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Very Human, Very Divine (III): With Christ's Sentiments

In this third article we delve into the heart of the human virtues: what they are, how they guide our feelings and why they make us freer.

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Jesus has already been asked several questions by people trying to sidetrack Him from his discourse. Our Lord answers them one by one, without getting impatient. Finally a

scribe approaches Him, surprised by everything he has heard. He is impressed by the Master's teaching, and raises in public a question that has troubled him for a long time: What is the most important thing in life? Accustomed to fulfilling meticulously even the smallest precept of the law, sometimes he finds himself confused about what is essential among everything he does. So he asks this question: *Which commandment is the most important of all?* (Mk 12:28). Jesus wants to untie the knots in the heart of this man, who is sincerely seeking happiness. He replies with words from Scripture suited for people in love: *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength* (Mk 12:30).

Jesus wants us to realize that the life of those who believe in God “cannot be reduced to anxious and forced

obedience, but must have love as its wellspring.”[1] To love with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength. But how can we do this? Saint Paul points out the way to the Philippians when he tells them to have the same sentiments among themselves that Christ had (cf. *Phil* 2:5). We need to foster the same feelings and reactions to everything, to all the people and situations we encounter, that we see in Jesus. In the sentiments of Christ’s heart we find the way to overcome the interior divisions that threaten the stability of human love. If, besides following our Lord’s example and words, we seek to *feel* as He did, we will find the simplicity and happiness that the scribe longed for.

Importance of the inner world

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that our feelings (or “passions” as they are sometimes

called) are “natural components of the human psyche; they form the passageway and ensure the connection between the life of the senses and the life of the spirit.”[2] Feelings or emotions are part of everyone’s life, and therefore they were part of Christ’s life. We know that Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus (cf. *Jn* 11:35), and that He reacted forcefully on seeing the money changers who had turned the Temple of Jerusalem into a marketplace (cf. *Jn* 2:13-17). We also see how He was filled with joy when the simple of heart welcomed the Gospel (cf. *Mt* 11:25).

To better understand the world of our affectivity and emotions, we first need to distinguish between our *actions* and our *feelings* or *passions*. In other words, between what we do and what “happens” to us. We say we *act* when we plan and do something on our own initiative; for example,

when we decide to study or visit a sick friend. But at other times we can be surprised by an unforeseen reaction to a situation: anger at words we consider offensive; sadness at the unexpected death of a loved one; or envy for something valuable we would like to possess. These internal reactions that occur without our deciding to admit them are called *feelings* or *passions*.

Precisely because our feelings are not chosen by us, they do not in themselves constitute merit or sin. This doesn't mean, however, that they are always neutral, since "they are morally qualified to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will."[3] That is, to the extent that they are actively sought or consented to, by welcoming them. The spontaneity with which they occur in us does not imply that they are unimportant for the Christian life. In fact, just the opposite is the

case: our feelings or emotions involve a preliminary judgment of the event that gives rise to them and suggests a subsequent course of conduct. And we can gradually mold them to conform more and more fully to what we really want.

For example, when faced by an event that is presented to us as good, an emotion such as joy or enthusiasm can arise which, in turn, suggests actions such as applauding the situation or approaching a person. In contrast, when faced with an event that is presented to us as bad, a feeling of anger or sadness can arise which, in turn, suggests actions such as reproving or distancing ourselves from someone. Naturally, there are times when a situation should not be applauded, despite the fact that the preliminary judgment of our feelings is positive; or there will also be times when we see an offense where there is none, and it would be a mistake to

react with reproach. We can say, therefore, that when our emotions involve a right judgment they are a help for our Christian life, since they make doing what is good more spontaneous; in contrast, when our feelings stem from a false judgment, they are an obstacle for doing what is truly good.

Of course, someone who experiences feelings based on a wrong perception of reality can still act well, by strenuously resisting this feeling. But we cannot go uphill all our life, continually fighting against the onslaught of bad feelings, doing what we don't want to do, or always rejecting what our emotions incline us towards. A sustained fight against our own feelings can easily lead to discouragement or exhaustion. If we fail to educate this inner world of ours, it will be difficult in the end to discern what is good from what is bad, because one's mind is darkened

and it becomes easy to give in to feelings just as they arise, without evaluating them.

Educating our emotions

“To educate is to introduce a person to life, and the greatness of life is initiating processes. Teaching young people to initiate processes and not to take up space!”[4] This is how the Pope once responded to a teacher in a meeting with the educational community of a school. This recommendation also applies to the formation of our emotions, which is not aimed simply at controlling bad feelings or blocking certain behaviors, but at giving shape, little by little, to the world of our emotions, so that the movements that arise spontaneously in us help us to do what is good quickly and naturally. To educate our emotions is to start a process that will lead us to better welcome God’s grace, and thus

to identify ourselves with Jesus. Putting order in our feelings enables us to like to do what is good – so that what we “feel like doing” almost always coincides with what pleases God.

