own god and do what we want when we want; that there are no Commandments and no beatitudes except those we invent for ourselves; that the only love that matters is found in the reflection

we see in the mirror every morning; that the cardinal virtues are silly, sophomoric, senseless.

But we know those are lies, for we have the Truth of Christ, the teaching of His Church, and the sacraments to help us grow in wisdom and grace before God and man (cf. Luke 2:52). We have, too, the help of those who have gone before, who pray for us, and for whom we pray, in the Communion of Saints. And we think of Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) whose moving prayer of petition captures perfectly the good life to which God calls us:

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace.
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

The life of goodness and virtue is, ultimately, the life of transformation in Christ. In the simplicity of the Gospel, as Pope John Paul II explains, Christian morality is “*following Jesus Christ*, in abandoning oneself to him, in letting oneself be transformed by his grace and renewed by his mercy, gifts which come to us in the living communion of his Church.”²⁰

ENDNOTES

- 1 Based on S. Jackson, “The Lottery” (in *The Lottery; or, The Adventures of James Harris*, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1949).
- 2 Fulton J. Sheen, *Life of Christ* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958).
- 3 John Paul II, Encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), n. 35. cf. n. 32.
- 4 *Our Sunday Visitor’s Catholic Encyclopedia*, p. 971.
- 5 *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), n. 99.
- 6 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1810.
- 7 Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*.
- 8 John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), n. 58.
- 9 Tom Morris, *If Aristotle Ran General Motors: A New Path of Wisdom for the Life of Business and the Business of Life* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 207.
- 10 Fulton J. Sheen, *Lift Up Your Heart* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950).
- 11 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1777.
- 12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1804.
- 13 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1806.
- 14 *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), n. 102.
- 15 Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), n. 59.
- 16 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1807.
- 17 *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), n. 120.
- 18 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1808.
- 19 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶ 1809.
- 20 *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), n. 119.

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