

I am very happy and grateful to the opportunity to be here tonight – in the parish that I consider to be “home”. When Father Dan asked me to speak, nearly a year ago now, I happily agreed and told myself, “I have plenty of time.” This week I found myself in a panic, struggling to get this talk together. Since Lent is a time for forgiveness, I beg your pardon in advance if I ramble. I knew I was supposed to talk on Catholic Morality and a couple of months ago, I was told that the title of my talk was “The Do’s and Don’ts of the Catholic Faith.” One seminarian suggested that I give an hour long talk that would sound like this: “Do good. Avoid evil. Do not kill. Love your neighbor, etc.” While he thought it would be mesmerizing, I thought it would be mind-numbing.

Not to disappoint, but the title is somewhat reflective of a particularly narrow historical and legalistic approach to Catholic moral life. In the 16th century, with the Council of Trent, in response to the Protestant Reformation, the Council Fathers sought to defend the sacraments. The Reformers denied all but two- baptism and Eucharist. Catholics had to defend the sacraments and in the 14th Session of the Council, they defended and explained the sacrament of penance. Among other things, they required that people confess all their grave sins in number and kind. That meant that priests had to be trained to hear confessions and to distinguish between grave and lesser (mortal and venial sins). Up to this point, there was no seminary system, so the Council fathers also mandated that seminaries be formed for the training of priests to celebrate the sacraments, especially the sacrament of penance. Catholic morality was taught in the seminaries for this practical purpose- to help priests learn to hear confessions.

While that sort of training helped priests, it also led to a restrictive view of morality, because the world at that time was changing. The new world had been discovered; new patterns of trade and new markets were emerging; new technologies were being developed; and consequently, new moral questions were emerging. People began to wonder whether what they were doing was right or wrong. If what they were doing was wrong, they wondered: “Will I be saved?” Often they came to the priest in confession to find out the answers: “Is this action permitted or not?” Other times the question took the form of: “Is this action prohibited by the law of nature; the law of God; or the law of the Church? Did I break one of the commandments?”

Because these questions were emerging, Catholic moralists adapted their teaching or moral theology and hearing of confessions to these questions. They began to compile big manuals of moral theology. These manuals were

filled with questions and answers dealing largely with laws and precepts. These were eminently practical for a less than learned clergy; however, these manuals often omitted issues such as the call to happiness and holiness and the ultimate end of man. These manuals often listed the Ten Commandments; the precepts of the Church; and often attempted to list the content of the natural law and the actions which went against the natural law. As a result, the priest could look in the manual or study it, and he could tell the people what was permitted or prohibited. This led to passivity on the part of the people. As long as they did what the priest told them and didn't break any laws of God or the Church, they could be saved. This also led to a minimalism in moral living. How far can I go before I commit a sin? What is the minimum I must do to be saved?

A good example of this is: "By when do I need to be at Mass in order to fulfill my Sunday obligation?" The answer given was usually: "By the Offertory." That's true, but there's no sense of being at Mass on time or early. There's no sense of needing to hear the Scriptures or to pray with the community or listen to a sermon, if one was to be given. Sunday Mass is viewed as an obligation- by Divine and Ecclesiastical Precept, and there is no reference at all in this type of questioning to receiving Communion.

Most glaring was the almost universal omission in the manuals of a treatment of the virtues. While the first principle of practical reason is: "Do good; Avoid evil" a person will carry this out if he or she is a person of character or virtue. That's what I want to speak with you about tonight – reframing the question of Catholic morality around the issue of character formation. Virtue is necessary for discipleship. The two central questions are: How does who I am as a Catholic affect what I do? How does what I do (my actions) affect who I am becoming as a person and as Catholic? These, I believe, were the concerns of the early Christians.

Virtue

As we begin, let me first give a quick definition of virtue. Servais Pinckaers comments: "The word virtue is despised in our day. Almost all the literature of the last century considers virtue as something boring and not rooted in history." The traditional definition of virtue places it in the category of a *habitus*, but it's something different from a mere habit. It is not something merely mechanical, useful, or something quasi-automatic; it is not just something that is *routine*. A virtue is a *habitus*. *Virtue is a quality or a consolidated, interior, permanent attitude that makes the person able to*

complete with ease and readiness the good in a given situation. It may also be understood as a form of interior strength.

