

nature and value of things (i.e., asking whether something is really worth sacrificing for) and involves a just cause. Fortitude strengthens the individual's resolve to resist temptation, overcome personal weaknesses and make sacrifices for what is good.

To have fortitude does not mean that a person is immune from fear. Instead, a person with fortitude recognizes fear, but does not allow fear to prevent him from doing what is good or, worse, to do what is evil. Think then of how important fortitude is to withstand peer pressure. Fortitude strengthens a person to conquer the fear of death or persecution and even to make the ultimate sacrifice of martyrdom.

Virtues stemming from fortitude include magnanimity, which inclines a person to perform great works in every virtue; munificence, which inclines a person to perform great physical works; patience, which inclines a person to endure present evils; and perseverance, which inclines a person to continue steadfastly in the pursuit of virtue. Vices contrary to fortitude include timidity, recklessness, presumption, ambition, vainglory, pusillanimity, inconstancy and pertinacity.

Finally, the virtue of temperance enables a person to keep his passions and emotions under the control of reason. While temperance moderates a person's attraction to pleasures and gives balance in the use of created goods, it also involves using these goods in a good way. Here one approaches pleasures and the use of created goods in the light of faith, of reason and of one's own vocation and circumstance of life.

The exercise of temperance includes two essential parts: a sense of shame and a sense of honor. The sense of shame causes a person to fear feeling the disgrace, confusion or embarrassment from being intemperate in action. The sense of honor causes a person to want to feel the dignity, esteem or love for practicing temperance. On one hand, the sense of shame prevents a person from acting intemperately and, thereby sinfully; while on the other hand, the sense of honor, inspires a person to act temperately and, thereby, meritoriously.

In all, temperance in action is self-preservation, whereas intemperance in action is self-degradation

and self-destruction. Virtues aligned with temperance include abstinence, sobriety, chastity, purity, continence, humility, gentleness, clemency, modesty and lack of greed. On the contrary, vices opposed to temperance include gluttony, drunkenness, unchastity, impurity, incontinence, pride, wrath and greed.

The practice and development of the four cardinal virtues are essential to anyone's spiritual life. However, as the old saying goes, "Easier said than done." Being the poor victims of original sin, each of us has difficulties living a virtuous life. Therefore, we need the abundant graces our Lord offers through prayer, the frequent reception of the sacraments and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Looking to the example of the saints and invoking their prayers also strengthen our resolution for holiness. We must never forget our Lord's challenge: "You must be made perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Through the practice of virtue, assisted by God's grace and the aid of the saints and angels, we can meet the challenge.

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#### **Pope John Paul II Society of Evangelists**

14818 Ranchero Road

Hesperia, California, USA

Telephone: 760-220-6818

FAX: 760-948-7620

E-mail: [pjpiisoe@earthlink.net](mailto:pjpiisoe@earthlink.net)

[www.pjpiisoe.org](http://www.pjpiisoe.org)

#### **Pamphlet 071**

## **Living a Virtuous Life**

### **Fr. William Saunders, Ph.d**

St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians captured the idea of virtue and the living of a virtuous life: "My brothers, your thoughts should be wholly directed to all that is true, all that deserves respect, all that is honest, pure, admirable, decent, virtuous or worthy of praise" (4:8). With this in mind, the classic definition of virtue is a habit or firm disposition which inclines a person to do good and avoid evil. Characterized by stability, a virtuous person not only strives to be a good person, but also seeks what is good and chooses to act in a good way. Aristotle defined virtue as "that which makes both a person and what he does good."

Dr. Joseph Pieper, one of the great Thomist theologians and an expert on virtue, provided this explanation: "The doctrine of virtue... has things to say about this person; it speaks both of the kind of being which is his when he enters the world, as a consequence of his createdness, and the kind of being he ought to strive toward and attain to — by being prudent, just, temperate and brave. The doctrine of virtue is one form of the doctrine of obligation, but one by nature free of regimentation and restriction" (The Four Cardinal Virtues).

On one hand, an individual can acquire human virtues through his own effort under the guidance of reason. Through education, by deliberately choosing to do what is good, and through perseverance, a person acquires and strengthens virtue.

On the other hand, with the help of divine grace from God, the individual finds greater strength and facility to practice these virtues. Through these grace-assisted virtues, which we would now call moral virtues, he gains self-mastery of his weakened nature due to original sin. In sum, these virtues help to forge that Christian character and to motivate a person to become God-like, in the best sense of the term.

There are four primary moral virtues, which are called the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The word cardinal derives from the Latin *cardo*, meaning "hinge."

Consequently, these four virtues are called “cardinal” because all other virtues are categorized under them and hinge upon them. The Book of Wisdom of the Old Testament states, “For [Wisdom] teaches temperance and prudence, justice and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful for men than these” (8:7).

