

# Fortitude

Strength of spirit, or fortitude, helps us cope with difficulties and overcome our limitations. For Christians, Christ is our example of how to practise fortitude, the virtue that opens the way to many others.

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**1. *Per ardua ad astra!*** (Through adversity to the stars!)

This well known motto graphically expresses our human experience: to achieve the best we have to fight;

everything worthwhile demands an effort; throughout life we always have to battle with obstacles and difficulties to gain the heights.

Many works of literature, in different cultures, exalt the hero who personifies in some way the Latin tag that we would all like to apply to ourselves: *nil difficile volenti*, roughly translatable as "where there's a will, there's a way."

On the human level, then, fortitude is valued and admired. This virtue, which goes together with a capacity for self-sacrifice, has been held in high esteem from ancient times. In Greek thought "*andreia*" is the cardinal virtue that governs and directs the urge to fight, and thus gives a person the strength to overcome fear in seeking the good even though it may be difficult and arduous.[1]

## **2. "For You are my strength" (Ps 31:5)**

Human experience also teaches us that we can be weak, and this is to a certain extent the other side of the coin of fortitude. We have to admit that we are often not able to carry out tasks that in theory are within our capabilities.

We have within us a tendency to give way, to be soft on ourselves, to refuse to take on any laborious project because of the effort involved. In other words, human nature, created by God for the highest things but weakened by sin, is capable of both great sacrifices and of great treachery.

Christian revelation offers a meaningful explanation of this paradox. On the one hand, it admits the natural virtue of fortitude, which is praised in many places in the Bible. The "wisdom literature"

reflects this, for example, in the book of Job, saying that "man's life on earth is warfare".[2]

In the New Testament our Lord said, rather mysteriously, that the kingdom of God "is for the violent", *violenti rapiunt*.[3] "In medieval iconography, such as in the painting in the Chapel of All Saints at Ratisbon (Regensburg), the figure that represents fortitude wrestles with a lion."<sup>[4]</sup>

At the same time, there are many texts in Scripture[5] that show that all the different manifestations of fortitude (patience, perseverance, magnanimity, audacity, firmness, frankness and even being ready to give one's life) come from God, and can only be maintained if they are anchored in God: *quia tu es fortitudo mea*, for you are my strength (Ps 31[30]:4). In other words, Christian

experience teaches us that "all our strength is on loan".[6]

St Paul accurately expresses this paradox, this interplay of the natural and the supernatural in the virtue of fortitude: "when I am weak, that is when I am strong", for our Lord assured him: *sufficit tibi gratia mea, nam virtus in infirmitate perficitur*, "my grace is sufficient for you, for strength is made perfect in weakness." [7]

### **3. "Without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5)**

For Christians, then, the model and source of fortitude is Christ himself. He provides us with a constant example, going to the extreme of giving up his life for love of us. [8] He also tells us that "without me, you can do nothing". [9]

Christian fortitude makes it possible for us to follow Christ day after day.

Fortitude helps us realize that true happiness lies in following God's will, even though fear, prolonged effort, mental or physical suffering, or danger may mask that fact, or threaten to put us off course. Our Lord's warning was clear, "They will put you out of the synagogues; indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."[10]

***4. Beata quae sine morte meruit martyrii palmam:*** martyrdom in everyday life.

From the beginning Christians considered it a privilege to suffer martyrdom, for they recognised that it meant full identification with Christ. Throughout history, the Church has kept up the tradition of giving particular veneration to martyrs, those who by a special dispensation of Providence shed their blood to proclaim their

faithfulness to Jesus, thus offering the supreme example not only of fortitude, but also of Christian witness.[11]