Imitation

If we want to practice virtue, then the first things we need are good examples. Without examples, without imitation, there can be no human civilization, no art or culture, no virtue or holiness. The elementary activities of fashioning a clay pot or constructing a cabinet, of learning to speak or sculpting a statue have their beginnings in imitation. By the time Christianity made its appearance in the Roman Empire, the practice of writing lives of virtuous men was well established. These virtuous people were to be imitated. The supreme model of imitation was Christ. John 13:15 reads: “I have given you an example that you should also do as I have done.” Even St. Paul says: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ.” Only in the 3rd century did Christians begin to write lives of their holy men and women. One of the earliest “lives of the saints” was the *Life of St. Antony*, written by St. Athanasius. Antony was one of the first Christian monks who lived in the desert in Egypt. Following the lead of Plutarch, Athanasius knew that while Christians were taught by precepts, only deeds can stir the soul to action. [Ex- Ignatius of Loyola; Camillus de Lellis; etc.] Athanasius wrote that when people hear of Antony’s deeds, they will want to imitate him. Imitation was not, however, a matter of mimicking the virtuous deeds of another person. Deeds were not isolated acts of mercy or justice, disconnected from a person but signs of character [Ex-Maximillian Kolbe]. Moral instruction had to do with formation of this character. Thus, lives of the saints have been an important part of Christian morality, not so much for the events they recount, but for the virtues that the saints demonstrate. [Ex-Monica as a model of perseverance]

The Relationship: The Key to Education and Formation

To be sure, in early Christian literature, there are treatises on moral issues such as lying, sexuality, marriage, just war, suicide, abortion, and homosexual acts, but the vast majority of early Christian writings on ethics and morality dealt with the formation of individual lives. Clement of Alexandria, who wrote the first treatise on Christian ethics, entitled *The Tutor*, said that the purpose of Christian ethics was to “heal the passions”: “The role of the tutor is to improve the soul, not to educate nor give information but to train someone in the virtuous life.” The goal, for him, of educating in morality was to form the soul in virtue.

Through the study of morality, typically by watching the example of others and by being taught by a teacher who truly loved his students, a student gradually learned to *practice* what he was being taught. Although learning precepts and rules was part of the instruction, what counted more was the example of the master and the bonds of friendship formed with the disciple. [Ex- parents; Fr. Bensman; Msgr. Amann] To correct, reprove, exhort, and encourage his students, the master had to know their habits, attitudes, and desires. This speaks to the development of a real relationship between the tutor and the student. One foundation of morality is this relationship. Think about the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. [Master; Teacher; and Friend]. If we are to teach our children, we must really know them and their habits. If we are to learn from Jesus, our Master, we must really know Him. If we are to shape and mould our spouse, we must really know him or her. All of this teaching and the corresponding relationship between tutor and student is directed toward the development of the virtues. The four cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. We will return to these later. These virtues are not ends in themselves. The goal of these virtues, and we could add to the cardinal virtues, the virtue of religion is to be “like God and to remain in Him.”

Virtue and the Interior Disposition

Virtuous deeds are the form of the moral life, yet deeds in themselves are insufficient. To be moral, an act had to be done for the right reason. Moral instruction also attended the inner life of the person. This requires prayer and active listening to achieve a degree of self-awareness. Today, we speak of purifying our intentions or checking our motivations when we do something. It is true that if someone is just, he pursues justice. It does not follow that if someone pursues justice, he is just. Why? One must “pursue justice justly”. It is, after all, possible to pursue justice unjustly. For example, giving to the poor is good and it is just, especially when our motivation is charity or to help the person; however, some people give to the poor only to be praised. They act out of vanity, not because they have the disposition of justice.

Imitation, the virtues, interior disposition, character, and the likeness to God—this was the soil in which early Christian ethics took root. The roots of much of what I have said thus far can be found in Greco-Roman civilization. The Christians adopted many ideas from the classical moral tradition, yet they also adapted and altered this to be in conformity with what they received in the Scriptures.

Happiness and the Christian Call

The Sermon on the Mount gives Christians a classical framework for the interpretation of Christian morality. Matthew 5:48 reads: “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” Again, 1 Peter 1:13 reads: “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” Whether the term is perfection or holiness, the New Testament presents Christian faith as a life oriented toward an end or a goal, what the ancients called the *summum bonum*. [Baltimore Catechism] In the phrase “be perfect”, the term for “perfect” derives from the Greek word for goal *telos*. Now when Christianity first appeared on the scene, the Greeks and Romans had their moral systems directed toward a goal- to lead a happy life.

Their understanding of happiness was different from ours. We use the term happiness to mean “feeling good” or enjoying certain pleasures, a transient state that comes and goes according to our circumstances or fortunes. They, however, used the term to mean a possession of the soul, something that one acquired and that, once acquired, could not easily be taken away. Happiness designated the supreme aim of human life- to live in accord with our nature, in harmony with our deepest aspirations as human beings. Ethics for the ancients was less concerned with what one ought to do than of what kind of person one can become by living a certain way. Thus they would have been aghast to read a bumper sticker like: “Do random acts of kindness.”

