

Supplemental Information for
Why Catholic? Journey through the Catechism
Life In Christ – Walking With God
To group leaders of
Christ the King Parish, Springfield, Illinois

By Deacon Al Laabs
September/October, 2010

Session 4: “Virtues”

Suggested Environment

Note again that we are reverting to the table arrangement suggestion from year one but I would continue to make the *USCCA* a part of each table arrangement since many of you who used it think highly of it.

Lifting Our Hearts

Last session three (Conscience) we prayed for the grace to know what is right. Notice that the basic call to grace that we are making in this prayer is for help to move us toward what is right. In other words, we know so often what is right but find ourselves doing something else, or degrees of something different that our conscience may have suggested. I think it is worthwhile to introduce this prayer, perhaps just simply by saying something as direct as “Last week we asked for the grace to form our conscience and this week we pray for God’s help to live what is right...”

Sharing Our Good News

As a follow up to last week’s session on conscience, it might be interesting to touch on the issue of examination of conscience. Other than positive and hence “virtuous” actions that might have been prompted by those bullet points for consideration, I wonder if others found themselves doing something I probably don’t do often enough, so here’s my confession: my Notre Dame Sisters from grade school days often suggested that we take a minute or two before we fall asleep and examine our conscience from the perspective of what we had done and how well we had loved during the day. So there I was after writing my comments on session three, getting back into a more formal mode of something that is actually quite powerful from my past. It turns out it has been a good addition to my evening breviary (formal prayers deacons say) and something maybe we all should resurrect and teach to our children.

Exploring the Catechism

So we begin with a good definition of what a virtue is from CCC 1803. Notice that the definition presumes a common understand of what the term “good” means. You would find this task of determining what good means as a central task in the history of philosophy. That’s why the second paragraph introduces the notion that persons “throughout history” have reflected on or discussed “good” in relation to virtuous actions or good habits. Implied in this second paragraph is a whole discussion of the profound idea that without common commitment to “goodness,” society as a collection of individuals living together is frankly impossible. It is almost self-evident, that without virtuous behavior, society cannot be productive and peaceful.

Since this is a key underlying idea behind future chapters (e.g. on moral solidarity), I’d suggest you test this understanding. When the third paragraph calls these “human virtues,” it is important to understand that we are dealing with the four key moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. Some of the group may remember that these four virtues are called the “Cardinal” virtues too. Society, without these virtues present, especially justice, would be a somewhat chaotic and would exist at the level of every person for him/her self. So I would suggest you pose the question, “Do you think that we can live together as human beings and not practice virtuous behavior tied to these four moral virtues?” What is at play here is a key idea that grace builds on nature, that these human virtues, as the third paragraph and CCC 1810 point out, are “purified and elevated” by God’s grace to help us overcome what sin and selfishness would do to block our virtuous actions. This is in keeping with the statement I have often mentioned our Pope has made, that “Christ became man to teach us what being human really means.” Notice in the *Catechism* that this section under article 7 “The Virtues” is labeled as “The Human Virtues.” The *USCCB* red book has a good discussion of this section on pages 315 to 318.

Paragraphs four and five discuss the four “cardinal” virtues and I would suggest reading the longer definitions in CCC 1806, 1807, 1808, 1809. Again, I would point out that these virtues are crucial behavior necessary for us to live civilized lives aside from any religious or theological considerations. In fact, historians can point out instances that underlie the fall of civilizations when these virtues cease being operative. What that little picture of two figures standing on “equal” pedestals and shaking hands seems to symbolize is a basic equality and relational stance necessary to co-exist.

Let me introduce a note on justice here. Too often our idea of justice is shaped by what is called retributive justice, namely, the type of justice in which we say someone gets what is due as a result of some usually bad behavior. It’s the kind of justice we think of in terms of fitting punishment. There is an equally important aspect of justice, however, that is known as distributive justice. What is meant by that term is simply equality or equity among humans as it refers to the distribution of goods or resources necessary for living. Thus Catholic social teaching holds that the goods of the earth are to be shared “with justice.” If you continue to think about this form of justice, you can see how the Church would be a critic of some of the most strident forms of unregulated or unbridled capitalism.

