

catechesis

VICES & VIRTUES

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CATECHESIS ON VICES AND VIRTUES

2023-2024

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1. Safeguarding the heart (27 December 2023)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to introduce a series of catecheses on the theme of vices and virtues. And we can start right from the beginning of the Bible, where the Book of Genesis, through the account of the progenitors, presents the dynamic of evil and temptation. Let us consider the earthly Paradise. In the idyllic picture represented by the garden of Eden, a character appears that will be the symbol of temptation: the serpent, this character that seduces. The snake is an insidious animal: it moves slowly, slithering along the ground, and sometimes you do not even notice its presence — it is silent — because it manages to camouflage itself well in its environment, and above all, this is dangerous.

When it begins to converse with Adam and Eve, it shows that it is also a refined dialectician. It begins as one does with wicked gossip, with a malicious question. He says, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” (*Gen 3:1*). The phrase is false: in reality, God offered man and woman all the fruits of the garden, apart from those of a specific tree: the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This prohibition is not intended to forbid mankind from the use of reason, as is sometimes misinterpreted, but is a measure of wisdom. As if to say: recognize your limit, do not feel you are the master of everything, because pride is the beginning of all evil. And so, the story tells us that God establishes the progenitors as lords and guardians of creation, but wants to preserve them from the presumption of omnipotence, of making themselves masters of good and evil, which is a temptation — a bad temptation, even now. This is the most dangerous pitfall for the human heart.

As we know, Adam and Eve do not manage to resist the temptation of the serpent. The idea of a God who is not so good, who wanted to keep them in submission, insinuated itself into their minds: hence the collapse of everything.

With these accounts, the Bible explains to us that evil does not begin in man [and woman] in a clamorous way, when an act is already manifest, but that evil begins much earlier, when one begins to engage with it, to nurse it in the imagination, in thoughts, and ends up being ensnared by its enticements. The murder of Abel did not begin with a thrown stone, but with the grudge that Cain wickedly held, turning it into a monster within himself. In this case too, God’s warnings are worthless.

Dear brothers and sisters, one must never dialogue with the devil. Never! You should never enter into conversation [with him]. Jesus never dialogued with the devil. He cast him out. And during his temptation in the wilderness, he did not

respond with dialogue. He simply replied with the words of Holy Scripture, with the Word of God. Be careful: the devil is a seducer. Never dialogue with him, because he is smarter than all of us and he will make us pay for it. When temptation arises, never dialogue. Close the door, close the window, close your heart. And in this way, we defend ourselves against this seduction, because the devil is astute. He is intelligent. He tried to tempt Jesus with quotes from the Bible, presenting himself as a great theologian. Be careful! One must not converse with the devil, and we must not entertain ourselves with temptation. There is no dialogue. Temptation comes: we close the door. We keep watch over our heart.

We have to be the custodians of our hearts. And that is why we do not converse with the devil. This is the recommendation — guard the heart — that we find in various fathers, in the saints. And we must ask for this grace of learning to keep watch over the heart. Knowing how to guard our heart is a form of wisdom. May the Lord help us in this work. Those who keep watch over their heart, guard a treasure. Brothers and sisters, let us learn to guard the heart.

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2. Spiritual struggle (3 January 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last week we introduced the theme of vices and virtues. It refers to the spiritual struggle of the Christian. Indeed, the spiritual life of the Christian is not peaceful, linear and without challenges; on the contrary, Christian life demands constant struggle: the Christian struggle to preserve the faith, to enrich the gifts of faith in us. It is no coincidence that the first anointing that every Christian receives in the sacrament of Baptism — the catechumenal anointing — is without any aroma and symbolically announces that life is a struggle. In fact, in ancient times, wrestlers were fully anointed before a competition, both to tone their muscles and to make their bodies elusive to their opponent's grasp. The anointing of catechumens immediately makes it clear that Christians are not spared the struggle, that Christians must struggle: their existence, like everyone else's, will have to descend into the arena, because life is a succession of trials and temptations.

