



THE MORAL VIRTUES

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“A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but 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.”
-CCC 1803

“Man's virtue perfects him in relation to the good.”
-St. Thomas Aquinas (*ST*, I-II, 63,2)

What is Virtue?

Not much is said about virtue these days, but a proper understanding of virtue is essential in our discussion of Catholic morality. A virtue is a habitual disposition to do good. But it is not merely a disposition, but a disposition put into concrete action. The concept of “act” is essential to understanding virtue; a virtuous man is not just he who knows what is right and wrong, but one who consistently *does* right and consciously avoids wrong.

As truly free, rational agents, only human persons are capable of acting virtuously. Virtue consists in making a free and deliberate choice to act well in pursuit of the good. The pursuit and attainment of the good leads to true happiness; thus, the virtuous life is the happy life, the life that leads to ultimate happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven and the Beatific Vision.

Beyond just saying that only humans are capable of exercising virtue, we could go on to say that human transcendence is experienced and asserted precisely by freely exercising virtue; i.e., though it is true that only humans can act virtuously, it is even more true to say that acting virtuously is what truly makes us human and separates us from the animal world.

The Habitual Nature of the Virtues

Virtue (like vice, its opposite) is a habit. A habit forms when an act repeated enough times to where one acquires a disposition to the act. When an action has become habitual, it requires less conscious effort to perform the action and can seem to take on an automatic nature; conversely, when an action has become habitual, the amount of effort required to break the habit is much greater.

By nature, we are not born with either a habitual disposition to virtue or one to vice; but the human person by nature is born with the innate *ability to form habits*, either for good or for ill. As Aristotle says, “Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, II, 1).

Unlike the beasts, every human has the chance to create himself everyday of his life, and we do this through *acting*. Consider this: who we are is determined by our overall character, our character is determined by the habits we cultivate; habits are formed from strings of individual actions repeated over and over; actions begin in the will and willing in the thought. Thus, there is a strong connection between *thinking rightly* and *acting rightly*. How we act will determine the type of character we form in ourselves.

To the extent that our character conforms to the Good, we will be that much closer to true happiness (which is the Supreme Good). To the extent that our character falls short of the Good, we will be unhappy. When our souls are united to the Good in the Beatific Vision, our happiness will be complete. Therefore, we must strive to cultivate good habits here on earth so that we can progress in the exercise of virtue and render our salvation more secure.

Human 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.

-CCC 1804

Though there are many virtues (just as there are many vices), Catholic Tradition has defined seven capital virtues: four are called *cardinal*, and three *theological*.

The Cardinal Virtues

The cardinal virtues are named from the Latin word *cardo*, which means, “hinge,” signifying the reality that all other virtues revolve around or “hinge” on these four.

The cardinal virtues are *natural* virtues; this means that they are attainable by any person of good will and are perfections of human nature as such. Though they can be motivated and perfected by God’s grace, they are the result of human effort; though they can dispose us to receive grace and to practice the theological virtues, these cardinal virtues themselves do not constitute holiness. The four cardinal virtues are: **prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude**.

- **Prudence**: the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; it was called in antiquity the *auriga virtutum*, the charioteer of the virtues, because it guides the other virtues in making wise judgments. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid.
- **Temperance**: the moral virtue that 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. The temperate man does not use created goods too much or too little, but acts with moderation.

- Justice: the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the “virtue of religion.” Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good.
- Fortitude: the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause.

Human virtues are acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by perseverance ever-renewed and by repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God’s help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them and they can dispose one to receive the theological virtues.

The Theological Virtues

The theological virtues differ from the cardinal virtues in several ways but are no less important to the forming of our character. While the cardinal virtues are ordered towards living a good life on earth, the theological virtues relate directly to God and the life to come (though they have ramifications in this life, of course). While the cardinal virtues are the result of human effort and repeated striving for the good, the theological virtues are *infused* in us by God at baptism and are not the result of human effort; they are gifts of God and flow from Him. The theological virtues inform the cardinal virtues and help shape them to reflect heavenly aspirations. The three theological virtues are: **faith, hope and charity**.

- Faith: 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. By faith “man freely commits his entire self to God.” For this reason the believer seeks to know and do God’s will. The gift of faith remains in one who has not sinned against it. But “faith apart from works is dead”: when it is deprived of hope and love, faith does not fully unite the believer to Christ and does not make him a living member of his Body.
- Hope: 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. The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every person; it takes up the hope that inspires men’s activities and purifies them so as to order them to the Kingdom of heaven; it keeps man from discouragement; it sustains him during times of abandonment; it opens up his heart in expectation of eternal beatitude. Buoyed up by hope, he is preserved from selfishness and led to the happiness that flows from charity.
- Charity: 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. The practice of all the

virtues is animated and inspired by charity, which “binds everything together in perfect harmony”; it is the *form of the virtues*; it articulates and orders them among themselves; it is the source and the goal of their Christian practice. Charity upholds and purifies our human ability to love, and raises it to the supernatural perfection of divine love. It is the preeminent virtue.