Although there have been martyrs in every age, especially our own, for most Christians these days it is unlikely that we will ever be in that situation. Nevertheless, as Benedict XVI has reminded us, there is also a "martyrdom of ordinary life", a testimony that today's world needs very badly. There is the silent and heroic testimony of "so many Christians who live Christianity without compromise, fulfilling their duty and dedicating themselves generously to the service of the poor."[12] Here our eyes turn naturally to our Blessed Mother, for she stood at the foot of her Son's Cross, giving an example of extraordinary fortitude without suffering physical death, to such an extent that she can be truly called a

martyr without dying, as in an ancient liturgical prayer: "Blessed be the Virgin Mary who at the foot of the cross merited the palm of martyrdom without dying."[13] As St Josemaría wrote, "Marvel at Mary's courage: at the foot of the Cross, with the greatest of human sorrows – there is no sorrow like her sorrow – filled with fortitude. And ask her for that same strength, so that you too can remain beside the Cross."[14]

**5. *Omnia sustineo propter electos***(I endure all things for the sake of the elect), 2 Tim 2:10

Our Lady of Sorrows is a faithful witness to God's love and a good illustration of primary act of the virtue of fortitude: to endure (*sustinere*) adversity, unpleasantness or hardship. It certainly involves persevering in doing good, for without doing good there can be no ultimate happiness. For Christians,

ultimate happiness means the contemplation of the Blessed Trinity in Heaven.

In our Lady the words of the psalm are fulfilled: *si consistant adversum me castra, non timebit cor meum*, though a war-host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear.[15] St Paul too practised fortitude all his life, right up to and including his supreme witness to Christ in martyrdom; to such an extent that he could say, "I endure everything for the sake of the elect."[16]

As an image of this endurance, Sacred Scripture often speaks of a rock. In one of his parables Jesus refers to the need to build upon rock, which means not just listening to his words, but making an effort to put them into practice.[17] In the final analysis we know that the rock is God, and we find the term used again and again in the Old Testament,[18]

for example "my rock, my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the strength of my salvation".

[19] It is not surprising, then, that St Paul says that the rock is Christ himself;[20] he is "the power of God".  
[21]

The strength to endure difficulties comes, then, from union with Christ through faith, as St Peter said:

*Resistite fortis in fide!* Resist, firm in your faith![22] In this way Christians can, like Peter, become a rock that Christ can use to build and support his Church.[23]

## ***6. "By your patience you shall gain possession of your souls" (Lk 21:19)***

Patience is a part of the virtue of fortitude. Patience has been described as "the daily form of love", and we can connect this with Pope Benedict's observation that "faithfulness over time is the name of

love".[24] The virtue of patience has always held a prominent place in Christianity, and St Augustine, in his treatise on patience, explains why, saying that it is "such a great gift of God that it must be called a mark of God who dwells within us".[25]

Patience is a characteristic of God in salvation history,[26] as Benedict XVI said at the inauguration of his ministry. "This is God's sign: he himself is love. How often we wish that God would show himself stronger, that he would strike decisively, defeating evil and creating a better world. All ideologies of power justify themselves in exactly this way, they justify the destruction of whatever would stand in the way of progress and the liberation of humanity. We suffer on account of God's patience. And yet, we need his patience. God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who

crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man."[27]

Many practical consequences follow from this consideration. Patience leads us to suffer in silence, to cope with tiredness, other people's bad temper, injustice etc., uncomplainingly. Serenity of soul similarly makes us capable of being all things to all people,[28] adapting to other people, while maintaining our own tone – the tone of Christ. In this way we Christians avoid endangering our faith or our vocation out of a mistaken idea of charity, because we realize that we can go as far as the gates of hell, but no further, since beyond them it is impossible to love God. This is the way to fulfil Jesus' words, "By your patience you shall gain possession of your souls."[29]

## **7. *He who perseveres to the end will be saved* (Mt 10:22)**

Patience is closely linked with perseverance. This can be defined as persisting for some time in doing virtuous deeds in spite of difficulties and tiredness. More precisely, overcoming the temptation to abandon the effort when faced with a specific obstacle is usually called constancy; and we talk about perseverance when the obstacle is simply keeping up the necessary effort over time.

