



How Catholics Live



Section 4:

Virtues and Vices



To Luke E. Hart, exemplary evangelizer and Supreme Knight from 1953-64, the Knights of Columbus dedicates this Series with affection and gratitude.

*The Knights of Columbus presents
The Luke E. Hart Series
Basic Elements of the Catholic Faith*

VIRTUES AND VICES

PART THREE • SECTION FOUR OF
CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

*What does a Catholic believe?
How does a Catholic worship?
How does a Catholic live?*

Based on the
Catechism of the Catholic Church

*by
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A WORD ABOUT THIS SERIES

This booklet is one of a series of 30 that offer a colloquial expression of major elements of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Pope John Paul II, under whose authority the *Catechism* was first released in 1992, urged such versions so that each people and each culture can appropriate its content as its own.

The booklets are not a substitute for the *Catechism*, but are offered only to make its contents more accessible. The series is at times poetic, colloquial, playful, and imaginative; at all times it strives to be faithful to the Faith.

The Catholic Information Service recommends reading at least one Hart series booklet each month to gain a deeper, more mature understanding of the Faith.

PART III: HOW CATHOLICS LIVE
(MORALITY)

SECTION 4: VIRTUES AND VICES

(This booklet, which is Part III, Section 4 of our course on **Catholic Christianity**, together with the preceding booklet, *Some Fundamental Principles of Catholic Morality* (Part III, Section 3), explains some basic principles of “natural law” morality, as defined in *Human Nature as the Basis for Morality* (Part III, Section 2). Part III, Sections 5-10 will focus on the “divine law,” that is, the Ten Commandments.)

1. *The meaning of virtue*

“Virtue” is a very simple concept to define. As vice is a bad habit, so virtue is a good habit. “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC 1803). Virtues and vices form a person’s “character.”

2. *The importance of virtue*

- a) Without personal virtue, we will do good only sporadically. The main source of a good and happy life – for the human race, for each nation and community, and for each family – is the personal virtue of each individual. No system or set of laws, however perfect, can work for good without virtuous individuals. A Chinese parable says: “When the

wrong man uses the right means, the right means work in the wrong way.” Bad bricks, however well arranged, don’t make a good building. Nothing can improve the world the way a saint does.

- b) Virtues – unless we lose them! – last forever. They are cultivated by each external good action, and underlie the habitual quality of virtuous actions.
- c) Virtues improve not just what you do but what you are. And every lover knows that the object of love is not just deeds but persons. Your boss may care more about what you do (your work) than about what you are (your character), but the opposite is true for those who love you. And God is not our boss, but our loving Father.

3. *The goal of virtue*

“Why should I be good?” The question is simple and profound, and requires a simple and profound answer.

Personal virtue is the key to improving the world, finding happiness, and helping other people to be good and happy too; yet the ultimate end of virtue is even greater than these great goals: “the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God”⁶³ (CCC 1803).

No secular answer to the question of the goal of virtue can rival this one.

4. *The four cardinal virtues*

From ancient times (Plato, Aristotle) and in various cultures four virtues have traditionally been recognized as the indispensable foundation of all the others, as the “hinges” (*cardines* in Latin, thus “cardinal”) on which all others turn. “Four virtues play a pivotal role and accordingly are called ‘cardinal’; all the others are grouped around them. They are: prudence [or wisdom], justice [or fairness], fortitude [or courage], and temperance [or self-control]” (CCC 1805). They are mentioned in Scripture by name (Wisdom 8:7) and

“are praised under other names in many passages of Scripture” (CCC 1805).

5. *Prudence*

Prudence “is not to be confused with timidity or fear” (CCC 1806). Perhaps “practical moral wisdom” is a clearer term for this virtue today. Prudence is “the virtue that disposes practical reason [the mind thinking about what should be done] to discover our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it.... With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases...” (CCC 1806).

6. *Justice*

“*Justice* is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the ‘virtue of religion’ [or ‘piety’]. Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships...harmony...” (CCC 1807).

Justice gives to each “what is due,” or “what is right,” or “just desserts.” This logical and almost mathematical aspect of justice, focusing on *equality and rights for individuals*, is balanced and complemented by a more intuitive and holistic aspect which aims at *harmony and right relationships*. Typically, men are especially sensitive to the first aspect, and women to the second. Complete justice requires both.

Justice transforms power and is transformed by love.

Power is meant to serve justice – might should serve right – and justice is meant to serve love.

We are born first knowing power and weakness, like the animals. As children, we learn a sense of justice from our conscience *and* from parents and teachers. As adults, we realize that justice, though necessary, is not sufficient; that our only hope is love and mercy and forgiveness – from God and from each other.

Wars will not cease and peace will not come, to nations or to families or to individuals, without justice. But neither will lasting peace come through justice alone.

