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CHAPTER FOUR



Skills for Living Wisely and Well

Virtues and the Quest for Happiness

We are pilgrims, people on the way.

Thinking of the moral life as a journey is fitting because from the moment our lives are set in motion at birth we are on a pilgrimage searching, exploring, reaching out for whatever we think will bring us joy. Initially, the objects of our quest are small—as babies we'd crawl to the first thing that caught our eye. Later, taking our feeble first steps, we'd stumble across the room for a stuffed animal or a doll to content us; but only momentarily, because soon something else would grab our attention, and we'd set forth anew. As the years unfold, the geography of our journey changes, and we take up more expansive adventures. We leave home to chase after dreams. We venture off to schools; fall in and out of love; try our luck with various careers; succeed, fail, and try again. We get lost, sidetracked, and sometimes even ambushed on our journeys, but, short of death, the pilgrimage never ends because to be human is to be a wayfarer, a people on the move.

The philosopher Josef Pieper calls this our *status viatoris*, the “condition or state of being on the way,”¹ and says it is the “innermost core” of what it means to be a creature.² As human beings we are never anything other than pilgrims because we never fully possess what we desire. We move toward wholeness, but we never know it completely. We strive for happiness and satisfaction, but are never so content that we don't reach out for more. Pieper calls it the “inherent ‘not yet’ of the finite being,”³ that inescapable condition of being orientated to fulfillment but never quite knowing it completely. And so the infant's gesture of reaching out defines us throughout our lives.

The objects of our attention change, but we never stop wanting, desiring, and striving. We make progress toward our goals, but no matter what we achieve, we press forward because something better always calls to us, something more always beckons.

This is especially true when what we are reaching for is the love and goodness of God. The Christian life is a pilgrimage, an always-unfolding quest whose destination is lasting communion with God and the saints. It is a happiness that must always be pursued but never fully possessed, not only because it is ultimately found not in this world but in heaven, but also because it requires the ongoing transformation of ourselves in the goodness of God, and at no point is that conversion complete. We strive for this goodness, we grow more deeply into it, but we are never perfectly conformed to it.

And so the “not yet” character of life abounds in the Christian life, first because it locates flourishing not exclusively in this life, but also in eternity; and second, because the remaking of ourselves in holiness will always be unfinished. At what point can we exhaust the goodness of God? When can we say no further growth in God’s goodness is possible for us? Moreover, sometimes we tire of the quest because it is difficult; we wander away from God, forget about our utmost possible good, and chase other possibilities. We lower our sights, explore other paths, and sometimes lose our way so completely that we have no idea what we should be seeking and no idea that we are lost.

This is why we need the virtues. We need skills and qualities of character that will keep us focused on what is best for us. We need “habits of being” that strengthen us in our pursuit of excellence lest we fall short of the happiness that is meant to be ours. That can happen in so many ways. When writing about the virtue of courage, Thomas Aquinas said that a “brave man . . . does not shrink from a journey . . . because of fear of shipwreck or bandits.”⁴ We can imagine this as the courage one needs to travel through a dangerous area or to undertake a perilous voyage. We can also imagine it as an apt metaphor for the journey of life, a journey no one can complete without bravery and perseverance, because it is also fraught with perils.

Think of the times we are “shipwrecked” by disappointment, discouragement, or adversity and are tempted to give up. Think of how suffering, whether from illness, great loss, or terrible sorrow, can be a “bandit” that steals our happiness and robs us of hope. Think of how we are shipwrecked by choices that turn out badly, by foolish decisions and wasted opportunities. “Thieves” along the way may rob us of hope and confidence, thieves whose cynicism, thoughtlessness, or casual maliciousness beats us down and steals life from us. We also are ransacked by our own misunderstandings of

the good, by our weaknesses, by our refusals to change, and by clinging stubbornly to things that are not healthy. A life can go wrong in many ways; even though we are called to goodness there is no guarantee we will seek it, learn to love it, and live to become one with it.

In the moral life, training in happiness is training in the virtues. We introduced the topic of the virtues in the previous chapter; now we will consider it more completely. First, we will examine the connection between goodness, happiness, and the virtues by considering what virtues are and why we need them, how they are acquired, and what they do for us. Next, we will inquire about specific virtues that are essential for a genuinely good human life: magnanimity, courage, and compassion. Magnanimity keeps us focused on what is truly best for us. Courage helps us deal wisely with the challenges that are part of any journey. And how can we be a force for good in the world if we are indifferent to the sufferings of others? If, as Christians believe, any one person’s happiness is tied up with the happiness of others, because every human being is sister or brother to us, then we are summoned not to turn away from those who are suffering but to befriend them and to do what we can to help them. That is the virtue of compassion. Finally, we’ll conclude our treatment of the virtues by considering briefly the theological virtues and the infused moral virtues. These are not virtues we acquire, but ones God bestows on us. They are absolutely indispensable in a Christian account of happiness because without them we cannot reach the beatitude for which we are made.

Virtues—Developing Our Potential for Excellence

Human beings are fulfilled in goodness. And goodness describes the excellence that inheres in anything that is what it ought to be. “Goodness” is in flowers that bloom, in tomatoes that are plump and juicy, in Kentucky bourbon that has been aged in charred white oak barrels just the right number of years. “Goodness” is in a Mozart symphony, in a Michelangelo sculpture, in a Jane Austen novel. “Goodness” is in predators that are swift enough to seize their prey and in creatures skilled in eluding them. And goodness is in a good and beautiful life: a life lived as well as possible. “In its most proper sense,” Jean Porter writes, “‘goodness’ applies to perfected being, to whatever is, insofar as it is what it ought to be. A good pen is a pen that writes well, a good desk is sturdy and even, and a good woman is healthy, wise, and virtuous.”⁵

Porter, taking a cue from Aquinas, notes that every creature has an innate drive to seek the fullest possibility of its nature.⁶ This means one thing for

an eagle, something else for a horse, and something altogether different for us. To understand anything's potential wholeness or fulfillment, we have to know what it would mean for it to be "good." But in every case something is good when it has developed as much as possible its own distinctive potential for excellence. As Porter writes, to say that "every creature seeks the good" means "that every creature is oriented toward its own goodness, that is, its fullness of being in accordance with the ideal of its species."⁷

The Natural Law

Catholic moral theology traditionally has described this fundamental orientation toward fulfillment in human beings through its teaching of the natural law. The natural law expresses how God has created us so that we can, by carefully attending to the fundamental inclinations of our nature, flourish both individually and communally. For example, along with other creatures, we are naturally inclined toward self-preservation. No one has to teach us this; we know it instinctively. We are also, along with other creatures, naturally inclined to preservation of the species, and so we live in families, have children, and care about their education and upbringing. As social beings, we also have a natural inclination to live in community and to seek relationships with others. As intelligent beings, we have a natural inclination to care about and seek the truth. And as moral beings, we instinctively know that good is to be done and evil avoided. No one has to teach us these things; we know them in our hearts.

These fundamental inclinations rightly can be described as "laws" or "precepts" because by following them we achieve what is good for us as human beings. We can appreciate the moral significance of the natural law if we consider what would happen to a person who cared nothing for her life and well-being, who was utterly indifferent to the welfare of the human community, who wanted no relationships with others, and who cared nothing for the true and the good. Such a person could not possibly flourish because she was living in ways that were utterly at odds with her nature.

