

CHAPTER THIRTY

VIRTUES

(Catechism nn. 1803-1845)

Moral Virtues

Reflecting on morality takes us into the area of virtues (see Catechism n. 1803-1845), defined by the Catechism as

‘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’(n. 1804).

One way of clarifying what we mean by a virtue is to recall a situation where we have acquired a bad habit that we are attempting to break. Our tendency to behave in a certain way is so habitual that given the right set of circumstances the behaviour that we are trying to change is triggered and almost automatically we slip into it again. Acting against the habit can be very difficult indeed. When we manage to resist we are taking a step to breaking the habit, but we have not yet acquired the contrary virtue. We speak of a virtue only when the bad habit has lost its hold on us and our morally good response flows almost automatically. Our experience then is that the good behaviour we have been striving for is ‘firm, stable and habitual’, such that we experience ‘ease, self-mastery and joy in leading a morally good life.’

Moral Virtues

Let us first consider ‘moral virtues’, that is, virtues that are

‘acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love’(n. 1804).

There is a moral virtue for every dimension of human behaviour, and we would do well to heed Paul’s exhortation to the Christians of Philippi to set our minds and hearts to do

‘whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, whatever is excellent and worthy of praise’ (Philippians 4:8).

This is not the place to write a treatise on the many elements that contribute to living a moral life. We will limit our considerations here to four basic moral virtues: prudence, justice, courage and temperance. These are sometimes referred to as ‘cardinal virtues’, from the Latin *cardo*, meaning a hinge. The ancient Greek moralists considered that these virtues played a pivotal role in a virtuous life. Greek thinking influenced Jewish Wisdom literature and we find these four virtues mentioned in the Book of Wisdom (8:7):

‘Wisdom teaches temperance and prudence, justice and courage; nothing in life is more profitable than these’.

Christian moralists continued to hold these virtues in high regard. The list is not sacrosanct – in the light of modern psychological advances we could well come up with a more satisfactory list – but, in deference to tradition we would do well to consider these virtues and to discipline our lives to integrate the values they encompass, for they are clearly important.

Prudence

Prudence is defined in the Catechism (n. 1806) as

‘the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it ... It guides the judgment of conscience ... It applies moral principles to particular cases.’

It can be described as ‘practical wisdom’, for a prudent person habitually makes decisions that wisely apply ideals and principles to situations that can be quite complex.

In its treatment of prudence, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), n.548 has the following note (slightly adapted):

The exercise of prudence calls for a progressive formation in order to acquire the necessary qualities:

- learning from the past: the capacity to remember one’s own past experience with objectivity, without falsification.
- docility: an authentic love for the truth that helps learning from others and profiting from their experience.
- diligence: the ability to face the unexpected with objectivity in order to turn every situation to the service of good, resisting the temptation to intemperance, injustice or cowardice.

These dispositions enable the development of the necessary conditions for the moment of decision:

- foresight: the capacity to weigh the efficacy of a possible course of action for the attainment of a goal which is moral.
- circumspection: the capacity to weigh the circumstances that contribute to the creation of the situation in which a decision is to be made to act in a certain way.

In the social context, prudence can be specified under two particular forms:

- the capacity to order everything for the greatest good of society
- the capacity to obey legitimate authority, but without compromising the dignity of the human person.

Justice

Justice is defined as

‘the virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour’(Catechism n. 1807).

In regard to our relationship with God, a person can be said to act justly when he or she habitually does God’s will. In regard to our relationship to our fellow human beings,

‘justice towards others disposes a person 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’(n. 1807).

Courage & Temperance

Courage

Courage is defined by the Catechism as

‘the virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. It enables a person to conquer fear, even the fear of death, and to face trials and persecution’(n. 1808).

A pamphlet reflecting on the crucifix in the Church of San Damiano in Assisi includes the following comment:

‘It is courage that makes saints and courage is nothing more nor less than trusting in God’s grace which is always present. For in our trials and sufferings God is always present, like the space that surrounds a bird.’

Temperance

Temperance is defined as

‘the 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 honourable’(n. 1809).

Concluding remarks on the moral virtues

The Catechism goes on to remind us that

‘human virtues – acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by constantly renewed perseverance in 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’(n. 1810).

‘It is not easy for us human beings, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ’s gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. We should constantly ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow God’s call to love what is good and to shun evil’(n. 1811).

Theological Virtues

The theological virtues differ from the moral virtues in that they are not acquired by human effort. They are always gift. We can be more or less open to the gift, but they are essentially a sharing in the divine life. The Catechism reminds us:

‘The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt our human faculties for participation in the divine nature: for the theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One Triune God for their origin, motive and object’(n. 1812).

Tradition speaks of three theological virtues: faith, hope and love (charity). These three virtues are frequently linked in Paul’s letters. Perhaps the best known text is found in his First Letter to the Corinthians:

‘Love believes all things, hopes all things ... Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love’(1Corinthians 13:7,13).

