

Virtues in Practice



Faith • Hope • Charity

PARENT GUIDE

VIRTUES IN PRACTICE—GENERAL PROGRAM INFORMATION

Virtues in Practice (VIP) is a program for children in grades pre-kindergarten through eight to grow in virtues and see the virtues as concrete expressions of their Catholic faith. It is set up in such a way that a whole school studies the same virtue each month, to provide a whole-school (and at home, whole-family) focus. The program covers 27 virtues over a three-year cycle. These three years emphasize and are named for the three theological virtues.

- The YEAR OF FAITH focuses on Catholic devotions and the idea that “faith works” (Gal 5:6), by a school-wide emphasis on service projects.
- The YEAR OF HOPE emphasizes study skills, because in order to fulfill God’s plan for our lives we need to develop the talents He has given to us.
- The YEAR OF CHARITY emphasizes community, particularly in regard to students’ interactions with one another, because “he who does not love the brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20).

Each month children in grades PK-8 learn about the same virtue, but primary, intermediate, and middle school students learn about different saints. In this way, students who are in the program throughout their elementary school career will have a basic introduction to a virtue at the primary level with one saint, cover the same virtue again in more detail at the intermediate level with a different saint, and delve into a deeper meaning of the virtue at the middle school level with a third saint. It is a great idea for parents to reinforce these saints as heroes by asking their children to tell them about the saints they are studying each month. Although the virtue is covered with more depth in the upper grades, the same definitions for each virtue are used at all grade levels, so that students become familiar with the particular meaning of each virtue.

Virtue is not something just to know, but to do. *Virtues in Practice* emphasizes role-playing in the classroom so that students can practice how to act when using a particular virtue, as well as monthly projects designed to help students grow in the virtue of the month by practicing it in real situations. These projects rarely involve making a product, but usually entail a discussion and a behavior goal to help the child develop the particular virtue. In grades PK-5, students complete a project each month with the help of their parents. Students in grades 6-8 may complete their projects with parents or with friends. In all grades, a simple form is signed by parents and the student, then returned to school to tell which project was chosen and to reflect on the student’s progress in the virtue for the month. A small completion grade is given to hold students accountable for this assignment.

Since parents are the primary educators of their children, *Virtues in Practice* respects their role by placing individualized conversations about a child’s character in the care of the parent. Home projects are not meant to dictate the role of a parent. Parents may choose to create their own project for any month, or may use the suggested list of projects provided as a resource. *Virtues in Practice* is most effective when parents model the virtue of the month, make references to it, or even choose to do one of the projects themselves. Why is the home component tracked with forms? The strength of any lesson is doubled when it is reinforced both at school and at home, and there is strength in numbers—it is easier for a student to work on achieving a behavior goal when, in one way or another, “everybody’s doing it” because it’s required. For all students, but especially middle school students, the need to sign a form provides parents with

an “excuse” to ask their child to work on certain behaviors or discuss difficult topics. Requiring this form shows that your child’s school values growth in virtue just as it values the many other projects and activities for which the school uses grades and forms. The school may send home a form each month along with a list of projects, or there is a sample form that can be printed from the back of this guide (page 48). Following this sample form are pages for notes which may be completed at the discretion of parents. When children are infants we take delight in noting their physical growth; what a treasure it would be to keep a log of notable moments in their spiritual growth as well!

Age-Appropriate Definitions: What is Virtue?

The following definitions are found in the inside cover of student workbooks and will be used in class:

PK-Kindergarten: *A virtue is a good habit.*

If we listen to Jesus, He will help us to make good choices. If we listen to Him over and over, we get used to making good choices. Then being good is easy, which makes us happy!

Grades 1-2: *A virtue is a good habit.*

A good habit is called a virtue. A bad habit is called a vice. Habits grow by practice. God always gives us the grace to choose and do what is good. If we think about what is right and open our hearts to God, we will make good choices and grow in virtue. Virtues make us free, happy, and holy.

Grades 3-5: *A virtue is a good habit.*

If we practice thinking about what is right and opening our hearts to grace, we make good choices and develop virtues. If we often do things that are wrong we develop bad habits, or vices. Vices can trap us. Virtues free us to be our best selves, which makes us happy and holy.