For Aquinas, the natural law is derived from the eternal law. The eternal law is "another name for God's providential direction—his master planning—of the universe as a whole."⁸ The eternal law represents what God envisions for the whole of creation and how God has ordered things so that every creature attains its own proper good. The eternal law manifests both the wisdom and the goodness of God because it reveals how God has designed the universe so that everything God created reaches its proper purpose or *telos*. What distinguishes human beings from other creatures, however, is

that through our intelligence, free will, creativity, and ingenuity we actively participate with God in achieving our good. This is how Aquinas understood the natural law. Unlike other creatures, who instinctively follow natural inclinations to achieve their proper good, through our attitudes, intentions, and actions we personally contribute to our flourishing and thus work with God in bringing about the eternal law. The precepts of the natural law orient us toward what is good for us, and we move toward (or away from) that good through our most consistent intentional behavior.

Thus, the precepts of the natural law identify core human inclinations that are fundamental for human flourishing; in this respect, the natural law is a foundation or starting point for morality. But it is only a starting point because being naturally oriented to fulfillment does not guarantee we will achieve it. An ethics of virtue needs the natural law to indicate the basis for and direction of human flourishing. But the natural law needs the virtues because the precepts of the natural law indicate fundamental dispositions in human beings that must be developed further into habits—into characteristic ways of being and acting—if we are to achieve the goodness and excellence in which our happiness uniquely consists. In short, the natural law points us toward fulfillment, but it is through the virtues that we reach it.

This is one difference between us and other creatures. Unlike us, everything else in existence achieves its own special excellence naturally or instinctively. All things considered, a flower will grow to bloom, a thoroughbred to be swift, and a retriever to retrieve. Each of them will naturally achieve some degree of goodness because they cannot be totally other than what they were created to be. But we can. **We can become something other than what a "good" human being ought to be because, given our ability to deliberate and to choose, we have an active role in our development that other creatures lack.** In the proper environment, animals will grow and develop as they ought—they will naturally realize their own distinctive goodness. But our growth and development, as well as our corruption and decline, are primarily not the work of instinct but of our own moral agency. Through our reason, imagination, emotions, and free will we are able to fashion ourselves in ways other creatures cannot. This is part of our nobility, but it can also lead to our demise because through the intentions, attitudes, and habits we foster we can turn away from our true good, neglect the potential that is most fittingly ours, and, therefore, ultimately waste our lives. Like every creature, we have an instinctive inclination toward goodness, a fundamental hunger to achieve our distinctively human potential.

But there is no guarantee that we will. A gap exists between what we are now and what we need to become; however, unlike other creatures, that gap

is closed not naturally but largely through the ongoing actions of our lives. Through the most consistent intentions we adopt, through the way we think, perceive, feel, and act, we can know happiness by realizing our unique human excellence or *telos* that resides in friendship with God and with all God loves. But we can also choose to widen that gap, by thinking, perceiving, feeling, and acting in ways that draw us increasingly further away from what we were created to be. We can tragically misdirect our lives.

What the Virtues Are and Why We Need Them

This is why we need the virtues. Sometimes when we hear a person described as virtuous we picture someone who is afraid to enjoy life, someone overly cautious, a bit uptight, and way too respectable. We imagine a person who plays by the rules and never takes chances. Who among us, if told we were about to spend the day with an exemplar of virtue, would conclude that might be fun? But to think this way is to misunderstand what the virtues are. Far from repressing us, the virtues are liberating ways of being and acting because they empower us to live both wisely and well. **The virtues are the qualities, attitudes, intentions, feelings, and habits we need to develop in order to have a rich and authentically good human life.** They are the qualities of character we must possess and the acts we must perform if we are to achieve the excellence most properly ours. For instance, an athlete must develop certain habits and skills that enable her to achieve excellence in a sport. She must be disciplined, practice diligently, take instruction well, and cooperate with others. For a student to achieve excellence, at the very least he needs the virtues of responsibility, perseverance, intellectual curiosity, and honesty. The virtues matter because they are the habits and skills by which we achieve excellence in any particular field.

We also need to achieve excellence at every level of life, both as persons and as communities, and for this we need certain habits and skills as well. To achieve excellence as human beings and to have a good life, we need to be skilled in the virtue of justice because we have to learn what it means to live well with others. This is true whether you are sharing a room in college, part of a family, working in a business, trying to be a good friend, or wondering how to honor the request of a stranger.

To achieve excellence as human beings and to have a good life, we need expertise in love because it is only in loving and being loved that we flourish. We also need wisdom in loving because, even though we are called to love all of our neighbors, we cannot love them all in the same way. Parents recognize

this when they learn loving every child equally does not mean loving every child identically. Teachers wrestle with the requirements of love (as well as justice) when they wonder if a student deserves another chance.

To achieve excellence as human beings and to have a good life, we need the virtue of prudence because as we make our way through life we are confronted with many situations in which what it means to do good is not always clear. We also need courage and patience and hope because anyone lacking these virtues will be defeated by difficulties or overwhelmed by adversity. And we need forgiveness because even the best relationships weaken through misunderstanding, hurts, and everyday failures in love.

Thus, the virtues do not repress us; they develop us in all the right ways. They are the quintessential humanizing qualities; through them we grow more deeply in our most genuine excellence as individuals and as communities, and acquire skills we need for life. The virtues constitute a humanizing way of being and acting because through them everything about us, our passions and emotions, our intelligence and our reason, our imagination and our perceptions, our freedom and our choices, even our memories, work together to help us achieve the good and, therefore, bring us more fully and authentically to life. This is why we cannot have a good and flourishing life without them. The virtues integrate and direct all our capacities so that everything about us is disposed to attaining the excellence that counts for happiness, the excellence Christians find in friendship with God. As Gilbert Meilaender puts it, with the virtues “we have begun to approach the furthest potentialities of our nature . . . we are living life characteristic of flourishing human beings.”⁹

Why do we need the virtues? Because through them we move from simply being oriented or disposed to the good (the natural law) to consistently doing good, even embodying and flourishing in the good. Through the virtues we become good persons who know what it means to live a good life, a “life that is becoming to a human being”¹⁰ in every possible way. As Russell Connors Jr. and Patrick McCormick summarize, “virtues are those good moral habits, affections, attitudes, and beliefs that lead to genuine human fulfillment, even perfection, on both personal and social levels.”¹¹ They are characteristic, habitual, and insightful ways of being and acting that make both *who we are* and *what we do* good. In summary, a first reason we need the virtues is that through them we grow more fully into the proper goal or purpose (*telos*) of human beings. They are the habitual ways of being and acting by which we “hit the target” not only in our everyday actions but with our lives as a whole.¹²

Vices—Habits That Impair Happiness

There are also characteristic, habitual, and less than insightful ways of being and acting that make who we are and what we do less than good, even evil; these are the vices. If we cultivate the vices rather than the virtues, we will “miss the target” not only in our everyday actions but with our lives as a whole. We will misunderstand and fall short of human flourishing. Vices are “poor moral habits, affections, attitudes and beliefs which hinder human fulfillment or perfection, both personally and socially.”¹³ Vices impair, and ultimately prevent, happiness and fulfillment because cultivating them not only turns us away from the good but also forms us into persons who can no longer recognize, much less enjoy, what is genuinely good for us.

If the virtues are habits that form us in the various characteristics of goodness that enable us to live in ways becoming of human beings (e.g., justice, love, compassion, generosity), vices are habits that deform, corrupt, and pervert because with them we develop ways of being and acting that are woefully incompatible with human flourishing. Vices make us ill suited for a truly good life. With them, we live not wisely and well but foolishly and poorly. For example, if I become skilled in the vice of selfishness, I cannot thrive as a person because my habitual disregard for others will deny me the kinds of relationships I need to be happy. If I have more expertise with envy and jealousy than gratitude, I will be so resentful of the gifts and achievements of others that I will never appreciate my own. Or if I become more adept at imprudence than prudence, I will wreak havoc in my life and the lives of others because my behavior will be careless and impetuous.

