

THE VIRTUE OF TEMPERANCE

I. Temperance is the ability to control one's desires so that one may be free to do what is good. The opposite, intemperance, is slavery to desires. "The alternative is clear: either man governs his passions and finds peace, or he lets himself be dominated by them and becomes unhappy." Catechism of the Catholic Church 2339; see also Catechism 1809. Although not generally using the word temperance, Scriptures, and especially the wisdom books and the New Testament epistles refer to such self-control frequently. See, e.g., Sir 5:2, 18:3. Wis. 6:17; Sir. 5:11-19; Romans 6:12-23; Gal. 5:16-25; 1 Peter 2:10-22.

A. Temperance and fortitude are complementary virtues. Temperance operates mostly by restraining one from seeking pleasures that we tend to want to excess. Fortitude spurs us onto actions that we tend to shrink from, such as those that are difficult, dangerous, dull, or not immediately rewarding. The two go together. As Saint Escriva once wrote, "[L]iving in this way, with a spirit of sacrifice, means freeing oneself from many kind of slavery, savoring instead, in the depths of one's heart, the fullness of God's love. Life then takes on again shades and tones which intemperance had tended to blur, We find ourselves able to care for the needs of others, to share what is ours with everyone, to devote our energies to great causes." Saint Escriva, Friends of God 84.

B. However, both virtues are means between extremes. Thus, one can be intemperate by excessively rejecting rightful desires or can contradict the virtue of fortitude by taking on unreasonable risks.

C. The overall idea is that human desires are created good. However, because of original sin and weakness, some desires are inordinately strong, while other strivings tend to be weak. In addition, if a desire takes charge, it tends to become corrupt.

D. "Two roads there are, two attitudes to life. One is to look for the most comfortable and agreeable way, to pamper the body and avoid sacrifice and penance; the other to seek the will of God even though it takes an effort to guard the senses and keep the body in check. It is either to live like pilgrims who, since they are only passing through, have what they strictly need and do not attach much importance to material things, or to be chained down by comfort-seeking, by pleasure and material goods which are seen as ends in themselves and not simply as means." Conversations With God Vol. 3 p. 652-53.

E. Some helpful ways of achieving temperance are: (1) thoughtfulness regarding pleasures (2) small mortifications; (3) control of the senses and imagination, especially with regard to advertisements and entertainment; (4) good company; and (5) taking delight in prayer, in good works, in uplifting occupations, and in good people. Prayer also helps one to sense the beauty of human nature in right proportion. "Spiritual beauty consists in a person's conduct or actions being well proportioned in respect of the spiritual clarity of reason." St. Thomas, Summa Theologica II-II q. 45 art.2.

F. A desire for honor before God and the angels and saints is helpful in attaining this virtue. A desire for honor before the world may be helpful when the world does in fact judge rightly, but this desire is of less help because worldly honor is so often inconsistent, based on appearances, or even based upon what is wrong.

II. Some of the types of temperance are: (1) moderation in eating and drink; (2) chastity; (3) sobriety; (4) clemency and peacefulness; (5) modesty with regard to appearance and fame; (6) humility; (7) studiousness; and (8) moderation with reference to entertainment, games, and conversation.

A. Eating and drinking, being among the most basic of human desires, is central to temperance.

1. St. Thomas identifies five types of gluttony: (1) regarding types of food; (2) preparation and appearance of food; (3) eating food too hastily or with bad manners; (4) demanding food when one wants it rather than when it is best; and (5) eating too much food. Summa Theologica II-II q. 148 art. 4.

2. Gluttony is hardly the worst of sins, but maintaining moderation on this front is commonly the first step in attaining self control generally. "Unless we tame the enemy dwelling within us, namely, our gluttonous appetite, we have not even stood up to engage in the spiritual combat." St. Gregory the Great, Morals of the Book of Job XXX:18.

3. Self-control with regard to food and drink, and especially fasting, also helps greatly in developing a life of prayer. The material hunger creates a spiritual hunger for God to fill. Such sacrifices are also a good way of doing penance.

B. Chastity is control of sexual and romantic desires (i.e., physical and emotional attractions.)

1. Such desires are meant to bring women and men together so that they may complement each other in love, thus bringing sanctity to each other and children into the world. As a Christian sacrament, marriage also shows forth an

image of the love between Christ and His Church.

2. Chastity keeps love, and the seeking of it, in control of desires; it gives love space to grow. This virtue insures that the physical and emotional expression of love is consistent with the true love the couple is committed to. "The chaste person maintains the powers of life and love placed in him." Catechism of the Catholic Church 2338. Chastity involves either abstinence outside of marriage or total loving fidelity inside of marriage, and also a pure frame of mind, whether inside or outside of marriage.

3. Celibacy is the voluntary forgoing of romantic interests and the right of marriage for the sake of consecration, as in priesthood, religious life, and consecrated single life. There is still a complementarity, as priests and religious brothers take the Church as their mystical bride (and even more than other Catholics take Mary as their queen and lady) and sisters and nuns take Christ as their mystical husband and (even more than other Catholics, take Joseph as their protector.) Consecrated single people are more living in the liberty of the Holy Spirit as the angels do. Consecrated men are often called to be in love with Wisdom, presented as a beautiful woman or a matron in the wisdom literature of the Bible. Consecrated women are often called to be in love with the masculine, thundering word of God.