7. *Fortitude*

“*Fortitude* is the moral virtue that ensures firmness in difficulties and constancy in the pursuit of the good. It strengthens the resolve to resist temptations and to overcome obstacles in the moral life. The virtue of fortitude enables one to conquer fear, even fear of death, and to face trials and persecutions. It disposes one even to renounce and sacrifice his life in defense of a just cause” (CCC 1808).

Of all the virtues this is perhaps the one most conspicuously lacking in the lives of most people today in technologically developed and relatively pain-free modern societies. Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1978 dedicated his Harvard Commencement Address to this challenging subject.

Fortitude is a necessary ingredient in all virtues, for no virtue “just happens,” but must be fought for.

8. *Temperance*

“*Temperance* is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures...” (CCC 1809), as fortitude moderates the fear of pains. (Thus it is also called “moderation.”) Without it we do not rise above the level of animals who live by their instincts, desires, and fears, especially the instinct to seek pleasure and flee pain. Temperance “ensures the will’s mastery over instincts [thus it is also called “self-control”] and keeps desires within the limits of what is honorable...and provides balance [i.e. moderation: not too little and not too much] in the use of created goods” (CCC 1809).

Our instinctive desire for pleasure and fear of pain is the matter, or raw material, to be formed and controlled by all four cardinal virtues. Prudence provides the map, fortitude tames the

fears, temperance tames the appetites, and justice regulates the resulting activities.

All four cardinal virtues have deeper and wider meanings than their names suggest in current usage. Prudence is not just “playing it safe,” justice is not just punishment, fortitude is not bull-headedness, and temperance is not just sobriety.

9. *The three theological virtues*

The four cardinal virtues are *natural*. That is, 1) they are *known* by natural human reason, 2) their *origin* is human nature, and 3) their *goal* is the perfecting of human character and life. They are also 1) known more perfectly by divine revelation, 2) aided and increased by divine grace, and 3) incorporated into the higher goal of union with God (see paragraph 3 on the goal of virtue).

The three “theological virtues,” on the other hand, are *supernatural*, for they are 1) revealed by God and known by faith, 2) “infused by God into the souls of the faithful” (CCC 1813), and 3) their purpose is our participation in the divine nature.

They are called “theological” because they have God as their object. “Faith, hope, and love” mean faith *in God*, hope *in God*, and love *of God*, and of neighbor for God’s sake.

10. *The relation between the natural and the supernatural virtues*

The three theological virtues are not an “extra,” a second story added onto the natural virtues. “The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character” (CCC 1813). The Christian is prudent, just, courageous, and temperate *out of faith in God, hope in God, and love of God*.

11. *Faith*

“Faith is the theological virtue 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' (CCC 1814).

The proximate, or immediate, object of faith is all the truths God has revealed. The ultimate object of faith is the person of God himself (see Part I, Section 2).

Faith is living and not dead only when it “works through charity”⁷⁹ (CCC 1814). “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Faith, hope, and charity are three parts of the same living organism; the root, stem, and flower of the same living plant.

12. *Hope*

“Hope is the theological virtue 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” (CCC 1817). “The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration of happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man” (CCC 1818).

Hope is not merely our natural desire for happiness; everyone has that. Like faith, hope is our freely chosen affirmative response to a divine revelation: in the case of hope, our response to divinely revealed promises. Hope is faith directed to the future.

Hope is the strongest source of fortitude. If you trust God’s promises of the incomparable happiness of Heaven, you can give up any earthly good or endure any earthly deprivation for that. “Man can endure almost any how if only he has a why,” wrote Viktor Frankl from the Auschwitz death camp (*Man’s Search for Meaning*). A “why” is a hope, a goal, a meaning and purpose to your life.

13. *Love*

What word shall we use to translate *agape* in the New Testament? It is a crucial point, for this is the most indispensable of all virtues (1 Corinthians 1:1-3), the greatest of all the virtues (1 Corinthians 13:13), the greatest of the commandments (Matthew

22:36-37), and the very nature of God (1 John 4:16), of ultimate reality.

“Love” is too broad a word, for it usually connotes the natural loves – of sex, food, beauty, comfort, friends, etc. “Charity,” the old word for *agape*, is now too narrow, for it usually connotes only giving money to good causes. We shall use both words, to compensate for the defects in the way each word is used.

“Charity is the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake [because he is worthy of such love], and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC 1822).

Charity is *not a feeling* or emotion, but a choosing by the will and an obeying. Here is how it was defined by Christ, the perfect incarnation of charity and the supreme authority on the subject: “he who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me” (John 14:21).

Christ commands charity to everyone, even our enemies: “You have heard that it was said, ‘you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:43-45). “Christ died out of love for us while we were still ‘enemies.’¹⁰⁰ The Lord asks us to love as he does...” (CCC 1825).

