**ISSUE:** What are the cardinal virtues? What is the role of the cardinal virtues in the Christian life?

**RESPONSE:** A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good (Catechism, no. 1803). There are two types of virtues: theological and human (or moral) virtues. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity relate directly to God, are given to us at Baptism, and allow us to live a life of supernatural grace as children of God (cf. Catechism, nos. 1812-13).

The immediate object of the human virtues is not God, but human activities that lead us to God. They are generally acquired by human effort but are assisted and reach their perfection by grace. These virtues help us to lead a morally good life with joy and relative ease (cf. Catechism, no. 1804).

Four of the human or moral virtues are known as cardinal virtues. “Cardinal” comes from the Latin word cardo, which means “hinge.” The cardinal virtues, then, are considered the “hinge virtues” and are the basis for all the other human virtues. They are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Sacred Scripture frequently attests to the value of these virtues in living a godly life, although sometimes under other names. For example, Wisdom 8:7 provides:

> And if any one loves righteousness, [wisdom’s] labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control [i.e., temperance] and prudence, justice and courage [i.e., fortitude]; nothing in life is more profitable for men than these.

**DISCUSSION:** The Catechism defines the cardinal virtues as “stable dispositions of the intellect and the will that govern our acts, order our passions, and guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith” (no. 1834). They help us to make good moral choices and thus are an indispensable part of the Christian life.

The moral virtues—like all habits—are acquired and grow through education, deliberate acts, and perseverance in struggle (Catechism, no. 1839). They can be diminished or lost by the repetition of acts that are opposed to the virtue. These acts not only destroy the virtue but typically replace it with the opposite vice. Also, when we fail to practice a particular virtue, it will gradually weaken and die.

We need to recognize that because of original sin our human nature is wounded and prone to sin and vice. Our new life in Christ gives us the grace to persevere in virtuous living. As a result, we “should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil” (Catechism, no. 1811). We need to be humble enough to recognize our sinful tendencies and cultivate the corresponding virtue. In this way we build a character worthy of our calling.

As we grow in virtue, it becomes easier for us to recognize truth and choose the good, and thus we truly experience the freedom of the children of God (cf. Jn. 8:32; Gal. 5:1). When we choose evil, we abuse our freedom and fall prey to the slavery of sin (cf. Catechism, no. 1733). Saint Paul helps to put this in focus for us:

> [W]hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,
whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Phil. 4:8).

Prudence

Prudence is the cardinal virtue that “disposes the practical reason to discern, in every circumstance, our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it” (Catechism, no. 1835). Prudence enables us to choose good means to a good end. It guides our practical decision making in individual, concrete circumstances and provides for effective execution once a decision is reached. With the help of prudence, we learn from our experiences and correctly apply moral principles to real-life situations (Catechism, no. 1806).

The three stages of prudence acting properly are deliberation, judgment, and decision. Note that hesitation is appropriate when it comes to deliberation: One can and should consider all the facts and moral principles that bear on the situation and be open to human and divine counsel. However, a considered decision should be performed swiftly. For example, if a person in authority asks us to do something that may be inappropriate, we should consider whether it would be prudent to obey. However, as soon as we discern that such a request constitutes a legitimate exercise of authority, our decision to obey should be promptly acted upon.

Errors in judgment can creep in through defects of prudence or through “false prudence.” Defects include thoughtlessness, rashness, negligence, indecisiveness, and inconstancy in execution. False prudence takes two forms. One is the giving in to the “prudence of the flesh,” thus making decisions based solely on serving the goods of the body, which Saint Paul criticizes as being displeasing to God and leading to death (cf. Rom. 8:6-8). The other form is what Saint Thomas calls astutia, which is often translated as “cunning” or “craftiness.” Astutia is concerned more with “tactics” than living in the light. True prudence isn’t only concerned with a good end, but also good means to that end. Conversely, astutia is the insidious temperament of the intriguer who will use any means to obtain the good.

Prudence is often called the first of the cardinal virtues. As the “charioteer of the virtues,” it guides the other virtues and guides the judgment of conscience (Catechism, no. 1806). Indeed, there is no way we can have a well-formed conscience without the virtue of prudence (cf. Catechism, nos. 1780, 1788).

In the Book of Tobit, we are advised:

Seek advice from every wise man, and do not despise any useful counsel. Bless the Lord God on every occasion; ask him that your ways may be made straight and that all your paths and plans may prosper (Tob. 4:18-19).

This passage encourages us to learn and take counsel from others in true humility and docility. It also encourages us to seek the Lord’s assistance. Through the gift of counsel, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (cf. Is. 11:1-3), prudence is purified and directed toward our ultimate good, God Himself.

Justice

“Justice consists in the firm and constant will to give God and neighbor their due” (Catechism, no. 1836). Justice in relation to God is called the virtue of religion. Justice toward our neighbor disposes us to respect the rights of others and to foster harmony in human relationships rooted in the truth (cf. Catechism, no. 1807).

