What is Virtue

The fact that the word *virtue* has in our time taken on the tinge of something unmanly and even ridiculous imposes two obligations upon the Christian. He must beware of any falsely pious abuse of the word and concept, and he must come to recognize its healthy and genuine sense, which it is his duty to embody, regardless of any human respect.

The Latin word *virtus* means *manliness*. The German word for virtue, *Tugend*, comes from *taugen, to be fit*; and related to this is the English word *doughty*, now obsolete except in humor, but originally meaning *able*. Virtue makes a man *fit and able* to be what his Creator intends, and to do what his Creator wills.

Thus virtue is not good surface behavior and orderly deportment. A good man is more of a man than a bad one, in the sense that he is making more of his humanity. He is in every respect *more fit*. Thus a man’s virtue shows that he is putting his ability into practice; here and now he is making actual what would otherwise remain merely possible within him. This means that he does good—and that he does it not because he has to, but because he wills to. He wants to, and he can. Through sin, the willful turning away from God, a man of his own free will becomes unfit to be and do what he is intended to be and do.

The highest and truest fitness of the Christian is to be able to lead the life of a child of God, in close relation-
ship with God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. His most abysmal unfitness consists in losing this power and this life through his own fault.

The most important Christian virtues are the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, fortitude, and moderation.

The Four Cardinal Virtues

The cardinal virtues are natural perfections—human potentialities on the natural level. But as Christian virtues they have their roots in the supernatural soil of faith, hope, and charity; above all, in sanctifying grace. In a Christian, the infused moral virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance go far beyond their natural strength and nobility, to the fullness of the sanctity of a life centered in God.

The Virtue of Prudence

The first of the four cardinal virtues, and the rule for the other three, is prudence. Now it goes against the grain of present-day thinking to see in prudence a virtue, let alone the first of the four cardinal virtues. The reason for this is that we often have an entirely wrong idea of the virtue of prudence. Prudence as virtùe has nothing to do with smartness and guile, nor with the timorous attitude of undue caution. Prudence is the quality of clear-sighted-ness. The prudent man approaches each decision with his eyes open, in the full light of knowledge and faith. He discerns reality objectively, sizes up a factual situation for what it is, and weighs the real value of things. Only after careful consideration does the prudent man make his decision. Whoever follows the impulse of his will before appraising the facts and the circumstances of a situation accurately and objectively is imprudent and unwise. That man is prudent who directs the choice of his will according to his insight in a situation and in the true reality of things as God has created them, and who is able to apply the general principles of virtuous action to the concrete, immediate instance.
If the prudent man feels that a situation is beyond his own powers of insight, he will rely on the insight of a more competent person. Hence, docility is a part of prudence—the ability to accept instruction and advice. Presumptuousness and lack of objective reflection are the contrary of prudence. The know-it-all and the man lacking objectivity are not humble enough to match their judgment with reality. This type of person believes that he can come to a decision impetuously and blindly. However, any decision not arrived at from a sober appraisal of reality is bound to be wrong. And if such a decision concerns a matter of morals, it cannot possibly be a good one.

The person who lacks objectivity and who is unable to keep still and to allow the facts to speak, in order to gain a sound basis for his decisions, cannot possibly be a just man either. Justice and all the other cardinal virtues demand capacity for weighing facts, respect for objective reality, and ability to transform this theoretical knowledge into effective action. From all this it becomes obvious that prudence is a first requirement for the other virtues. And that is why St. Thomas calls it their “mother.”

Prudence is the art of deciding wisely. The prudent man acknowledges the obligations contained in objective reality. Not only does he know what is right, he also does what he has realized to be right. The decisions based on prudence, therefore, are the verdict of our conscience. Conscientiousness—and prudence are as closely related as effect and cause. Whoever works on the development of prudence in others and in himself also improves and perfects his conscience.

