

RCIA CLASS 18 - FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF MORALITY, PART I: HUMAN  
NATURE, VIRTUES AND VICES

I. There is a universal call to holiness, that is, to being an inspired person of heroic virtue, one able to live as a son or daughter of God.

A. Scriptures confirm that all of us are called to become excellent, indeed inspired people.

1. Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “Be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Matt. 5:48. The path toward such perfection is difficult, but Christ is with us all the way. See Matt. 7:14, 16:24.

2. Likewise, the Pauline letters generally describe the whole Christian community as the “holy ones” or those “called to be holy.” See, e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Phil. 1:1. The term for the holy ones, *hagioi* in Greek, or *sancti* in Latin, is the same as the term for saints. We are all called to the level of the saints.

B. The prophets spoke of a time when all of the people of God would be filled with the Holy Spirit. Starting with Pentecost, this time has now come.

1. Moses of old prayed that all the people of God would be filled with the Spirit, that they would all be prophets. See Num. 11:29.

2. The prophets predicted that, in the days to come, God would in fact give His Spirit to all of His People. See, e.g., Joel 2:28-29; Ez. 36:25-29; Jer. 31:31-34.

3. And at Pentecost God fulfilled these promises by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the early Christians. See Acts 2:14-18. Thus, by the grace of God, we become temples of the Holy Spirit and called to act in a fashion guided by the Holy Spirit. See, e.g., Romans 8:14-17; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16-18.

C. We are also called to be sons and daughters of God. See, e.g., John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 3:23-4:7. Our final destiny is to become co-heirs with Jesus Christ to an everlasting kingdom. See, e.g., Luke 19:11-19; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; Rev. 2:26. In this role, we are called to heroic sanctity, reflecting the heroism that pagans thought was available to only the select few.

- Thus, the Beatitudes all begin in Greek (the language of the New Testament) with the word *makarios*, which we translate “blessed.” See Matt. 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23. Although Christ would have spoken in Aramaic, the early Christians used that term *makarios* to translate His meaning in proclaiming the Beatitudes. And that term referred to both to nobility (in this case being nobles in the kingdom of heaven) or the joy, the glory, the splendors of the heroes of old (e.g., Hercules, Hector, Orpheus) in that mythical Age of the Heroes. The message was that God has given to all of us a call to be princes and princesses in this greater kingdom, to live out the heroic joy that the pagans thought restricted to the few from some mythical era long ago.

D. The Catechism summarizes these principles by stating, “All Christians in any state of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. All are called to holiness.” Catechism 2013. In fact Part III, which describes the moral law, is entitled Life in Christ, for sharing in His life and love is the goal of the moral law.

II. Fulfilling this calling to heroic virtue, the Catholic moral system is based upon the idea that we fulfill our destinies by growing always in the ability to participate in God’s creative goodness, to live in an excellent, even heroic fashion. Central to this advancement is the development of virtues, the ability to be a man or woman of high quality, excelling at what it means to be human. The Church, as well as ancient Greek philosophy, defines a virtue as a regular and consistent disposition to do the good easily and naturally and to give the best of ourselves. See Catechism 1803. The virtues thus give the ability to obtain this true freedom, the ability to participate in the creative goodness of God.

A. The Greek philosophers of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C. developed the idea of virtues 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. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and others took the Greek term *arete*, which meant 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.

1. Plato, especially in his book The Republic, compared a virtuous person to a well-ordered city. He said that the mark of a virtuous person is that by reason he controls his passions and his “spiritedness.” (Spiritedness is a strong desire for honor, adventure, heroism and the like.) By the virtues a person can rise to greater and greater perceptions of the good and the ability to carry it out. Plato and other ancient philosophers tended to think of justice as the central virtue.

2. Aristotle systematized descriptions of different types of virtues. From his works we get the idea of the cardinal virtues: justice, prudence (meaning clear thinking), fortitude, and temperance (meaning 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. Catholic teachers often use them to organize moral principles. See, e.g., Summa Theologica I-II question 61.

- The term “cardinal virtue” comes from the Latin *cardines*, or hinge, for they are the hinges to other virtues.

- In his famous book Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle also distinguished between three levels of human goodness and three levels of evil. The first two levels of goodness are: (1) the disciplined, those who generally do what is right, but with a great deal of struggle; and (2) the virtuous, those who do what is right more naturally and easily. The first two levels of evil are: (1) the undisciplined, those who struggle to do what is right but frequently fall much short of it; and (2) 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 “heroic, indeed divine.” The brutish person engages in evil beyond ordinary vice and selfishness (e.g., cruelty, perversions, grotesqueness.) The heroic, indeed divine person rises to a level of goodness (e.g., heroism, generosity, passion for truth) well above what we would think of a regular good person as doing.

- B. Catholic thought has used much of the Aristotelian system for describing the human virtues. And, from St. Paul’s writings, we understand that God brings us further to the heights of excellence with the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity. See, e.g., 1 Cor. 13:13; Eph. 1:15-23; Col. 1:3-5.
1. The human virtues, and especially the cardinal virtues, can and should be understood by everyone, albeit we can understand them only incompletely without divine revelation. As with other matters of natural reason, not everyone will understand them, but they can. With each of these virtues, there are also other virtues allied to them. Thus, for example, allied to justice are such virtues as gratitude, courtesy, and generosity, and allied to fortitude are such virtues as patience and magnanimity, the willingness to take on great projects for their own sake. Grace is needed to practice even these virtues, whether a person knows it or not, or whether a person has faith or not. In addition, even the natural virtues would be impossible to practice fully without this sanctifying grace, which makes us friends of God.
  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 and to act as sons and daughters of God.
- C. The virtues build upon commands of God, such as the Ten 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, or do what is right because it comes from one’s natural disposition. Doing what is right is always good, if the motive is at least neutral, but doing what is right as a matter of second nature is a sign of virtue, which is a higher motivation still. 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, with the good action marred by the evil intent. See C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, ch. 2 (1952). Doing what is right for a lesser, but still good reason (e.g., to be rewarded or to avoid punishment) helps build the virtues, but indicates that there is still work to do for the virtue really to be there.
  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.

