

Faith of Our Fathers

[A WEEKLY INSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG AND OLD.]

CHAPTER XVI.—ON THE VIRTUES.

1. The doctrine we have been discussing relates to grace, and to the means of salvation given to man by the mercy of God. Man, on his side, must make use of these means, correspond with grace, and thus produce good works, which will make him worthy of salvation.

These good works are acts of the virtues which we must practise according to the law of God and by the grace of God.

To practise these virtues it is necessary to know them well and to study them from the teachings of faith, joined to those of sound reason.

We will sum up this doctrine in two articles:

Article I. The Virtues in general.

Article II. The Theological Virtues.

First Article: Virtues in General.

2. The word virtue, in a broad acceptance, means strength; here we take it in its moral acceptance, as strength of the soul, or a good moral quality in man. In this sense virtue may be defined as a disposition, or an inclination, of the soul which leads men to do good actions, and which renders him good who is endowed with it.

Virtue is the opposite of vice, which consists in a bad habit or inclination of the soul, which leads man to commit bad and blameworthy actions, and renders him bad who is under its dominion.

3. In virtue two elements may be distinguished—namely (1) the disposition of the soul, or the virtue itself, and the act of virtue; (2) the subject of the virtue and its object.

4. (1) The disposition of soul—which is, properly speaking, the virtue—is a state of being (*habitus*), a quality, a faculty, or an abiding power; the act is only the transitory exercise of it. A virtuous disposition not only renders us capable of performing virtuous acts, but it also inclines us to produce them; and, being permanent, it remains after the production of such acts. It is easy to recognise the analogy between the disposition which constitutes virtue and that which constitutes a science or an art. Consider, for example, the art of music: it is a disposition or faculty by which the musician produces harmonious sounds, and which remains with him after the musical performance is over. In the same way a virtue—for instance, the virtue of faith—causes the production of acts of faith, and still remains in the soul after those acts have been produced, soon again to become active, and repeat its own acts indefinitely. Virtue, again, may be compared to a tree, and acts of virtue to the fruit it produces.

5. An act of virtue, however, does not always necessarily suppose the corresponding virtue; and the virtue itself may sometimes exist without producing acts on all occasions. Thus, to show patience in some particular case is not a proof of the possession of the virtue itself; and if occasionally impatience should be shown instead, it is not a proof that the virtue is wholly wanting in the individual, but only that it has failed in an isolated instance.

6. (2) The person who possesses a virtue, or, more strictly speaking, the soul and the powers of the soul which are its seat, are called the subject of the virtue. Thus, the subject of the theological virtues is the Christian who possesses them, and above all his soul, where they reign together with grace. Thus, again, the subject of faith is the understanding, and that of charity the will.

The object of a virtue is the thing on which it is exercised. Thus the object of faith is the truths which are believed; that of hope, the good which is expected and desired; that of charity, Almighty God, the sovereign good, who is beloved.

This theory may be explained by saying the subject answers to who? and the object to what? To the object is linked the motive of the virtue, which answers to the question why?

7. Virtue constitutes the perfection proper to man, and renders him good and perfect in the eyes of his Creator. Man is made to practise virtue as a tree to bear fruits, and the sun to spread its rays. Virtue is the fruit which

the reasonable creature ought to produce; it constitutes his glory and beauty, whereas, without virtue, man is a barren tree, a rayless sun.

It follows, then, that the perfection of the human creature, in the eyes of God, and his true glory, consist neither in riches nor science, nor in any exterior advantage, but in virtue; and that man is more or less perfect according to the greater or smaller number of his virtues.

8. Virtues are divided—(1) according to their object, into theological and moral virtues; (2) according to their origin, into infused and acquired virtues, or into supernatural virtues, and natural or human virtues.

9. (1) The theological virtues have God Himself for their object; they relate immediately to Him, and direct our morals only mediately by the influence they exert over our thoughts, feelings, views, and actions. They are three in number—namely, faith, hope, and charity.

The moral virtues have for their object the regulation of our lives, and they only refer to God in an indirect manner. They are very numerous, and form four groups, so to speak, that are linked to the four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

10. (2) A virtue is said to be infused when the Holy Ghost bestows it on man, and infuses it into the soul, together with sanctifying grace.

A virtue is called acquired when man gains it by his own efforts and by the frequent repetition of the acts it prescribes.

Those virtues are called supernatural which are practised with the help of grace from motives of faith, which relate to God and our eternal salvation.

A virtue is natural and human when it is practised by man according to the simple lights of reason, and for a purely natural and earthly end.

11. Virtues are connected one with the other, like the different branches of one tree, so that one leads by degrees to the others; if one in particular be cultivated, all the others profit thereby; and when one is possessed in perfection, all the others are possessed to a certain degree. A similar bond exists between vices. Vice is a malignant gangrene which, having attacked one member, very soon spreads to the others.

The three theological virtues are connected in a very particular manner. Faith is the foundation of the two others, because we cannot either hope in God or love Him without first knowing Him by faith. Hope and charity cannot, then, exist here below without faith; but faith and hope can exist without charity, though only in an imperfect degree.

12. All the virtues together constitute that which is the perfection of man—namely, holiness. Their brilliant assemblage resembles that of the flowers which form a garden, or that of the stars which form a firmament, the features which go to make up a portrait, or the members which form a living body. As found in the Christian, they reflect in his soul the image of Jesus Christ; they constitute the interior man, the new and spiritual man created by the grace of Our Saviour.

13. It will, then, be understood that the virtues are not without a certain order, nor are they gathered together confusedly, like pieces of gold or silver thrown haphazard into a treasury. They are, on the contrary, co-ordinate, and dependent one on the other from different points of view.

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