Faith (Catechism n. 1814-1816)

We refer the reader to Chapter 5 for a fuller treatment of faith. The word ‘faith’ derives from the Latin *fides* and is linked etymologically with words such as ‘faithful’, ‘fidelity’, ‘confide’, and ‘abide’. It is closely connected with ‘trust’, ‘entrust’, ‘truth’, ‘betrothal’, and ‘tryst’. The English ‘belief’, from the Anglo-Saxon *be+léof*, means to ‘be-in-love’. Faith involves entrusting oneself to love. This leads to a special ‘knowing’ which opens us to ‘believe’ what is revealed to us in and through this love. In the words of Paul:

‘The only thing that counts is faith working through love’(Galatians 5:6).

In the brief treatment of faith in this section, the Catechism offers this definition:

‘Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that God has said and revealed to us.’

Hope (Catechism n. 1817-1821)

This is the first time that the Catechism looks at the virtue of hope (Greek: *elpis*). It is interesting to note the change in the meaning of *elpis* as we find it in the Greek moralists, in the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible and in the Newer Testament. In non-Biblical Greek *elpis* means ‘estimation’ or ‘expectation’. The Greek moralists encouraged their disciples to leave superstition behind and to ensure a sound basis for their judgment of what the future might hold for them. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Psalms and in the prophetic writings, however, *elpis* is used quite differently, translating Hebrew words that express ‘trust’. This is because for the people of Israel, the basis for hope was not a judgment based on reason; rather it was confidence in the presence of God in their lives and God’s promises to them as his chosen people. In the prophetic literature and in the Psalms, the focus of hope is not on the future but on present reliance on God. We see this, for example, in Psalm 131:

‘YHWH, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvellous for me. I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother. My soul is like the weaned child that is with me. O Israel, hope in YHWH from this time on and forevermore’(Psalm 131).

Much of the Wisdom literature of the Older Testament was composed during the Hellenist period when Judah came under the influence of the Greek world. This shows in the use of *elpis*. The focus is still on trust, but has shifted from the present to the future. It is the same in the Newer Testament, where we could define ‘hope’ as a present trusting confidence in regard to the future – a trust based on one’s faith in God. Trusting that God is faithful we are sure that what God has promised will happen, and we can leave the future peacefully to God. There is a place for eager longing, but this is not what hope is as we find it in the Newer Testament. Eager longing is not a theological virtue; hope is, where the focus is on present assurance because of the God in whom one now places one’s confidence, on whom one now relies, to whom one now looks.

Hope

If hope distracts us from a present lived in love, it is not the Christian virtue, for hope enables us to entrust the future into God's hands, so that, free from fear, we can live fully the present communion we have with God in love.

This is picked up in the English 'be-lieve' – which highlights the intimate connection between faith and hope. The difference is that faith is concerned with objective reality: the fact that God is real, the fact that God's will has been revealed, and that our basic response (our 'faith') is to accept this truth revealed in our history, base our life upon it and act accordingly. The objective reality in which we believe is what God has revealed in Jesus. Hope, on the other hand, speaks of an attitude of trust whereby, because we believe, we can leave the present and the future in God's hands. We are frail. We easily fall back into sin. We know that the fullness of communion with God is something for the future. Our faith encourages us to eagerly await the promised communion. Our hope encourages us to trust that God knows our longing, for our longing is God's gift. God is faithful. Let us believe in Jesus and live accordingly: which means giving ourselves to his Spirit. If we do this, we will find that the love that we see burning in his heart will set fire to our own, and this is all that matters. To quote once again from Paul:

'The only thing that counts is faith working through love'(Galatians 5:6).

As the Newer Testament continues to remind us, the object of our hope is 'glory': sharing in the radiant beauty of Jesus in his risen life. Paul speaks of

'Christ in you, your hope of glory'(Colossians 1:27).

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read:

'God's promise encourages us to seize the hope set before us. We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered'(Hebrews 6:18-20).

Later in the same Letter we read:

'Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful'(Hebrews 10:23).

Paul writes:

'When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory'(Colossians 3:4).

'This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure'(2Corinthians 4:17).

'We boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God'(Romans 5:2).

'We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him'(Romans 8:17).

'I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints'(Ephesians 1:17-18).

To experience glory is to experience the working of God's powerful love in the world. To experience glory is to experience being 'saved by the life of God's Son'(Romans 5:10). To experience glory is to experience communion in God's life. As Paul writes to Titus:

'God poured the Spirit out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life'(Titus 3:6-7; quoted Catechism n. 1817).

Ultimately, to experience glory is to experience the fullness of this communion beyond death. The virtue of hope enables us to entrust this to God who has promised us a share in Jesus' glory.

'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied'(1Corinthians 15:19).

'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure'(1John 3:2-3).

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you'(1Peter 1:3-4).

This is 'the hope laid up for you in heaven'(Colossians 1:5).

We are moved to hope because of God's promise and because of Jesus' redemptive death, resurrection and glorification.

'If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us'(Romans 8:31-34).

We are moved to hope because of the experience of Jesus' Spirit now in our lives:

'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'(Romans 5:5).

