

"Walk in the footsteps of Jesus"

In his 24 April general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about the theological virtues.

04/24/2024

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In recent weeks we have reflected on the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They are the four cardinal virtues. As

we have emphasized several times, these four virtues belong to a very ancient wisdom that predates even Christianity. Even before Christ, honesty was preached as a civic duty, wisdom as the rule for actions, courage as the fundamental ingredient for a life that tends towards the good, and moderation as the necessary measure not to be overwhelmed by excesses. This patrimony that is so ancient, the patrimony of humanity has not been replaced by Christianity, but focused on, enhanced, purified, and integrated in the faith.

There is therefore in the heart of every man and woman the capacity to seek the good. The Holy Spirit is given so that those who receive it can clearly distinguish good from evil, have the strength to adhere to good by shunning evil, and, in so doing, achieve full self-realization.

But in the journey that we are all making towards the fullness of life, which belongs to the destiny of every person – the destiny of each person is fullness, to be full of life – the Christian enjoys special assistance from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. It is implemented through the gift of *three other, distinctly Christian virtues*, which are often mentioned *together* in the New Testament writings. These fundamental attributes, which characterize the life of the Christian, are three virtues that we often speak of together: *faith, hope and charity*.

Let's say it together: [together] faith, hope... I don't hear anything! Louder! [together] Faith, hope, and charity! Good job!

Christian writers soon called them “theological” virtues, insofar as they are received and lived out in relationship with God, to

differentiate them from the other four, called “cardinal” insofar as they constitute the “hinge” [It., “cardine”] of a good life. These three are received in Baptism and come from the Holy Spirit. The one and the other, both the theological and the cardinal, put together in so many systematic reflections, have thus composed a wonderful septenary, which is often contrasted with the list of the seven deadly sins. This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the action of the theological virtues: “the theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy

Spirit in the faculties of the human being" (n. 1813).

While the risk of the cardinal virtues is of generating men and women who are heroic in doing good, but all alone, isolated, the great gift of the theological virtues is existence *lived in the Holy Spirit*. The Christian is never alone. He does good not because of a titanic effort of personal commitment, but because, as a humble disciple, he walks in the footsteps of Jesus, the Master. He goes forward on the way. The Christian has the theological virtues, which are the great antidote to self-sufficiency. How often do certain morally irreproachable men and women run the risk of becoming conceited and arrogant in the eyes of those who know them! It is a danger that the Gospel rightly warns us against, when Jesus advises the disciples: "You too, when you have done all that you have been

commanded, say, ‘We are useless servants. We have done what we ought to have done” (*Lk 17:10*). Pride is a poison, a powerful poison: a drop of it is enough to spoil a whole life marked by goodness. A person may have performed a mountain of good deeds, may have reaped accolades and praise, but if he has done all this only for himself, to exalt himself, can he still call himself a virtuous person? No!

Good is not only an end, but also a means. Goodness needs a lot of discretion, a lot of kindness. Above all, goodness needs to be stripped of that sometimes too cumbersome presence that is our ego. When our “I” is at the centre of everything, everything is ruined. If we perform every action in life only for ourselves, is this motivation really so important? The poor “I” takes hold of everything and thus pride is born.

To correct all these situations, which sometimes become painful, the theological virtues are of great help. They are especially so in times of falling, because even those with good moral intentions sometimes fall. We all fall in life, because we are all sinners. Just as even those who practice virtue daily sometimes make mistakes; we all make mistakes in life: intelligence is not always clear, will is not always firm, passions are not always governed, courage does not always overcome fear. But if we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit – the Master of the interior life – He revives the theological virtues in us: then, if we have lost confidence, God reopens us to faith; with the strength of the Spirit, if we have lost confidence, God reopens us to faith; if we are discouraged, God awakens hope in us; and if our heart is hardened, God softens it with His love. Thank you.

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