



FORTITUDE

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES : FORTITUDE AND TEMPERANCE



TEMPERANCE

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FORTITUDE

Fortitude is the cardinal virtue that ensures a steadiness of the will in the pursuit of the good notwithstanding any difficulties (cf. Catechism, no. 1808). This virtue allows us to maintain our balance in the face of danger. On the one extreme, we need to avoid cowardice, which involves giving in to the passion of fear. On the other, we must avoid rashness or recklessness, which involves imprudently subjecting ourselves to temptation or some physical danger.

The virtue of fortitude has two parts: to attack and to endure. Of the two, fortitude most fully shows itself in patient endurance—where there is no reasonable hope of conquering the evil that is threatening us. One who is not patient cannot possibly be brave. However, patience is much more than merely passive submission to danger and suffering. Rather, it is a strong quality of the soul that allows us to cling steadfastly to the good and refuse to yield to fear or pain.

Ultimately, the virtue of fortitude enables us to conquer even the fear of death, and thus face trials and persecutions willingly and every joyfully (cf. Catechism, no. 1808). For the Christian, the supreme act of fortitude is martyrdom:

Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death. The martyr bears witness to Christ who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity. He bears witness to the truth of the faith and of Christian doctrine. He endures death through an act of fortitude (Catechism, no. 2473).

In Revelation 12:10-11, those who have conquered the powers of evil are those for whom “love for life did not deter them from death.”

Yet this willingness to “fall in battle” must be understood properly. Fortitude is not authentic unless it is grounded in prudence and justice. It is completely foreign to a reckless or “daredevil” approach to danger. The truly virtuous man does not suffer injury or martyrdom for its own sake, but as a means of preserving or acquiring a greater good. The Gospel summarizes this paradox: “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn. 12:25).

TEMPERANCE

The Catechism defines temperance as “the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will’s mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable” (no. 1809). Temperance helps us “to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world” (Tit. 2:12).

While fortitude is self-possession in a sea of danger, temperance is self-possession during a storm of passion. Too often, temperance is equated with a puritanical approach to creation and legitimate human pleasures. Thus, it’s limited to simply avoiding excessive pleasure. In reality, temperance is a positive ordering of our bodily appetites for our own good and the good of society. Temperance allows us to be fully ourselves and not slaves to food, alcohol, sex, gambling, comfort, success, or other pleasures which may result from excessive indulgence in them (cf. Catechism, no. 2290). This inner ordering of the bodily appetites produces what St. Thomas calls a “serenity of the spirit,” but requires vigilance, discipline, and grace because of our fallen human nature (q. 141, art. 2).

The surest way to walk a straight line in the snow is to keep our eyes focused on our destination. We may be tempted to look at our feet and simply put one in front of the other, but eventually we’ll drift off (if we

don't first walk into a tree!). This points to the importance of humility, which helps us to see ourselves as we truly are: creatures who are at once sinful and redeemed. More fundamentally, humility orients us toward God, who is both our origin and our goal. This virtue is no less than temperance as it relates to our quest for excellence, which for the Christian is to "attain to . . . the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

THE FAMILY OF MORAL VIRTUES

All the moral virtues are in some way related to one of the cardinal virtues. Here are some examples:

Fortitude—constancy in the pursuit of the good

- Magnanimity literally means "great souled," and inclines us to heroic acts of virtue.
- Magnificence leads us to do great things at great expense.
- Patience enables us to remain at peace despite trials and opposition.
- Perseverance helps us to pursue a good cause to the end, and reaches its perfection in the distinctly Christian virtue of martyrdom.

Temperance—moderation in all things

- Clemency remits or lessens the punishment due to a guilty person.
- Meekness is self-possession in the face of adversity, and thus is even able to restrain justified anger.
- Modesty allows us to be self-assured without being self-absorbed or calling undue attention to ourselves. It involves moderation in our dress, language, and behavior.
- Abstinence is moderation in the consumption of food for our spiritual welfare.
- Sobriety is the regulation of our consumption of food—and especially alcohol and medicines—according to the dictates of reason.
- Diligence regulates our desire for ease and comfort.
- Chastity controls our desire for sexual pleasure in conformity with reason and the teachings of Christ (cf. Catechism, nos. 2337 et seq.).

Catholics United for the Faith, Faith Facts: The Cardinal Virtues; <http://www.cuf.org/2005/02/morality-is-habit-forming-the-cardinal-virtues>.