

CHRISTIAN MORALITY

Introduction: Part Two

(C 1691-2051, USC Ch. 23-24)

In the previous lesson, we touched upon the first six building blocks of Christian morality. In Part II, we continue with four more building blocks.

BUILDING BLOCK 7: CARDINAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES (C 1803-1845, USC p. 315)

“Whatever 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)

“Growth in virtue is an important goal for every Christian, for the virtues play a valuable role in living a Christian moral life.” (USC p. 317)

We will look at the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues.

What is a virtue?

“A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good... The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God” (C 1803). Simply put, a virtue is a good habit that helps us to practice Christian ideals in daily life.

The Cardinal Virtues

There are many human virtues but from ancient times, four of them have been considered principal or *cardinal* virtues. The term “cardinal” comes from the Latin word *cardo* meaning hinge. All human virtues are related to or hinged to one of the cardinal virtues. The four *cardinal virtues* are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Wis 8:7 reads: *“If one loves justice, the fruits of her works are virtues. For she [Wisdom] teaches temperance, prudence, justice and fortitude.”* We will briefly examine each one of these key human virtues.

Prudence (C 1806). “The *natural* virtue of prudence assists people to organize their lives and activities in order to achieve the goal of a happy life in this world... The *supernatural* virtue of prudence helps us organize our activities, desires, possibilities, resources, and behavior in such a way that we may come to eternal life. We may do many things that are imprudent from a worldly perspective but are prudent for eternal life. The only time we need to be *naturally imprudent* for the honor and glory of God is when the

supernatural virtue of prudence contradicts the natural.” (*The Virtue Driven Life*, pp 30-32: see Chapter 1 of this book for an example on how the natural and supernatural virtue of prudence may clash.)

Justice (C 1807). *“When justice is done, it is a joy to the righteous, but dismay to evildoers”* (Prov. 21:15). The human virtue of justice calls us to be fair and honest in our relationship with God and others. From a Christian perspective, justice must always be tempered with *mercy*. God is our model in this regard. If God treated each of us as we justly deserved, who would be saved? The cardinal virtue of justice calls us to fight injustice wherever we see it. A small way to bring justice into our world is to be generous in tipping those who work for menial wages. Another way is to advocate and vote for laws that will help the poor.

Fortitude (C 1808). This moral virtue gives us the courage and strength to do the right thing even in the face of difficulties and temptations as, for instance, when we lose our job or even when we face death for the sake of justice, e.g., St. Thomas More.

Temperance (C 1809). This moral virtue is sometimes called moderation. Temperance “moderates our appetite for pleasure and secures the balance in created goods, and helps us control our instincts and desires in a Christ-like way” (*This is Our Faith*, p. 253).

Ways to acquire human virtues (C 1810-1811, USC p. 317)

All of us have heard the saying “practice makes perfect.” Through frequent repetition of a particular act, we will acquire virtuous behavior. As we seek to grow in virtue, we will need the help of the Holy Spirit and, when possible, fellowship with people who are also seeking to live a virtuous life.

Pause: *Can you name a practical situation where we need one of the cardinal virtues to assist us?*

The Theological Virtues (C 1812-1813, USC p. 317)

“Faith, hope and love remain, these three, but the greatest of these is love” (1Cor 13:13). In the sacrament of baptism, each person is infused with special

graces and gifts to help him/her be a faithful disciple of Christ. Some of these graces have been called “infused virtues,” the most important of them being faith, hope and charity. These virtues are called “theological” (“theos”=God) because they have God as their origin and object. We acquire these gifts not by human effort but from God. They help us to have an intimate relationship with God.

Faith (C 1814-1816). Faith is the gift that enables us to believe in God and in what he has revealed. Through a mature faith, we are able to commit ourselves totally to God. True faith expresses itself in good works. St. James says “faith apart from works is dead” (Jas 2:26). We must be ready to “confidently bear witness to our faith and spread it” (C 1816). (For more on faith as our response to Divine Revelation, see my Catechism Article 1, Part 2.)

Hope (C 1817-1821). Hope is the virtue that enables us to trust that God’s promises to us will be fulfilled. Faith and hope enable us to relate to and deal with unseen reality. “*Only faith can guarantee the blessings that we hope for, or prove the existence of realities unseen*” (Heb 11:1). One way to *distinguish* faith from hope is to view faith as a “now virtue,” and hope as a virtue that enables us to deal with the future. Faith and trust in God help us to deal with our present struggles. Hope helps us to trust that God will save us or, more immediately, that there will be a successful outcome to a present problem, e.g., sickness. Two sins against hope are *despair* (losing all hope) and *presumption* (believing God will save us with little or no effort on our part).