A famous saying attributed to Abba Anthony the Great, the first great father of monasticism, goes like this: "Remove temptations and no one would be saved". Saints are not men and women who have been spared temptation, but rather people who are well aware of the fact that in life, the seductions of evil appear repeatedly, to be unmasked and rejected. We have all experienced this, all of us: that a bad thought comes to you, that you feel a desire to do this, or to speak badly of others... All of us, all of us are tempted, and we must strive not to give in to these temptations. If any of you have no temptations, say so, because that would be an extraordinary thing! We all have temptations, and we all have to learn how to behave in these situations.

There are many people who absolve themselves, who consider themselves to be "just fine" — "No, I am good, I don't have these problems". But none of us is "alright"; if someone feels they are alright, they are dreaming; every one of us has many things to adjust, and must also be vigilant. And at times it happens that we go to the sacrament of Reconciliation and we say, sincerely, "Father, I don't remember, I don't know if I have any sins...". But this is a lack of awareness of what is happening in the heart. We are all sinners, all of us. And a little examination of conscience, a little insight, will be good for us. Otherwise, we run the risk of living in the dark, because we have become accustomed to darkness and no longer know how to distinguish good from evil. Isaac of Nineveh said that, in the Church, those who know their sins and mourn them are greater than those who raise a dead man. We must all ask God for the grace to recognize ourselves as poor sinners, in need of conversion, keeping in our hearts the confidence that no sin is too great for the infinite mercy of God the Father. This is the opening lesson Jesus gives us.

We see it in the first pages of the Gospels, primarily in the account of the baptism of the Messiah in the waters of the River Jordan. There is something disconcerting about the event: why does Jesus submit to such a rite of purification? He is God, He is perfect! Of what sin must Jesus ever repent? None! Even the Baptist is shocked, to the point that the text says: “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” (Mt 3:14). But Jesus is a very different Messiah from the way John had presented him and the way the people had imagined him: He does not embody the wrathful God and does not summon for judgement, but, on the contrary, queues up with sinners. How come? Yes, Jesus accompanies us, all us sinners. He is not a sinner, but he is among us. And this is a beautiful thing. “Father, I have many sins!” — “But Jesus is with you: talk about them, he will help you come out of it”. Jesus never leaves us alone, never! Think about this. “Oh Father, I have committed serious ones!” — “But Jesus understands you and accompanies you: He understands your sin and forgives it”. Never forget this! In the worst moments, in the moments when we slip into sin, Jesus is by our side to help lift us up. This brings consolation. We must not lose this certainty: Jesus is by our side to help us, to protect us, even to lift us up again after sin. “But Father, is it true that Jesus forgives everything?” — “Everything. He came to forgive, to save. Jesus just wants your heart to be open. He never forgets to forgive: it is we who often lose the capacity to ask for forgiveness. Let us regain this capacity to ask for forgiveness. Every one of us has many things for which to ask forgiveness: let each one of us think about it, inwardly, and speak about it with Jesus today. Speak with Jesus about this: “Lord, I do not know if this is true or not, but I am sure that you will not turn away from me. I am sure that you forgive me. Lord, I am a sinner, but please do not turn away from me”. This would be a beautiful prayer to Jesus today: “Lord, do not turn away from me”.

And immediately after the episode of the baptism, the Gospels tell us that Jesus retreated into the desert, where he is tempted by Satan. In this case too, we ask ourselves: why does the Son of God have to know temptation? Here too, Jesus reveals himself to be in solidarity with our frail human nature, and becomes our great *exemplum*: the temptations he faces and overcomes among the arid stones of the desert are the first instruction he gives to our life as disciples. He experienced what we too must prepare ourselves to confront: life is made up of challenges, tests, crossroads, opposing views, hidden seductions, contradictory voices. Some voices are even persuasive, so much so that Satan tempts Jesus by resorting to the words of the Scripture. We must preserve our inner clarity in order to choose the path that truly leads to happiness, and then strive not to stop along the way.

Let us remember that we are always torn between opposite extremes: arrogance challenges humility; hatred opposes charity; sadness hinders the true joy of the Spirit; the hardening of the heart rejects mercy. Christians continually walk along these edges. Therefore, it is important to reflect on vices and virtues: it helps us to defeat the nihilistic culture in which the boundaries between good and evil become blurred and, at the same time, it reminds us that the human being, unlike any other creature, can always transcend itself, opening up to God and journeying towards holiness.

