

8. The Cardinal Virtues

The cardinal (or moral) virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance direct the appetitive powers of the soul by bringing them under the gentle rule of reason's reign. Prudence is the charioteer of the virtues, for it engages the practical intellect to guide the will and passions according to right reason. Justice moderates the will give others their due. Fortitude tames the irascible (or spirited) dimension of the soul and enables it to withstand serious obstacles in order to attain a greater good. Temperance tempers the concupiscible appetite so that earthly pleasures are sought after and used in a moderate, appropriate manner. These virtues are acquired through practice and, once under the influence of God's grace, become infused.

I. Introduction: We Will Take a Thomistic Approach to the Cardinal (or Moral) Virtues: The Moral Virtues are Dispositions of the Powers of the Soul That Lead Us to Do Good and Avoid Evil.

The Powers of the Soul: Reason: Perfected by Prudence - Will (Rational Appetite): Rational by Participation, Perfected by Justice - Concupiscible Appetite (Passions for Pleasure): Rational by Participation, Perfected by Temperance; Irascible Appetite (Passions for Facing Danger): Rational by Participation, perfected by Fortitude. Integral, Subjective, and Potential Parts (Some Brief Distinctions):

Integral: must all be present for any complete or perfect act of the virtue.
Subjective: fully satisfy the formal definition of the cardinal virtue and differ from one another in being ordered toward distinct ends or goods. Potential: share something in common with that virtue but fall short of fully satisfying its formal definition. Acquired: Habits of Mind and Heart Attained through Human Effort (Practice); Infused with the Grace of the Spirit (Acquired Virtues Transformed by Grace)

II. Prudence: Commentary on Prudence (CCC 1806): Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it. "The prudent man looks where he is going." "Keep sane and sober for your prayers." Prudence is "right reason in action," writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle. It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues). It guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and

overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid

III. Justice - Commentary on Justice (CCC 1807): 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." Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good. The just man, often mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures, is distinguished by habitual right thinking and the uprightness of his conduct toward his neighbor. "You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor." "Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven."

IV. Fortitude - Commentary on Fortitude (CCC 1808): 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. "The Lord is my strength and my song." "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

V. Temperance - Commentary on Temperance (CCC 1808): Temperance is 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. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good and maintains a healthy discretion. "Do not follow your inclination and strength, walking according to the desires of your heart." Temperance is often praised in the Old Testament: "Do not follow your base desires, but restrain your appetites." In the New Testament it is called "moderation" or "sobriety." We ought "to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world."

VI. Natural Virtues Infused by Grace - Presupposes the Theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love: Infused Prudence: Right Reason Leading Us to Our Ultimate End and Good; Infused Justice: Willing and Giving God, Others, and All Creation Their Due Infused Fortitude: Standing Firm in the Face of Obstacles to Our Faith (Martyrdom); Infused Temperance: Tames the Passions That Lead Us Away from God

Conclusion: "To live well is nothing other than to love God with all one's heart, with all one's soul and with all one's efforts; from this it comes about that love is kept whole and uncorrupted [through temperance]. No misfortune can disturb it [and this is fortitude]. It obeys only [God] [and this is justice], and is careful in discerning things, so as not to be surprised by deceit or trickery [and this is prudence]." (CCC 1809)

Reflection Questions

1. Why are Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance called "The Cardinal Virtues".
2. What is the difference between an acquired and an infused virtue?
3. What are the integral, subjective, and potential parts of a virtue?