

## **Pastor's Pen: Virtue and Humility Part 1**

A life well lived is an art. It takes the same attention to detail, the same discipline, and the same skill as a master painter, musician, or sculptor. Living the Catholic life fully is no different. One develops the skills over time. Usually an artist learned those skills at the instruction of another. To live the Catholic life requires the same. How to use the various tools of the art is a learned skill. In our Catholic faith, we have the best teacher in Jesus Christ, we have those who have mastered our teacher's lessons in the lives of the saints, and we are given the best of tools in the teaching of Christ and His Church. Wielding these tools with grace and beauty so as to make a masterpiece of a life is part of our call as Catholics.

In my last column I talked about humility. A truly humble person paints of a portrait of his or her life every bit as beautiful as the paintings of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, or Caravaggio. In these next few columns I would like to point out the tools of the art that when used in union with God's grace, produce something worthy of our Catholic call. These tools are called virtues. Virtues are good habits, that when mastered, speak powerfully about the life of the person who has mastered them.

The two sets of virtues I will write on are the cardinal virtues and the theological virtues. The more we can master these virtues through intentional application and thoughtful discipline, the more striking the portrait of our life becomes.

The cardinal virtues (meaning hinge virtues) are prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude. The theological virtues are faith, hope, and love. All seven are necessary to a fully and powerfully lived Catholic life.

### ***Humility and Prudence***

Prudence is the ability to take knowledge and truth and apply it with wisdom. Prudence seeks truth. Prudence and humility work hand in hand. Prudence helps us to see the truth of the situation at hand and respond to it from a vantage point of what is right or wrong. The prudent person seeks not what is good for them, but what is good period. A prudent person sees that sometimes in seeking the good that sacrifice and even suffering might be required. The prudent person knows that such a short term loss might well result in a long term gain.

Prudence helps us to negotiate around biases, emotions, and resentments. Because prudence seeks truth, it seeks to develop the resolve to be a better person. For example: so many times we come upon an explosive situation in our lives. We can react, sometimes viscerally, out of the emotion of the moment and create further drama. A prudent person can step back objectively from the moment and determine the best long term outcome. They will ask questions like: How will this affect my relationships around me? What will this do to my

relationship with God? Is my response appropriate to the situation? Am I taking personally this situation? What has the Gospel to say about things like this? Is my response born of vengeance, retaliation, or healing the situation?

Because a prudent person asks these questions, they are seeking truth. Grace becomes necessary because the answer is not always self-evident. Humility is strengthened in that the person allows truth, and not mere emotion, to determine the response. Hence prudence helps us defuse situations and find an optimum outcome.

Prudence also helps us in determining the good use of our time, energy, and resources. Prudence helps us look beyond our own needs and to seek the good of others as well. Prudence helps us determine the appropriate giving of time, energy, and resources so that one does not burn oneself out, neglect those for whom they have primary care (spouse, children, for example), nor neglect one's community or parish. Prudence helps us balance life so that appropriate time is given as Christ would have us give.

### ***Temperance and Humility***

While we are speaking of the right use of things, we can now talk about temperance. Temperance is the virtue that helps us rightly use the things of this earth, not merely for our own good, but for the good of all. Temperance helps us avoid extremes. It steers us away from and keeps us from falling into addictions. Temperance requires humility lest we fool ourselves into believing that indulgence is okay and warranted.

Temperance is especially focused upon during the season of Lent. The idea of being able to control consumption of goods through fasting and abstinence is a key to understanding temperance. Temperance will lead us to an understanding that we are not owned by the goods of this world, but that we own the goods of this world and that there is a proper and holy way to dispense with the goods of this world. As a temperate person is honest, they are aware of what they can and cannot handle.

For example, a temperate alcoholic knows he or she cannot handle alcohol and so in humility steers clear of its use and avoids what can lead to that use. Temperance helps a unhealthy person to realize the unhealthy habits that have gotten them to this point and the behaviors that must change to get beyond this point. Temperance helps us to establish balance where balance has been lacking.

Finally, temperance paired with humility, helps us to move beyond the selfishness that can accompany our use of things and leave open the room for a magnanimity of heart where our lives can be a reflection of the generosity we are shown by God and by others. A temperate heart is a thankful heart as well.