

VERY HUMAN, VERY DIVINE (XIX): Giving the Best of Ourselves

A poet has painted the picture of birds soaring on a sea breeze by the ocean, joyfully contemplating the foaming waves below and the bright sky above. If we are not lucky enough to live near the ocean, perhaps we can recall some of our trips there: not only the immense expanse of the sea and the bracing breeze and bright colors and clean smells, but also the soothing sounds. Many recordings exist of the sounds of the sea that enable a person anywhere to listen to the invigorating voices of the breaking waves and cries of the birds. Saint Josemaría once described the human virtues in terms of the sounds of the ocean: “Just as the clamour of the ocean is made up of the noise of each one of its waves, so the sanctity of your apostolate is made up of the personal virtues of each one of you.”¹ The harmony of these “personal virtues” is what we are going to consider in the paragraphs below.

Being perfect does not mean being the same

Saint Jerome wrote that “Christ does not command impossible things, but perfect ones.”² Faced with this statement, we might object that it is precisely what is perfect that often seems impossible to us. Who dares to claim that their actions are “perfect”? Besides, the testimonies of the saints seem to affirm the opposite: the closer they come to God’s intense light, the more clearly they see their own imperfections. Our perplexity only increases when we realize that the Gospel verse Saint Jerome is referring to here is this forceful command from Jesus: *You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48)*. What mystery is hidden behind these words?

A first clarification perhaps has to do with our understanding of “perfect” as impossible to improve on. Applied to a person’s behavior, this view of “perfection” can remove it so far from the realm of our common experience that it could even cause a certain repugnance in us. But the most frequent meaning of this word in the Bible is connected with what is complete and finished, giving everything possible of oneself. Thus we can better understand why Christ’s invitation to “be perfect” is not a matter of living up to the highest possible standards in every sector of life, but the crowning of a discourse in which He speaks of loving everyone, both friends and enemies, as God loves them (cf. *Mt 5:43-48*). “Being holy does not mean doing more and more things or fulfilling certain standards we have set for ourselves. The path to holiness, as Saint Paul makes clear, consists in corresponding to the action of the Holy Spirit, until Christ is formed in us (cf. *Gal 4:19*).”³

¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 960.

² Saint Jerome, quoted in *Catena Aurea*, commentary on *Mt 5:43-48*

³ Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 6.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church speaks of the human virtues in accord with this meaning of “perfection”: “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself.”⁴ Just as the sound of the sea is made up of the voices of each of the waves, one different from the other, so in a holy life each virtue is in harmony with the others, and together they bring about the best possible version of each person. And since no two persons in the world are the same, neither are there two identical ways of combining each of the virtues. To lead us to holiness, that is, to lead us to Him, God counts on each of our unique characteristics, which He knows much better than we do. We all need to strive to grasp more fully the “unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us, which takes shape amid so many varied situations and limitations.”⁵ This plan is always aimed at bringing about, with God’s grace and our own freedom, the beloved son, the beloved daughter whom God has dreamt of from all eternity. From very early on, Saint Josemaría told those who drew close to Opus Dei: “You have to be as different from one another as the saints in heaven are different, with each one having one’s very special personal characteristics.”⁶

Holiness is a made-to-measure suit

The various virtues not only help us to choose in a specific action what is good instead of bad; this is certainly praiseworthy, but it is still little. In reality, the self-dominion that the virtues bring, the ordering of our forces towards love, impels us to choose the best over the mediocre. At times, a reductive understanding of the virtues may have led us to view each virtue as a compromise between two negative extremes, as a geometric mean between two poles that we need to avoid. Thus, instead of looking towards the summit, we are more concerned about not falling into the ravine on the right or on the left. And yet, God has given each of us our own “summit,” which corresponds to our own geological landscape, which is where we begin our personal journey. We need to discover in this landscape both the obstacles and dangers that threaten our path as well as the terrains in which we can walk more securely.

When commenting on Aristotle’s ethics, Saint Thomas said that “the mean for us is what does not exceed or lack due proportion *for us*. Therefore, this mean is not the same for everyone.”⁷ To explain this, the saint uses the image of shoes: each person has to find out what size fits their own feet. The Greek philosopher, on his part, uses the image of food. Temperance in meals for an athlete is not the same as temperance for someone who hardly exercises. Since there is no single way of living the virtues, trying to write universal recipes for someone to become an orderly, generous or humble person does not seem very practical. And as Aristotle also understood, one does not become virtuous only by externally performing a series of acts, but by doing so with

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1803.