Charity is *freeing*. “The practice of the moral life animated by charity gives to the Christian the spiritual freedom of the children of God. He no longer stands before God as a slave, in servile fear, or as a mercenary looking for wages, but as a son responding to the love of him who ‘first loved us....’¹⁰⁶” (CCC 1828) “Perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Indeed “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10). But it is not the end. Love is.

14. *The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit*

Seven qualities are traditionally listed as the “gifts of the Holy Spirit.” “The seven *gifts* of the Holy Spirit are wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:1-2; CCC 1831).

15. *The twelve fruits of the Holy Spirit*

“The *fruits* of the Spirit are perfections that the Holy Spirit forms in us as the first fruits of eternal glory. The tradition of the Church lists twelve of them: ‘charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, chastity’¹¹²” (Galatians 5:22-23; CCC 1832).

16. *The Beatitudes*

“The Beatitudes [“blesseds”] are at the heart of Jesus’ preaching” (CCC 1716). “The Beatitudes depict the countenance [face, character] of Jesus Christ and portray his charity. They express the vocation of the faithful...” (CCC 1717) to be like Christ. They all appeal to the theological virtue of hope by including promises of rewards to be fully given in the next life.

They are:

1. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
2. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.
3. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.
4. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.
5. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.
6. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.
7. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you

when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven¹²” (Matthew 5:3-12).

17. *Vices*

The four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) have opposite vices: folly, injustice, cowardice, and intemperance.

The three theological virtues have even more serious opposite vices – more serious because they directly imperil our eternal salvation.

- 1) The knowing and deliberate repudiation of faith is *apostasy*.
- 2) The deliberate refusal of hope is *despair*. This is not to be confused with feelings like pessimism or depression, for two reasons. First, no mere feeling in itself is virtuous or vicious; only the will’s free consent to a feeling makes it morally good or evil. Second, despair is not psychological but theological. That is, just as the theological virtues have God as their object – they are three ways of saying Yes to God – so their opposites are three ways of saying No to God.

Presumption is the opposite extreme from despair, and an equally serious sin against hope. “There are two kinds of *presumption*. Either man presumes upon his own capacities (hoping to be able to save himself without help from on high), or he presumes upon God’s almighty power or his mercy (hoping to obtain his forgiveness without conversion and glory without merit)” (CCC 2092).

- 3) The deliberate refusal of charity includes indifference, ingratitude, lukewarmness, spiritual sloth, and hate. Hate wills evil and harm to another, and refuses to forgive.

Christ clearly tells us that if we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven (Matthew 6:14-15).

18. *Sin*

Sin is any deliberate thought, word, or deed contrary to God's law. Sin is disobedience to God's law, thus God's will, thus God himself. It is "a revolt against God" (CCC 1850). Sin is the very worst thing there is, since it is the contrary of God, the very best thing there is.

"Sin" means more than "evil" or "vice." It is a specifically religious term. It means evil *in its relation to God*. It means damaging or breaking the relationship with God, the spiritual marriage covenant.

19. *Kinds of sin*

"Sins can be distinguished:

[1] "according to their objects, as can every human act;

[2] "or according to the virtues they oppose, by excess or defect;

[3] "or according to the commandments they violate.

[4] "They can also be classed according to whether they concern God, neighbor, or oneself;

[5] "they can be divided into spiritual and carnal sins,

[6] "or again as sins in thought, word, deed, or omission" (CCC 1853).

[7] The most important distinction is between mortal and venial sins.

20. *Mortal and venial sin*

"The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture [1 John 5:16-17],¹²⁹ became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience" (CCC 1854).

Venial sin *damages* the relationship with God; mortal sin *destroys* it. Venial sin is like a fight between spouses, mortal sin is like a divorce. To die in a state of mortal sin is to lose Heaven forever. For there is *no more time* for repentance and conversion after death. To die with venial sins on the soul is to need Purgatory to purify the soul before Heaven. To die with neither kind of sin, and without their consequences in the soul is to merit heaven without the need for Purgatory.

21. *The three conditions for mortal sin*

There are three conditions necessary for mortal sin. All three must be present for the sin to be mortal; if any one is missing, the sin is venial.

They are: “grave matter,” “full knowledge,” and “full consent.”

First, the sin must be a “grave matter,” an act in itself seriously sinful, like adultery, grand larceny, blasphemy, or murder (including the murder of unborn children or old people). The objective act itself must be seriously (gravely) sinful.

Second, there must be full knowledge that the act is a serious sin.

Third, there must be full consent of the will. Sins of weakness, committed reluctantly, in spite of a sincere effort to avoid them, are not mortal sins. Fear, addiction, and compulsion diminish personal freedom and therefore responsibility for evil acts, but they do not wholly remove it. “The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense, as can external pressures or pathological disorders” (CCC 1860) – as is probably the case in many suicides.

