

Rising 8th Grade Summer Reading Assignment

Students will read a total of **one book and one article**.

The **book** should be *approved by their parents*. Parents, please visit Common Sense Media's Book Review section to approve your son's or daughter's reading choice for the summer. Students should take notes on each chapter (major events) and be prepared to discuss main themes of their book with the class in class discussions the first week of school.

The **article** (below) for the students to read is by Dr. Edward Sri: *Called to Greatness*.

Article Assignment: As you read the article, please reflect on how this article relates to your own life as an 8th grader. Discuss the following questions with your parents and follow these directions to write out your responses. **USE EXAMPLES FROM THE TEXT IN YOUR RESPONSES!**

Please type responses to the following questions using complete sentences. **You answers should be comparable in length to a short paragraph (5-6 sentences).**

1. Sri defines magnanimity as “greatness of soul”. St. Thomas Aquinas describes it as a “stretching forth of the mind to great things”. Alexandre Havard defines it as “the quest of the spirit for great things.” How is it possible to strive for this greatness, while still growing in the virtue of humility? Explain.
2. The opposite of magnanimity is “pusillanimity,” which means “smallness of soul.” Why is pusillanimity considered a vice, a sinful habit? How is sin so often the result of a person's pusillanimity? What temptations to pusillanimity do you think exist for an 8th grader at St. Rose? Explain.
3. Sri tells the story of Jan Tyranowski, and writes: “Imagine if Tyranowski responded differently to the Nazi occupation of Poland. Imagine if he said he was too busy or too scared or not skilled enough to start a Living Rosary group. We might not have had a John Paul II.” At your Mass of Commissioning, you made a promise to “inspire my classmates to greatness of soul.” Considering this, how do the virtues of magnanimity and pusillanimity affect the whole Church? What two open-ended questions do you have for your fellow 8th graders regarding this? Explain.
4. Sri writes: “A second reason to shrink from doing great things is fear of failure.” In a prayer for courage, we ask our Heavenly Father to “free us from the fear of failure.” When it comes to striving for magnanimity and acting as 8th grade leaders this year, in what ways do you fear failure? In what ways are you causing others to fear failure? What is needed on a practical, everyday level for you to help rid yourself and others from this fear of failure? Explain.

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Called to Greatness: The Virtue of Magnanimity

~EDWARD P. SRI

"The ways of the Lord are not comfortable. But we were not created for comfort, but for greatness." - Pope Benedict XVI

When faced with choices in life, do you tend to pursue what is most noble — what will form you in excellence and benefit others most? Or do you tend to shy away from things that may push you out of your comfort zone — even if they are good for you — either because you fear failure or because you tend to avoid doing what is difficult and challenging?

Striving for greatness is at the heart of a virtue called "magnanimity," which means "greatness of soul." This is the virtue by which man pursues what is great and honorable in his life, even if it is difficult. St. Thomas Aquinas describes it as a "stretching forth of the mind to great things."¹ The magnanimous person seeks to do great acts, "things as are deserving of honor."²

This is not opposed to humility. The magnanimous person pursues greatness in proportion to his ability. He humbly takes stock of all the gifts that God has given him and seeks to use them as best he can. As Aquinas explains, "Magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God."³

While magnanimity is certainly exhibited among the famous saints who evangelized whole cultures, started new religious orders, or defended the Church against widespread heresies, it is also found in simple, small, ordinary people whose sincere desire to give the best of themselves is used by God to do extraordinary things.

A Great Man from Poland

When the Nazis occupied Poland in World War II, they sought to eliminate every element of Polish culture, including its Catholic heritage. But there was one Polish man who did not sit back and passively watch his country's faith be so severely attacked. Because of his magnanimity, this man not only played a key part in preserving Poland's culture amid this crisis, but his actions eventually impacted the entire world. Who was this magnanimous Polish man? You guessed it: Jan Tyranowski.

Jan Tyranowski was a tailor. He was not a priest and had no formal training in theology. But as the Nazi regime killed a third of the Polish clergy, sent thousands of priests and religious into concentration camps, and outlawed education in the faith, the Church turned to laypeople to lead

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underground catechetical groups to pass on the faith to the younger generation. Tyranowski led one of the most successful of these clandestine ministries, called Living Rosary groups.

