



ISSUE: What are the cardinal virtues? What is the role of the cardinal virtues in the Christian life?

RESPONSE: Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good (Catechism, no. 1803). There are two types of virtues: theological and human (or moral) virtues. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity relate directly to God, are given to us at Baptism, and allow us to live a life of supernatural grace as children of God (cf. Catechism, nos. 1812-13).

The immediate object of the human virtues is not God, but human activities that lead us to God. They are generally acquired by human effort but are assisted and reach their perfection by grace. These virtues help us to lead a morally good life with joy and relative ease (cf. Catechism, no. 1804).

Four of the human or moral virtues are known as cardinal virtues. “Cardinal” comes from the Latin word *cardo*, which means “hinge.” The cardinal virtues, then, are considered the “hinge virtues” and are the basis for all the other human virtues. They are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

Sacred Scripture frequently attests to the value of these virtues in living a godly life, although sometimes under other names. For example, Wisdom 8:7 provides:

And if any one loves righteousness, [wisdom's] labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control [i.e., temperance] and prudence, justice and courage [i.e., fortitude]; nothing in life is more profitable for men than these.

DISCUSSION: The Catechism defines the cardinal virtues as “stable dispositions of the intellect and will that govern our acts, order our passions, and guide our conduct in accordance with reason and faith” (no. 1834). They help us to make good moral choices and thus are an indispensable part of the Christian life.

The moral virtues—like all habits—are acquired and grow through education, deliberate acts, and perseverance in struggle (Catechism, no. 1839). They can be diminished or lost by the repetition of acts that are opposed to the virtue. These acts not only destroy the virtue but typically replace it with the opposite vice. Also, when we fail to practice a particular virtue, it will gradually weaken and die.

We need to recognize that because of original sin our human nature is wounded and prone to sin and vice. Our new life in Christ gives us the grace to persevere in virtuous living. As a result, we “should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil” (Catechism, no. 1811). We need to be humble enough to recognize our sinful tendencies and cultivate the corresponding virtue. In this way we build a character worthy of our calling.

As we grow in virtue, it becomes easier for us to recognize truth and choose the good, and thus we truly experience the freedom of the children of God (cf. Jn. 8:32; Gal. 5:1). When we choose evil we abuse our freedom and fall prey to the slavery of sin (cf. Catechism, no. 1733). St. Paul helps to put this in focus for us:

“[W]hatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4:8).

Catholics United for the Faith, Faith Facts: The Cardinal Virtues; <http://www.cuf.org/2005/02/morality-is-habit-forming-the-cardinal-virtues>.