To educate our feelings we need to understand them, to know why they arise. We have been created with a natural inclination towards what is good for us: the instinct to survive, the sexual tendency, the desire for knowledge, the need to work and have friends, the reasonable demand for recognition and respect from those around us, the search for a transcendent meaning in life... All these natural inclinations are like a force that flows from us in search of what we truly need. When these tendencies are satisfied, a positive inner resonance is produced, which is a feeling of joy, gratitude or serenity. But when a tendency is frustrated, a negative feeling of

anger, confusion or pessimism can arise.

However, there are two factors that distort the world of our feelings and hinder the harmonious functioning of our soul. The first is the disorder that sin has produced in our tendencies. Christ won for us the grace of justification which restores God's friendship to us, but our desires are still subject to disorder and need to be put right little by little. The second factor varies from one person to another, depending on the education received, the social environment, and personal sins – all of which over time can deform our tendencies. To correct this disorder and prevent harmful feelings from arising, we need to guide the deepest layer of our personality and order it towards what is truly good. And this is achieved through the virtues.

What are the virtues

At the beginning of the 14th century, Giotto painted frescoes on the interior of a Padua chapel that today is considered one of the world's most important works of art. On the sides, each painting presents a scene from the life of Jesus and Mary, from the Annunciation to the Ascension. These all converge on the back wall, which represents the end of time and the scene of the Last Judgment, with the blessed on Christ's right and the condemned on his left. In addition, the side walls in the lower part, the area closest to the viewer, have two series of seven images that do not strictly speaking belong to the history of salvation and that depict the personification of seven virtues and seven vices. In this succession of images, found to either side of our Lord in majesty, the artist seems to have wanted to represent our human collaboration in divine history: our ability to facilitate or hinder the work of grace.

As Saint Josemaría once said, there are many people who “may not have had an opportunity to listen to God’s words, or have forgotten them. Yet their human dispositions are honest, loyal, compassionate and sincere. I would go so far as to say that anyone possessing such qualities is ready to be generous with God, because human virtues constitute the foundation for the supernatural virtues.”[5]

But what are the virtues? Are they something we can possess, like when we hold something in our hand, wear a suit or put on shoes? In a certain sense, yes. Our intellect and will, which are spiritual faculties, and also our sensitive appetites have the capacity to possess. Although not material objects, they are qualities which, when possessed in a stable way, are called good habits or virtues. These qualities are not visible like shapes and colors, but

their presence is easily noticed in a person. For example, a mathematician does operations and calculations with ease that a person who has not studied mathematics cannot even begin to do. The mathematician possesses a body of knowledge that is an intellectual virtue. The temperate person, to take another example, eats and drinks what is reasonable without great effort because he or she “possesses” the moral virtue of temperance. Whoever does not have this habit will be able to limit themselves to what is reasonable only with difficulty and considerable effort; in contrast, whoever has the vice opposed to temperance, the vice of gluttony, will easily be led to eat more than they should.

The moral virtues have three fundamental dimensions. The first is intellectual: since virtues have to regulate a reaction, knowledge of a

lifestyle is required, that of a person who is striving to follow Christ. The virtue of poverty, for example, presupposes the knowledge of the role that material goods have in the life of a Christian. The second dimension of the virtues is their affective nature: they are introduced into the tendencies that are directed towards each concrete good, modifying them little by little and helping their spontaneous movement conform to the Christian lifestyle. This is achieved by repeating acts that are both free – conforming to what is virtuous – and performed precisely because they are good. Acts that seem good but that are done out of fear, convenience, or for other reasons unrelated to the good, will not help make human tendencies virtuous, since they will not shape our affectivity. The third dimension of the human virtues is that they generate a predisposition for the good: virtuous people have special

facility and agility for distinguishing good from evil, even in complex or unforeseen situations.

The virtues set us free

In presenting Himself as the Good Shepherd, an image that evoked in his listeners the arrival of the Messiah who would save his people, Jesus says: *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10)*. This abundant and full life is given to us by God's grace, supported by our yearning to discover and do what is good. Therefore possessing these habits makes us freer; little by little it makes us more flexible persons who can more easily discover how to do good in very different situations. The virtues liberate us because they allow us to choose between the different goods that are presented to us. Vices, in contrast, are rigid, because they generate automatic reactions that are difficult to give up.

Identification with Christ, towards which the Holy Spirit is leading us, entails acquiring and consolidating the virtues that Jesus taught: both theological and moral. We have considered only the latter, which reorder the inner world of our feelings, so important for the Christian life. However the source and driving force of all these virtues is charity. Without charity, everything else would be seen as a weight that oppresses our freedom. When we sincerely want to live for the glory of the Father as Christ did, then love gently guides our choices so that they become more and more like Christ's. The commandment with which Jesus answered the scribe's question – to love God with all our heart and all our strength – is far removed from any forced obedience. God needs children who are eager to undertake a joyful mission, because their feelings are in accord with Christ's.

[1] Francis, *Angelus*, 25 October 2020.

[2] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1764.

[3] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1767.

[4] Francis, *Address*, 6 April 2019.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 74.