

Pastor's Pen: Virtue and Humility Part 2

As we continue through the relationship between virtue and humility, remember that the goal is to use these tools in such a way as to be the best version of what we were created and called to be by God. Having dealt with the relationship between humility and prudence and humility and temperance, we now move onto the relationship between humility and the other two cardinal virtues of justice and fortitude.

Humility and Justice

For us to understand this relationship and how it plays out in our lives, we must first understand just what justice is. All too often we see justice as institutionalized vengeance. We see justice as a matter of people getting what their actions merit or deserve. Sometimes justice is seen as giving to another that which they want or believe themselves entitled to have. Many times, a wrong interpretation of social justice mirrors this belief about justice.

Virtue, though, is motivated by the good of the other. Justice is no different. Justice, in Catholic theology, is giving to another person that which they need. This does not mean we give others necessarily what they want or feel entitled to have. This does mean we use justice as a mechanism of revenge. Justice looks to the good of the individual. Sometimes that will mean the provision of goods for those who lack the ability to get those goods. For example, we provide our children food, shelter, education, clothing, and such as a matter of taking care of their needs. There comes a point where we help them to appropriately learn to do this on their own. We also give our children love, teach them life has consequences, and teach them to exercise virtue in their lives. All of these go to creating a responsible adult.

Justice also looks to the good of the communities to which we belong. Justice makes us look at our own contribution to the good of the groups to which we belong. Justice leads us to ask the humble question as to whether I am contributing to the problem or the solution. Because justice does concentrate on what is good for me first, it helps develop that sense of humility that is necessary to grow on faith.

Justice is a reflection of God. If justice were merely a means of vengeance, then Jesus Christ would not have come and humanity would have been wiped out. We needed a savior. We may not have wanted one, but we needed one. Justice will lean toward mercy over vengeance. If justice were merely a matter of giving us what we want, there would be no such thing as free will. That God does not reward ill behavior is a matter of justice. Even in eternal judgement, justice is a verification of the choices made.

Justice and humility together give us the ability to judge our own actions and attitudes when it comes to how we treat one another. It gives us the honesty to fully live

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (Matthew 7:12) Justice is at the heart of “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass us” (Matthew 6:12) and “the measure you use against other will be the measure used against you.” (Matthew 7:2) Justice and humility open our eyes to how we treat others and thus how we are asking God to treat us.

Humility and Fortitude

Fortitude is courage. It is the ability to act even when such action might be unpopular, misunderstood, or even hated. Fortitude is the ability to act with prudence, justice, and temperance. The person with fortitude understands how and when action must be taken. The person with fortitude does not hide behind excuses or fear. The person with fortitude accepts the vulnerability that comes with acting rightly and accepts the consequences acting rightly might bring.

The person with fortitude is willing to take calculated risks in helping others. Fortitude also helps us to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do; not because there is expectation of a reward. Fortitude also helps us in appropriately responding to being wronged. A person who develops fortitude develops patience. This person will know that many times discretion is the greater part of valor. The person with fortitude is able to take being wronged in stride and not allow it to embitter them.

Fortitude requires us to embrace the heroic in our lives. Many times that ‘heroic’ is a matter of realizing where change must take place in one’s own life. Fortitude enables us to be honest with ourselves as to whether we are being prudent in our decisions. Fortitude is what enables us to realize where we are intemperate and where habits and dispositions within ourselves need to change. Fortitude enables us to look at how we treat others, to question whether we are capable of being better, and to engage in that betterment despite external and internal pressures to not change.

Fortitude is necessary to humility because it informs our actions. Humility is not a passive internal disposition but a mode of operation. A few weeks back, in the introduction to these columns, I had printed the “Litany of Humility” by Cardinal Merry de Val. He was the Secretary of State under Pope St. Pius X. His position required a great exercise of the virtues. In his prayer, he asks for the fortitude to neither be influenced by praise nor criticism in how he acts. He prays for the ability to be considered lesser even as he holds a powerful position. For him to make this prayer public is a great act of fortitude and humility.

Now having covered the four cardinal virtues, over the next 3 weeks, we will look into how the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) and humility help us to be the best version of who God has created and called us to be.