Certain attitudes, intentions, feelings, and actions are incompatible with happiness and a flourishing human life because they undermine the proper development of ourselves in goodness; they misconstrue what is best for us. The vices leave us morally and spiritually malformed. With them we cultivate not excellence but mediocrity and moral decline. If the moral life is a journey, with the vices we lose our way and ultimately forget what the journey is about. Vices not only sidetrack our pursuit of the good but also leave us pursuing things that are not good; with them we relinquish the only truly worthwhile human quest in favor of adventures that may initially appear promising but ultimately lead not to happiness but to sorrow.

Take, for instance, the vice of **greed**. Living to attain as much money as possible is an enticing option. In order to achieve such a goal, one would have to love wealth and possessions more than anything else. But where would pursuing such a life take one? What other goods and possibilities would greed deny a person? What is lost to me if I consistently opt to invest my time and energy in attaining wealth rather than in caring for my mar-

riage? What is lost to me if I am so habitually concerned with possessions that I never take time to know the soul of the person who loves me?

Or consider the vice of **revenge**. It is easy to nurture the habit of revenge because it is always appealing to settle a score by inflicting a little harm on those who have harmed us. But does this bring excellence? Does revenge make us happy? And what if we become so skilled in revenge that we are characteristically vindictive, even cruel? Vices corrupt, vitiate, and destroy; they disfigure us morally and spiritually. They, not the virtues, are the truly oppressive (and ultimately enslaving) habits, because in developing them we move further and further away from our true good until we eventually have no idea what our true good is. The cumulative effect of their ongoing deterioration is to make us strangers to happiness; with the vices everything about us works against our flourishing and fulfillment as humans. Developing qualities such as pettiness, laziness, dishonesty, greed, malice, cynicism, or unfaithfulness leads not to wholeness and contentment but to our moral and spiritual disintegration. With them we become fatally unsuited for life.

Virtues—Skills for Completing the Journey

We need the virtues in order to achieve our unique excellence as human beings. We need them because each of the virtues develops a particular human capacity or potential in the most fitting way, and thus brings about our most complete and authentic humanization. But we also need them to deal with all we will encounter during the course of our lives. If the moral life is a journey, an unfolding odyssey in search of the goods that complete us, a second reason we need the virtues is that they provide the skills we must have in order to complete the journey successfully.¹⁴

The virtues are skills we need for life. As people on the way, we confront a variety of situations and challenges. Sometimes the surprises of life work in our favor, but other times they are woefully unsettling. Moreover, as we move through life we encounter all kinds of persons. Some are cooperative, well intended, and kind, but others are crafty and manipulative, even malicious. Some have our best interests at heart, but others are devious and untrustworthy. The path of any life is never a completely blessed trajectory. We deal with setbacks and disappointments, painful failures, and terrible losses. Loved ones die, cherished relationships end, illness besets us. Any life bears an inescapable fragility because the well-being and stability we work so hard to achieve are threatened by bad luck, misfortune, or the malice of others.¹⁵

If we are not to be undone by the challenges and setbacks of life, we need virtues such as courage, hope, patience, and perseverance. When we leave home for the first time, when we begin a job or lose a job, when we are

injured or confronted with serious illness, we need courage to help us deal with our understandable fears. Inevitably, we face difficult situations where people, groups, or institutions work against us; without patience, discouragement triumphs, and we begin to lose hope. Or our luck suddenly changes, and we find ourselves struggling through very trying periods of life; without hope and perseverance, we cannot go forward. The nature of any quest—particularly the quest of a human life—is to expose us to peril.

We see this when we listen to a person's life story. No matter how blessed with security, good fortune, love, and support, no one moves through life unscathed. The normal bumps and bruises of life come from minor disappointments, slight hurts, or small setbacks. But far greater calamities can easily defeat us if we lack the fortitude and resolve necessary for finding our way through them. This is what the virtues give us. They are the attitudes, habits, and qualities of character that enable us "to respond creatively to new situations or unanticipated difficulties."¹⁶ They are the skills we need to negotiate successfully all that we might encounter as we take up life.¹⁷

Every worthwhile quest is full of challenges. Many of those challenges are external to us, but sometimes we discover challenges within us, elements in ourselves that can sabotage a life well lived. When we are tired or stressed, maybe we learn that we are not as patient and kind as we had thought, or maybe we seek relief in behavior that is not healthy. When things do not go our way, perhaps we grow bitter and resentful and angry. Maybe the tinge of envy we feel reminds us we are not quite gracious enough to rejoice at a friend's success. Or when we are pressured by others to conform, do we discover that we are not strong enough to follow our own convictions? These inner revelations can defeat us if we allow our own weaknesses and imperfections to convince us that aspiring to what is best is impossible for us. Unless we develop qualities of character that help us deal with the inevitable perils of the journey, whether external or internal, we will not have a good and flourishing life. This, too, is why we need the virtues.

Acquiring the Virtues—How to Become Experts in Goodness

How then do we acquire the virtues? Although some virtues, in light of our personality, temperament, and upbringing, might develop more easily in us than others, no one is naturally virtuous, because a virtuous person is someone who does the good consistently, skillfully, insightfully, and even delightfully; as Daniel Westberg notes, we are virtuous when it has "become natural and joyful for us to perform what we know is right and good."¹⁸

Becoming this sort of person takes time. It takes practice. All of us have inclinations to goodness, but an inclination to goodness is not enough be-

cause it does not ensure that we will actually do good, especially when doing so is costly or difficult. We have an initial capacity for virtue because as human beings we are oriented to the good, but in order to acquire true expertise in goodness that tendency to the good has to be developed into a habit—a firm, stable, and reliable quality of being and acting. When this occurs we are virtuous persons, persons who are "experts" in goodness because the distinctive qualities of all the various expressions of goodness have become enduring qualities of ourselves. We do good skillfully and characteristically, not ineptly and haphazardly, because we are good.¹⁹

Developing a virtue is something like developing a talent. Even the most naturally gifted musician still has to devote years to practicing if she is to become a true virtuoso in her field. The great artists whose works we admire today did not paint masterpieces from the start. They gained excellence in their field as they experimented, worked diligently, took counsel from others, and learned from their mistakes. Simply having a talent is not enough to assure excellence because that talent has to be honed and deepened over time—the gift must become a true expertise. The same is true in the moral life. We have a capacity for justice and generosity and mercy and courage, but that is not enough to assure goodness because it does not guarantee we will act justly or generously or mercifully or courageously at any particular moment, much less do so with insight and a certain amount of ease.