The first of the three conditions for mortal sin is public, objective, and the same for everyone; it is easy to tell whether a sin is a serious sin, or grave matter, since “[g]rave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments...” (CCC 1858). But the other two

conditions are subjective, psychological, personal conditions. They are much harder to discern, even in oneself, much less in others. Therefore although we can define and judge what mortal sin is in itself, we cannot judge who is in the state of mortal sin, and should not try to (see Matthew 7:7). “[A]lthough we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offense, we must entrust judgment of persons to the justice and mercy of God” (CCC 1861), for we do not know others’ deepest minds, hearts, and motives.

22. *Why venial sins require our attention*

“Venial” sins are not *unimportant*. All sins are sin; in fact, sin is the most terrible thing in the world, for it separates us from God, whether partially (venial sin) or totally (mortal sin), and God is the ultimate source of *all* good and all our happiness. But venial sin, because it concerns less serious matter, does not deprive the sinner of sanctifying grace or of friendship with God or of eternal happiness.

The *Catechism* gives three specific reasons why venial sins require our attention:

- 1) “Venial sin weakens charity,” i.e. weakens the life and grace of God in us.
- 2) “[I]t merits temporal punishment...”
- 3) Worst of all, “[d]eliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin” (CCC 1863).

“While he is in the flesh, man cannot help but have at least some light sins. But do not despise these sins which we call ‘light’.... A number of light objects makes a great mass; a number of drops fills a river; a number of grains makes a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession....¹³⁵” (Saint Augustine; CCC 1863). For sacramental confession is not just an x-ray, it is an

operation: it really removes the cancer of sin (see Part I, Section 8 and Part II, Section 5).

23. *The seven deadly sins*

Tradition highlights seven sins as especially dangerous, or “deadly.” They are the soul-deadening opposites to the soul-enlivening virtues commended in the Beatitudes.

Pride is self-assertion and selfishness; *poverty of spirit* is humility and selflessness.

Avarice is greed, the selfish reach to grab and keep for oneself; *mercy* is the reach to give, to share with others, even the undeserving.

Envy resents another’s happiness; *mourning* shares another’s unhappiness.

Wrath wills harm and destruction; *meekness* refuses to harm and *peacemaking* prevents destruction.

Sloth refuses to exert the will toward the good, even when it is present; *hunger and thirst for righteousness* are the passionate desire for good even when it is absent.

Lust dissipates and divides the soul, desiring every attractive body; *purity of heart* centers and unifies the soul, desiring the one God alone.

Gluttony wants to consume an inordinate amount of worldly goods; *being persecuted* is being deprived of even ordinate necessities.

24. *Sin and grace*

The saints understand both sin and grace most clearly, for sanctity clarifies our vision, while sin clouds it.

The saints are always clearer than anyone else about four facts about human sin and divine grace:

- 1) that they themselves are sinners;

- 2) about the great harm all sins, even “little” sins, do to eternal souls, to divine charity and beatitude (thus the saints often pity the murderer more than the murdered);
- 3) about the inexhaustibility of divine mercy and forgiveness (“where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” – Romans 5:20);
- 4) and about our need to repent and confess in order to receive this forgiveness.

For “God created us without us, but he did not will to save us without us”¹¹⁶ (Saint Augustine; CCC 1847). That is why “[t]o receive his mercy, we must admit our faults [repent and confess]” (CCC 1847). Thus the denial of the very existence of sin (“I’m OK, you’re OK”) imperils our very salvation, as living in denial of a life-threatening disease imperils our life. God offers free grace and mercy, like a doctor offering a free operation, but “to do its work grace must uncover sin...” (CCC 1848).

This is a very unpopular and misunderstood message to our modern “therapeutic” culture of self-esteem. But it is far better to experience undeserved rejection from a million ignorant men than deserved rejection from the one all-knowing God.

Notes from the Catechism in Order of Their Appearance in Quotations Used in this Section

⁶³ Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *De beatitudinibus*, 1: PG 44, 1200D.

⁷⁹ *Rom* 1:17; *Gal* 5:6.

¹⁰⁰ *Rom* 5:10.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *1 Jn* 4:19.

¹¹² *Gal* 5:22-23 (Vulg.).

¹² *Mt* 5:3-12.

¹²⁹ Cf. *1 Jn* 5:16-17.

¹³⁵ Saint Augustine, *In ep. Jo.* 1, 6: PL 35, 1982.

¹¹⁶ Saint Augustine, *Sermo* 169, 11, 13: PL 38, 923.

“Faith is a gift of God which enables us to know and love Him. Faith is a way of knowing, just as reason is. But living in faith is not possible unless there is action on our part. Through the help of the Holy Spirit, we are able to make a decision to respond to divine Revelation, and to follow through in living out our response.”

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, 38.

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Pope John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici* 34
Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission
of the Lay Faithful in the Church and the World

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