C. 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.

1. 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. He compares the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the natural virtues as like the difference between having to row a boat, or having the wind lead it onward with greater speed and power.

2. 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.

3. In Divinum Illud Munus (That Divine Office), Pope Leo XIII said in 1897, “The 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 form the structure for the human person to be an excellent man or woman. 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 is 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 clear thinking, the ability to decide what is true, what is right, how to achieve the good, and the desire to get things right, both intellectually and practically. It is like the ability to steer a car and keep it in good order.

a. Prudence is not simply caution, but rather a willingness act and think intelligently. When deciding on a course of action, prudence guides on to consider the information available, carefully apply general principles to it, and by means of this careful thought make decisions about the best course to take. Intellectually, prudence likewise leads one to consider the information one is receiving, sift through it carefully, and decide what is true, or at least probably true, as the evidence really indicates. Both rushing to a decision and indecisiveness are contrary to prudence. Thus, refusing to make a commitment when called for, along with rushing into foolish commitments, are both contrary to the virtue of prudence.

b. Prudence begins by looking at reality clearly. This ability includes: (1) the

disciplining of memory, a willingness to recall what has gone before accurately; (2) the willingness to see the present as it is rather than as one wishes it to be, or fears it to be; and (3) the ability to foresee results of various paths. It includes an appreciation of the fact that there will often 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, and both a commitment to truth when the right answer is clear, and the willingness to deal with situations where the best path is not clear.

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 or other goods that we tend to want to excess, but it also allows for the enjoyment of good things as free gifts. Thus, as with the other virtues, it is a mean between extremes. One can, therefore, be intemperate by excessively rejecting rightful desires, as one can violate the virtue of fortitude by taking on unreasonable risks.

b. The overall idea is that human desires are created good. However, because of original sin and the resulting weakness, some desires are inordinately strong, while other strivings tend to be weak. And if a desire takes charge, it tends to become corrupt and domineering, like an undisciplined dog or other animal. Temperance enables us to be in control and therefore free.

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 keeps us from backsliding; when rightly understood it also restrains people from excessive risk-taking. It is like the energy of a car.

a. Fortitude operates primarily by urging us onto a goal that is difficult but 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.)

c. We often think of fortitude mainly as involving situations where a great deal of risk or difficulty is involved. But it operates more often in situations where doing the good requires perseverance and dealing with tasks that are hard or dull but necessary for a good goal. The seemingly small sacrifices are needed both

for themselves and to build courage for large ones.

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 in order to bring about right relations between people, and between us and God.

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 is 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 the Lord and the angels and saints. Faith is not merely an intellectual belief in propositions, but a deep trusting relationship with God Himself. The literal translation of the Nicene Creed that we recite at Mass would say that we believe into one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and into one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. Through our faith, we enter into a deep relationship with the Almighty God and with His Church.

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 (either the idea that God will save everyone regardless of what we do or that we save ourselves) and despair (the idea that a situation or a person is hopeless.) 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.

b. There is an excitement, for we do not know what events the future holds, but rather know God's promises to sustain us through the unknown. We also are not certain, although by living a Christian life we can become increasingly so, about whether we will cooperate with God's grace in the future. Rather, we must

continually make efforts to do so. As St. Paul says, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is the one who, for His good purpose works in you both to desire and to work.” Phil. 12-13.

c. Recognizing that all of this life is but the beginning of everlasting life, and therefore, that we can change dramatically as youth do, and living the adventure of life, hope is thus the virtue of youth. As Josef Pieper, German and one of the leading Christian philosophers of modern times put it in his 1962 book Faith, Hope, and Love, “Natural hope blossoms with the strength of youth. . . . Supernatural hope . . . is actually rooted in a much more substantial youthfulness. . . . [I]t gives man such a long future that the past seems short however long and rich his life.” See also 2 Cor. 14:16.

3. Love (agape in Greek) is difficult to define for it is the deepest of all things. 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.

a. As C.S. Lewis points out in The Four Loves, the love of God is built upon and controls all human loves so that they can be more fully themselves, while complementing each other. As St. Thomas points out, the love of God brings about a peace within the self because it orders all human desires and loves toward the beloved and above all toward God. See Summa Theologica II-II q. 29. It also leads to a peace among all who love God, but not necessarily with the world.

b. As St. Thomas points out, joy is the natural overflowing of love, for love finds delight in the goodness of others, and above all in the goodness of God, of which there is no end. See Summa Theologica II-II q.28 art. 1. Thus the Scripture refers to joy or rejoicing about 250 times. This joy is not mere human happiness, which can come and go, but rather an enduring sense of the divine with us. Thus, when St. Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” see Phil 4:4, he does not mean that we should always be happy, but rather that the deeper joy that comes from the love of God should always be with us.