Prudence, the “mother” of all of the virtues, is the virtue by which a person recognizes his moral duty and the good means to accomplish it. Actually, prudence is part of the definition of goodness. A person can be prudent and good only simultaneously. No other virtue can contradict what is prudent. Therefore, what is prudent is substantially what is good, and prudence is the measure of justice, temperance, and fortitude.

A prudent person looks at the concrete reality of a situation with a clear, honest objectivity; references and applies the moral truths (e.g. the 10 Commandments or the teachings of the Church); makes a moral judgment; and then commands an action. Moreover, prudence also seeks to accomplish the action in a good way — doing what is good in a good way.

Clearly, prudence is essential for the formation and operation of one’s conscience. To be a prudent person, one must know God’s truth, just as to have a good conscience, one must know God’s truth. One cannot do what is good if one does not know the principles of truth and goodness.

To prudently examine a situation and then to determine a course of action, one must keep in mind three aspects of prudence: memoria, docilitas, and solertia. Memoria simply means having a “true-to-being” memory which contains real things and events as they really are now and were in the past. Everyone must learn from his past experiences. Remembering what is to be done or avoided from past experiences helps to alert us to the occasions and causes of sin, to prevent us from making the same mistakes twice, and to inspire us to do what is good. Be on guard: the falsification or denial of recollection is a grave impediment to exercising prudence.

Docilitas means that a person must have docility, an open-mindedness, which makes the person receptive to the advice and counsel of other people. A

person should always seek and heed the wise counsel of those who are older, more experienced and more knowledgeable.

Finally, the exercise of prudence involves solertia, which is sagacity. Here a person has a clear vision of the situation at hand, foresees the goal and consequences of an action, considers the special circumstances involved, and overcomes the temptation of injustice, cowardice, or intemperance. With solertia, a person acts in a timely manner but with due reflection and consideration to decide what is good and how to do the good. With a well-formed conscience attuned to God’s truth, and with the proper exercise of memoria, docilitas, and solertia, a person will act prudently.

Contrary vices to prudence include precipitance (acting impulsively), inconstancy (changing resolutions too quickly), negligence and losing sight of one’s supernatural destiny, namely eternal life. Perhaps the last vice is most prevalent today: too many people act without regard to their eternal judgment and without setting their sights on Heaven. The prudent person seeks to always do what is good in the eyes of God so as one day to be joined to His everlasting goodness in Heaven. After all, Jesus asked, “What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process?” (Matthew 16:26).

St. Thomas Aquinas defined justice as “a habit whereby a man renders to each one his due with constant and perpetual will.” The first duty in justice is toward God. We have the duty to pray, to worship, to obey the God who has shown such great love to each one of us and whom we must love above all things. In justice to God, we uphold vows taken to Him and make sacrifices for the sake of His love, such as accepting martyrdom rather than abandoning the faith.

The second duty in justice is toward our neighbor. A person must not only refrain from doing evil toward his neighbor, but also do what is good toward his neighbor. As such, a person must respect the rights of each person and establish relationships which promote equity among all people and build up the common good.

The virtue of justice has three dimensions: commutative or reciprocal justice, distributive justice, and legal or general justice. Commutative or reciprocal justice governs relationships between individuals. Strictly speaking, here is contract justice. The meaning of the contract between individuals is to identify each party’s rights and to guarantee one party’s claim to a certain benefit as much as the other’s obligation to provide that benefit.

Looking at the broader spectrum of justice, distributive justice orders the relationship of the community as a whole to its individual members. In justice, the whole community must promote the common good for each person, not just the majority. Therefore, those entrusted with the care of the common good must make sure individual members are given what is their due. For example, in justice, the government must insure that each person has proper food, clothing, shelter, medical care and educational opportunities which are basic goods for the dignity of each person. Here one recognizes the duty of the whole community to care especially for those members who are most vulnerable — the unborn, the old, the sick, and the disabled.

Finally, legal or general justice concerns the individual’s relationship to the whole community. Every person has the duty to uphold and obey the just laws that insure the common good. For instance, every citizen has a duty to support the common good through the defense of the country or through the payment of taxes (too bad, but true).

Virtues that derive from justice include piety (here the proper reverence and service to our parents, country, and others in legitimate authority), obedience, gratitude, veracity, affability (the proper friendliness and civility among all) and equity. Next, the virtue of fortitude enables a person to stand firm against and endure the hardships of life and to remain steadfast in pursuing what is good. Here such steadfastness and endurance reflect the soul’s clinging onto what is good. Genuine fortitude does not entail making sacrifices or risking one’s life arbitrarily or foolishly. However, genuine fortitude is always exercised in accord with reason, assesses the true