This is not merely the human quality needed to achieve a particular objective. Perseverance, imitating Christ, who was obedient to the Father's will to the very end,<sup>[30]</sup> is necessary for salvation, according to the words of the Gospel, "he who perseveres to the end will be saved".<sup>[31]</sup> Hence we can understand St Josemaría's assertion that "To begin

is easy; to persevere is sanctity."[32] And it is also easy to understand why, as a holy priest, he loved work done perseveringly and finished off well. He described it as setting "the last stone" on each job.[33]

"All faithfulness must pass the most exacting test: that of duration. (...) It is easy to be consistent for a day or two. (...) Only a consistency that lasts throughout the whole of life, can be called faithfulness."[34] These words of St John Paul II help us to understand perseverance more deeply. It is not mere persistence, but primarily a genuinely consistent life; fidelity that ends in meriting the master's praise in the parable of the talents, whose words could be seen as formula of canonisation. "Well done, good and faithful servant; as you have been faithful over little things, I have greater things to commit to your charge: enter into the joy of your lord".[35]

## *Magnus in prosperis, in adversis maior*

"Great in prosperity, greater in adversity". These words on a memorial monument to the exiled Stuart king James II, in the church at Saint-Germain-en-Laye near Paris, express the harmony between the different parts of fortitude: on one side patience and perseverance, both related to the act of persisting in the good that we have already considered; on the other, the generosity (or "magnificence") and magnanimity that have to do directly with carrying out great deeds – including in small matters of everyday life. According to moral theology, "because it restrains the urge to abandon activity in the face of obstacles to seeking the good, the virtue of fortitude restrains our fears – *cohibitiva timorum*. At the same time, fortitude moderates deeds of daring and audacity – *moderativa*

*audaciарum.* So fortitude deals with fear and daring, restraining the first and imposing a balance on the second."[36]

Magnanimity or greatness of soul is the readiness to undertake virtuous actions that are excellent, difficult and worthy of great honour.

"Magnificence" refers to the effective carrying out of great works, in particular finding and using material resources and money for big schemes for the glory of God and the common good.[37]

St Josemaría described a magnanimous person as one having a "greatness of spirit, a largeness of heart wherein many can take refuge. Magnanimity gives us the energy to break out of ourselves, and be prepared to undertake generous tasks that are for the benefit of all. Small-mindedness has no place in the magnanimous heart, nor has

meanness or egoistical calculation, nor self-interested trickery. The magnanimous person devotes all his strength unstintingly to what is worthwhile. As a result he is capable of giving himself. He is not content with mere giving, he gives his very self. He thus comes to understand that greatest expression of magnanimity: giving oneself to God."[38]

Magnanimity is needed to start again each day with the job of sanctifying ourselves and doing apostolate in the middle of the world, with the usual everyday difficulties, and to do so in the conviction that everything is possible for someone who believes. [39] With this conviction, magnanimous Christians have no fear of proclaiming and firmly defending the teaching of the Church in their particular surroundings, even doing so at times when they have to defy public opinion, [40] – an

attitude deeply rooted in the Gospel. Magnanimous Christians combine understanding for people with holy intransigence about doctrine,[41] in accordance with St Paul's recommendation *veritatem facientes in caritate* – practising the truth with charity.[42] This leads them to defend the totality of the faith without violence. They understand that obedience and docility to the Magisterium of the Church are not opposed to freedom of opinion. On the contrary, the Magisterium helps them to distinguish between what are truths of faith and what are matters of simple human opinion.

We started with Mary's patient endurance at the foot of the Cross. Our Lady's example of fortitude also includes the greatness of soul that led her to exclaim to her cousin Elizabeth: *Magnificat anima mea Dominum ... quia fecit mihi magna qui potens est.* My soul magnifies the

Lord ... because he has done great things for me![43] Mary's rejoicing has important lessons for us, as Benedict XVI reminded us, "Only if God is great is humankind also great. With Mary, we must begin to understand that this is so. We must not drift away from God but make God present; we must ensure that he is great in our lives. Thus, we too will become divine; all the splendour of the divine dignity will then be ours."[44]

## **Recommended Reading**

*Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 736, 1299, 1303, 1586, 1805, 1808, 1811, 1831, 1832, and 2473.

