

Lesson Six: Fortitude Or: The Determination to Become Happy

In our lives many situations arise in which it becomes difficult to do the right thing, even when we know what it is. There may be all sorts of reasons for why it is disagreeable to act according to what we know is best. In order to stay strong, to do what is good, we need the third cardinal virtue, known alternately as fortitude, courage, or bravery. This is the virtue *by which we do the right thing, even in the midst of hardship*. Fortitude helps us to overcome any dangers, obstacles, and fears; it enables a person to withstand whatever difficulties may block him from attaining his true goal.

Classically, fortitude was that virtue which made a man willing to fight and even potentially die in battle. It was seen as the virtue of the soldier, who was determined to offer his life for the sake of a greater good. Now, we Catholics believe that we too are soldiers, that we too are engaged in battle, although the battle is not a physical one, but rather spiritual. We too, must be willing to offer our lives for the greatest good, namely, the glory of God. In early Christian times, and even in parts of the world today, this possibility of being killed for the sake of the faith was and is very present, and so the Church has been provided with the most shining examples of fortitude, namely, the *martyrs*.

This is the call of every Catholic: to possess fortitude to the extent that we willingly offer up our lives for God and the Church. Although we probably won't be literally killed for our faith, still we must be prepared to make all kinds of great sacrifices in living out our Catholic identity.

Fortitude lies between Extremes

All the cardinal virtues exist as forms of balance, and so must be carefully distinguished from the various excesses which threaten to substitute for virtue. This is especially true in the case of fortitude, with can easily degenerate into one of the following extremes:

Firstly, *Brashness*. Brashness is the vice of lacking a proper awareness of or concern for real danger. A brash man, an excessively bold man, foolishly charges into dangers and difficulties that could have been avoided. He is the one who goes looking for trouble, who enjoys risk for its own sake. But there is *nothing* virtuous about needlessly courting danger; such an attitude is foolhardy, not brave.

Secondly, *Cowardice*. Cowardice is the vice of refusing to take a prudent risk or making a prudent sacrifice because of fear. It is the abandonment of the greater good due to the terror of sustaining loss and hurt. The coward is so concerned with total self-preservation that he becomes crippled in relation to the world; the world presents itself not as an opportunity for attaining goods, but rather as a collection of personal threats. Such a person is incapable of take advantage of the joy and happiness of life.

The virtue of fortitude helps steer a middle course, as it helps overcome fear and yet restrains excessive boldness. It is interesting to note that someone who is brash or cowardly will be unable to comprehend courage. The too-fearful person tells the courageous man, "You're crazy! Always taking risks! What a daredevil!" Whereas the too-bold person tells the courageous man, "You're a wimp! Always playing it careful, like a frightened chicken." One can always tell a balanced, virtuous person, because all

those around him will be accusing him of opposite extremes. As G.K. Chesterton pointed out, if half the people declare a certain man to be too tall, and the other half declare him to be too short, one can reasonably assume that man is just the right height.¹ This is the balanced life that every Christian must strive for, an integral dimension of which is fortitude.

Fortitude, Fear, and Love

An illuminating principle for understanding the virtue of courage is the following: *In order to have courage you must have fear, and in order to have fear you must have love.* Let's unpack this idea a little bit:

Courage means being able to overcome fear in order to pursue the greater good. This is not the same as being fearless; quite the contrary, the fearless person can never be truly brave. This is because fear is based on love for something, and a desire not to lose it. But if a person does not love the thing he risks, does not value it, then where is the merit in risking it? A suicidal maniac, for example, is not brave because he risks his life for anything; he is stupid for not recognizing the value of his life, and for so casually placing his life in danger.

A brave man experiences fear because he loves the thing he is risking, and so he is afraid to lose it. No one fears the loss of something he does not love and value. *Yet what makes a person able to be brave is that he values the thing he is pursuing more than the thing he is risking.* Courage means the willingness to sacrifice something lesser for something greater.