This is why a good act is not necessarily a virtuous act. **We possess a virtue only when our disposition for a particularly appropriate feeling, attitude, or action has through practice and repetition developed into an abiding characteristic or habit.** Then we can be counted on to be kind or just or compassionate not just occasionally but regularly, because each of those expressions of goodness has become an enduring quality of ourselves. We are just, generous, merciful, and courageous people because we bear those qualities within us. In this respect, the virtues are not added to an already formed identity, like ornaments on a tree, but are true expressions of that identity; as Julia Annas writes, "a virtue is a deep feature of a person."²⁰

And so we acquire a virtue by acting a certain way over time. I become compassionate by regularly making myself available to the needs and sufferings of others. I become generous by recognizing my tendency to be stingy, by refusing to succumb to it, and by gradually overcoming it through acts of generosity. At first, it might be hard for me to loosen my grasp on what is "mine" in order to share it with another; I need to uproot my well-learned vice of stinginess and replace it with the virtue of generosity, and that not only takes time but also can be quite difficult. This is the way growth in any of the virtues ordinarily begins. The path to acquiring the virtues com-

mences when we resolve to loosen the hold certain vices may have on us. Nonetheless, if I persist in cultivating the virtue of generosity, after a while I find it easier. Eventually, I even look for ways to share and find great delight in doing so. Similarly, one act of kindness does not make one a genuinely kind person. But making a practice of kindness will, because the quality of kindness that forms the act gradually transforms the person, making him into the sort of person we expect to be kind because, by “practicing kindness,” he has become kind. Kindness “becomes him,” or, even better, he has “become kindness” because what once was only occasionally a quality of his actions is now a true expression of his self.

These examples illustrate the circular relationship between actions and character. If we act a certain way often enough, eventually the quality of that action becomes an ever-deepening and enduring quality of who we are. And the more it becomes an abiding quality of our character, the more we will practice it in our actions. Thus, at some point acting justly, generously, prudently, and courageously is so much a part of who we are that doing so has truly become second nature for us; indeed, if we fail to act in those ways, people who know us will say that we acted “out of character.”

Virtues change us because they are transformative activities. But the extent of that change depends on the degree of goodness we hope to possess. If I simply want to be decently good or conventionally good, the change demanded may be slight; however, if the measure of goodness I aspire to is found in God—if that is my understanding of excellence and fulfillment—then at no point is the conversion of the self complete. Aquinas expressed this when he said a virtue represents a change or “modification of a subject.”²¹ But he also noted that the virtues change us in “accord with a standard,” and through them we are brought to the full “term of our development.”²² If the “term” or end point of our moral and spiritual development is found in our being conformed to the love and justice and mercy and goodness of God, then possessing the virtues is truly the work of a lifetime. When virtues are measured according to the unsurpassable goodness of God, I can never fully possess them.²³

In his *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas captured the inexhaustible potential of virtue in the Christian life by speaking about the virtues of beginners, the virtues of those well on their way, and the virtues of those who have finally arrived.²⁴ Those “who have finally arrived” are the saints. Thus, as we journey toward God we grow in God’s goodness, but in this life we never fully possess it.

Aquinas’s analysis of the stages involved in the development of the virtues reminds us that we only understand what a virtue is about when we

remember the excellence it is meant to help us achieve.²⁵ The purpose of any particular virtue is to help us realize a potential good, such as justice in our relationships. But the form a virtue takes depends on what it means to achieve excellence in the different roles of our lives and at different stages of our lives, as well as in our lives as a whole. For example, courage is essential for any good life, but what courage requires and how it is expressed will be different for a soldier in battle than for parents raising children. Similarly, both adolescents and the elderly need courage, but what it means for someone at seventeen won’t be what it means for someone struggling with physical and mental diminishment at eighty-seven.

Moreover, if the overall purpose of the virtues is to help us achieve our utmost proper excellence as human beings, how we understand this depends on what we take to be our highest possible good. For Aristotle, it was a flourishing and successful life as a citizen in Athens. For Christians, who believe that all human beings have God as their ultimate end, it is everlasting communion with God and the saints in heaven. Thus, if something is truly a virtue only if it enables us to achieve our most distinctive good (*telos*), in the Christian moral life the virtues are the habitual ways of being and acting by which we draw closer to God by growing in the love and goodness of God. In other words, for Christians, something is truly a virtue only if it fosters deeper friendship with God.

It is important to end this section with two observations. First, to describe a virtue as a habit does not mean a virtuous person does the good in a rote or mechanical way. The language of habit can be misleading if we take it to mean that doing good becomes so second nature to a person that he does it almost thoughtlessly and impersonally. To act that way would not be virtuous at all precisely because a genuinely virtuous person does what is right and good not only consistently but also insightfully and fittingly. To say that doing what is right and good is second nature to someone means that he knows how what is right and good ought best to be done in all the various circumstances of his life. A virtue is a skill for excellence that enables us to do good in the right manner, at the right time, for the right reasons, and with the right amount of feeling. Thus, far from being rote or mechanical, the virtues are marked by beauty, artistry, and even innovation.

Second, the inseparable connection between actions and our character reminds us not only that we cannot claim to have certain virtues if we seldom display the actions that correspond to those virtues but also that we cannot distance ourselves from less than flattering actions that we do more than occasionally. As Daniel Westberg writes, virtues are “revealed in the actions that are associated with them.”²⁶ When it comes to the virtues, good inten-

tions are necessary, but they are hardly enough precisely because virtues are habits that lead to actions. I may have the intention of being a loving, just, compassionate, and forgiving person, and may comfort myself by thinking that I am that kind of person. But unless I regularly bring those good intentions to life in acts that are loving, just, compassionate, and forgiving, I am not the person I claim to be. The only indisputable evidence that we have a particular virtue is behavior that manifests that virtue.

Similarly, despite my belief that I am a gentle and patient person, if I am prone to outbursts of anger and get unreasonably upset anytime something doesn't go my way, then I am hardly the person I think I am. The connection between our actions and our character underscores that what we do reveals who we are. We may try to separate ourselves from our actions by maintaining that we are not that kind of person, but at some point our protests are not convincing because our actions bring our true self out in the open; they expose who we really are, not who we would like to think we are. As Westberg summarizes, "Character determines actions; actions reveal character."²⁷

Facing Shipwreck and Bandits—Virtues That Help Us Prevail

For Christians, identifying happiness with partaking in the love and goodness of God—a life of friendship with God or charity—is a compelling way of understanding our lives. But the epic dimensions of this ambition can leave us skeptical of its realization. We may believe that envisioning our lives as a quest for happiness that is fulfilled in the ongoing transformation of ourselves in the love and goodness of God is the most promising way of understanding our lives. But the challenges involved in this conception of happiness can tempt us to lessen our ambitions by focusing on more easily attainable goals. This temptation isn't something only Christians struggle with; any truly worthwhile goal is seldom easily or quickly gained. And so we want a journey whose destination will be more conveniently reached and whose promised joy will be more immediately attained.

This is understandable; however, if we lower our hopes and opt for a more comforting account of life, we deny ourselves our most promising possibilities. If the Christian life is a pilgrim's journey to beatitude with God, we must not be "shipwrecked" by discouragement or "robbed" of our most exquisite possibility by struggle or disillusionment. And so we need virtues to sustain us on our way from where we are to where our hope summons us to be. Many could be considered—and more will be examined in subsequent chapters—but three seem especially crucial: magnanimity, courage, and compassion.

Magnanimity—Sustaining an Aspiration for Greatness

One reason it is easy for us to forsake the quest for ever-deepening friendship with God is that we live in a world that increasingly no longer believes in the value of such a life. We are, both subtly and brazenly, instructed to turn our attention elsewhere, to make something else the object of our hope. In fact, to make holiness one's life ambition can seem foolish, even incomprehensible, in societies that teach us to aim for little more than "comfortable survival."²⁸ As Brian Hook and Russell Reno observe, Christianity is alien to many people today not because it may be hard to believe in God but because "it pursues excellence without limit and seeks glory everlasting."²⁹ It is the heroic ambition of Christianity that puts us off, the vastness of its hope that unsettles us.