Before going on to the next paragraph, here are some classical links to the four cardinal virtues from the older version of the Catholic Encyclopedia: [Prudence](#), [Justice](#), [Fortitude](#),

[Temperance](#). Note that the link on fortitude is awfully academic and the combined link to the [cardinal virtues](#) may be more helpful if you are looking for additional information. An even shorted overview of the cardinal virtues is [here from the Wikipedia](#), free encyclopedia.

The next to last paragraph on the bottom of page 21 has a lot of highlighted material from the CCC. I would encourage you to suggest underlining the last sentence in that paragraph, “The human virtues are rooted....foundation of Christian moral activity.” It is important to see our human virtues literally the substance upon which God builds the life of grace within us and draws our behavior always more closely to that of his Son and our model. When we hear St. Paul says things like “we are baptized into the life of Christ,” we want to keep in mind that our human nature is transformed by baptism, that our human virtues are enabled and raised by the Spirit’s presence in our lives to a new level that we can only experience and see with the eyes of faith. And as we are transformed, we enter the Christian life, that is we are following a life modeled and patterned after Christ and we are living on a different value basis, forming through repeated acts habits that draw us towards the Good here on earth but hopefully to the final Good when we meet God face to face.

The next two paragraphs that touch on the theological virtues are really packed with information. Perhaps it may help to touch on what the word “infused” may mean. You might recall from another year’s session, the idea that faith is a gift from God. Both these terms, gift and infused, share the idea that God has given us a capability that we can exercise in a certain way. In other words, we are able or capable of activating Faith, Hope, and Charity in our lives towards others. The giftedness and the infusion take place within us when we bring our intellect and will together and live out these gifts/virtues in our lives. Just as repeated exercise of a golf swing, improves our ability (or should), when we pray often, when we place our hope in God, and when we engage in acts of love towards God and neighbor, we grow and strengthen these virtues and they shape who we are. I would encourage you to read CCC 1814, 1817, and 1822.

The final paragraph in this section has a summary sentence in it that reads, “Our human ability to believe, to hope, and to love is elevated to a supernatural level by the powerful presence of God’s Holy Spirit.” That is what we can truly see and experience by the eyes of faith. It is as if we put on our Christian glasses and the entire world and the people in it are seen differently because we see through eyes that have been transformed by our faith. All our relationships to others are transformed by that great theological virtue of charity and we have peace because we know we are living the Lord’s great commandment of love.

Scripture: Pondering the Word

Ephesians 4: 25-32

25 ¹⁰ Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun set on your anger, ¹¹

27 and do not leave room for the devil.

28 The thief must no longer steal, but rather labor, doing honest work ¹² with his (own) hands, so that he may have something to share with one in need.

29 No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear.

30 And do not grieve the holy Spirit of God, with which you were sealed for the day of redemption. ¹³

31 All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice.

32 (And) be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.

Philemon 4-9

4 ⁴ I give thanks to my God always, remembering you in my prayers,

5 as I hear of the love and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus and for all the holy ones, ⁵

6 so that your partnership in the faith may become effective in recognizing every good there is in us ⁶ that leads to Christ.

7 For I have experienced much joy and encouragement ⁷ from your love, because the hearts of the holy ones have been refreshed by you, brother.

8 Therefore, although I have the full right ⁸ in Christ to order you to do what is proper,

9 I rather urge you out of love, being as I am, Paul, an old man, ⁹ and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus.

Note that these are from the USCCB website for the Bible and the small colored footnote numbers can serve as links to the footnotes applicable to each of these quotations from scripture. Note also the specificity of actions that St. Paul encourages to these Christians to whom he is writing. Such “virtues” as truth telling, kindness, etc., are concrete actions that help define virtue as more than a “disposition towards the good.” I think it’s also safe to say that we would find it hard to define a virtue that doesn’t touch on a relationship to some other being. So in a real sense virtues are relational and not just a personal habit that ties me only in one direction, only towards God but always must be seen in relationship to God and neighbor.

Sharing Questions

I think this is a great question and a good chance to talk about our heroes in faith or perhaps our favorite saints who have been examples to us. I hope that someone in each group would mention a father or mother who not only impressed them with a virtuous life but also inspired them to live one. After all is said and done, parents want their children to live good lives and virtuous lives even more than they usually want them to follow in the same career.