The Fathers of the Church noted that the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount begin with the term *happy*, though some translations render this “blessed”. According to Jesus, happiness was the goal of human life. The beatitudes depict the character of a person who was happy. St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote: “Happiness is possession of all things considered good.” He continues: “Just as the art of the physician looks to health, and the aim of farming is to provide for life, so also the practice of virtue has as its aim that the one who lives virtuously will become happy.”

Beyond the goal-oriented moral philosophy of the Greeks, Christianity went a step further. The *summum bonum* was, on the basis of the Scriptures, equated with God. God is the highest good, the source of our bliss, and the goal of our striving. Only in communion with God will human lives be brought to fulfillment. The Bible teaches us that the only *telos* that can bring us true happiness is life with God or a “return to fellowship with Him.” [Genesis story.] When we sinned, we turned away from God who made us to walk our own way. Our nature is now fallen. Christian ethics can never be a

matter of simply perfecting the good that is within us. The “return to God” must begin in “repentance”- in turning away from sin.

The Return to God: Humility

While we are made in God’s image and likeness, the sin of our first parents has “scratched” the image, so to speak. Greek Christians viewed the moral life as a restoration of our “likeness to God.” Often times they would use the term “divinization” to describe this. We see this language in the Bible (1 John 3:2): “We know that when he appears we shall be *like* him, for we shall see him as he is.” To return to the “likeness of God” for a Father of the Church such as Clement of Alexandria, this meant practicing the virtues, yet Christian authors were uncomfortable about speaking of the virtues in the same sense as their pagan counterparts. That is, as Christians they invoked Christ and the Holy Spirit as the guide to perfection. The perfect life of the human being can be seen in that of Jesus Christ, true God *and* true man. [Later theologians would also refer to the Mother of God as the “highest honor of our race”.] We must admit that at times we wonder, knowing our own fragility and our tendency to sin, whether we can be like God, who lives in unapproachable light?

Despite such a question, we might admit that there are things about God that can be imitated. One virtue, a particularly Christian virtue, to be imitated is the virtue of humility. “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This poverty of spirit is voluntary humility. St. Paul reminds us that God, “who being rich, for us became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich.” Humility is within our grasp and is the perfect antidote to pride, which was the sin of our first parents and which is at the root of every sin. Jesus Himself, as St. Paul, reminds us beautifully in his hymn to Christ in Philippians 2, “was in the form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather He emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave.” What greater poverty than for the Son to take on human flesh and share our human nature. In the Incarnation, good comes to us in space and time. To journey in discipleship, to return to the “image of God” is to hear the Lord’s call to follow His humble example.

Interestingly, the Greek philosopher Aristotle—the acknowledged father of virtue ethics—would scratch his aristocratic head at our suggesting that humility is key shaper of our character. For Aristotle “humility” was for slaves and women.” Virtues flowing from Jesus are different from those of the Greeks.

Christ, in His wisdom, urges us his disciples to humble service:

So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves; we have done only that which we ought to have done.'" (Lk. 17:10)

Let's look at Christian humility. First of all, humility is not beating myself up mercilessly. A humble person acknowledges her or his talents and gifts—and knows that they are a gift from God; and secondly, humility calls us to live by the maxim—"all that I have been given, I've been given to give." Many gifts and one spirit—all used to build the Kingdom of God. After all, we all know what happens to the steward that hordes his talents. The Master chastises him saying, "you lazy lout." Now, who wants that on your tombstone?

The virtue of humility opens our heart to divine grace—we know our fragility and temptation to the wrong kinds of love. But St. Paul alerts us to what we need to cultivate in our character: trust in the transforming grace of Christ. St. Paul owns his weakness—his humility draws him into a profound act of faith in the grace of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. He writes his rambunctious Corinthians:

"I willingly boast of my weakness, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I am content with weakness, with mistreatment, with distress, with persecution and difficulties for the sake of Christ; for when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong." 2 Cor. 12:9b-10

In the parable of the wedding feast, Christ gently admonishes us, His disciples, to seek the lower place at the table, so that the host may say, "Friend, come up higher" in the end the lesson is "For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted." (Lk. 14: 10-12)

The virtue of humility uproots the vice of pride that too often proves cruel. The goal of humility remains likeness to God, but God has become visible to us in the person of Jesus Christ. The example of Jesus becomes the measure of our humility.

Christ is not, however, only the model to be imitated. He is also the goal. If we consider the 4th beatitude or better yet the 8th beatitude: "Happy are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," we realize that being persecuted is not an end in itself. To be happy

one must possess the good. There must be some prize at the end of the struggle. What will bring us happiness? In the end, the goal is possessing Christ Himself. The beatitudes are not simply moral maxims. They don't tell us that this or that is permitted or prohibited. They are invitations by Christ to his disciples to "ascend with him" so that they might enjoy "fellowship with all creation."