Pope John Paul II, "The Virtue of Fortitude", general audience, Rome, 15 November 1978.

St Augustine, *De Patientia* (On Patience), *Patrologia Latina* (Migne) 40.

St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, qq. 123-140.

St Josemaría, *Friends of God*, nos. 77-80.

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[1] See Enrique Colom and Ángel Rodríguez Luño, *Chosen in Christ to be Saints. I: Fundamental Moral Theology*, Rome: ESC, 2014.

[2] *Job* 7:1.

[3] *Mt* 11:12.

[4] Romano Cessario, *The Virtues, or The Examined Life*, Continuum, 2002, p. 169.

[5] E.g. *Ex* 15:2; *Is* 25:1; *Ps* 31[30]:3; *Ps* 46[45]:1; *Ps* 71[70]:3; *Ps* 91[90]:2; 1 *Tim* 1:12; 2 *Tim* 1:7; *Col* 1:11; *Phil* 4:1; *Rom* 5:3-5.

[6] St Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, 728.

[7] 2 Cor 12:9-10.

[8] See *Jn* 13:15 and 15:13.

[9] *Jn* 15:5.

[10] *Jn* 16:2.

[11] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 2473. The Latin word *martyr* comes from the Greek *martus*, which means witness.

[12] Benedict XVI. Angelus 28 October 2007. St Josemaría described this unbloody martyrdom in *The Way*, 848.

[13] Alleluia, Common Masses of Our Lady.

[14] St Josemaría, *The Way*, 508.

[15] Ps 27[26]:3.

[16] 2 Tim 2:10.

[17] Lk 6: 47-49.

[18] See *1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:47; Deut 32:4; Hab 1:12; Is 26:4; Ps 19[18]:14; Ps 28[27]:1; Ps 31[30]:2-3; Ps 62[61]:2; Ps 89[88]:25; Ps 94[93]:22; Ps 144[143]:1*; and many more.

[19] 2 Sam 22:2-3; cf. Ps 18[17]:2.

[20] 1 Cor 10:4.

[21] 1 Cor 1:24.

[22] 1 Pet 5:9.

[23] See Mt 16:18.

[24] Benedict XVI, Address, 12 May 2010.

[25] St Augustine, *De Patientia*, 1 (PL 40, 611). Patience is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit listed by St Paul in *Gal 5:22*. See *CCC* nos 736 and 1832.

[26] See *1 Pet* 3:20; *2 Pet* 3:9 and 15; *Rom* 2:4; *Rom* 3:26; *Rom* 9:22; *Rom* 15:5; and *1 Tim* 1:16.

[27] Benedict XVI, Homily at the solemn inauguration of his pontificate, Rome, 24 April 2005

[28] *1 Cor* 9:22.

[29] *Lk* 21:19

[30] *Phil* 2:8

[31] *Mt* 10:22.

[32] *The Way*, 983.

[33] "I like 'last stones' for they mean the summit of long, patient effort." (St Josemaría , interview for *El Cruzado Aragones*, 3 May 1969).

[34] St John Paul II, Homily in Metropolitan Cathedral, Mexico, 26 January 1979

[35] *Mt* 25:23.

[36] Romano Cessario, *The Virtues, or The Examined Life* (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 168.

[37] Magnanimity or longanimity is traditionally considered one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: cf. *CCC* no. 1832.

[38] St Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 80. St Josemaria included care of little things among the signs of greatness of soul. "Great souls pay much attention to little things", *The Way*, no. 818.

[39] See Mk 9:23.

[40] See St Josemaria, *The Way of the Cross*, 13th Station, point 3.

[41] See St Josemaria, *The Way*, nos. 393–398.

[42] *Eph* 4:15.

[43] *Lk* 1:46-49.

[44] Benedict XVI, Homily on the  
Solemnity of the Assumption,  
Castelgandolfo, 15 August 2005.

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