Exploring the Catechism (continued)

This next section is pretty straight forward but there are a few areas where I think comments are important. The first paragraph talks of the roles of the divine persons: God the Father as creator, the Son as Redeemer, and the “Holy Spirit makes us holy.” Makes is clearly understood in the sense that the Spirit’s life within us is one that “empowers” us if we cooperate with God’s grace, or God’s life within us. This is related to the idea that we really are dependent on God’s transforming grace, His life within us, to shape our wills and give us that nudge to continually come close to Him. And of course, that transforming grace is fed by Word and sacrament and prayer on our part together with encouragement and support from our life in community. There are three phrases I would encourage you to ask your group to underline near the end of that first paragraph in this section. Those really are another way of saying the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. The phrases are: “believe in Christ as our Savior; hope for God’s mercy; and serve one another with love...”

And that make a neat tie into the life of the Trinity discussed in the next paragraph. If love is the animating core of the life of the Trinity, then love, Christian love in our lives must be dynamic and not static. It is not one dimensional in the sense that it is only aimed towards God but must always be relational towards others as the life of the Trinity is shared among Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Paragraphs three, four and five are really straight forward but I might encourage you to perhaps ask one question about paragraph five. As the text says, quoting John 8:31-32, “...the truth will make you free,” the obvious question that might generate some conversation is “What are you free from...?” In other words, we have all heard this expression “know the truth and it will make you free” so often, but what do we understand by that. Might be fun to draw out some ideas of what the group thinks this means. Some might say that if I know the truth and what to do I don’t have to search for what is right. Others might say that the truth to me means that I don’t have to worry about facing God when I die if I know and live the truth of what is good behavior.

That final paragraph is merely an echo of sorts of the reference to living the life of the Trinity at the heart of our lives as Christians. As that first sentence says, morality is about relationships just as the life of the Trinity is about relationships in love. Reverencing the truth that comes from Scripture and God’s Church, we know, and I emphasize the word “know,” that we have discovered the truth about moral and virtuous living. We are not anxious about life and we are “free” in the truest sense to be all that we can be to draw closer to that image of our creator whose face we see in his Son Jesus Christ. Our Jewish brothers and sisters as our spiritual forbearers, have a Psalmist who said, God has not done this for any other peoples, meaning that God has not gifted any others with his Word in Torah, their guide for a moral life. As followers of Christ we are blessed not only with his Word but also his example and most assuredly with his Church and the Spirit that He had promised to always live in and with the People of God. And so we have the confidence that with the Spirit’s presence living in the People of God, guiding our apostolic Church and its leaders, we can know and live the moral life. What a powerful reassurance that is and the truth will set us free!

Sharing Our Faith

These are some good questions to discuss again. I would suggest adding to that first bullet point the following idea..."how has my view of good and evil perhaps changed over time?" That second bullet point may open up some very personal areas and perhaps would be best dealt with on an individual personal basis. It's almost more of confessional reflection question. I think the third bullet point has the merit of opening up the possibility of focusing on one of the virtues. As an example, suggest that the group consider hope. So then how do individuals view hope now in their lives as contrasted perhaps to sometime in the past. Someone may have a story of "hope is what got me through this or that difficult period in my life." Or perhaps because we are focusing on virtue in general, you might frame a question such as, has anyone had the experience of feeling that they've grown stronger in a virtue and if so how. Perhaps someone might share how they've grown their faith as a mature adult compared to when they were in college or high school....

Living the Good News

I would particularly point out the first bullet point in terms of its suggestion to focus on one virtue and not only think about but pray about how I can strengthen that virtue in my life. Dare I suggest that we could always use grace to strengthen the virtue of charity in our lives? So how do we strengthen charity except by practicing examples and acts of charity? And I think this is one of the best gifts we can give one another and our families—acts of charity that make the dynamic life of love at the heart of the Trinity a little more real in our tiny corner of the world.

Lifting our Hearts

You will find me encouraging each group to open up the closing to spontaneous prayer for all the variety of intentions that we always do carry in our hearts so suggest going around the room/group to ask each person present to pray for a specific intention. Since the month of October is Respect Life Month, please include a petition for the recognition of the value and sanctity of life among your prayers. You might model this session by praying "Lord, for the grace to strengthen my hope and faith, let us pray to the Lord."

Additional note: Suggest to those who have the *USCCB* (red book) that pages 323 to 327 would be a great read for the next session. In all actuality the *USCCB* does a much better and less confusing job of touching on key elements of Catholic Social teaching in this area of the Catechism.

Addendum Note: Any feedback you would like to give is most welcome. Please reply to allaabs1770@gmail.com