Virtue is never simply a matter of spiritual athleticism, of doing spiritual exercises. Virtue is possessed in Christ and is sealed by the Holy Spirit. Christian life is Trinitarian. It is oriented toward the supreme good, who is God. The Holy Spirit has the power to bestow good upon us, including the moral good. For whatever is good comes from God through the Son and is perfected by the Spirit. In baptism, St. Ambrose says, the Spirit is poured out, the "spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and devotion, the spirit of holy fear". These are necessary for living a holy and happy life.

The Virtues of Justice and Mercy

Among the ancients, there were four virtues that were considered to be cardinal virtues: *prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice*. In brief, prudence is not only knowledge of the truth, as Cicero says, but as a Christian virtue, it means knowledge of the truth of God. It means knowing God and through knowledge of him choosing among different means, the best one to make the right moral judgment. Temperance refers to moderation of the appetites and to self-mastery. Fortitude refers to strength of character, having the courage to do the right thing, even at considerable personal expense; and justice, typically, refers to giving a person his or her due. Of this, Jesus reminds us that unless our justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, we shall not enter into the kingdom of God. St. Ambrose writes that justice is "first directed toward God." Only when God is given his due is it possible to deal justly with others, that is, to love them. [Importance of Sunday Mass attendance; priority of the commandments]

[We see this in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Jesus begins with what is known as the Law of the Talion from the Code of Hammurabi. This law in our ears rings of exacting revenge or at least meeting out justice. In fact, in the ancient world it was largely used to limit excessive punishment. One could demand no punishment greater than the

damage received. Jesus wants his disciples to go beyond mere damage control.]

He has told them (5:20) that unless their justice exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, they shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus demands more than simple justice, which means giving a person his or her due. Jesus calls His disciples to love. If you ever go to Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford, you will notice several large medallions in the floor, just in front of the apse. They mark the four cardinal virtues, but if one looks carefully, one notices a fifth: *miser cordia*- mercy. The four cardinal virtues do not tell us everything about the Christian moral life. The Gospel adds something.

During our Lenten journey, it is particularly appropriate to plant our feet at the foot of the Cross. On the Cross the justice of God meets the unfathomable mercy of God—as Pope Benedict notes in his encyclical on the love of God.

God’s passionate love for his people—for humanity—is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim pre-figurement of the mystery of the Cross : so great is God’s love for man that by becoming man he follows him even into death and so reconciles justice and love.” (Deus caritas est: #10)

On the Cross the Lord prays, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Virtue dislodges the vice of revenge, smoldering resentment and even hatred.

The Virtue of Patience

Tertullian, one of the most impatient early Christian writers, suggests that the mercy of God is intimately tied to the virtue of patience. If I had a nickel for every husband, wife, father or mother who confessed impatience, I would be a very wealthy priest. Patience is not simply “waiting”, rather it is the willingness to endure, even suffer. When God was born, Jesus patiently underwent the stages of childhood and adolescence, leading to maturity. When Christ reached adulthood, he did not rush to be recognized, even allowing Himself to be baptized by John. He patiently endured His disciples’ lack of response and understanding-without ever giving up on them. The supreme example of patience was Christ’s Passion. It is in God’s nature to be patient. We are made in the image and likeness of God.

The singular mark of patience is not endurance or fortitude; rather, it is hope. To be impatient is to live without hope. Patience is grounded in the Resurrection. It is a life oriented toward a future that is God's doing, and its sign is longing, not so much to be released from ills of the present but in anticipation of the good to come. Hence, patience becomes the key to the other virtues, including love, which can never be learned without the exercise of patience. St. Paul begins his beautiful discourse on love in 1st Corinthians with: "Love is patient; love is kind."

We close our time together with a Resurrection scene. The patience of the Lord with Simon Peter is oriented toward the future- for Peter and the Church. In this scene, the virtues come together: patience, humility, mercy, culminating in love. We see the relationship between Teacher and Student; between the Lord and His disciple. In the closing moments of John's Gospel, Jesus and Peter sit along the shore of the Sea of Tiberius—and Jesus puts the deepest question of Christian virtue—of Christian discipleship—to the deeply remorseful Peter: "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" ...[*Quote passage from John 20, and conclude: "Follow me."*]

In the end deepening our relationship with Our Lord Jesus turns on the depth of our love. In humility, we build upon faithful love that grounds our hope. We plant mercy and reap reconciliation. We can learn if we imitate those who follow Jesus in the Gospels. We must sit at the feet of the Master and listen as did Mary at Bethany. We must stand our Blessed Mother and John beneath the Cross and contemplate. We must confess like Peter: "Lord, you know that I love you."

Catholic morality is not so much about the Do's and Don'ts as it is about being a good disciple. The Master calls: "Follow me."