

Character Built on Virtue

A new article in the series on forging a strong Christian personality. "Virtues reinforce our personality, rendering it stable and even-tempered. They enable us to rise above ourselves."

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As he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"^[1] As disciples of our Lord, we witness the

scene together with the Apostles, and may find ourselves surprised by his answer: *Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.*^[2] Jesus does not give a direct reply. With gentle divine pedagogy, he wants to lead that man to an awareness of the deepest meaning of his longing: “Jesus shows that the young man’s question is really a religious question, and that the goodness that attracts and at the same time obliges man has its source in God, and indeed is God himself. God alone is worthy of being loved ‘with all one’s heart, and with all one’s soul, and with all one’s mind.’”^[3]

To enter Life

Our Lord right away returns to that person’s daring question: what must I do? *If you would enter life*, he answers, *keep the commandments.*^[4] The Gospels portray the young man as an observant Jew who might have

been satisfied with this reply. The Master has confirmed him in his convictions, by pointing to the commandments he has observed since early childhood.[5] But he wants this new *Rabbi* who teaches with authority to spell them out clearly. He rightly suspects that Christ can open up for him undreamt of horizons. *Which?*[6], he asks. Jesus reminds him of the duties that have to do with our neighbor: *You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*[7] These are the precepts of the so-called “second tablet” that safeguard “the good of the person, the image of God, by protecting his goods.”[8] They are the first stage, the path towards freedom, and not yet perfect freedom, as Saint Augustine remarks. [9] In other words, they are the first

phase on the path of love, but not yet a mature, fully developed love.

What do I still lack?

The young man knows and puts into practice these prescriptions, but his heart is asking him for more. Surely there must be something more he can do. Jesus reads his heart, and *looking upon him loved him.*^[10] Our Lord puts to him the challenge of his life: *You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.*^[11] Christ has placed this man squarely before his own conscience, his freedom, his desire to be better. We don't know to what extent he has understood the Master's requests, although from his own question, *What do I still lack?*, it would seem that he was expecting other "things to do." His dispositions are good, though perhaps he has not yet understood the need to

interiorize the meaning of God's commandments.

The life God is calling us to is not simply a question of doing good things, but of *being good*, of being virtuous. As Saint Josemaria said,[12] it is not enough to be “goodish”; rather we must strive to be good, in keeping with the vast horizon Jesus opens up before us: *One there is who is good.*[13]

Christian maturity means taking control of our life, *asking ourselves truly*, before God, what we may still lack. We are spurred to leave the comfort zone of merely “fulfilling” the law, to discover that what really matters is following Jesus, in spite of our own mistakes. Then we will allow his teachings to transform our way of thinking and feeling. We will experience how our heart, which used to be small and shrunken, expands with the freedom God

places there: *I have run the way of your commandments when you enlarged my heart!*[14]

The challenge of moral formation

The young man didn't expect that "what he was lacking" was precisely placing his life at God's feet and serving others, shedding his sense of security as a "fulfiller." And he went away sad, as happens to anyone who prefers to do things his own way, instead of letting God take the lead and surprise him. God has called us to live with his freedom: *hac libertate nos Christus liberavit.*[15] And deep down, our heart cannot settle for less.

To grow in maturity means to learn to live our life in keeping with high ideals. It is not just a matter of knowing a set of precepts, or of acquiring an ever clearer perception of the consequences of our actions. To decide to *be good*, in a word *holy*,

means to identify ourselves with Christ, discovering the reasons for the way of life he offers us. Thus it requires understanding the meaning of the moral norms that teach us about the goods we should aspire to, how to attain a life that is truly fulfilled. And this is only possible if we enrich our way of being with the Christian virtues.

Pillars of character

Moral knowledge is not an abstract discourse, nor a technique. The formation of our moral conscience requires a strengthening of our character that is grounded on the virtues as its pillars. Virtues reinforce our personality, rendering it stable and even-tempered. They enable us to rise above ourselves, our self-centredness, and focus our concern on God and others. A virtuous person is “poised,” with the right measure in all things, upright,

self-possessed and well-rounded. Those who are short on virtue, in contrast, will find it hard to undertake significant projects or to give shape to high ideals. They will be forever improvising and lurching to and fro, and end up being unreliable, even for themselves.

Fostering virtues enlarges our freedom. Virtue has nothing to do with getting used to situations or acting out of routine. To be sure, a single action is not enough for a good operative habit to take root, to shape our way of being and make it easier for us to do good. Habits are formed thanks to repeated actions: we become good by *being* good. To act once and again upon the resolution of getting down to study at a set time, for example, renders every successive effort a little less costly. But we need to persevere in this effort in order to preserve the habit

of study, or otherwise it might be lost.

Renewing our spirit

Virtues, both human and supernatural, direct us towards the good, towards the attainment of our deepest aspirations. They help us reach true happiness, union with God: *This is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.*^[16] They make it easier to act in accord with moral precepts, which are no longer seen as rules to follow but as a path leading to Christian perfection, to identification with Christ in the life marked out by the beatitudes. The beatitudes, a portrait of Christ's face, "speak of basic attitudes and dispositions in life"^[17] that lead us to eternal life.

