

THE VIRTUE OF FORTITUDE

I. Fortitude involves the willingness to be firm and steadfast in the pursuit of a good goal despite difficulties and dangers. CCC 188.

A. On a natural level, fortitude is guided by justice and prudence, which indicate what goals are worth pursuing and what effort and risks are worth taking. On a supernatural level, this virtue is guided by faith and charity and the gifts of wisdom and counsel, which likewise, but at a greater level, indicate the good worth pursuing. Without these virtues, courage is not a virtue, for it merely involves the strong pursuit of self-interest or a worldly goal. Fortitude becomes a virtue because of something greater than itself. As St. Ambrose says, "Fortitude must not trust itself," lest it become pride or a desire for power.

B. Fortitude operates primarily by urging us onto a goal that is worth pursuing. It complements temperance, which operates primarily by restraining us from desires that are wrong or excessive. However, as with temperance, fortitude is a mean and thus also operates by restraint from foolhardiness (i.e. the taking of risks for goals that are not worth it) and presumption (the taking on of a greater goal than we are able to achieve.) Temperance also works with fortitude both by keeping us from loving too much the things of this world, and thus being too fearful of losing them, and by humility, which keeps fortitude from leading to pride.

C. Faith gives us a sense of the final goals worth pursuing and thus informs fortitude and gives us goal worth pursuing above all else. It also gives us a sense of the presence of Jesus and the angels and saints with us as we face dangers and difficulties. The virtue of hope involves a confidence that God will guide us through all things and will not give us tests beyond our ability. It also gives us confidence that our efforts in the face of difficulties and dangers we face will be rewarded, even if they do not seem to succeed.

II. One aspect of fortitude involves the balance between the passions of fear and daring. Fear, as St. Thomas says, is based on love; we fear losing what we love. Daring is the desire to take on risks and challenges. Neither is inherently good or evil, but rather, are the passions about which fortitude deals.

A. Love of natural things (e.g., life, health, good relations with neighbors, a good job, etc.) is rightful, but must be kept in line. Fortitude involves keeping proper understanding of the value of these things, but even more having an appreciation of greater things that one is willing to risk sacrificing lesser things for the greater ones. There is an intellectual aspect (the recognition of

the value of greater and lesser things), but even more a discipline of the passions to act according to what we know to be true.

B. Fear is not generally wrongful, but must be controlled. A lack of fear could be because one has such a sense of the greater things that losing lesser things is of little control; such a lack of fear is a sign of advancement. But a lack of fear could also be due to a failure to value life, health, family, etc., or due to ignorance of the dangers. Such a lack of fear would not be fortitude, but sloth and ignorance.

C. We should love God above all else and therefore fear the loss of God, or the diminishment of our life with God above all else. Thus, "the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord." Ps. 111: 20; Sirach 1:12. There is an excitement that comes from the challenge of avoiding all temptations and pleasing the Lord. The desert fathers in fact portrayed the spiritual life as one of combating against sins with the same courage as soldiers combat an enemy.

D. People naturally desire certain risks. The virtue of fortitude builds up this desire when needed, moderates it when necessary, and channels to the right ends.

III. Fortitude also operates by being consistent in the pursuit of a good goal despite difficulties, delays and struggles.

A. In particular, St. Thomas describes patience as the virtue that is willing to pursue the good calmly and consistently despite disappointments. It allows reason to maintain control when things go wrong. It thus goes alongside the virtue of peacefulness.

B. The virtue of perseverance enables one to stay with a good project or practice day in and day out. It moderates sloth and the desire for constant change.

C. Another virtue allied with fortitude is magnanimity, or the willingness to take on the great things that one is called upon to do. A related virtue is munificence, the willingness to spend a great deal of money, time, or so forth on a great cause.

1. The opposed vice by defect is pusillanimity, the shrinking from great things to which one is called. There is also a vice of not caring enough about one's reputation.

2. The opposed vices by excess are presumption, i.e., the temptation to rush into things that one is not capable of and vainglory. Vainglory can be: (1) seeking honor in excess of what one deserves; (2) seeking honor without recognizing

others, especially without referring to God; or (3) an excessive desire for honor.

IV. Fortitude is also a gift of the Holy Spirit.

A. As a gift of the Holy Spirit, fortitude gives us: (1) an additional sense that Jesus and His angels and saints are with us in the midst of struggles; (2) a real sense of what we know by the virtue of hope, i.e. that God will guide us through all things and make all things work to the good of those who love Him; and (3) that all of our sufferings taken on for Christ or dedicated to Him have great value.

B. As a gift of the Holy Spirit, therefore, fortitude continue in heaven in a mysterious way. The unity with Christ and the angels and saints is certainly there in heaven. Perhaps even the saints joyfully make sacrifices for the sake of what is greater. See, e.g., Ps. 27:6; Amos 9:13-14; Rev. 22:2 (referring to "medicine" even in the heavenly Jerusalem.)