⁵ Francis, *Gaudete et exultate*, no. 170.

⁶ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 947.

⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 6.

specific internal dispositions: “First, he must act with knowledge; secondly, he must deliberately choose the act, and choose it for its own sake; and, thirdly, the act must spring from a fixed and permanent disposition of character.”⁸ Hence, if the educational environment does not encourage people to understand the need to acquire this or that virtue, and to choose it freely moved by love, the external acts that supposedly form that virtue run the risk of being in vain.

A humble and simple woman, on seeing how God wants to count on our personal characteristics for us to become holy, once prayed: “Help us to live our lives, not like a game of chess in which every move needs to be calculated, nor like a match in which everything is a challenge, nor like a theorem that our heads can’t comprehend, but like the endless feast of a constantly renewed encounter with you, like a dance in the arms of your grace.”⁹

Muscles that flex in any direction

One of the signs of being in good physical shape is that our muscles have great elasticity. Thanks to stretching exercises and good joint care, the body can reach positions that seem almost impossible. Maintaining flexible muscles helps prevent problems caused by poor posture and reduces the likelihood of injury. Something similar happens with the virtues in the spiritual life. Saint Josemaría used to say that “sanctity has the flexibility of agile muscles.”¹⁰ He goes on to explain that, just as sometimes God’s love will lead us to strive to do something we find difficult, at other times it will lead us to opt for something we find more pleasant and to thank Him for it.

It is no coincidence that the word “virtue” comes from the Latin *virtus*, which means capacity or strength. The virtues function somewhat like our muscles. To the extent that they have become part of us, they not only enable us to perform good acts with pleasure and ease, but also make us flexible in adopting the direction that each circumstance may require. It is true that the virtues lead us to do things in an orderly manner; but, more deeply, they lead us to be ordered ourselves, although in some circumstances this may not be evident externally.

It is said that Saint Charles Borromeo, as a young bishop, had the reputation of being a very austere person, who lived on only a small portion of bread and water. But if his relationship with a specific person required it, he was happy to drink wine when necessary.¹¹ “If we Christians were to act otherwise,” the founder of Opus Dei said, “we would run the risk of becoming stiff and lifeless, like a rag doll.”¹² A rag doll never loses the smile on its face. We all like to be around

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1105a-1105b.

⁹ Servant of God Madeleine Delbrêl, “The Dance of Obedience.”

¹⁰ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 156. Quoted in Fernando Ocariz, Pastoral Letter, 28 October 2020, no. 6.

¹¹ Cf. Letter from Saint Francis de Sales to the Baroness de Chantal, 14 October 1604.

¹² *The Forge*, no. 156.

cheerful people, but because they act freely, at the right time and in the right measure, and not because they are mechanically forced to appear to be happy.

Saint Francis de Sales, in an early letter to the woman who would one day be Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, described the true freedom of a daughter of God that she should strive for: “If a soul has become attached to the exercise of meditation and you interrupt this practice, that person will be upset and anxious. But a soul with true freedom of spirit will react with a cheerful face and a kind heart to this annoyance, because everything is the same: either serving God by meditating, or serving Him by putting up with our neighbor. Both are God’s will, but putting up with our neighbor is necessary then.”¹³

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“Be brave!” Pope Francis encouraged a group of young Polish men and women. “The world needs your freedom of spirit, your confident gaze on the future, your thirst for truth, goodness and beauty.”¹⁴ The strength and flexibility given to us by the virtues show the Holy Spirit our eager docility for Christ to be formed in our soul in a personal and unique way. The Catechism speaks to us about the virtues precisely in the chapter on “Man’s Vocation: Life in the Spirit.”¹⁵ We are called to live that divine life with great trust and freedom, like the birds soaring on the ocean breeze, confident that God will always sustain us in our struggle.

¹³ Letter from Saint Francis de Sales to the Baroness de Chantal, 14 October 1604.

¹⁴ Francis, Message, 15 August 2018.

¹⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Third Part, First Section.