

Perfecting In Grace: Life in the Spirit

Deacon Jim Munno — 2024-03-07

As in prior weeks, we will make good use of the excellent slides Deacon Jim provided, which can be found on the talk web page [HERE](#) or linked directly [HERE](#). Deacon Jim focused on virtue this week. He encouraged us to listen for and tune our filters to "virtue" in any form throughout the talk — not just the word virtue, but particular virtues as they are mentioned. Let the virtues grab our attention as they come up.

Deacon Jim then went over a brief review of the series. He gave us a clarifying thought on confirmation and baptism — namely, confirmation is to baptism as what growth is to birth, attributed to Thomas Aquinas. In this talk, Deacon Jim focused on the life of virtue, the theological and the cardinal virtues.

Deacon Jim reminded us that holy baptism is the basis of our whole Christian life, the gateway to our life in the Spirit. Baptism is the door which gives us access to the other sacraments. The most Holy Trinity gives us sanctifying grace, enabling us to believe, to hope and to love. Baptism begins theosis (our deification), and we are incorporated into the Body of Christ. Last week, we went over the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord). These are gifts of sanctifying grace, received at baptism, causing us to become more Christ-like and God-like. Deacon Jim reminded us that we are not talking about behavior, but about our very "being." Since our very "being" changes, it causes us to change our behavior, which in turn causes us to become more Christ-like. The gifts "complete and perfect" the virtues of those who receive them so that they, like our Blessed Mother, can become "full of grace," however, with the graces specifically meant for them.

THE LIFE OF VIRTUE: COOPERATION WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT — From the book of Wisdom, we learn "if one loves righteousness, whose works are virtues, She [Wisdom] teaches temperance and prudence, justice and fortitude, and nothing in life is more useful than these" (Wisdom 8:7). These are the four cardinal virtues.

- The practice of the life of virtue is the key that unlocks the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Suma I, II, 65, 3). Of all the gifts of the Spirit, love is the most important, for whoever has [the theological virtue of] love has all the Gifts of the Spirit. If you do not have love, then the gifts of the Spirit will lie dormant in your soul (Suma I, II, 68, 5).
- Previously, we learned from 2nd Peter how we become partakers of the divine nature — see slide 10. This week, Deacon Jim shared the next verses from 2nd Peter, telling us how to get from faith to love: "For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love" (2 Peter 1:5-7). These verses present a litany of virtues leading us from faith to love. We begin with the "God-given", infused, and theological virtue of faith, through a pathway of "human" virtues, and end in the "God-given," infused in our souls, theological virtue of love. Practicing the life of virtue is indispensable if we want to seek the perfection that is available to us, that is offered to us; everything is available to us for life and godliness. There is a pathway and it is given to us via gifts from God, but we have to walk this path.

THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES: FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE — There are countless human virtues. "The human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt [our] faculties for participation in the divine nature: for the theological virtues relate directly to God. They dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity. They have the One and Triune God for their origin, motive, and object" (CCC 1812). The gifts of faith, hope, and love are infused on our soul and orient us to God. They have God as their motive and their object. They draw us to a happiness we cannot attain in any other way. On earth, almost everything we do, good or bad is in pursuit of happiness. Our happiness in heaven transcends our human capacity and we can start living that happiness here and now. We can do so because heaven came down to earth in Jesus Christ — incorporating us in His body, filling us with His Spirit. So we have a divine-motivated happiness in us, but the happiness that we know will exist in heaven cannot be completely lived here: we are going to need to be perfected in grace and living with God in heaven for that to happen. However, we can start living in it now. The Catechism tells us further that the theological virtues are "the foundation of Christian moral activity... they inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful..." (CCC 1813). See slide 13 for the full quotation. Faith, hope and love are gifts from God, and they do NOT come to us in any other way than as gifts from God.

- The definition of love is willing the good of other “as other” (the way they are) Another definition of love is when someone else's happiness is vitally important to our own. However, all definitions fall short of what love truly is. Love is a theological virtue, it is divine, it is a mystery, it is infinite. Likewise, God manifests Himself in each of these 3 characteristics since He is love itself. All the theological virtues are so much more that we can understand. We can grow in them; and some day, God willing, we can be fully perfected in them, especially in love in heaven.

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES — The cardinal virtues are cardinal because all the other virtues hinge on the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, and prudence stands at the head. There is no virtuous act that does not engage prudence. The slides describing each one is referenced beside each virtue. In this summary, we add a few comments from Deacon Jim's talk.

- **PRUDENCE** (slide 15) can be described as "right reason in action." It is our ability to know the good AND to see the means to achieve it in every circumstance. We need to know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil in order to be prudent. We may need to grow in prudence to know how to achieve the good to be done. We need to practice all the human virtues in order to grow in them. If we want to become more prudent, we have to be prudent! Every virtue, in its own way, is in pursuit of the good, so we need prudence to grow in ALL virtues. The necessity to act prudently is for our benefit, and for the benefit of the world. We need to know the value of prudence. Part of our evangelization is to draw everyone closer to God, and everyone needs to understand the value of prudence in order to do so.
- **JUSTICE** (slide 16) is giving the other their due — what is due to them. As we grow in the spiritual life, our concept of justice will grow with it. If we are in an argument with someone else and we know that they are graced by God, loved by God, made in the image and likeness of God, then justice is to show them love — to will their good as other. Prudence guides us in what is just and what is not.
- **FORTITUDE** (slide 16) is the virtue that keeps us constant in our resolve. Exercising fortitude when we say no to chocolate in Lent, for example, can grow our fortitude for the greater spiritual battles in life. Deacon Jim did not remember who the saint was who loved oranges, and placed one on her desk, constantly in her view, that she never ate. When asked why she set this constant temptation in front of her, she replied "If I cannot say no to an orange, how am I ever going to say no to Satan?"
- **TEMPERANCE** (slide 16) can best be summarized with "all things in moderation." We all have temptations that tug at us, even going after things that are beyond us, like trying to "earn" our way to heaven. Every appetite that draws us to something that is ultimately not good is moderated by temperance.

GO FORWARD, GO BACK — Deacon Jim concluded his talk with a long quote from St. Teresa of Avila from her masterwork on prayer, called Interior Castle. The full quotation can be found on slides 17. At the end of her work on prayer and contemplation, she speaks of the importance of acquiring virtues and of "praising" them. She speaks of the necessity of a life of virtue in order to go forward in the spiritual life. And to stand still is to go back.

A LENTEN PERSPECTIVE — Deacon Jim concluded his talk by, once again, revisiting the three pillars of Lent powered by grace:

- **PRAYER:** Be mindful of faith, hope, and love in prayer
- **ALMSGIVING:** Justice and fortitude directed by prudence and driven by love
- **FASTING:** Temperance and fortitude directed by prudence and driven by love

Let us remember always that every virtue has at its core love.

A CHALLENGE — For the next week, Deacon Jim challenged us to spend a couple of hours paying careful attention to everything we do, and ask ourselves where is faith, hope, and love in what we are doing? Where is prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance? If we spend some time focusing on how the virtues fit into our lives, it can be an eye-opening experience and may direct us in unexpected ways.