The “debts” of justice we owe to others is called a duty. Before there can be a duty, however, the other person
must have a corresponding right. I don’t have a duty to pay a $10 debt unless my creditor has a right to receive it. Rights can arise in a variety of social, economic, or political contexts. However, there are some fundamental rights that pre-exist human laws or business transactions. These are rights given to us by God that we have by virtue of our being created in His image and likeness. These include the right to life, the right to religious liberty, and the right to earn an honest living. When individuals or governments fail to recognize these rights, they act contrary to the truth of creation. In other words, they act unjustly.

Psalm 112 calls the just man a “light in darkness.” Conversely, when we succumb to injustice, and call “evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20), we are “already on the path to the most alarming corruption and the darkest moral blindness” (Evangelium Vitae, no. 25).

Justice is distinct from charity, but they are not opposed to each other. We can and must be both just and charitable in our dealings with others. The distinction may be summed up as follows: Charity is based on the union that exists with one’s neighbor. That’s why the most intimate human relationship—marriage—is presented in Scripture as the two becoming one (cf. Mt. 19:6), and Our Lord commands us to love others as ourselves (cf. Lk. 10:27). Justice, however, recognizes that we maintain our individuality despite our communion. Justice demands a distinction of parties, otherwise a debt cannot be owed to the other.

There are three basic forms of justice (cf. Catechism, no. 2411). Commutative justice is the justice that individuals owe each other. Distributive justice describes the relation of the whole to its parts. Specifically, it describes the duty the government owes its citizens—including the protection of their fundamental rights. Legal justice describes the relation of the citizens to the state. For example, this includes that obligation to “[r]ender to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Mk. 12:17), such as the payment of taxes.

Also included under justice is the Church’s social teaching, which often comes under the general heading of “social justice.” The social doctrine of the Church has seen remarkable development over the past century, beginning with the encyclical Rerum Novarum authored by Pope Leo XIII, followed by the landmark Vatican II document, Gaudium et Spes, and up to the three social encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. This body of teaching provides principles about social and economic matters that involve the promotion of fundamental human rights and the common good (see generally Catechism, nos. 2419 et seq.).

**Fortitude**

Fortitude is the cardinal virtue that ensures a steadiness of the will in the pursuit of the good notwithstanding any difficulties (cf. Catechism, no. 1808). This virtue allows us to maintain our balance in the face of danger. On the one extreme, we need to avoid cowardice, which involves giving in to the passion of fear. On the other, we must avoid rashness or recklessness, which involves imprudently subjecting ourselves to temptation or some physical danger.

The virtue of fortitude has two parts: to attack and to endure. Of the two, fortitude most fully shows itself in patient endurance—where there is no reasonable hope of conquering the evil that is threatening us. One who is not patient cannot possibly be brave. However, patience is much more than mere submission to danger and suffering. Rather, it is a strong quality of the soul that allows us to cling steadfastly to the good and refuse to yield to fear or pain.

Ultimately, the virtue of fortitude enables us to conquer even the fear of death, and thus face trials and persecutions willingly and even joyfully (cf. Catechism, no. 1808). For the Christian, the supreme act of fortitude is martyrdom:

*Martyrdom* is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by
charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude (Catechism, no. 2473).

In Revelation 12:10-11, those who have conquered the powers of evil are those for whom “love for life did not deter them from death.”

Yet this willingness to “fall in battle” must be understood properly. Fortitude is not authentic unless it is grounded in prudence and justice. It is completely opposed to a reckless or “daredevil” approach to danger. The truly virtuous man does not suffer injury or martyrdom for its own sake, but as a means of preserving or acquiring a greater good. The Gospel summarizes this paradox: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn. 12:25).

Temperance

The Catechism defines temperance as “the moral 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 honorable” (no. 1809). Temperance helps us “to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world” (Tit. 2:12).

While fortitude is self-possession in a sea of danger, temperance is self-possession during a storm of passion. Too often, temperance is equated with a puritanical approach to creation and legitimate human pleasures. Thus, it’s limited to simply avoiding excessive pleasure. In reality, temperance is a positive ordering of our bodily appetites for our own good and the good of society. Temperance allows us to be fully ourselves and not slaves to food, alcohol, sex, gambling, comfort, success, or other pleasures which may result from excessive indulgence in them (cf. Catechism, no. 2290). This inner ordering of the bodily appetites produces what Saint Thomas calls a “serenity of the spirit,” but requires vigilance, discipline, and grace because of our fallen human nature.

The surest way to walk a straight line in the snow is to keep our eyes focused on our destination. We may be tempted to look at our feet and simply put one in front of the other, but eventually we’ll drift off (if we don’t first walk into a tree!). This points to the importance of humility, which helps us to see ourselves as we truly are: creatures who are at once both sinful and redeemed. More fundamentally, humility orients us toward God, who is both our origin and our goal. This virtue is no less than temperance as it relates to our quest for excellence, which for the Christian is to “attain to . . . the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

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