4. The Church especially recommends the avoidance of idleness, custody of the eyes, modesty in dress, care regarding entertainment frequent recourse to prayer and the sacraments, and acts of voluntary mortification as ways of achieving purity and thus greater company with the angels and saints. Roman Catechism, Part III: The Sixth Commandment: Means of Practicing Purity; Catechism of the Catholic Church 2340.

5. Moderation regarding food and drink and chastity are especially important in attaining a sharper intellect and greater contemplation, as was the case with the patriarch Joseph, the prophet Daniel, and John the Baptist. See Matt 5:8; Summa Theologica II-II q. 148 art. 6, q. 149, art. 5.

C. Sobriety involves the use of alcoholic beverages in moderation.

1. The opposed vices are either: (1) drunkenness; or (2) simply drinking more than is prudent without being drunk. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 150, art. 2 & reply 2.

2. The first vice, if deliberate, is apparently an attempt at experiencing the excitement that rightfully comes through rising

above ordinary human affairs through the Spirit, but by easy means of alcohol, rather than the demanding path of the Holy Spirit. See Eph. 5:18. Because it involves deliberately overthrowing reason, intentional drunkenness is a mortal sin.

3. The latter vice, i.e., simply drinking too much, without being drunk, would stem from an excessive desire to be sociable, at the cost of prudence and other responsibilities.

D. Clemency and peacefulness involve the control of anger.

1. At. Thomas distinguishes between clemency (i.e. moderation in the desire to punish or retaliate) and peacefulness (moderation in anger.) The one involves mostly action, while the other involves thought. The two virtues tend to work together.

2. The opposed vices are primarily anger and vengeance. However, there can be a defect insofar as one can lack a sense of justice. In addition, a failure to punish frequently comes from a lack of fortitude. In the latter case, the thought of anger often continues, while no action is taken

3. As an emotion, anger is inherently neither good nor bad, but people tend to have that emotion, and perform the resulting actions, to excess. Excessive anger can come from letting oneself become angry too quickly or easily, or from letting anger continue from too long. Sometimes anger expresses itself actively, as in angry words or action, and sometimes passively, as in sullenness or avoidance. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 158, art. 5,7. Anger basically involves letting an injury, whether real or imaginary, occupy too central a place in one's vision of reality.

E. Modesty, strictly speaking, involves a control over the desire for admiration or approval. By extension, it can also involve chastity and charity in dress.

1. The desire for a good reputation is itself a good thing, for a good reputation both allows one to accomplish things in the world and be a good example, and encourages one to uphold what is right. See, e.g., Matt. 5:16; Summa Theologica II-II q. 72, art. 3. But this desire can be excessive, or focused more on self-interest than on.

2. Excessive attention to one's appearance or excessive concern about one's status is the more common of the vices

opposed to modesty. But a neglect of good manners is also a vice opposed to modesty. See, e.g., Summa Theologica II-II q. 169 art. 1. Excessive attention may be due to vanity, a desire for advancement, or a desire to provoke wrongful thoughts. In the first two cases, it is most likely a venial sin; in the latter case, it is most likely a mortal sin.

F. Humility is the recognition of one's rightful place; it disciplines the desire to seek rightful things. At its essence, it involves an appreciation for the sovereignty of God and, by extension, of the goodness He has given other people, as well as the goodness He has given oneself. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 161 art. 4. Thus, humility is, at its essence, a rightful sense of openness to all good things.

1. The most common vice opposed to humility is pride, which imagines one's own accomplishments (actual and potential) as the center of reality. Pride is the queen of all the vices because it involves, at its essence, a refusal to recognize the goodness of God and, by extension, of His creatures. All other sins tend to flow from pride, for they involve the elevation of one's own plans and desires above those of God.
2. God calls humble people to greater things because they can do greater things without ignoring God or other people. See Luke 14:11; James 4:10; Summa Theologica II-II q. 161 art. 2 reply 2.
3. An unwillingness to do great things that one is called to can involve a defect of rightful pride.

G. Studiousness is a disciplined desire for rightful knowledge

1. Although studiousness involves fortitude by spurring one onto rightful study, St. Thomas believes that it more often operates by way of restraint, i.e., by keeping one from pursuing harmful or frivolous knowledge, thus clearing the way for rightful knowledge. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 166, art. 2.
2. In particular, one can seek excessive knowledge by: (1) seeking knowledge primarily for the sake of showing off or gaining an advantage; (2) spending so much time on lesser things that one has not the time for greater ones; (3) seeking knowledge from an illegitimate or harmful source (e.g., a gossip or a newspaper with tempting images); (4) putting too much trust in untrustworthy sources and too little faith in God; or (5) seeking certainty or deep knowledge more quickly than it can be acquired; or (6) seeking knowledge of things one is not meant to know (e.g., the future or the personal lives of other people.)

H. With regard to entertainment, games and conversation, there can be an excessive desire to engage in such things, as well as a deficiency in people who "are without mirth, not only. . . . lacking in playful speech, but . . . also burdensome to others." See Summa Theologica II-II q. 168 art. 3-4.

1. The desire by excess in modern society tends to involve either: (1) taking too much time with "easy" entertainment (e.g., television, CDs), and not engaging in leisure that really uplifts the soul (e.g., fine literature, real conversation) ; and (2) on a related point, not being careful about the potential for entertainment or conversations to lead to sinful desires.
2. There can, at the same time as an excessive desire for easy entertainment, be a lack of social mirth, for much entertainment today is isolated and therefore, unsocial. The solution is both a tempering of the desire for the entertainment one is used to and the virtue of fortitude in having the courage to get to know other people better.