And so, instead of aspiring for excellence in God's goodness or for joy in God's love, we are taught to seek economic success, social acceptance, material comfort, and pleasure. Or we are told through advertising and endless commercials (and too many silly television shows) that we need not aim for anything higher than our own gratification; thus, we immerse ourselves in distractions and trivialities. We think a mistaken life is not one that falls short of goodness but one that lacks novelty and excitement and, increasingly, celebrity. In many societies today people implicitly are taught that a life of calculated self-interest is wiser than a life of service. To know success in the world, we have to put ourselves first; in fact, crafty people who dissemble, who use cleverness and deception to advance themselves, are held up for our admiration. As Hook and Reno summarize, "our age is allergic to heroic ambition and inured to the attractions of excellence."³⁰

But it is a costly allergy; adopting such ways of thinking and living leads not to happiness but to superficiality and emptiness and, ultimately, despair. This is why magnanimity is an indispensable virtue for anyone whose highest ambition is not amassing wealth, gaining power, or becoming famous but, rather, living in a way that is truly honorable and hopeful for a human being. Magnanimity, which literally means to be of "great soul" or "great spirit," is the virtue that stretches us to reach for what is best in every dimension of our lives and prevents us from forsaking our most promising hope. Josef Pieper says, "Magnanimity, a much forgotten virtue, is the aspiration of the spirit to great things."³¹

It is characteristic of persons who want their lives to count for something worthwhile. The magnanimous person always aspires to what is best, always strives for what is truly excellent and most worthy of our lives, and refuses to settle for less; in Aquinas's words, a magnanimous person is one who has

“the spirit for some great act.”³² That “great act” can be expressed in any way of life that calls us out of ourselves in love, service, faithfulness, sacrifice, and generosity; any way of life in which we use our gifts and opportunities to have a positive impact on the world. Magnanimous people are not afraid to lift their sights to what is truly great and most promising for human beings. They have high expectations for themselves, are not reluctant to set challenging goals for themselves, and consistently strive to become more than they already are. In short, we’re magnanimous when we have the courage necessary to grow into “the fullness of who we each have it in us to be.”³³

The magnanimous person is not deterred by the lure of more immediately appealing possibilities. She does not allow difficulty, fear, or discouragement to dissuade her from her goal of growing in the virtues, being an instrument for the good in the lives of others, becoming a person of integrity, and striving to do her best in light of the circumstances of her life. She knows that a magnanimous person is not someone who always succeeds but is, rather, a person who even when she fails still has “the courage to seek what is great and become worthy of it.”³⁴

This is why her “yes” to life always triumphs over an alluring “no” to life.³⁵ She will not be cowardly in her hopes or puny in her ambitions. She insists on being as great in goodness and love as she possibly can because she knows happiness is found in embracing a life that enables us to transcend ourselves for the sake of others. More than anything, she accepts the greatness to which God calls us and for which God has made us capable.³⁶ She knows our fundamental error is not that we hope for too much but that we settle for so little.

The opposite of magnanimity is pusillanimity, a vice that is hard to spell and even harder to pronounce but important to avoid. In writing about this vice, Aquinas described pusillanimity as a “pettiness of mind” by which a person turns away from excellence.³⁷ If the magnanimous person looks to what is best, the pusillanimous person lowers his sights by consistently opting for what is easier or more appealing. As the word suggests, a pusillanimous person has “puny” hopes, puny dreams, puny goals, and puny expectations of himself and of life. In Shane Claiborne’s *The Irresistible Revolution*, he recalls a college professor who said, “All around you, people will be tiptoeing through life, just to arrive at death safely.”³⁸ That’s a perfect description of a pusillanimous man. He tiptoes through life, just to arrive at death safely.

Pusillanimity is a dangerous habit to acquire because through it we not only lose our taste for what is truly good and promising but also grow comfortable with mediocrity. A magnanimous life will always challenge us, but a pusillanimous life asks nothing of us. The pusillanimous person refuses to

grow, refuses to change or be challenged, because he avoids any goals or commitments that would call him beyond himself in sacrifice, goodness, or love for the sake of another. This is why moral and spiritual excellence means nothing to him. The pusillanimous person plays it safe, preferring comfort and complacency to living his life as well as possible. He persistently shuns any aspirations to greatness because he fears what they will ask of him. He lacks the courage a magnanimous life requires. He is afraid to be as great as God calls him to be and thus will not grow into the fullness of who he has it in him to be. In his analysis of this vice, Aquinas noted that for Aristotle pusillanimity was one of the most damaging habits to develop because by it a person little by little “withdraws from what is good.”³⁹ To withdraw from what is good is an enduring temptation for any of us and explains why magnanimity is an indispensable virtue for a good and happy life.

Courage—For All Those Times We Need to Be Brave

Second, courage or fortitude is one of the four cardinal virtues that traditionally have been judged to be most essential for life. The other cardinal virtues are prudence, justice, and temperance, and we will consider them in subsequent chapters. **Courage helps us deal with the fears, hardships, and losses of life.** When we find it difficult to act because of timidity, insecurity, anxiety, or a gripping lack of self-confidence, **courage gives us the strength we need to remain true to our convictions, to continue to pursue our goals, and to do what we ought.** It is a moral and spiritual resilience that is most necessary for life. Westberg describes courage as “the quality of character that enables a person not to be diverted by difficulty or danger from carrying out an action or plan for achieving some good purpose.”⁴⁰

Several years ago I was making a retreat. One of the participants on the retreat was a Native American woman from northeastern Wisconsin. On the last day of the retreat she brought a gift for all of us: a small red cloth pouch that was filled with a few herbs and spices. As she passed these around to each of us, she said that in her tribe you would hold this little pouch in your hand any time you needed “to be brave.” Those words—and her gift—have stayed with me because I know how many times I have been challenged “to be brave.” That is true for all of us.

We need to be brave when we are faced with difficult situations, especially ones that continue over time. We need to be brave when we face obstacles in our lives, whether from other people, institutions, or problems that are not easily solved. We need to be brave when suffering visits our lives or the lives of people we love. We need to be brave when we face situations we would much rather flee but know we must confront. Kayla Mueller, the twenty-six-

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year-old woman from Arizona who worked with Syrian children who were refugees of war, definitely needed to be brave when in August 2013 she was captured by militants of the Islamic State. Not only was she brave, but she exhibited exemplary courage in incredibly difficult circumstances.

Most of us will never face situations that demand such extraordinary courage; nonetheless, when we look back over our lives we recognize moments when fear easily could have conquered us, whether the fear came from dealing with intimidating people, threatening situations, or even our own anxiety and insecurity. Fear stymies us. It prevents us from being fully engaged with life. It keeps us from risking potentially enriching experiences and certainly impedes our personal development. Overall, fear is “a definite hindrance to living and acting well.”⁴¹ By contrast, courage gives us the energy, resolve, and ingenuity necessary to move through challenges and tribulations so that they do not deter us on our quest toward a good and flourishing life.

It is easy to be deterred because it is easy to lose heart. When writing about the virtue of courage, Aquinas said courage helps us deal with all that opposes us in life,⁴² with all that shakes our confidence or convinces us that the good we seek is either impossible to attain or not worth the hardship it involves. This “opposition” may come from other persons, from the betrayal of friends, from physical difficulties, from financial stress, or from our own limitations and weaknesses. It may come during times of transition, during periods of disillusionment, from the failures of others or our own foolishness. No matter how fortunate we may be, eventually we struggle with anxiety, stress, and discouragement. No matter how strong our convictions, at some point adversity makes us question them. The traditional model for courage is the battlefield because, if our greatest fear is the fear of death, no one wrestles with this more than the soldier under attack.