There are three virtues that are called *theological virtues*. These virtues are given to us by God, lead us toward God, and open our hearts for God to live within us. We receive these virtues in baptism and develop them as we grow in holiness. They give life to all the other virtues. The theological virtues are *faith, hope, and charity*.

There are four virtues that are called *cardinal virtues*. “Cardinal” is from a Latin word that means “hinge”, like the hinge on a door. All the other virtues rely on these. The cardinal virtues are *prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance*.

Grades 6-8: *A virtue is a good habit.*

The word virtue comes from the Latin *virtus*, which means “strength”. Our fallen nature is weak and can easily become entangled in vice, but the graces available to us through Christ enable us to overcome our weaknesses and develop strength, or virtue. People who are virtuous enjoy the freedom of being their best selves and growing closer to God—so don’t forget to pray for this grace!

Human/moral virtues are acquired by education, deliberate acts, and persevering effort. They are purified and elevated by grace. Four of these virtues play a pivotal role and so are called the *cardinal virtues*: *prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance*. They lead us to God through other things that are good for us.

The three *theological virtues* of *faith, hope, and charity* are given to us by God at baptism. These give life to the moral virtues by allowing God to dwell within us and by drawing us to be virtuous out of love for Him. They lead us directly to God.

The seven *gifts of the Holy Spirit* (*wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord*) are poured out by the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Confirmation. The gifts are different from the virtues because they are given directly by God rather than acquired by repeated good actions. The gifts of the Holy Spirit complete and perfect all the virtues by making us docile to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. (See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* #1803-1845)

Age-Appropriate Definitions: Who are Saints?

The following definitions are found in the inside cover of student workbooks and will be used in class:

PK-Kindergarten: A saint is a person who is in heaven.

All the people in heaven are called saints. If we listen to Jesus and make good choices to follow Him, someday we will be happy with Him forever! The saints in this book are people we know for sure are in heaven.

Grades 1-2: A saint is a person who is in heaven.

God wants us all to become saints in heaven. When the Catholic Church tells us we can be sure a certain person is in heaven, that person is a *canonized* saint. These saints loved God very much and led lives filled with virtue. They give us good examples of how to get to heaven and we can ask them to help us with their prayers.

Grades 3-5: A saint is a person who is in heaven.

The Catholic Church *canonizes* some saints. "Canon" means list; canonized means someone is added to the list of saints. One of the first steps in the process for canonization is an investigation to see if the person lived a life of "heroic virtue". In the last step of the process, the Church prays for a miracle through the intercession of the person. *Blessed* and *Venerable* are titles for people who are almost canonized. The Church gives us canonized saints as role-models and intercessors, but every single one of us is called by God to be a saint.

Grades 6-8: A saint is a person who is in heaven.

God desires each of us to be with Him forever in heaven—to be a saint. The Catholic Church canonizes some saints so that we can look to them as role models and intercessors. Canonization is a process of verifying that the person lived a life of "heroic virtue" and is now in heaven, enjoying the full vision of God with inexpressible happiness, and eager to help those of us on earth. Promoting a cause for sainthood takes years of work and prayer by a group

of people devoted to the cause.

Steps of Canonization*:

1. *Servant of God*: Rome and the local bishop have approved the opening of an investigation of the person's life, writings, and miracles.
2. *Venerable*: the findings of this investigation have been presented at the Vatican and approved by the pope.
3. *Blessed*: a miracle attributed to the intercession of this person has been scientifically investigated and approved. (For a martyr, a first miracle is not required.)
4. *Saint*: a second miracle has been approved and the person is canonized.

**The Church has the authority to bypass this process, and does so at times.*

VIRTUES FOR THE YEAR OF

Faith

September: FAITH

—believing in God and all He has revealed

October: REVERENCE

—showing your deepest respect for things of God

November: STEWARDSHIP

—returning to God the first fruits of your time, talent, and treasure

December: GENEROSITY

—giving without counting the cost

January: GRATITUDE

—seeing everything as a gift and being thankful

February: HONESTY

—being trustworthy and true

March: MERCY

—caring for those who suffer

April: JUSTICE

—being fair and giving each his due

May: ZEAL

—being driven by an intense love for God

INTRODUCTION TO THE YEAR OF FAITH

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1)

"We walk by faith, not by sight." (2 Corinthians 5:7)