In the gospels Our Lord give us two illustrations of this willingness to sacrifice. The first is of a man who finds a treasure buried in a field. The man sells "all that he owns" in order to purchase the field and acquire the treasure. The second story is about a man who finds a very valuable pearl ("the pearl of great price"), and sells everything he has in order to buy it.² These parables do not describe brash men, men who liquidate their assets over any passing impulse; rather, these two men are prudent enough to recognize that which is most desirable in life, and are brave enough to sacrifice everything they have so they can possess it.

Really then, the first step in gaining fortitude is to ask yourself, "What do I value the most?" Another way to ask the same question is, "What do I fear losing the most?" We must deliberately construct a hierarchy in our mind, with the most valuable thing at the top, and then be willing to pursue that one thing at the expense of everything else. So what do you see as your number one goal in life? Is it high academic grades? Is it human society? Is it excitement, or deep emotional experience? Is it success at work, or maybe someone of the opposite sex? Or is it your relationship with God? Which of these things do you love/value the most? Which of these is the last thing in your life you'd be willing to sacrifice?

To have courage, it is absolutely essential to first have your priorities straight. A man who pursues a lesser good at the expense of a greater good is not brave, but stupid. It is stupid to exchange a dollar for a penny, and it is of no profit to a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul. Courage is about ordering your loves and fears so that you fear most the loss of what is truly most valuable. Only then will you be able to

¹ *Orthodoxy*, chp 6.

² Mt 13:44-46

overcome lesser fears in carrying out what is right. Pray then to the Holy Spirit for His gift of the “Fear of the Lord,” which allows us to fear the loss of His love before all else.

The Two Forms of Courage: Attack and Endurance

Fortitude is lived out in different ways, according to different conditions of the concrete situation. The first of these involves a direct attack on whatever evil is attempting to hinder the promotion of goodness. This kind of courage is sometimes called *holy wrath*. Holy wrath is frequently neglected in the life of the Christian, since many believers make the mistake of identifying anger as an un-Christian feeling. They forget that there can be holy anger, an outrage which rises up against some atrocity. They forget that it is sometimes proper for us to get “fed up” about evil, and that if we just stay even keel, we will never do anything to change it.

Our Lord certainly manifested this holy wrath on various occasions. For instance, in His diatribes against the Pharisees, or in His violently casting the money-changers out of the temple. He encountered evil, grew angry, and directed His anger in an attack upon that evil. We too must sometimes respond this way to evil in the world, by taking the offensive against it. Things like abortion, pornography, prostitution, blasphemy, etc... are not going to go away on their own, and only when we finally get upset about it will we get involved in the fight against these things.

For example, a video rental store near my hometown began aggressively advertising their pornographic films, placing them in the front and center of the store. Two college students noticed the change, were appalled, and went around the surrounding community collecting petitions for the store to rid itself of such movies. Enough petitions were collected, and the store complied with the demand, which it surely would not have done had it not been for the efforts of these two principled young persons. The point is that our faith is not a faith of pure passivity. Courage demands that we be ready to act, to stand up for what we know to be right.

A second form of courage is needed for those times when the only viable option is to suffer patiently and endure the trials that beset us. In these situations, directly attacking the evil is ineffective; what is required is a persistent pursuit of the good in *holy patience*. In fact, patience is the supreme test of fortitude, for when a person has run out of other options, patience still enables him to hold his ground and persevere through any oppressing hardship. The measure of courage is endurance.

So, ask yourself, what hardship is present in your life, and just won't go away? Is it some addiction you can't break? Some disappointment you can't get over? Do you have some kind of chronic problem? Are your family relationships or your friendships always strained? Is there something you've never been good at? Are you depressed? Can you not figure out your vocation? *What is that difficulty that you just can't fix, no matter how hard you try?*

Because in that difficulty is the opportunity to prove yourself brave: will you persevere in doing the good, in spite of whatever problems continue to weigh on you? For example, let's say you can't manage to stop a certain vice: will you keep going to confession, and keep trying to do better? If so, that's fortitude. Or maybe you're in a marriage that is terribly unhappy, that is deeply unsatisfying to both you and your spouse. Will you stick it out, continue trying to love your spouse and children, and asking God

for the graces to bring peace into your family? If so, then you are proving your bravery, and you will be greatly rewarded for your courage.

