

Spiritual Camino – Day 4

Virtues

When I was growing up, there was a time when I used to do exactly the opposite of what I was told. It got to the point that my mom had to use some form of reverse psychology or pure sarcasm to get me to do what I was supposed to do: *Don't pick up your shoes, leave them there exactly where they are and let's see who trips and falls! Don't do your homework, maybe it will do itself! Put on those worn out jeans again, I am sure they will be formal enough for the party you are going to!*

Human nature is built to act reasonably and pursue what is good and noble. However, the wound of sin has left us with a curiosity for what's contrary to that. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that a *"virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself"* (CCC N. 1803). It even adds that *"the virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions."* Finally, *"the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God."*

Virtues prove that a person is in intimate union with God who is the source of all good. God attracts all to himself and moves the mind and the heart to desire and do only what is beneficial and necessary. The cultivation of virtues requires clarity of mind, right intention, and commitment. In other words, we need to know what the good we desire to practice is, to have a noble reason to do it, and to sharpen our determination to let God's grace strengthen our will and resolve.

In Moral Theology we are taught that there are acts of man and human acts, the former refers to involuntary actions such as breathing and falling asleep and the latter refer to those that require the participation of our will such as conversing or working. Virtues are built upon human acts, that is, that they require our deliberation and choice. Voluntary behaviors are sometimes inclined towards something beneficial and sometimes towards something detrimental. When they are good, we call them favors and when they are bad, we call them faults. The recurrent practice of good acts shapes the person's character and forms a habitual disposition in some aspects of life. The good habits are called virtues and the bad habits are called vices.

Traditionally, we distinguish between human virtues and theological virtues. Human virtues govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according



to reason and faith. They are acquired through discipline and cooperation with grace. The theological virtues are infused by God in the soul.

There are four primary human virtues from which many others emerge: *prudence* (to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it), *justice* (the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor), *fortitude* (firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good), and *temperance* (moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods).

The Theological Virtues are three: *faith* (by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us, and that Holy Church proposes for our belief, because he is truth itself), *hope* (by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit), and *charity* (by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God). The theological virtues relate directly to God and confirm our participation in the life of the Trinity.

The human drama of desiring to live a virtuous life and not being able to do it was well captured by St. Paul in the Letter to the Romans, "*I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing*" (Romans 7:19). The struggle of the human flesh is wanting to return to the things that we have programmed ourselves to do. It starts with a good vision and a bad plan to achieve it, then it moves us to set unrealistic expectations, and as a result, we face a disappointing outcome that combines the inflated assessment of our capacities with the underestimation of God's grace.

For example, to achieve the virtues of a good athlete, a good musician, or a good speaker, we still need some discipline, self-denial, and commitment to practice. It is not enough to say that we are naturally gifted with great physiques, a good ear, or superb verbal skills. It takes time and humility to acquire the qualities of the art. It also takes time and humility to embrace the truth about ourselves by knowing the things that we can do well on our own and the things we need to rely on others to help us achieve.

In my abstract way of thinking, I am constantly depending on people with a practical intelligence to catch me in my esoteric elucubrations and help me understand that maybe I don't need to use the word "elucubration" after all. I could have used, reflection, meditations, or thinking. Virtues are cultivated after we realize our insufficiencies and the need to compensate for the good we are not able to practice, which



could come from me after hard work and prayer or maybe from the person next to me who can do it better and show me by example how to do it with more ease.

The purpose of a virtuous life is to be like God. In this noble end, we sometimes fail and sometimes succeed. In any case, we are to remember that there is no authentic Christian life without virtues, because they prove that something good and pure is sustaining and moving our lives, i.e., God. However, virtues demand a daily renewal of our determination if we want to cultivate them, practice them, benefit from them, and give glory to God through them.