The spiritual struggle, then, leads us to look closely at those vices that shackle us and to walk, with the grace of God, towards those virtues that can flourish in us, bringing the springtime of the Spirit into our lives.

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3. Gluttony (10 January 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In the journey of catechesis that we are doing on vices and virtues, today we will take a look at the vice of *gluttony*.

What does the Gospel tell us about this? Let us look at Jesus. His first miracle, at the wedding at Cana, reveals his sympathy towards human joys: he is concerned that the feast should end well and gives the bride and groom a large quantity of very good wine. In all his ministry, Jesus appears as a prophet who is very different from the Baptist. While John is remembered for his asceticism — he ate what he found in the desert — Jesus instead is the Messiah whom we often see at table. His behaviour causes scandal in some quarters, because not only is he benevolent towards sinners, but he even eats with them; and this gesture demonstrates his readiness for communion and closeness with everyone.

But there is even more. Although Jesus' attitude towards the Jewish precepts reveals his full submission to the Law, he nonetheless shows himself to be sympathetic towards his disciples. When they are found wanting, because they pluck grain out of hunger on the Sabbath, he condones them, recalling that even King David and his companions had taken the sacred bread when they were in need (cf. *Mk 2:23-26*). And Jesus affirms a new principle: the wedding guests cannot fast when the bridegroom is with them. They will fast when the bridegroom will be taken away from them. By this point everything is relative to Jesus. When he is in our midst, we cannot be in mourning, but at the hour of his passion, then yes, we fast (cf. *Mk 2:18-20*). Jesus wants us to be joyful in his company — he is like the bridegroom of the Church, but he also wants us to participate in his suffering, which is also the suffering of the small and the poor.

Another important aspect. Jesus *eliminates the distinction between pure and impure foods*, which was a distinction made by Jewish law. In reality, Jesus teaches that it is not what enters man that contaminates him, but what comes out of his heart. And by so saying, “he declared all foods clean” (*Mk 7:19*). This is why Christianity does not consider unclean foods. But the attention we have to have is an interior one: thus one that is not about food per se but about our relationship with it. And with regards to this, Jesus clearly says that what makes something good or bad, let's say about food, is not food in itself but the relationship we have with it. And we see this when a person has a disordered relationship with food; we see how they eat, they eat hastily, as though with the urge to be full but without ever being sated. They do not have a good relationship with food, they are slaves to food. This serene relationship that Jesus established with food should be rediscovered and valued, especially in so-called affluent societies, where many

imbalances and many *pathologies* manifest themselves. One eats too much, or too little. Often one eats in solitude. Eating disorders — anorexia, bulimia, obesity — are spreading. And medicine and psychology are trying to tackle our poor relationship with food. A poor relationship with food produces all these illnesses.

They are illnesses, often extremely painful, that are mostly linked to sufferings of the psyche and the soul. The way we eat is the manifestation of something within: a predisposition to balance or immoderation; the capacity to give thanks or the arrogant presumption of autonomy; the empathy of those who share food with the needy, or the selfishness of those who hoard everything for themselves. This question is so important. Tell me how you eat, and I will tell you what kind of soul you have. In the way we eat, we reveal our inner selves, our habits, our psychological attitudes.

The ancient Fathers gave the vice of gluttony the name “*gastrimargia*”, a term that can be translated as “folly of the belly”. Gluttony is a “folly of the belly”. There is also this proverb, that we should eat to live, not live to eat. Gluttony is a vice that engages one of our vital needs, such as eating. Let us beware of this.

If we interpret it from a *social* point of view, gluttony is perhaps the most dangerous vice that *is killing the planet*. Because the sin of those who succumb before a piece of cake, all things considered, does not cause great damage, but the voracity with which we have been plundering the goods of the planet for some centuries now is compromising the future of all. We have grabbed everything in order to become the masters of all things, whereas everything had been consigned to us for us to protect, not for us to exploit. Here, then, is the great sin, the fury of the belly is a great sin. We have abjured the name of men, to assume another: “consumers”. Today we speak like this in social life: consumers. We did not even notice when someone first began to call us by this name. We were made in order to be “Eucharistic” men and women, capable of giving thanks, discreet in the use of the land, and instead the danger is that we turn into predators. And now we are realizing that this form of “gluttony” has done great harm to the world. Let us ask the Lord to help us on the road to sobriety, so that the many forms of gluttony do not take over our life.