Gifts and Fruits of the Spirit

The moral life of Christians is sustained by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are permanent dispositions which make man docile in following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Church speaks of the *Seven Gifts of the Spirit* and the *Fruits of the Spirit*.

Gifts of the Spirit

The seven *gifts* of the Spirit complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them. They make the faithful docile in readily obeying divine inspirations. These are graces given by God to help us overcome temptation and persevere in virtue and are usually associated with the graces of Confirmation. The seven gifts are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord.

Fruits of the Spirit

The *fruits* of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The gifts of the Spirit which make the Christian life possible bear fruit in us and cause us to bring forth the nine fruits of the Spirit. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: “charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity.” These are spiritual dispositions that souls who progress in holiness tend to exhibit.

The Moral Law

The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom. Its biblical meaning can be defined as fatherly instruction, God’s pedagogy. It prescribes for man the ways, the rules of conduct that lead to the promised beatitude; it proscribes the ways of evil, which turn him away from God and his love. It is at once firm in its precepts and, in its promises, worthy of love.

CCC 1952 There are different expressions of the moral law, all of them interrelated: eternal law – the source, in God, of all law; natural law; revealed law, comprising the Old Law and the New Law, or Law of the Gospel; finally, civil and ecclesiastical laws.

CCC 1953 The moral law finds its fullness and its unity in Christ. Jesus Christ is in person the way of perfection. He is the end of the law, for only He teaches and bestows the justice of God: “For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified.”

1955 The “divine and natural” law shows man the way to follow so as to practice the good and attain his end. The natural law states the first and essential precepts which govern the moral life.

It hinges upon the desire for God and submission to him, who is the source and judge of all that is good, as well as upon the sense that the other is one's equal. Its principal precepts are expressed in the Decalogue.¹

1956 The natural law, present in the heart of each man and established by reason, is universal in its precepts and its authority extends to all men. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for his fundamental rights and duties:

For there is a true law: right reason. It is in conformity with nature, is diffused among all men, and is immutable and eternal; its orders summon to duty; its prohibitions turn away from offense.... To replace it with a contrary law is a sacrilege; failure to apply even one of its provisions is forbidden; no one can abrogate it entirely (Cicero).

1958 The natural law is *immutable* and permanent throughout the variations of history; it subsists under the flux of ideas and customs and supports their progress. The rules that express it remain substantially valid. Even when it is rejected in its very principles, it cannot be destroyed or removed from the heart of man. It always rises again in the life of individuals and societies.

1960 The precepts of natural law are not perceived by everyone clearly and immediately. In the present situation sinful man needs grace and revelation so moral and religious truths may be known "by everyone with facility, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error" (Pope Pius XII).

The Old Law

1962 The Old Law is the first stage of revealed Law. Its moral prescriptions are summed up in the Ten Commandments. The precepts of the Decalogue lay the foundations for the vocation of man fashioned in the image of God; they prohibit what is contrary to the love of God and neighbor and prescribe what is essential to it. The Decalogue is a light offered to the conscience of every man to make God's call and ways known to him and to protect him against evil:

God wrote on the tables of the Law what men did not read in their hearts (St Augustine).

III. The New Law or the Law of the Gospel

1966 The New Law is the *grace of the Holy Spirit* given to the faithful through faith in Christ. It works through charity; it uses the Sermon on the Mount to teach us what must be done and makes use of the sacraments to give us the grace to do it:

1968 The Law of the Gospel *fulfills the commandments of the Law*. The Lord's Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing or devaluing the moral prescriptions of the Old Law, releases their hidden potential and has new demands arise from them: it reveals their entire divine and human truth. It does not add new external precepts, but proceeds to reform the heart, the root of human

¹ Greek: "Ten Words"

acts, where man chooses between the pure and the impure, where faith, hope, and charity are formed and with them the other virtues.

1972 The New Law is called a *law of love* because it makes us act out of the love infused by the Holy Spirit, rather than from fear; a *law of grace*, because it confers the strength of grace to act, by means of faith and the sacraments; a *law of freedom*, because it sets us free from the ritual and juridical observances of the Old Law.

Conclusion

The Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments urge us to practice virtue and avoid vice; in doing so, we conform ourselves to Christ, draw closer to God and further from sin, become more virtuous and thus more happy. The Ten Commandments are given as rules to keep our lives straight, and the grace of the New Covenant enables us to keep this Law by the Spirit of Christ.

For Further Reading: *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1803-1869; Ps. 34:21, Phil. 4:8, 2 Pet. 1:5; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 49-89; Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*; Servais Pinckaers, O.P, *Sources of Christian Ethics*; C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*; Charles E. Rice, *50 Questions on the Natural Law*