Love (C 1822-1829). Love is the greatest of all virtues (1 Cor 13:13), the greatest of the commandments (Mt 22:36-37) and it is the very nature of God (1 Jn 4:16). The *Catechism* states that “charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (C 1822). (For more on the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues, see *The Virtue Driven Life* by Fr. Benedict Groeschel, C.F.R.)

Pause: Can you recall a time where your faith helped you to get through a difficult situation?

BUILDING BLOCK 8: A COMMUNITY OF LOVE AND JUSTICE

“This is what Yahweh asks of you: to act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly before the Lord.” (Mic 6:8)

Previous building blocks or foundation stones of Catholic morality dealt mainly with how *we as individuals* are called to live the great commandment of love. In this building block, we will focus on how we are to live the great commandment in community—local and global. We can say that it is God’s dream that every person in our global family is lovingly cared for and treated justly and respectfully. In God’s family, there is no such thing as “us and them.” There is only “us.”

Promoters of the common good (C 1905-1912)

The *Catechism* states that “the common good comprises the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily” (C 1924). Governments and individuals are called to promote the common good, to create social conditions in which all are treated with dignity and respect, all have an opportunity to grow spiritually and materially, and all have basic human rights including the right to food, shelter, health care, education, employment and freedom of expression.

On a global level, promotion of the common good involves the sharing of resources by developed nations with underdeveloped nations. “*If a man who was rich enough in this world’s goods saw that one of his brothers was in need but closed his heart to him, how could the love of God be living in him?*” (1 Jn 3:17)

Employers promote the common good when they pay their employees just wage and create fair and safe working conditions. Employees promote the common good when they do an honest day’s work and care about their employers and co-workers. Parents promote the common good when they provide food, shelter and emotional support for their children.

Christians promote the common good when they become involved in politics and public life. In doing so, they can fight to create social structures that are respectful of persons, and fight structures that dehumanize the members of society. The Church promotes the common good when she models justice and love by the way she lives, by being a prophetic voice for all who have little or no voice, and by speaking out against all forms of social injustice.

Sins against the common good

Even though it is God’s dream that all his children live in peace and harmony and have the opportunity to develop their human and spiritual potential, the reality is very different. Some flagrant examples of sins and

crimes against the common good are world hunger, abortion, outsourcing of work to poor nations, unjust wages, etc.

Pause: Name some ways that our country promotes the common good and ways that it fails to do so.

Christian response to social injustice

In the Old Testament, the prophets were very harsh in their condemnation of social injustices, and so was Jesus. Jesus was the champion of the outcast and the marginalized. In his famous Last Judgment scene (Mt 25:31-46), *the saved* are those who *showed compassion* to those in need and the *condemned* are those who *lacked compassion*.

The Church's response to poverty and injustice is twofold: *social action* and *works of justice*. The former seeks to give immediate help to those in need, e.g., food, clothing, medicine, etc.; the latter seeks to remove unjust structures that are designed to keep the poor poor, and favor the rich. We can say that Mother Teresa is the patron saint of all involved in social action, and Martin Luther King the patron saint of those involved in removing from society those sinful structures that favor some and oppress others. *Social action* ministries give a person a fish for today; *social justice* ministries seek to teach a person how to fish for himself. Both initiatives are needed.

Three large organizations within the Catholic Church in the United States that carry out works of charity and justice are: *Catholic Relief Services*, *Catholic Campaign for Human Development*, and *Catholic Charities*.

We should note that many non-church groups are involved in social action and social justice activities, e.g., NGO'S (non-government organizations), human rights watch groups, the media when it does stories on justice issues. Wherever there is social injustice, all of us have a responsibility to be a voice for the oppressed and to do what we can to remove such injustice. (For more on the social teachings of the Church, see article #25.)

Pause: In your opinion, what is one of the greatest social injustices in the United States and in our global family today?

BUILDING BLOCK 9: THE ROLE OF LAW IN CATHOLIC MORALITY (C 1948-1986, USC p. 327)

In general, we can say that laws are meant to enlighten and guide us, teach and protect us, and challenge us with regard to the more important values in life. Good laws are like good teachers and good road maps: they point us in the right direction. They show us which roads to take (good values to embrace) and which roads to avoid (values to resist).