The path of growth in Christian life then opens up before us, as Saint Paul exhorts: *Be transformed by the*

renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.[18]

Grace transforms the way we judge events and gives us new criteria for action. We gradually learn to adjust our way of seeing things to God's will, expressed also in the moral law. And then we come to love moral goodness, a holy life, and taste *what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

[19] We reach Christian maturity in our moral and emotional life, which helps us to readily appreciate what is really noble, true, just and beautiful, and to reject sin, which offends the dignity of God's children.

This path leads to the forging, as Saint Josemaria said, of a "person of sound judgment." [20] But what are the characteristics of this sound judgment? Elsewhere he says that it "requires maturity, firm convictions, sufficient doctrinal knowledge, a refined spirit and an educated

will.”[21] What an excellent portrait of a Christian personality! We need the *maturity* required to make decisions with interior freedom and to take responsibility for them. Also firm and sure *convictions*, based on a deep knowledge of Christian doctrine, acquired through formational classes or talks, reading good books, reflection, and especially through the good example given by others, since “the true guiding stars of our life are the people who have lived good lives.”[22] And along with this, a *refined spirit*, shown in kindness towards others, and an *educated will* that leads to a virtuous life. A “person of sound judgment,” therefore, will ask in every circumstance: What does God expect of me? He or she will ask the Holy Spirit for light, have recourse to the principles they have assimilated, seek advice from those able to help, and act in consequence.

Fruit of love

Thus moral behaviour, specified in living out the commandments under the impetus of the virtues, stems from love, which spurs us to seek and foster moral goodness. This love is much more than just feelings, which by their very nature are fluctuating and fleeting. It does not depend on our mood or what we like or would prefer to do in a given situation. Rather, to love and be loved means to give ourselves, in a self-giving grounded on the awareness that we are loved by God, and on the high ideals that are worth staking our freedom on: “When people give themselves freely, at every moment of their self-surrender, freedom renews their love; to be renewed in that way is to be always young, generous, capable of high ideals and great sacrifices.”[23]

Christian perfection is not restricted to fulfilling a set of rules, nor to striving for isolated goals such as self-control or efficiency. Rather it leads to surrendering our freedom to our Lord, responding to his invitation with the help of his grace: *Come, follow me.*^[24] It is about living according to the Spirit,^[25] impelled by charity, with the desire to serve others. And then we come to understand that God's law is the privileged path for putting into practice this freely chosen love. Rather than rules, it is a question of adhering to Jesus, of sharing in his life and destiny, in loving obedience to his Father's will.

Avoiding “perfectionism”

The determination to grow in maturity by strengthening the virtues is far removed from a narcissistic quest for perfection. We struggle out of love for our Father

God, with our gaze fixed on Him, not on ourselves. Therefore we need to reject any tendency to “perfectionism” that might arise were we to erroneously focus our inner struggle in terms of efficiency or results. While such an approach may be quite common in certain professional environments, it disfigures the Christian moral life. Holiness lies above all in loving God.

Maturity leads to harmonizing the desire to act uprightly with the real limitations that we experience in ourselves and in others. We may sometimes feel inclined to make Saint Paul’s words our own: *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*^[26] We won’t lose our peace, though, since God tells us, as he did the Apostle: *My grace is sufficient for you.*^[27] Our gratitude

and hope grow stronger, since God takes our limitations into account, as long as they spur us to convert our lives and to approach Him for help.

Here, too, Christians find a firm reference point in Jesus' first reply to that young man: *One there is who is good.*^[28] The life of God's children is grounded in his goodness. He gives us the strength to direct our whole life towards what is truly valuable, to understand what is good and to love it, in order to render ourselves fit for the mission He has entrusted to us.

[1] *Mk* 10:17.

[2] *Mk* 10:18.

[3] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, no. 9. Cf. *Mt* 22:37.

[4] *Mt* 19:17.

[5] Cf. *Mk* 10:20.

[6] *Mt* 19:18.

[7] *Mt* 19:18-19.

[8] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, 6 August 1993, no. 13.

[9] Cf. *In Ioannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 41, 9-10 (quoted in *Veritatis splendor*, no. 13).

[10] *Mk* 10:21.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Cf. *The Way*, no. 337.

[13] *Mt* 19:17.

[14] *Ps* 118 (119):32.

[15] *Gal* 5:1.

[16] *Jn* 17:3.

[17] Saint John Paul II, Enc. *Veritatis splendor*, no. 16.

[18] *Rom* 12:2.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] *The Way*, no. 33.

[21] *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, no. 93.

[22] Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe salvi*, 30 November 2007, no. 49.

[23] *Friends of God*, no. 31.

[24] *Mk* 10:21.

[25] Cf. *Gal* 5:16.

[26] *Rom* 7:15.24.

[27] *2 Cor* 12:9.

[28] *Mt* 19:17.

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