At the risk of his own life, Tyranowski opened his apartment for instructing several young men in the spiritual life, and many of these men went on to form Living Rosary groups of their own with their peers. This underground ministry had such a deep effect on people's lives that 10 of the men involved eventually become priests. What is most interesting is that one of those priests coming from this group was Karol Wojtyla, the man who eventually became John Paul II — the pope who had such a tremendous impact on the Church and the world throughout his pontificate.

Our Call

At first glance, this tailor's little prayer group might not appear to be that significant in the scope of world history. But when we see how the Lord used his desire to give the best of himself in a crisis situation, we realize that he did in fact play a crucial part in forming one of the most influential people the world has ever known. Imagine if Tyranowski responded differently to the Nazi occupation of Poland. Imagine if he said he was too busy or too scared or not skilled enough to start a Living Rosary group. We might not have had a John Paul II. Indeed, the world might be a very different place today if it was not for the magnanimity of this one tailor in Poland!

Like Jan Tyranowski, we also live in a time of crisis when the Catholic faith is being attacked — perhaps not by a totalitarian regime, but by what Pope Benedict has called "a dictatorship of relativism": a cultural environment that does not tolerate Christian religious and moral convictions and undermines the Catholic way of life. Many cultural forces today work against our efforts to build strong Christian marriages, raise godly children, and live in imitation of Christ. Like Tyranowski, we may not have much training in theology, but we have been given the faith in a period when many people do not know Christ or His Church. What will we do with this gift God has entrusted to us? Will we bury our talent in the ground or magnanimously use it to the best of our abilities?

The Adornment of the Virtues

This does not mean every good Catholic must start a good organization or lead a parish activity. Magnanimity is often lived — in quiet, simple ways off the radar screen of most of the world. The person who daily endeavors to be a better spouse, parent, friend, or child of God is truly seeking "greatness of soul."

Indeed, the magnanimous person continuously strives to perfect the virtues in all areas of his life. He is not content with simply being good. He reaches out toward excellence. For example, magnanimity may impel a good man to go beyond his daily obligations and make more sacrifices in his daily life for the sake of others. He may be driven to defer to others' preferences, to endure criticism with patience, to respond gently to his child's temper tantrum, or to avoid defending his opinion in non-essential matters. These are small ways of living "greatness of soul." As such, magnanimity is sometimes called the "adornment" of all the virtues, for the magnanimous man endeavors to make

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his virtues greater.⁴ Or as Aquinas explains, "If his soul is endowed with great virtue, magnanimity makes him tend to *perfect* works of virtue."⁵

Mediocrity

Yet what is it that prevents a person from pursuing greatness and causes him to settle for mediocrity in his life? The man lacking in magnanimity suffers from a vice called "pusillanimity," which means "smallness of soul." Whereas the magnanimous man seeks what is best, even if it is difficult; the pusillanimous man shies away from noble, arduous tasks because they will demand a lot out of him. He instead pursues the path of least resistance, opting for whatever is easier.

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According to Aquinas, one reason the pusillanimous man shrinks from great things is *ignorance of one's own qualification*. Many people do not think they are capable of great things. They do not know the high call God has for every one of His children: a call to perfection. Even more, they are not aware of the grace Jesus offers us to help us achieve this perfection that we could never arrive at on our own. So instead of striving for greatness, which they view as impossible to achieve, they merely seek to avoid doing bad things.

A second reason people shrink from doing great things is *fear of failure*. Someone, for example, might sense God is calling them to share their faith more, pray more, or serve the poor, but they are afraid to take a step forward because they are too worried that they will not be good at these works. They are afraid they will not be successful, and their fear of failure keeps them from striving after the great desires God has placed on their hearts.

Something Mother Teresa once said might be helpful here: "We are called to be faithful, not successful." Many of the great heroes in the Church — from Pope John Paul II to the tailor Jan Tyranowski — did not know when they began to answer God's call in their lives how successful their efforts would be. But they did have the magnanimity to be faithful and put the rest in God's hands.

Endnotes:

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 129, Art. 1.
2. Ibid., Q. 129, Art. 2.
3. Ibid., Q. 129, Art. 3.
4. Aristotle, *Ethics*, IV, 3.
5. *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q. 129, Art. 3, emphasis added.