The Virtue of Justice

While prudence is the cornerstone of the cardinal virtues, justice is their peak and culmination. A good man is above all a just man. But what is justice? As a virtue, it makes man eminently fitted for life in common with others. Only a just man can truly live with others. The just man gives to each his due. He takes an objective and unprejudiced view in his judgments of others and of their accomplishments. He is fair. He is appreciative where appreciation is due, and his appreciation is not restricted to words but shows in his spirit and action. The just man finds his appropriate place in society, whether in the family, the community, the state and the Church. This means that a just man is disciplined and knows how to obey and how to command, how to praise and how to blame, all with incorruptible objectivity, whether his position be that of a leader or subordinate. He never talks behind another’s back, nor does he pass on to others whatever evil he may hear of his fellow man. He does not even listen to it. The Bible admonishes us to frown on the slanderer: “The north wind stops rain, and a frown a backbiter” (Proverbs 25:23).

Also opposed to justice is the hasty and ill-considered fault-finding with the orders of legitimate authority. The just man is fair here too. He is neither petty nor ungracious nor self-righteous.

Above all, the just man is truthful. Truthfulness is one of the cornerstones of communal life. Wherever truth ceases to be respected, communal life breaks up and falls apart, whether within the family, among friends, or in the greater social bodies of nation and world. The virtue of justice alone makes men fit to live together in true peace and genuine harmony.
Whenever Sacred Scripture wants to single out someone as particularly perfect—St. Joseph, for example, the foster father of our Lord—it calls him "a just man" (Matthew 1:19). "Treasures of wickedness shall profit nothing; but justice shall deliver from death" (Proverbs 10:2).

The Virtue of Fortitude

Good does not prevail of itself. Courageous men have to stand up for it. It is one of the basic errors of liberalism to suppose that good will prevail without the support of ready courage, or fortitude. The consequences of the virtue of fortitude consist essentially and precisely in the readiness to fight for the cause of good in the world and to set one's defenses against the powers of evil.

The courageous man is ready to suffer injuries in this battle, and by that we mean anything disagreeable to human nature, such as misunderstanding, scorn, ridicule, as well as harm to his body and his possessions. In this battle, the man of courage is even willing to give his life. Death in a good cause is the noblest show of fortitude, and the readiness to die is its very essence.

The greatest cause a man can stand up for is the cause of Jesus Christ. Martyrdom for Christ is therefore the highest achievement Christian fortitude can reach. Its close second is death for the community, particularly death in a just war for the rights and peace of one's people.

Now fortitude, in order to be virtuous, must be linked to justice. Only the just man can be truly courageous, and true fortitude is to be found only if the fight is for a just cause. The courage of the criminal is not fortitude. Hence St. Thomas Aquinas says that "the praise of fortitude depends upon justice"; and St. Ambrose, that "courage without justice is a prying tool of the evil one."

Courage, however, is shown not in attack only, but also in endurance. As every seasoned soldier knows, it may be a much braver thing to hold one's ground than to attack. To storm an enemy position calls for less moral fortitude than to sit out a heavy bombardment. The same is true of martyrdom, the crown of Christian fortitude. We may well say that martyrdom consists in holding one's ground and enduring for the cause of Christ.

Patience is a part of fortitude; patience, in the Christian sense, means firmness of soul that does not weaken under the constant attack of sorrow nor in the face of cruelty and evil. However, the readiness of the courageous Christian to endure patiently even unto death does not imply that he will refrain altogether from attack. His courage in attack will gain from his patient endurance; for this gives him detachment and freedom of mind denied to mere "men of action" who despise patience as an "unmanly" quality.

The Virtue of Moderation, or Temperance

Since the fall of Adam we have not been able to take an ordered inner life for granted. We are faced with the constant possibility of the revolt of the senses against the spirit. The desire for sensual enjoyment, whether it be in eating, in drinking, or in sexual intercourse, may exceed the measure set by God and by reason. And the immoderation of such desire destroys man's interior order. The essence of the cardinal virtue of moderation, traditionally called temperance, consists in not allowing one's will for enjoyment to exceed due measure. The human will for
enjoyment may easily reach destructive proportions, but not in the temperate man.

Sins against this virtue in eating and drinking and sexual life differ from offenses against the other virtues in that they plainly bear the mark of disgrace and shame. All intemperance, especially incontinence, runs directly counter to man's true dignity and worth as a rational spiritual being. A man who cannot control his desire sinks below the level of an animal. He grows more and more apart from one of the greatest goods ever given to him, his inner freedom of choice. Only the disciplined man can make clear and calm and free decisions. In the words of St. Thomas, intemperance is slavery. Its victim eventually grows dull to all spiritual values and unreceptive to divine things. Whereas temperance, restraint, and chastity are signs of manliness and maturity, immoderation of whatever kind is a sign of immaturity. Therefore a Christian, for the sake of higher spiritual and divine goods, will keep his desires in check even when they are not directed to evil. The Preface of the Mass in Lent gives thanks to God for this restraint; “for by this bodily fasting thou dost curb vice and uplift the mind, bestowing upon us virtue and its rewards, through Christ our Lord.”