It's also important to keep in mind that endurance, or patience, is not a virtue for downcast, pessimistic, broken people. Patient, persevering people are not the ones who say, "Yeah, you know what, I don't even care anymore, so whatever." As opposed to the state of dejection, "to be patient means to preserve cheerfulness and serenity of mind in spite of injuries that result from the realization of the good."³ Patience is not something that belongs to sad, weak people, but rather to the strong and joyful. In the words of St. Hildegard, "Patience is the pillar which nothing can soften." The reason is that what motivates patience, like what motivates all the virtues, is the desire for the good that we want to obtain. Patience comes from that wise realization that "What's worth having is worth waiting for."

But how will you know whether you should be courageous through attack or through endurance? The answer to this question is simply said, but hard to carry out: in order to discern *how* to be brave, one needs the virtue of prudence. (Recall that prudence is the virtue which allows us to see what decision is needed in any given situation). Ultimately, such prudence comes from a prayerful relationship with God. A good daily prayer that asks for the twin virtues of prudence and fortitude is the following:

"Lord, God, grant me the patience to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Fortitude and Hope

Before a person can pursue the greater good courageously, he has to actually believe that the greater good exists and is capable of being obtained. This is Hope: to acknowledge the highest good and one's capacity to acquire it. The opposite of this is a form of despair: not to believe in supreme happiness, but to think that the best a person can achieve is passing pleasure or thrills.

The tragedy is the great number of those who really think that's it. They think, "Yeah, you can have a good time here or there, a few kicks, but perfect happiness is just an illusion." These people live in despair, and no one in despair can ever be courageous. They are incapable of ever being thoroughly brave, of laying down their lives for some higher good, because they don't even believe in a higher good.

The only source of fortitude is a constant reminding of the good that awaits us through the virtues, that is, complete enjoyment of all the basic human goods. Only perfect happiness is worth dying for, and really, only perfect happiness is worth living for.

Our Top Fear: Fortitude and Public Witness

Since courage is about overcoming fear for the sake of a greater good, it's probably a good idea to try and figure out what our top fear is. Time and time again, studies show what Americans are most afraid of: it isn't heights, it isn't mice, it isn't even death – it's public speaking. Americans especially dislike speaking publicly about important and controversial matters, because such conversation usually feels awkward, and Americans *hate* to say awkward things in public. And nothing is quite so important,

³ Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, 129.

controversial, and awkward as talking with conviction about one's religious beliefs. So most of us would rather never discuss our faith as long as we lived.

Still, as Catholics, speaking up about our faith isn't really an option. Our Lord sent out His first followers to spread His teaching and His salvation and the same is expected of us. Many Catholics like to quote a dictum attributed to St. Francis, "Preach always, and when necessary use words." This is indeed a beautiful saying, but no one who is serious about their faith, least of all St. Francis, would ever interpret him to mean that we can avoid using words as a tool for evangelizing to those around us.

We have got to start making a conscious effort to verbally witness to our faith, even in difficult situations. For example, when people say things against the Church, or against our moral code, when people make foul jokes against the dignity of women, or against the priesthood, we have a duty to stand up for what we believe. If we're at somebody's house, and something inappropriate comes on the screen, we need to have the guts to say something, or at least to leave the room.

Most importantly, we need to have the courage to try and invite people to Christ and the Church. Of course it's intimidating, and many will not come; our obligation is simply to make the invitation, and then let the Holy Spirit take care of the rest. (Think of how Philip simply said "Come and See" to Nathaniel.)⁴ If we don't even make the gesture, what does that say about our own dedication as Catholics? Fulton Sheen told a story of two good friends who were partners together in a law-firm. The first was a Catholic, and the second an unbeliever. The latter became terminally ill, and upon visiting him the Catholic friend asked, "Don't you want to make your peace with God before you die?" The sick man answered him, "All the years we have been friends and colleagues, you've never once spoken with me about religious matters. If your faith has mattered so little to you in your life, of what use can it be to me at my death?"

Pray to God for the grace to overcome cowardice, for the strength to courageously witness to the truth of salvation before it is too late.

⁴ Jn 1:45-50.