

RCIA CLASS 18 - THE VIRTUES AND TRUE HUMAN FREEDOM

I. Man is in the image and likeness of God and finds his fulfillment in reaching toward Him.

A. What is it that makes us glorious, different from animals, machines and what gives us our infinite value is that we were created in God's image and likeness, and receive a dignity greater than all the universe. Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8:3-5.

- In this image and likeness, we are likewise called to a destiny of being transformed fully to receive God's glory in all its majesty as nothing less than children of God forever. See 1 John 3:1-2.

B. This progress towards God means fulfilling the good, the true, the beautiful, and the holy. These aspects distinguish us from animals and even more so from machines.

1. As humans, we can love the good in God, in each other and in all creation. Seeking this goodness is at the essence of the call to love, which in turn is what gives freedom its final purpose. As Dante wrote:

The greatest gift that God of His largesse

Made in creation, perfect even as He

Most of His substance, and to Him most dear

He gave to the will, and it was liberty.

Paradiso V:19-21

b. Freedom is so important because, without freedom, we cannot love and thus cannot be in the image of God. See 1 John 4:7.

c. This love is not mere sentimentality, but rather shows itself in sacrifice, such as the love of a husband working for his wife, the love of a mother sacrificing for her children, the love of a scholar in pursuit of the truth, the

love of a soldier fighting for his country. These loves come to their height in the love God has for us, the love shown from the Cross, which we are meant to imitate. That love alone goes beyond death. Thus, he who would save his life must lose it. See Mark 8:35.

2. Love, however, depends upon truth, for we cannot seek the good if we do not know what the good is. And we cannot desire and celebrate the good of God or another person without knowing what that good is.
 - a. Love of our opinions about others is, in the end, self-love. Truth, by contrast, brings real unity. Thus, we are endowed with an intellect to know the truth. All truth finds its source in God Himself.
 - b. Thus, love and truth go together. As Pope Benedict points out in Caritas in Veritate 3, "Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love." Truth needs love, lest it become cold; love needs truth lest it become fake.
3. The good is naturally attractive, and true beauty is the natural attractiveness of the truth. There is a splendor to truth, which we as humans learn more and more to perceive and express. The Psalms express this beauty of the truth. E.g., Ps. 19:7-10, 27:4. Pope John Paul II made this point in his letter to artists, saying "In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty." He quotes Plato, "The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful."
 - In his book Reflections on the Psalms, C.S. Lewis comments upon the fact that the Jews considered the Law to be beautiful; he argued that this law was the order of all things, the symmetry of reality that they admired. When we see this symmetry, this fittingness, we see true beauty.
 - But all true beauty points beyond itself to something greater. All deep joy reflects a greater realm, as C.S. Lewis would likewise point out in Surprised by Joy. One wants beauty to last forever, but on earth it cannot; there is an attraction to a greater realm.
4. This call to a greater realm is the call to the holy, to that union with God in the celestial realms. St. Paul begins most

of his letters by addressing them to "the holy ones" or "the ones called to be holy." There is, as the Catechism says, a universal call to holiness.

- The delight at prayer, the call to a higher realm, that soaring of the Spirit to God are part of this universal call to holiness. As St. Augustine wrote, "You made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You."

- All people naturally desire the mystical, something beyond this earth, for religion has been a regular aspect of civilization, the source, along with love, of the greatest poetry, building, and self-sacrifice. This calling can, without guidance, go terribly astray. But it should not be denied either. Rather, it must be guided that we may soar to the heavens.

D. The modern world highly values freedom, but usually understands freedom as simply the ability to do what one wants. Simply following desires, however, is another form of slavery, a slavery that ends in death.

1. Earthly desires, in the end, come from forces beyond ourselves, such as biology, chemistry, popular trends, advertisements, and the like. If we simply live in accordance with those desires, we are slaves to those tendencies.

2. When one sins, one is letting these desires get control. As Jesus says, **Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.** @ John 8:34.

3. Furthermore, all such desires if not redeemed, end in death, for death claims an end of human life. See Romans 6:12-14.

E. Freedom is valuable above all else because it is a participation in God's creative goodness. As the Vatican II Council said, **Genuine freedom is the exceptional sign of the image of God in humanity. People gain such dignity when, freeing themselves of all slavery to the passions, they press forward towards their goal by freely choosing what is good.** @ Gaudium et Spes (1965) 17.

F. Such freedom is necessary to live true love, which seeks the eternal and participates in the divine. This love, this participation in God, is the final end of freedom.