Now as we have seen, temperance is not the greatest of the cardinal virtues. The greatest is justice, the virtue of community life. But he who cannot be temperate cannot be just either. So while we must not make the mistake of supposing temperance, abstemiousness, and chastity to be the only virtues of a Christian, or even his highest or most important ones, neither must we forget that without these virtues no full and perfect life is possible. We must also bear in mind that the world of today has little respect for restraint and chastity, and that these virtues are therefore in particular danger. It is therefore important that these virtues be understood in their true nature, without any distortion or exaggeration. They are the virtues of manliness and moral cleanliness, of human dignity and of honor, and of that inner freedom which comes with clear-headed and disciplined maturity.

The Ten Commandments

In the sevenfold picture of the three theological and the four cardinal virtues we have given an outline of the Christian image of the good man. It is by these virtues that the Christian is enabled to live in accordance with the commandments of God.

God gave the Ten Commandments to the people among whom He was one day to raise the Messias. We know from St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians (2:15) that the commandments of God were also engraved in the hearts of the heathen. They are the “Law” which Christ said He had come to destroy but to fulfill. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:18) He says: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, Thou shalt do no murder; if a man comitts murder, he must answer for it before the court of justice. But I tell you that any man who is angry with his brother must answer for it before the court of justice” (Matthew 5:21).

This comparison between the Old and the New Law—“You have heard that it was said to the men of old . . . But I tell you . . .”—is repeated many times; it shows that the life of a Christian is measured by a higher standard, and a stricter one, than the life of either pre-Christian man or pagan man.
The Ten Commandments are:

1. Thou shalt not have strange gods before me;
2. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain;
3. Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath day;
4. Honor thy father and thy mother;
5. Thou shalt not kill;
6. Thou shalt not commit adultery;
7. Thou shalt not steal;
8. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor;
9. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife;
10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods.

It is important to bear in mind that these commandments were given, not to an individual, but to a people—the Chosen People of God. They contain the principles of every just and healthy social order. The first three commandments indicate that proper order prevails only in a society which believes in God, fears Him, and puts the belief into practice, rendering to God the public honor which is His due as supreme King and Lord. Hence the institution of the Sabbath, or day of rest, our Sunday, the observance of which extends to civil life as well as religious. The fourth commandment declares the need to recognize legitimate authority in family, community, and state. This condition is essential if a society is to survive. In the fifth commandment God declares the life of each individual human being to be sacred and inviolable. It may not be touched by threat or injury from any unlawful or self-appointed power whatever. A society in which the life of the individual is not respected will go down in ruin. The sixth and ninth commandments protect marriage as the basis of the family and of all society. The seventh and tenth protect the right of private property. The economic and legal orders are thus given their moral and religious foundation. From the eighth commandment we learn that it is truth and truthfulness which hold society together, and that falsehood destroys it.

Belief in God, service of God, obedience to legitimate authority, respect for human life, respect for the sanctity of marriage, protection of property, perfect maintenance of truth and veracity—these are the basic prerequisites for a truly moral public order. And no one but the virtuous man is fit to fulfill them.

Christ, our Model

The whole point of a Christian's life is to become like Christ. It can be put even more strongly: the Christian is to become another Christ. In the words of St. Paul (Ephesians 4:13), the Christian is to "reach perfect manhood, that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ." For Christ said, "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

The fullness of Christ's own Life is treasured up in the Church. The Church imparts it to her members by virtue of their life with the Church, especially in the sacraments. This life, which the Christian receives in the Church through Jesus Christ, forms him into a new man. By the power of faith, hope, and charity, he matures into a constructive and good man: prudent, just, courageous, and moderate,—able and willing to keep the commandments of God.
The Three Theological Virtues

Faith, hope, and charity relate directly to God. Hence they are called "theological." They are man's response to the reality of the Trinity—not a reaction of the mind only, but a living response involving his whole being. They are a response which no one can give without the aid of grace; for only to the man who has received grace has the reality of the Trinity been revealed. Thus these three virtues are the fruits and effects of sanctifying grace. They make man fit for an effectiveness to which of himself he would never attain; they elevate him to a perfect and complete life otherwise beyond the reach of his own powers.