'We who have the first fruits of the Spirit groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience'(Romans 8:23-24).

'Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer'(Romans 12:12).

'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling'(Ephesians 4:4).

Karl Rahner SJ writes (*On the Theology of Hope* Theological Investigations 10):

‘Hope is the theological virtue by which we are graced to reach out to an always transcendent God. It remains in the Beatific Vision, for the absolute mystery [God] is never finally ‘overcome’ or ‘solved’. In heaven our longing will no longer be able to be suppressed and we will experience no distractions. We will delight in self-surrender, a full yielding to the Translucent. Hope makes it clear that the basic attitude of the Christian is not to guard and preserve, but rather, informed by, guided by, and faithful to tradition, we are called to remain open to the constant surprise of the always transcendent. Hope is not simply the attitude of one who is weak and at the same time hungering for a fulfilment that has yet to be achieved, but rather the courage to commit oneself in thought and deed to the incomprehensible and the uncontrollable that permeates our existence, and, as the future to which it is open, sustains us. Such courage has the power to dare more than what can be arrived at merely by planning and calculations. In the final and definitive consummation hope still prevails and endures, because this definitive consummation is God.’

Commenting on the psalm which says: ‘Seek his face always’ (Psalm 105:4), Saint Bernard reminds us that we will never cease seeking God even when we find him:

‘When the soul happily finds God its desire is not quenched but kindled. Does the consummation of joy bring about the consuming of desire? On the contrary, it acts like oil poured upon the flames. Joy will be fulfilled, but there will be no end to desire, and therefore no end to the search. Do not think of your eagerness to see God as caused by God’s absence, for God is always present; and think of the desire for God as without fear of failure, for grace is abundantly present’ (*On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 84,2).

Charity (Catechism 1822-1829)

Charity is love, but not any kind of love. Charity is the love that is the life of God, the love that God has poured into our hearts. It is a theological virtue for it has its source in God and binds us to God and to others because of our communion with God. John of the Cross writes:

‘The union of love of God is a habitual and loving attentiveness to the will of God’ (*Spiritual Canticle* 28.10).

It is this love that Jesus refers to when he says:

‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love ... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:9,12).

It is this love that Paul is speaking of in his famous canticle to love (the love he has found in the heart of Jesus; the love that is poured into our hearts by Jesus’ Spirit):

‘Love never stops caring. Love acts always in a kind way. Love does not act out of jealousy or envy. Love does not boast or behave arrogantly. Love does not behave indecently or insist on its own way. Love does not give way to irritation or brood over wrongs. Love takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.

‘Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone. Love believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes. Love does not come to an end’ (1Corinthians 13:4-8).

Jesus who is the perfect revelation of God showed in the way he constantly gave himself that love in the sense of self-giving is the essence of what it is to be God. Creation itself is an expression of God’s self-giving, a ‘word’ of love. When God revealed himself to Moses it was as a liberator who hears the cry of the poor and who is determined to redeem them (Exodus 3:7). His word was a challenge to Moses to offer himself as God’s instrument in delivering the Hebrew people from slavery. The call to be an instrument of God’s love is at the very centre of the law. This call has been fulfilled in the heart of Jesus, for in him, at last, love has come to its perfection. In Jesus’ self-giving, especially on the cross, we see a human heart responding perfectly to God’s gift of self, to God’s love.

The love that Jesus gave is the love given to Jesus by God. It is this love that is poured into our hearts through the gift of Jesus’ Spirit, and it is this love that overflows from our hearts to embrace our brothers and sisters. As Paul writes:

‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Romans 5:5).

The love we are to have for one another is God’s love flowing through us to others. Gerald May writes:

‘My single desire for God will be of more help to my friends because my single desire for God will birth the kind of action that will really help them. It is not desiring God instead of doing helpful actions, but desiring God as the source of the actions that are going to be really helpful. It is that simple’ (*The Awakened Heart*, page 234).

Jesus’ love generates within us an imperative urging us to love as he loves. If it was only good example that we were receiving, we might admire Jesus, but we would despair of ever being able to do what we see Jesus doing. Jesus is offering us more than example. He is offering us his own Spirit, the very love that he enjoys with the Father. With this Spirit we will be able to love our brothers and sisters, for we will have Jesus’ own love to offer them.

The fountain of love which has poured into the heart of Jesus from his Father, and which he in turn has poured into the hearts of his disciples, is to continue to be poured out in the love his disciples have for one another. This is clearly more than a love of friendship. It is more than the kind of love we experience with people who treat us well. It is more than a response to an obviously attractive quality which other people might exhibit. It is our sharing in the creative love which God has and which Jesus reveals. As Paul writes:

‘God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Romans 5:8).

This is the kind of love which Paul urges on us:

‘Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us’ (Ephesians 5:2).

A moral life

Conclusion

A moral life is sustained by grace, and so by the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. To the extent that we draw on grace, and discipline ourselves, we can acquire habitual predispositions to make good decisions and to act upon them: we acquire the many moral virtues that facilitate living a moral life.