1. Machines can create or money can buy merely earthly things. But such things are in the end unsatisfactory because they do not appeal to our deepest longings.

2. From time immemorial, people have asked what will satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, what will bring us that happiness that sin and death cannot destroy. Christ answered that question by giving the two greatest commandments, that of love of God and neighbor, the commandments that lead to eternal life. See, e.g., Matt. 22:34-40. As St. Paul says, it is this love that makes all other things valuable, for only this love, supported by faith and hope, brings us to God. See 1 Cor. 12:32-13:13.

3. This love is difficult to define, but is given and shown in the life of Jesus Christ. God first loves us and gives us a share in the knowledge and goodness of Himself, a thrill, a deep desire, to live in this goodness. See, e.g., 1 John 4:7-21

II. The virtues are the ability to advance toward this true freedom, the ability to participate in the creative goodness of God. In the Church, as well as ancient philosophy, a virtue is considered to be a habitual disposition to do the good easily and naturally and to give the best of himself. See Catechism 1803.

A. The general notion of virtue was developed by the Greek philosophers of the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. largely in response to skeptics who viewed moral norms as either nothing more than societal rules, or as ideas the strong used to keep others under control.

1. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle and others took the Greek term arete, meaning an excellence at some pursuit (e.g., a trade, a skill, or a sport) and applied it to excellence at being a good and happy human being, which they defined as virtue. Before that time, there was not much abstract notion of virtue, but rather codes of moral rules and stories, real or mythological, about what a good person is.

2. Plato, especially in the Republic, compared a virtuous person to a well-ordered city. He said that the mark of a virtuous person is that he controls by reason his passions and his Aspiritedness so that he can rise to greater and greater perceptions of the good. He tended to think of justice as the central virtue.

3. Aristotle systematized descriptions of different types of virtues. From his works we get the cardinal virtues: justice,

prudence, fortitude, and temperance, or self-control. The book of Wisdom, written about 200 B.C. picks up on these virtues and describes them as central to the acquisition of wisdom. See Wis. 8:7. These virtues have become central to Christian explanations of the good life. See Catechism 1805-1809. Dominican teachings use them to organize moral principles. See Summa Theologica I-II question 61.

- The term Acardinal virtue@ comes from the Latin cardines, or hinge, for they are the hinges to other virtues.

- He also distinguished between six levels of virtue or vice: in the middle are the virtuous (those who do what is right more naturally and easily), the disciplined (those who generally do what is right, but with a great deal of struggle), the undisciplined (those who struggle to do what is right but generally do not succeed), and the vicious (those who do not even try to do what is right, instead justifying what is wrong.) He also described, at the lowest level, the brutish and, at the highest, those whose dispositions are Aheroic, indeed divine.@

B. Catholic thought has used much of the Aristotelian system for describing the human virtues. And, from St. Paul, we bring them further with the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 13:13.

1. The human virtues, and especially the cardinal virtues, can and should be understood by everyone, albeit incompletely. Not everyone will understand them, but they can. With each of these virtues, there are also other virtues allied to them.

2. It is only by the sanctifying grace given through the sacraments that we receive the supernatural virtues, faith, hope and charity. These virtues allow us to be in relationship with God Himself through Jesus Christ.

C. The virtues build upon commandments, but bring them further.

1. The commandments tell one what is right and wrong in a given case. One may do what is right naturally, because of favorable circumstances or with struggle. Doing what is right is always good, but doing what is right as a matter of second nature is based upon virtue. Virtues also imply that one does what is right for a right reason. To perform a rightful action for a wrong reason (e.g., correcting another person in order to hurt him, or helping another person for the sake of demonstrating one's superiority) would still be unvirtuous. See C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, Book 3, ch. 2 (1952).

2. As with excellence in other fields, repetition builds the virtues. Thus, even if an action is done with struggle, or

simply because the situation was favorable, repetition can make the good action deeper so that the person develops virtues. People naturally have a desire for the virtues, but we are not born with them; we must acquire and develop them by grace and training, which involves repetition.