But sometimes the “battlefield” is an appropriate metaphor for our lives. We too can feel under attack in so many ways. The obstacles we face may not be as mortally perilous as those of a soldier—or of the millions of people who struggle every day to survive in countries plagued by war or terrorism or destitution—but they are nonetheless real. And just as any soldier cannot be paralyzed by fear if he or she wishes to survive, neither can we be ruled by fear if we hope to survive life’s challenges in order to continue to grow in life’s goods. This is why there is no happiness apart from courage.

We can summarize these initial reflections on courage in three points. First, human beings need courage because we are vulnerable.⁴³ If we could not be hurt or if we could not suffer, we would not need courage. Second, a courageous person is not the man or woman who has no fear but the man or woman whose fears are reasonable and who does not let fear control them.

At times when we are faced with threats and dangers it is perfectly reasonable to be afraid. A courageous person does not deny her fears but knows how to move through them or overcome them. In some circumstances fear is not a reasonable response. If we exaggerate threats, see danger where it doesn’t exist, are excessively cautious or are kept from acting because of paralyzing anxiety or phobias, then our fear is irrational and a serious hindrance to a good and healthy life. Moreover, precisely because a courageous person values her life, she does not take foolish chances or put herself in unnecessary danger for trivial reasons. Courage empowers us to take risks or even to put ourselves in danger for the sake of truly important goods. A person who rushes into traffic to rescue a child is courageous. A person who rushes into traffic in search of a thrill is stupid. He may do so because he overestimates his ability and underestimates how life-threatening what he is about to do really is; however, his act is not brave but foolish.

Furthermore, a terrorist who risks danger in order to do great harm is definitely not courageous because he puts himself at risk for something that is horribly evil. Again, courage can only be displayed in pursuit of something genuinely good. Thus, cowardice and recklessness are both vices that oppose courage. The coward is excessively or inappropriately fearful; the reckless person is insufficiently fearful. Third, we need courage so that we do not turn away from what is right on account of fear. This fear can come from the pressure of others or from the cost that sometimes comes from following our conscience. And without courage we can forsake our quest for the highest goods whenever pursuing them is threatening or dangerous.⁴⁴ This is why Aquinas saw the supreme expression of courage in the martyrs who did not turn away from God even when remaining faithful led to their deaths.

Courage consists of two parts: **perseverance** (or **patient endurance**) and **daring** (or **attack**). Perseverance is the aspect of courage that helps us “persist to the end of a virtuous undertaking”⁴⁵ when doing so is hard. With **perseverance, we resist the urge to give up**. This “virtuous undertaking” may be striving to remain committed to the most important goals and projects of our lives when we are discouraged or when we see little hope in achieving them. It may be trying to live a life of truthfulness, kindness, and integrity when people who do not hesitate to be dishonest or to use others seem to be getting ahead in the world far more than we are. It may refer to our commitment to treat others justly, even when this requires sacrifice from us. It may be our intention to remain faithful to people we have promised to love. Or the “virtuous undertaking” may be caring for a person who is terminally ill or suffering through situations we cannot change. Perseverance is necessary for integrity because it reminds us of who we want to be and because, in the

face of fear or pressure, it keeps us from compromising the beliefs, values, and convictions by which we have identified our lives.

It is hard to remain steadfast in the good—hard to persevere—because so much weakens our resolve and lures us away from the path to happiness. Think of how hard it is to speak out when others (whether individuals or institutions) want you to be silent or when you know being truthful will come at great cost, something both prophets and corporate whistle-blowers can attest. Think of how hard it can be to refuse to join your peers in something you believe is wrong. Or consider the times when being fair and honest might lessen your popularity with others, whether colleagues, other employees, fellow students, or even family members. Any person willing to “be steadfast and not turn away from what is right”⁴⁶ needs the perseverance that courage brings.

A common failure in the moral life is to turn away from what is right because of fear or difficulty. This may be a typical temptation, but it is one we cannot afford to grow comfortable with, for, if we flee what is right whenever embracing it is costly, we move progressively further away from the goodness and integrity that happiness requires. Ordinarily, we turn away from the good on account of fear or difficulty not all at once but gradually. This is precisely the danger. We may hardly notice the effect of moral cowardice on our character, but it must be resisted if our ambition for excellence is not to die. This is why persons of courage, regardless of the obstacles they face, “cling most bravely to what is good.”⁴⁷

The second part of courage is daring. If courage means that all we can do when faced with difficulties or challenges is patiently endure and persevere through them, then it might suggest a kind of passive resignation that could leave us accepting situations that we ought to resist. Perseverance has to be balanced with daring because the aim of courage is not only to help us endure difficulties but also to overcome them. There may be some hardships we can only suffer through, but patient endurance should not be our first response to hardship and, certainly, not our only response. Initially, courage works not to endure adversity but to conquer it.

With daring we attack all that stands in the way of the good. We don't simply endure injustice; we speak out against it. We don't simply pray for the poor; we denounce the structures, institutions, and policies that perpetuate economic injustice. We do not simply hope that corporations, governments, or churches will be more just; we openly call them to change. Daring is not recklessness or carelessness; rather, it gives us the insight, imagination, energy, and determination we need to confront and overcome the “oppressing difficulties” of life whenever we can—not only for ourselves but for others as

well. We need daring to know how to deal with people who oppress us and who make life a constant battle for us, whether playground bullies, intimidating professors, belligerent spouses, or unethical supervisors.

Martin Luther needed to be daring when, in the sixteenth century, he spoke out against abuses he saw in the church. And, four hundred years later, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. certainly needed this aspect of courage when, at the cost of his life, he called for an end to racial discrimination. Persons and communities cannot persevere in the quest for goodness, particularly justice, without daring. If we are not adept at this dimension of courage, we easily grow complacent with evil, allowing what is unjust to become the norm rather than the exception.

Daring serves the Christian life by helping us attack anything that thwarts our quest for God. As we journey to God, we encounter many obstacles or “dangers” that threaten the successful outcome of our quest. These dangers can come from temptations, from the presence of evil in our world, from other persons as well as from our own fears and weaknesses. If we are not to be undone by all the things that impede our desire to be faithful, we need to be daring. In his analysis of courage Aquinas said, “But courage ought not merely to endure unflinchingly the pressure of difficult situations by restraining fear; it ought also to make a calculated attack, when it is necessary to eliminate difficulties in order to win safety for the future.”⁴⁸

The “future” Aquinas had in mind was eternal beatitude with God and the saints in heaven. We cannot afford to allow fear or difficulty or opposition to stop our progress to God, or to leave us abandoning that quest altogether. As pilgrims on our way to God, we must make “calculated attacks” on anything that might defeat us so that we “win safety for the future.” Courage is an essential element to our training in happiness; without it we too easily give up on the quest instead of, with God's help, seeing its completion.

Compassion—Making Suffering Productive of Good for Us and for Others

Then there is compassion. Without this virtue, to speak of the moral life as a quest for happiness can sound scandalously egotistical, as if all that matters is that everything turns out well for me. Without compassion, the Christian moral life easily collapses into a selfish concern for one's goodness, one's holiness, one's salvation—as if we could secure any of these without concern for someone else, especially those who suffer. Compassion expands the horizons of our world by reminding us that any genuine understanding of happiness has to take into account the pain and suffering of others. This is especially true in the Christian life because Christians believe the whole of humanity

A virtuous journey

constitutes a body, and as members of this body each person's happiness is inseparably connected to the happiness of every other person.