"Jesus said to them, 'Do you believe that I am able to do this?' They said to Him, 'Yes, Lord.' Then He touched their eyes, saying, 'It shall be done to you according to your faith.'" (Matthew 9:28)

"He said to them, 'Why are you afraid, you of little faith?' Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm." (Matthew 8:26)

"In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love." (Galatians 5:6)

"What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and be filled,' and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? . . . Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." (James 2:14-16, 26)



Although each of the three years in *Virtues in Practice* is based on a theological virtue (faith, hope, charity), the definition of "theological virtue" is perhaps most clear in the case of faith. Most virtues are good habits that we gain through practice, but these three virtues are called *theological* because they are given to us by God Himself at our baptism. Not only does God Himself give us these three virtues, but they allow Him to live within us, and draw us to direct our lives toward Him.

We often think of faith as an act of our own will: "I choose to believe." In actuality, we cannot gain access to God by our own choice. Bigger than the universe, more brilliant than all the world's greatest geniuses combined, the God who created us is far beyond our understanding. We can know Him only because *He* chooses to reveal Himself to us. In His goodness He has willed not only to let us know *about* Him, but to let us know *Him*: through the gift of faith, we participate in God's own life, and He dwells within us. Stop and think about that for a minute. We are called to participate in God's life. This is not possible except as a gift from God; it is miraculous, and many of us never notice the reality of it.

Similar to the other virtues, the theological virtues grow. We deepen our faith through study and prayer—if we want to deepen our relationship with a person, we seek to learn more about him and to spend time being with him. It's the same with God. How can your family deepen faith through study and prayer this year? In baptism, you and your children received the "seed" of faith. What more can you do to help it to grow?

Faith is about seeing and doing. The person of faith sees what the unbeliever cannot imagine. We believe in the invisible. Faith is not like a political stance, a platform to be agreed upon, a membership badge to be worn. To say "I believe" or "I am a Catholic" means that God has given me an entirely different perspective on daily experiences and on the purpose of life. If I am a Catholic, I know that in my daily routine I am surrounded by powerful angels helping to guide people and nations. I know that the Mother of God and the saints—including those in my own family who have reached heaven—are constantly with me, intimately involved in my life and supporting me by the power of their prayers. If I am a Catholic, I know that physical things have deep meaning and that God works through them; that the grace needed to transform the world is available in the whispered words of the confessional box, in a drop of holy water; that God Himself is awaiting us in tabernacles around the world, hidden under the appearance of bread so that we can be *physically close* to Him. If I am a Catholic, I love the Holy Father as Christ's vicar on earth, and the Church because it is my family, and my source of life because *He* works through it. And most importantly, if I have faith I know that every human person is also a spiritual being and that the purpose of life is to gain heaven, to reach life with God in eternal joy and to avoid the danger of eternal misery without Him. This is how a person of faith sees the world.

If we see the world this way, it changes how we act, and it allows God to act in our lives. Christ was not able to perform miracles in communities that closed their minds and hearts to Him. In this Year of Faith, let us open our hearts to Christ! When we do, He is able to work miracles in us and through us.

Good works follow on faith and prove the authenticity of faith. True faith compels us to evangelize, that is, to share and proclaim the love and truth we have found in Jesus Christ so that His good news reaches to the ends of the earth. And because we know the eternal destiny of each person, we care for them as priceless. We all know that it is one thing to "talk the talk" and a far deal greater to "walk the walk". We must not only say "I believe"... we must live it.

In the Year of Faith, virtues such as faith and reverence provide an opportunity to renew Catholic devotions at the parish and school. These could include a Living Rosary in October, a Saints Gallery in November, a school Christmas pageant that is focused on the birth of Jesus, a Faith Rally or Family Retreat for Catholic Schools Week, praying the Stations of the Cross or acting in a Passion Play, 40 Hours of Eucharistic Adoration in Lent, or Crowning Our Lady in May. Since "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26), the Year of Faith also emphasizes service. Virtues such as stewardship, generosity, mercy, and justice provide opportunities to focus on class or school service projects (trips, collections), joining the Holy Childhood, or incorporating service-learning across the curriculum.

In the Year of Faith, let us seek to deepen our relationship with God, to know Him and to serve Him by serving others. May each of us be among those Our Lord had in mind when He told Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29).