The Virtue of Faith

The first and the fundamental theological virtue is faith. First and foremost, the Christian is a believer. That means that he is convinced of the existence and the works of the Blessed Trinity. The Christian has fully realized this reality and answers God's revelation and gift of Himself with an unqualified and completely confident acceptance. The Christian is conscious of this newly experienced reality of God with the same certainty and directness as of his natural surroundings. Though he can neither see nor prove it, he is certain of it because God Himself revealed it, disclosing it to human sight in His incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, and because, by grace, he bears within himself the witness to God.

Although faith is never unreasonable, it comprises a certain element of daring. The strength to undertake the required act of daring has its source in the grace of God and in the will of man to cooperate. Man's will has the confidence to cooperate with God, because it relies upon the word of God. God is thus both the content of faith and its motive. We believe in God, and we believe God.

Christian faith includes not only an inner conviction but also an outward profession. The two go hand in hand. "Thou canst find salvation," says St. Paul (Romans 10:9-10), "if thou wilt use thy lips to confess that Jesus is the Lord, and thy heart to believe that God has raised him up from the dead. The heart has only to believe, if we are to be justified; the lips have only to make confession, if we are to be saved."

This does not mean that a Christian is in duty bound to proclaim aloud everywhere and at all times his belief in the Triune God and His works. But it most certainly does mean that he may neither conceal nor deny his faith when the glory of God and of His Church, or the salvation of his neighbor, requires him to profess it.

In the first chapter of this book we spoke in detail of the content of Christian faith as consisting of the reality of the Trinity and the threefold work of Creation, Redemption, and Sanctification.

The Virtue of Hope

The Christian is a man who says to himself, "Things will turn out well with me in the end." That is, he lives
in hope. He who does not hope is no true Christian. The true Christian hopes for a happy end—eternal life, life in God. Eternal life is the final and real object of the virtue of hope.

This hope—the reliance on God’s power and veracity—cannot be shattered by anything. “Even if he slays me,” said Job (13:15), “I will hope in him.” And the Christian makes these words his own.

Hope, like faith, is a gift of God, a gift that confers an indestructible youthfulness. The actual secret of “eternal youth” lies in the supernatural virtue of hope; for the hopeful Christian always knows that he is headed for the happy end infinitely surpassing all expectation—eternal life. This expectation keeps him alert and resilient. In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (40:30-31) we read: “Youths shall faint and labour: and young men shall fall by infirmity. But they that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall take wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

Now it is true that this expectation of eternal life never leaves a Christian any rest. As long as he has not reached eternal life or become worthy of it, he can never be completely satisfied with himself. As St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”

But this restlessness has nothing in common with the torturing unrest of boredom and despair. It is the joyful activity of youth, happy in the knowledge that the real goal still lies ahead. And as long as a Christian is alive on this earth his goal in very truth still lies ahead of him. He will reach it in eternal life.

Yet Christian hope is not the same as final certitude. No one is definitely certain of not losing eternal life through his own fault. This is a great mystery. Man’s free will and God’s infallible grace cooperate in a way beyond our understanding. In our hope we know two things: that our true goal still lies ahead of us, and that we may miss it. Hence Christian hope always involves the “fear of the Lord.” This is the fear of being separated from the author and essence of eternal life, God, through one’s own fault.

Hope is essential to prayer. He who has ceased to hope cannot pray; and he who supposes himself already in possession of everything will not pray. But he who really hopes prays from the deepest motivation within him; for prayer is nothing else than hope expressed. St. Thomas says that the expression of Christian hope is the Lord’s Prayer. “This, then,” said our Lord (Matthew 6:9), “is to be your prayer:

“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

“Thy kingdom come.

“Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

“Give us this day our daily bread.

“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us.

“And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

In this prayer, St. Thomas says, everything is set forth which the Christian hopes to attain, as well as everything which he hopes to avoid. Specifically:

Eternal life (Thy kingdom come).

