Chapter Two – The Virtues: Cultivating Character

A good deal of what we do and how we make decisions, moral or otherwise, is based on habits that have been formed from the norms of our families and society. There is a link between our “being” and our “doing” in such a manner that reciprocally “who we are shapes what we do, and what we do shapes who we are.”

I. Virtues:

A. Authentic Freedom: Freedom Versus License

Our Catholic Catechism defines authentic freedom as, “Freedom is the power to act or not to act, and so to perform deliberate acts of one’s own. Freedom attains perfection in its acts when (ultimately) directed toward God.” CCC #174 (Italics is mine)

This means that one has the proper desire in all that one does (meaning a desire that is ultimately directed toward God) and couples this with the commitment and will to act in a way that positively affects others and strengthens one’s relationship with God.

Freedom is not license – that is, the ability to do whatever one wants whenever one wants. This is not authentic freedom, but often mistaken for it. 

Virtue has a Latin root meaning “strength or power” – and we understand virtues to be gifts given to us by God, but needing our work and cultivation for their fruition. One does not become virtuous overnight – it takes time, effort, openness to God’s love, listening to others who are virtuous, and persistence even in difficult situations. Once one truly cultivates a virtuous character it is second nature.

(This is what we mean when we say someone is a saint – that is – they always act and decide out of a virtuous character.)
II. The Theological Virtues

The theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity (love). These virtues are named this (theos is Greek for God) because they are rooted in the very nature of God’s presence (love) in our lives. Once again, this is a reaching out by God in love to you and me therefore, it demands a response on our part. As one develops virtue in one’s then these theological virtues will be second nature.

A. Faith – Seeking to Do God’s Will

In our faith we acknowledge that God exists and thus we also recognize that God’s existence implies certain moral principles.

*Faith means that we will always look to strengthen our relationship with God in all situations that come before us in life. Consequently, no matter what happens we believe that by trusting and deepening our relationship with God we will be both closer to the truth of life, and therefore, ultimately better for believing.*

(Do not take lightly the book’s example of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was an extremely difficult moment for Jesus and one where it was very hard to believe. You do not sweat blood – Luke’s account of the Garden – just because you are nervous. Jesus was literally scared, almost to death!! Yet he kept his faith!)

When we act in faith we struggle to maintain our moral character, even in difficulty. We do not abandon our efforts because in our prayers everything did not work out the way we wanted. Instead, we should keep the relationship open with God and allows God’s Spirit to act within us and help us to understand what is before us – and how God may be calling us in a different way than we could have imagined.

B. Hope – A Virtue of Responsibility

One of the more common ways of understanding hope is as a passive quality, e.g., “I sure hope everything works out.” Whatever happens is in no way connected to my actions – it “hopefully” will just be okay.

But genuine hope is not just a “wish.” Hope is virtue that sustains us and strengthens us to be dedicated, committed, and persistent for those beliefs and dreams that we see as a part of God’s vision for the world. In authentic hope one does not stand by idly waiting for something to happen, but instead, one actively works to make that dream a reality in the world, e.g., one’s hope for peace, or world unity, etc.

The virtue of hope, given to us by God and cultivated in our characters, assures us that in the end, “all shall be well,” as Juliana of Norwich was fond of saying. In other words, we can trust God in faith, and act in hope, believing that our actions will make a difference. When Jesus calls us to build the Kingdom of God, a world of peace and love, we are called to act as believers filled with hope. In such a manner, we will give hope to others and the virtue will become “contagious.”
C. Love (Charity) – The Cornerstone of Virtues

Ultimately, love is the foundation and basis of all virtue. When we act in faith, with hope, we are expressing love in its fullness. Our text offers the definition of love as stated by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. Read this carefully and meditate how you can make this a deeper reality in your life. Be specific and think of real expressions of love that God is calling you to make in your daily living.

As St. Thomas Aquinas stated, “Love is to will the good of another.” Use this definition to examine your day. Are you loving as St. Paul defines love? How can you grow to be an even better lover of all people?