Compassion is a principal virtue in all of the major world religions. In Buddhism a purpose of meditation is to cultivate a more compassionate vision of life and more compassionate behavior toward all creatures. Judaism's abiding concern for the poor and for the victims of the world testifies to the importance of compassion. And the *zakat*, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, cultivates compassion because it obliges Muslims to give a portion of their wealth to those in need.⁴⁹ This emphasis on compassion reminds us that we cannot pursue a life of moral excellence without compassion because a constitutive element of such a life is attending to the plight of others. Opportunities for learning this virtue abound: on our pilgrimage through life we encounter many along the way who are afflicted and distressed, many who are wounded and broken.

Compassion connects us to the sufferings of others. But compassion does not romanticize suffering. Suffering is an evil. We may be able to find good in our suffering, but suffering itself is not a good. No one wants to suffer, and no one should ever seek to suffer. Our natural tendency is to want to flee suffering because suffering is fundamentally (if not ultimately) a negative experience. We may endure suffering, but we do not choose it, because by its very nature suffering "restricts, victimizes, oppresses, and deprives."⁵⁰ Like an unwelcome guest, suffering displaces us. It intrudes upon our life, upsetting our plans and overturning the order of our world. Something as simple as trying to study for an exam or finish a paper while being plagued with the flu illustrates this. Much more seriously, consider what happens to the person who has just been diagnosed with cancer. Or who has just lost her job. Or whose life has been ravaged by misfortune. We have goals we want to accomplish, and we have hopes for the future, but suffering distances us from those goals; it weakens those hopes. Suffering can turn our world upside down and make us question everything.

Suffering is a stumbling block on the way to happiness because suffering, at least in some sense, impedes our attainment of happiness.⁵¹ Any experience of suffering is difficult because suffering comes between us and the life we hope to have. As Sebastian MacDonald comments, "Suffering is the experience of an intrusion into the usual sense of well-being and functioning of a person, inflicting tension, conflict or ill at easeness."⁵² Suffering distances us from fundamental goods of life, such as health, relationships, peace, and security. Most of all, suffering reminds us of the fragility of life, of the limits of our powers, and of our own inescapable mortality. It exposes what we least want to admit—namely, our lack of control, our dependence

on others, and our own eventual diminishment. Suffering represents "the lack of something good that should be present, but is not," MacDonald elaborates. "Suffering is undesirable, and one seeks to avoid it, if possible, or else eliminate or diminish it. It is negativity, involving absence, loss, limitation, restriction."⁵³

Suffering may be undesirable, but it is hardly unavoidable. No matter how well we plan, as we make our way through life, suffering visits us. It is an unwelcome but inevitable part of every person's journey. If suffering is not to defeat us, we have to find a way to suffer well instead of poorly. Put differently, if suffering comes to all of us, we must find "a good way of being human" in the face of suffering.⁵⁴ We must find a way to seek excellence and achieve good even amid suffering. Patricia McAuliffe describes suffering as an "unchosen negativity," but she also notes, "suffering can serve to humanize as well as dehumanize." If suffering is not to dehumanize, "we must make it productive of good."⁵⁵

All suffering changes us in some way but not necessarily for the better. How suffering affects us depends on how we as moral agents respond to it. We likely have had moments when suffering led to self-pity, resentment, and bitterness. These responses to suffering, no matter how understandable, are ultimately self-defeating not only because they give suffering increased power over us but also because they shape us in ways that are at odds with goodness. We must learn how to suffer so that the experience, no matter how negative, might change us for the better; indeed, if suffering is not to be a wholly negative experience, we must find a way we can grow in love and goodness not only despite suffering but also through suffering. Again, this is not to romanticize suffering or to minimize its difficulty. But it is to say that we give suffering more power over us than we ought when we allow it to diminish us morally and spiritually.

We make suffering "productive of good" when we remain moral agents in our suffering, not simply victims to suffering. As moral agents, we can give meaning to our suffering and determine how we will respond to it. For example, suffering can prompt us to reassess our lives and our priorities. It can lead us to a clearer sense of identity and give us a much keener and truer perspective on life. Suffering can induce a healthy reevaluation of what matters most to us and what we want most to achieve; thus, it can be a means to moral and spiritual conversion. Many people who have endured great suffering say it taught them that nothing matters more in life than loving those entrusted to them; that nothing matters more than kindness, goodness, generosity, and faithfulness. They were not claiming that their suffering was good, but they were insisting that it could be productive of good depending on how

they chose to respond to it. Their suffering led to a richer understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Perhaps most importantly, instead of narrowing their world, suffering deepened their sensitivity to others and connected them to fellow sufferers throughout the world. Thus, suffering may be a fundamentally negative experience, but it does not have to be finally negative because goodness accrues to the person who allows her suffering to deepen, not diminish, her humanity. "To have survived well means that one has remained wholesome through it all, not beaten into defeat, or hardened by bitterness," Sebastian MacDonald writes. "The results of this development appear as a refinement occurring within the inner recesses of a person's character. This refinement can reflect a certain excellence about the person, who has learned to bear well the suffering, with its duration and intensity, and to utilize the helps one has received to sustain it, on behalf of other sufferers."⁵⁶

That is compassion. As MacDonald's comment illustrates, compassion is the virtue that enables us to take something essentially negative—something we would very much prefer to avoid—and make it productive of good by using it to deepen our connectedness to others, especially those who suffer. It is the virtue that opens our eyes and hearts to the suffering so that we befriend them instead of turning away from them. The power of any love is to unite us to the persons we love. Compassion, which means "to suffer together," is the form love takes in the face of suffering because, instead of abandoning those who suffer, compassion unites us to them by drawing us into their lives.⁵⁷ As Bryan Massingale writes, "Compassion, then, is the response stirred within one's deepest humanity when confronted with human agony or need."⁵⁸

Moreover, because we know what it is to suffer, compassion enables us to identify deeply and sympathetically with others who suffer. Through compassion we choose to enter into the world of those who suffer and to become involved with their lives because, having undergone suffering ourselves, we know what suffering does to a person. And because we know the debilitating effects of suffering, we do not want them to suffer alone. We want to be with them in their sufferings, and we want to help them. Genuine compassion is not a passing emotion or fleeting sentiment, but it is an active and abiding commitment to do what we can to assist persons who are suffering. Like Jesus in the gospels, the compassionate person opens himself to the suffering of others and allows him to be deeply moved by their afflictions, so much so that the pain and misery of others draws him out of himself to do what he can on their behalf. This deep sense of solidarity that compassion creates enables him to see suffering human beings not as strangers about whom he can be indifferent but as his sisters and brothers. As Diana Fritz Cates notes,

"Compassion is, in part, a disposition deliberately to receive and respond to persons in pain as if they were persons with whom we share our lives. That is to say, it is partly a disposition to experience in the presence of persons in pain a sense of 'mutual indwelling' or oneness that makes it possible for us to say meaningfully that we experience something of the same pain that they experience (and we therefore desire and seek the alleviation of that pain as partly our own)."⁵⁹

Compassion makes our own experiences of suffering "productive of good" because it empowers us to turn our familiarity with suffering into a gift for others. Because we recall the frustration, fear, vulnerability, pain, and fatigue that accompany suffering, we are not only able to understand well what another sufferer is experiencing, but we are also more attuned to knowing how to help him in his suffering.⁶⁰ The person of compassion has gained a certain expertise in relation to suffering and chooses to use that expertise to benefit others who suffer. In fact, because suffering marked some of her own journey in life, she wants to befriend others who suffer in order to help these fellow pilgrims along the way. In this respect, just as our own suffering displaces us by taking us out of the normal routines, comfort, and security of our lives, persons of compassion choose to be displaced a second time by deliberately deciding to be with those who suffer.⁶¹

