



Living a Life of Virtue

by Mike Nelson

Marcus Tullius Cicero, one of the great Roman statesmen and philosophers, is credited with first declaring, “Virtue is its own reward.”

Who and how many lent Cicero their ears is unclear. But less than a century later, thousands gathered in Galilee, far from Rome, to hear Jesus of Nazareth say something quite similar.

“Take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them,” Jesus told the crowd. “Otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father” (Mt 6:1).

In the late 1800s, Blessed John Henry Newman expounded on Cicero’s observation, and Christ’s teaching:

“Virtue is its own reward, and brings with it the truest and highest pleasure,” Cardinal Newman said. “But if we cultivate it only for pleasure’s sake, we are selfish, not religious, and will never gain the pleasure, because we can never have the virtue.”

Virtue, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us, is “an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he

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pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions” (no. 1803).

What qualities does a “virtuous” person have? Catholic teaching defines seven qualities as Christian or “heavenly” virtues.

The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity (or love), inspired by St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. And the four human, or “cardinal,” virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and courage (or fortitude)—are rooted in the theological virtues. Put another way, we act out of faith, hope, and love when we practice the cardinal virtues. Faith, hope, and love guide us to defend the right to life, to feed and house and clothe the poor, to welcome the stranger, to forgive willingly, and to bear wrongs patiently, in summary, to perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy that Pope Francis has promoted in this Year of Mercy.

Practicing such virtuous behavior, of course, is easier said than done. Yet this is our baptismal

calling: to live and (by example) teach others, especially our young.

Pope Benedict XVI spoke to that point, and to parents, during a January 13, 2008, Mass at St. Peter’s in which he baptized children. “As you offer them what they need for their growth and salvation,” the pope said in his homily, “may you always be committed, helped by their godparents, to developing in them faith, hope and charity, the theological virtues proper to the new life given to them by the Sacrament of Baptism.”

Pope Benedict, of course, devoted his first three encyclicals to the theological virtues: *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*, *Spe Salvi (On Christian Hope)*, and *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*. He addressed these in his January 13, 2013, homily:

“The seed of the theological virtues, faith, hope and charity, sown by God, seeds that are planted in their hearts today through the power of the Holy



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Spirit, must always be nourished by the word of God and by the sacraments so that these Christian virtues may grow and attain full maturity, until they make each one of them a true witness of the Lord.”

And just as the theological virtues are the source of the cardinal virtues, it might be suggested that one of the latter makes possible the others. St. John Paul II, during his first month as pope, indicated as much.

“We need fortitude,” the pope declared Nov. 15, 1978, speaking to a general audience at the Vatican. “The truly prudent man, in fact, is only he who possesses the virtue of fortitude, just as also the truly just man is only he who has the virtue of fortitude.” It isn’t that we are called to be noble superheroes, saving the world from destruction. We are, however, called to treat one another in a manner reflecting virtue— reflecting, in other words, behavior that is of our loving and merciful God.

The list of positive, constructive virtues, it should be noted, does not stop with the seven virtues associated with church

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teaching. Pope Francis, in his 2015 Christmas speech, gave the Catholic Church leadership a list of virtues to cultivate, and it included humanity, accountability, and humility.

We have to recognize that accepting the need to practice such virtues requires a predisposition to accept the need to practice prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance. How can one be humble without temperance and prudence, or accountable without courage and justice? Or can we be human without faith, hope, or love, as St. Paul told the Corinthians?

We can learn a lot about virtue from 1 Corinthians 13:4-8: “Love is patient, love is kind. It is not jealous, [love] is not pompous, it is not inflated, it is not rude, it does not seek its own interests, it is not quick-tempered, it does not brood over injury, it does not rejoice over wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.”

All of that is virtue.

Nelson is former editor of The Tidings, a newspaper of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.



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