3. The virtues then call upon one also to exercise of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the Beatitudes, see Is. 11:1-2; Matt. 5:3-12.
 - a. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are the ability to soar above even what is ordinarily called good to the divine, the ability to act in a manner that is "inspired," that is full of the Spirit. See St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, Part II-I, question 68, article 1. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, they are greater than the human virtues, but lesser than the theological ones.
 - b. The Beatitudes are dispositions to happiness in various ways, and are thus the flowering of the virtues and the gifts. The Beatitudes show how we experience joy in this life, and final joy in the life to come.
 - c. In Divinum Illud Munus (That Divine Office), Pope Leo XIII said in 1897, "AThe just man . . . [n]eeds those seven gifts which are properly attributed to the Holy Spirit. By means of these gifts, the soul is excited and encouraged to attain the evangelical beatitudes which, like the flowers that come forth in the spring time are the signs and harbingers of eternal beatitude.@

III. The virtues together make for a good human being. The supernatural virtues are higher than the human ones, and involve more of the effects of grace. However, they still rely on the human virtues, the exercise of which are also possible only with the grace of God.

A. The cardinal virtues work together to make a good human, as can be understood by anyone using right reason. They involve

maintaining a middle level between extremes.

1. Prudence is the ability to decide what is right and how to achieve it, along with the desire to get things right. It is like the ability to steer a car.

a. Prudence is not simply caution, but rather a willingness to consider the information available, carefully to apply general principles to it, and through this careful thought make decisions or come to conclusions. Both rushing to a decision and indecisiveness are contrary to prudence.

b. Prudence begins by looking at reality clearly. This ability: (1) includes the disciplining of memory, a willingness to recall what has gone before accurately; (2) the willingness to see the present accurately; and (3) the ability to foresee results of various paths. It includes the knowledge that there will be uncertainty and the ability to deal with it. It also involves both an understanding of the principles of morality to be applied to each case.

c. Prudence also involves docility, which rightly understood means the ability to trust others when they are reliable and to take the advice and counsel of others, along with an understanding of whose counsel is worth taking.

2. Temperance, or self-control, is the ability to control the passions so that one can use them for good, and so that one is not controlled by them. It is like the good working order of a car.

a. Temperance is a rightful attitude towards human desires, whether physical, intellectual, aesthetic, and even spiritual. Being temperate means controlling such desires, rather than being controlled by them. This virtue operates mostly by restraining one from seeking pleasures that we tend to want to excess.

b. However, as with other virtues, it is a mean between extremes. Thus, one can also be intemperate by excessively rejecting rightful desires as one 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.

3. Fortitude is the willingness to do what is right, and to avoid evil, especially when such righteousness is difficult or tiresome. Fortitude spurs on one to do good things we may shrink from, and to avoid backsliding. It is like the energy of a car.

a. 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.

b. 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.)

4. Justice is the desire to maintain and establish right relations with others by giving them what is their due.

a. Fairness is the aspect of justice that rewards good and punishes evil. However, justice goes beyond that, showing kindness and mercy even when strict fairness does not demand it.

b. In order to establish right relations between us and God, justice not only gives others what is due to them by their actions, but also what is due to human nature. Thus, caring for those in need and reconciling people is a part of justice. Above all, rendering to God what is His due, in worship, obedience, and dedication, is the highest form of justice.

B. We receive the supernatural virtues in baptism, and maintain them through the sacraments, prayer, penance and good works.

1. Faith is the willingness and ability to trust in what God says, especially in Scripture and in the Church. It is based upon a trusting relationship with God, and maintained by regular contact with Him and by carrying out His will.

a. Faith is that complete trust in God that both comes from and enhances our relationship with God and the angels and saints. Faith is not merely an intellectual belief in propositions, but a deep trusting relationship with God Himself.

b. But we could not have that relationship without God revealing Himself to us. Thus, He inspired authors who wrote the Bible and guides the Church to reveal Him and His words to us. The faith is based upon our relationship with God, who gives these sources their trustworthiness. Thus, as St. Thomas says, when we say we believe in the Bible or in the Catholic Church, we are implicitly saying that we believe in the Holy Spirit speaking through them. Summa Theologica Part II-II, question 1, article 9.

2. Hope is the ability to trust in God=s guidance of one=s own life, of the lives of people we know, or the Church, and of the world.

a. It is opposed to presumption (the idea that God will save everyone regardless of what we do) and despair (the idea that a situation or a person is hopeless.)

b. It also opposed to false worldly hopes that mere institutions or programs are the ultimate solution and an excessive condemnation of things in the world.

3. Love (agape in Greek) is difficult to define. It involves a perception of the goodness of God above all, and of other persons because they reflect God=s goodness. It is the controlling principle behind all of the other virtues and moral laws. See, e.g, Matt. 22:34-40. It should also be the controlling principle of all human loves (e.g., for spouse, for family, for friends, for country, and for interests.) See 1 Cor. 13:1-13.