For Christians, compassion is not an optional virtue but a quintessential way of imitating God. In his study of the virtue of compassion, moral theologian James Keenan links compassion with mercy and defines it as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of others so as to answer them in their need."⁶² But if one were to ask why we should be merciful and compassionate, Keenan says it is because God was merciful and compassionate to us. In becoming one of us in Jesus, God entered fully into the chaos, messiness, sorrows, and sufferings of our world in order to help us in our need. Jesus is God's compassion incarnate, God's merciful presence in person. If in Jesus God was immersed in the pain and suffering of the world, then in imitation of God we should enter into the pain and suffering of others not only to comfort them in their suffering but also, like Jesus, to do what we can to alleviate it and to eliminate the causes for it.⁶³

Practices of compassion have to be part of the Christian moral life; by imitating this central characteristic of God, we grow more fully in the goodness of a God who in Jesus became a fellow sufferer in our world. The virtue of compassion makes us like God because nowhere is the character of God more fully revealed than in God's willingness to enter into the tears, pains, and sufferings of our world. It was God's willingness to be "displaced" by becoming one of us in Jesus that guides our own displacement on behalf of those

who suffer. As Keenan observes, “Mercy is so important because it is, above all, the experience we have of God. In response to that mercy, we become imitators of the God in whose image we are made.”⁶⁴

No account of life that is founded in the goodness of God can neglect compassion. If the God we strive to imitate did not ignore the sufferings of others, then neither can we seek fullness of life by neglecting the afflicted among us. Any initiation into a good and happy life has to include education in compassion because in the Christian life we cannot know the happiness of God if, as we make our way, we ignore our brothers and sisters who suffer.

The Theological Virtues and the Infused Moral Virtues

Throughout this chapter we have focused on virtues that can be acquired through our own efforts. However, in a Christian account of life our ultimate and most complete happiness is found not in a natural good but in the supernatural good of everlasting life with God, which is not something we can attain by ourselves. If something is a virtue only insofar as it helps us achieve the overarching purpose of our lives (*telos*), and if for Christians this is friendship and communion with God, then purely human virtues do not suffice. We do not have within us the power or the capacity to reach a good that transcends us, a good that truly is supernatural because it surpasses our nature in every respect. We need to receive virtues that are beyond our natural capacities, and that is what the theological virtues and the infused moral virtues are.

The three theological virtues are **faith**, **hope**, and **charity**. They differ from the acquired moral virtues in two ways. First, we do not acquire the theological virtues on our own; rather, they are given to us by God. We cannot acquire these virtues because their purpose is to help us achieve everlasting union with God, and that is beyond our natural powers. Second, the object or direct focus of the theological virtues is God, whether belief in God, hope in God, or love for God. No other virtues concern God directly because their object is to help us achieve excellence in this world through a strictly human good. But the object of the theological virtues is not flourishing in this world but flourishing forever with God and the saints in heaven. As the authors of *Aquinas’s Ethics* summarize, “Given to us directly by God—in Aquinas’s terms, ‘infused’ by the grace of the Holy Spirit—the theological virtues expand our natural capacities and inclinations and direct us to a supernatural end, an end above our nature, which we could not apprehend or achieve with our own natural power. Theological virtues therefore have a supernatural source corresponding to their supernatural end—God.”⁶⁵

But even the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are not enough if our ultimate goal is union with God. If something is truly a virtue only if it helps us attain our ultimate end or *telos*, there must be a way that everything we do can be directed to God as the unsurpassable good of our lives; this is the role of the infused moral virtues. Unlike the acquired moral virtues, the infused moral virtues are given to us directly by God. And unlike the acquired moral virtues, the infused moral virtues are virtues in the most complete sense because through them everything we do, whether an act of justice, generosity, faithfulness, forgiveness, or any other virtue, serves our ultimate end of friendship with God.⁶⁶

Still, it would be a mistake to think that the infused moral virtues simply replace or overwhelm the acquired moral virtues, as if we are “zapped” with the infused virtues, God takes over, and nothing is left for us to do. On the contrary, as God’s gifts to us, the infused moral virtues give us the capacity or potential for acts that help us attain God, but as with any other virtue that capacity has to be acted on, developed, and strengthened over time. The infused moral virtues represent how we are enabled by divine grace to direct every dimension of our lives to the happiness God desires for us. If what God desires for us is everlasting beatitude with God and the saints, then God has to make this possible for us, and one way is through the infused moral virtues.

Again, as the authors of *Aquinas’s Ethics* explain, “While it is true that God causes infused virtue in us ‘without any action of ours,’ Aquinas also adds that God does not do so ‘without our consent.’ Once God gives us a virtue, furthermore, it is up to us to act on it, and acting according to an infused virtue in turn strengthens the habit. God is the direct cause of the virtue itself, therefore, but human beings in turn must use these virtues to direct their own acts.”⁶⁷

Conclusion

We have traveled far in this chapter. And perhaps all the talk about life as a quest, about us as pilgrims forever on the way, and about virtues and excellence is wearying. Wouldn’t it be enough just to become moderately good rather than to aim for the elusive goodness of God? Isn’t it acceptable to lower our sights a little by settling for simple human decency instead of holiness? The problem with an ethics of virtue, especially in the Christian life, is that it connects happiness with becoming great in goodness, specifically with imitating and ultimately resembling the goodness of God. Most of us do not want to aspire to that kind of happiness because of the transformation it demands of us. We prefer being ordinary over being great, being mediocre

over being excellent. But what do we lose when we refuse to be our best? When we flee from heroic ambitions? What happens to us and to our world when we are no longer able to risk the happiness of the saints?

In a postscript to *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl's famous memoir recounting his years in the death camps of Nazi Germany, Frankl came to an interesting conclusion. This Jewish psychiatrist, who had beheld and suffered the most unimaginable atrocities, would have had every reason to despair of humanity's potential for goodness. But it was precisely his exposure to the worst of humanity that convinced him that nothing less than aspiring to greatness in goodness would give the world hope. In the closing lines of a 1984 postscript to the book, Frankl wrote, "You may of course ask whether we really need to refer to 'saints.' Wouldn't it suffice just to refer to decent people? It is true that they form a minority. More than that, they always will remain a minority. And yet I see therein the very challenge to join the minority. For the world is in a bad state, but everything will become still worse unless each of us does his best."⁶⁸

Some Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you explain the natural law? What might it contribute to our understanding of the moral life? And what is the relation of the natural law to the eternal law?
2. How would you explain what a virtue is and why we might need them? How do you know if someone is truly virtuous? And which virtues would you see as most important for your life now?
3. What can make developing a virtue difficult?
4. How would you explain the "cost" of developing vices? What would you see as some of the more destructive vices in persons and societies today?
5. How would you explain what magnanimity is and why it is important? Do you think it is possible for ordinary people to become magnanimous? Can you think of examples of truly magnanimous persons?
6. Can you think of times in your life when you needed the virtue of courage? What happens to us if we lack courage? And what are some ways that individuals, churches, and societies might need to be more "daring" in courage today?
7. How would you explain the importance of compassion in "the good life"?
8. How did you understand the theological virtues and the infused moral virtues? Did it make sense to you?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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