Moral law (C 1950-1953)

Moral law is the work of Divine Wisdom (C 1950). It is God's instruction for right human conduct. It teaches us what is good and how to act in order to attain earthly and eternal happiness. It also points out to us the choices that lead us away from God. We will look briefly at four different types of laws, all of them interrelated: natural law, civil law, revealed law (Old and New Testament), and church law.

Natural law (C 1954-1960, USC p. 327). When God created human beings, he built into their nature an innate sense of what is right and wrong behavior. This original moral sense is called *natural law* (C 1955). Natural law provides the whole human race with certain principles to guide behavior – principles which may be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways in different cultures and circumstances. Natural law is the foundation of human community and from it arises civil law. An example of natural law is the “law of fair play.” When we say something is not fair, we assume the existence of a universal moral law. Because natural law is placed by God in the heart of man, it applies to all people in all places and at all times. Natural law provides the foundation for civil law.

Civil law. Without civil law, we would have chaos. In general, we can say that the purpose of civil law is to apply the principle of natural law to a particular society. If some civil laws are unjust, we need to fight to replace them with just laws, e.g., *Roe v. Wade*, which allows a doctor the right to kill an unborn child.

Revealed law (C 1961-1974, 1981-1986). Revealed law spells out more concretely the central principle of natural law, i.e., “Do good and avoid evil.”

The *Catechism* speaks of two stages in revealed law: the law of the Old Testament which is summarized in the Ten Commandments, and the law of the New Testament which is summarized in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5, 6 & 7).

The Old Law is imperfect and a *preparation* for the New Law of Christ. The New Law or the Law of the Gospel “fulfills, refines, surpasses and leads the Old Law to perfection” (C 1967). In Mt 5:1-11, Jesus tells us that he came “not to abolish the old law but to bring it to fulfillment.” Jesus makes several contrasts between what was said in the Old Law and what he is now proposing as the New Law of love, i.e., “You have heard it said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you...” (Mt 5:43-44). We cannot live the New Law of love without God’s grace (the focus of our next building block).

Church law (C 2030-2021, USC p.330). Living as active members of our Church family helps us to live a good moral life. Through her teaching ministry, the Church helps us to better understand our call to holiness, better understand what is asked of us as disciples of Jesus, and better understand what are appropriate and inappropriate responses to Christ’s law of love. In the Church, we have outstanding and inspiring witnesses of Christian living.

The Magisterium, the supreme teaching office of the Church, has a special role to play as moral teacher in our Church family. Briefly, her role is twofold:

- to faithfully protect and interpret the moral teachings of the Church. The Magisterium must protect moral truth from erroneous interpretations.
- to deal with new moral issues (e.g., medical ethics) that previous generations did not have to contend with. The Church must seek guidance in her moral wisdom tradition and apply it to new questions raised in every age.

Pause: *If you were president or pope for a week, what law/s would you add to or strike from the books?*

BUILDING BLOCK 10: GRACE
(C 1987-2005, USC p. 328)

The word “grace” literally means gift. The *Catechism* defines grace as “*the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted children. It introduces us into the intimacy of the Trinitarian life*” (C 2021). Grace is the free gift of God’s presence, life, and love living within us, for the purpose of transforming us into his likeness which we lose when we sin.

The way grace works is a bit like what happens when a man who drinks too much and eats too much, and is rough around the edges, falls in love with a beautiful woman who loves him unconditionally. Her love transforms him. He quits drinking, begins to eat in moderation, and gradually becomes a very nice person to be around with. All this happens because he allows the woman’s love to enter his heart and motivates him to change his whole way of living. He is free to accept or reject the love of his lady friend. So it is with us – God’s grace presence – God’s love – totally embraces us. It enables us to open our hearts to God, gives us the strength to change and transform sinful habits, and moves us in God’s direction.

Our role is to allow God to do his transforming work in us and to cooperate with his grace. Our part may seem easy but it is not. Dying to self and to sinful attitudes and behavior is never easy. We must be strongly motivated and very generous in our response to God’s grace.

Pause: *How have you experienced God’s grace in your life?*

Suggested actions

Try to be more in tune with injustices that exist in our local, national and global society. Be more aware of God’s grace presence that envelops your whole life.

————— **Meditation** —————

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved and set me free. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; how precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toil, and snares I have already come; ‘tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me, His word my hope secures; He will my shield and portion be as long as life endures.

When we’ve been there ten thousand years, bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.

(John Newton)

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