Fulfillment of the will of God (Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven).

Possession of the necessary goods of life (Give us this day our daily bread).

Forgiveness of sins (And forgive us our trespasses).

Victory over temptation (And lead us not into temptation).

Release from all distress (but deliver us from evil).
The Virtue of Charity

The greatest of all Christian virtues is the love of God and neighbor, or charity. "I may speak," wrote St. Paul in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (13:1): "with every tongue that men and angels use; yet if I lack charity, I am no better than echoing bronze, or the clash of cymbals." And Christ said (Mark 12:30-32) that the commandments to love God and to love our neighbor were the greatest commandments there are. "One of the scribes ... came up and asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? Jesus answered him: the First commandment of all is, Listen, Israel; there is no God but the Lord thy God; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with the love of thy whole heart, and thy whole soul, and thy whole mind, and thy whole strength. This is the first commandment, and the Second, like, is this. Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than these."

Supernatural love of God and neighbor is not primarily a matter of feeling, nor is it a wallowing in sentiment. This greatest of all loves, charity, is a matter of the free decision of a man's will, enlightened by his intellect and by faith; it is the true fruit of the new life flowing into him from the Holy Spirit.

There are no bounds to the love which God deserves. This we know from our faith, especially from faith in our Redemption through Jesus Christ. How can I, a finite human being, love the infinitely lovable God as He deserves? Only by charity.

My neighbor is a child of God. This too we know from our faith. All the redeemed are "sons and heirs of God." The love of God and the love of our neighbor belong together.

In the life of the early Church the intimate connection between love of God and love of neighbor was open for all to see; the works of charity were directly and visibly combined with the sacramental meal. Everybody could notice that all Christian love of neighbor takes its origin and strength from the intimate union of God and man. On the natural level, I can love my neighbor as a friend, as my partner in marriage, as my child, my parent, my fellow-countryman. But I can love him also because God loves him so greatly that for his sake as well as for mine He sent His only-begotten Son into the world to be sacrificed. This love surpasses all purely natural love—not in emotional fervor, but in the strength of its affirmative power. Such loves do not live on human strength alone, but on the power of the Holy Spirit, by whom—as the Bible tells us (Romans 5:5)—"the love of God has been poured out in our hearts."

Supernatural Christian love participates in the love by which God loves His Son and us. And the natural love of friendship, of conjugal life, of any human association at all, receives from this supernatural love a wholly new fervor and a greatly increased strength and depth.

Supernatural love of neighbor manifests itself above all in compassion. Christian charity is ready with sympathy and instant generosity of heart to help any one in distress, whether he be friend, stranger, or enemy. Christ Himself, Incarnate God, takes the place of the one in distress; and love of God and love of neighbor thus merge into one and the same charity—because their common source is Christ. At the end of the world, Christ the Judge will say to the elect (Mt. 25:35-46): "I was hungry, and you gave me food; thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you brought me home, naked, and you clothed me; sick, and you cared for me, a prisoner, and
you came to me. . . . 'Believe me, when you did it to one of the least of my brethren here, you did it to me.' And to the accursed the Judge will say: 'I was hungry, and you never gave me food; I was thirsty, and you never gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you did not bring me home; I was naked, and you did not clothe me; I was sick and in prison, and you did not care for me. . . . Believe me, when you refused it to one of the least of my brethren here, you refused it to me.'

Charity is the greatest of all the Christian virtues. By charity man becomes worthy of the Kingdom of God. Charity wipes out all sins; it cannot bear to be separated from God; supernatural love and sin are mutually exclusive. An act of supernatural love may suffice to justify man before God. "Make charity your aim" we are exhorted by St. Paul (Corinthians 14:1), who, in the thirteenth chapter of his first Epistle to the Corinthians, has left us the greatest hymn to charity.

The Theological Virtues and Sanctifying Grace

All three theological virtues have their roots in sanctifying grace. Their seeds are implanted in us together with grace as new potentialities which would otherwise be beyond our reach. In the order of their nature, faith comes before hope, hope before charity. And sin destroys them in reverse order—charity first, faith last. The faith of a man living in mortal sin is indeed incomplete, but it is the spark from which the flame of his supernatural life can be lit again to become full, warm, and bright.