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4. Lust (17 January 2024)

Brothers and sisters, good morning!

Let us continue our journey concerning vices and virtues; and the ancient Fathers teach us that, after gluttony, the second “demon” — that is, vice — that is always crouching at the door of the heart is that of *lust*. While gluttony is voracity with regard to food, this second vice is a kind of “voracity” with regard to another person, that is, the poisoned bond that human beings have with each other, especially in the sphere of sexuality.

Be careful: in Christianity, there is no condemnation of the sexual instinct. There is no condemnation. A book of the Bible, the Song of Songs, is a wonderful poem of love between two lovers. However, this beautiful dimension of our humanity — the sexual dimension, the dimension of love — is not without its dangers, so much so that Saint Paul already had to address the issue in the First Epistle to the Corinthians. He writes: “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans” (5:1). The Apostle’s reproach concerns precisely an unhealthy handling of sexuality by some Christians.

But let us look at the human experience, the experience of *falling in love*. There are so many newlyweds here: you can talk about this! Why this mystery happens, and why it is such a shattering experience in people’s lives, none of us knows. One person falls in love with another, falling in love happens. It is one of the most astonishing realities of existence. Most of the songs you hear on the radio are about this: loves that shine, loves that are always sought and never attained, loves that are full of joy, or that torment us to the point of tears.

If it is not polluted by vice, falling in love is one of the purest feelings. A person in love becomes generous, enjoys giving gifts, writes letters and poems. He stops thinking of himself to be completely focused on the other. This is beautiful. And if you ask a person in love, “Why do you love?” they won’t have an answer. In so many ways their love is unconditional, without any reason. So be it if that love, which is so powerful, is also a little naive: a person in love does not really know the face of the other, they tend to idealise them, they are ready to make promises whose weight they don’t immediately grasp. This “garden” where wonders are multiplied is not, however, safe from evil. It is defiled by the demon of lust, and this vice is particularly odious, for at least two reasons.

First, because it *destroys relationships between people*. To prove such a reality, unfortunately, the daily news is sufficient. How many relationships that began in the best of ways have then turned into toxic relationships, of possession of the

other, lacking respect and a sense of limits? These are loves in which chastity has been missing: a virtue not to be confused with sexual abstinence — chastity is more than sexual abstinence — but rather, to be connected with the will never to possess the other. To love is to respect the other, to seek his or her happiness, to cultivate empathy for his or her feelings, to dispose oneself in the knowledge of a body, a psychology, and a soul that are not our own, and that must be contemplated for the beauty they bear. That is love, and love is beautiful. Lust, on the other hand, makes a mockery of all this: lust plunders, it robs, it consumes in haste, it does not want to listen to the other but only to its own need and pleasure; lust judges every courtship a bore, it does not seek that synthesis between reason, drive and feeling that would help us to conduct existence wisely. The lustful seek only shortcuts: they do not understand that the road to love must be travelled slowly, and this patience, far from being synonymous with boredom, allows us to make our loving relationships happy.

But there is a second reason why lust is a dangerous vice. Among all human pleasures, sexuality has a powerful voice. It involves all the senses; it dwells both in the body and in the psyche, and this is very beautiful; but if it is not disciplined with patience, if it is not inscribed in a relationship and in a story where two individuals transform it into a loving dance, it turns into a chain that deprives human beings of freedom. Sexual pleasure, which is a gift from God, is undermined by pornography: satisfaction without relationship that can generate forms of addiction. We have to defend love, the love of the heart, of the mind, of the body, pure love in the giving of oneself to the other. And this is the beauty of sexual intercourse.

Winning the battle against lust, against the “objectification” of the other, can be a lifelong endeavour. But the prize of this battle is the most important of all, because it is preserving that beauty that God wrote into His creation when He imagined love between man and woman, which is not for the purpose of using one another, but for loving one another. That beauty that makes us believe that building a story together is better than going in search of adventures — there are so many Don Juans out there! — that cultivating tenderness is better than bowing to the demon of possession — true love does not possess, it gives itself — that serving is better than conquering. Because if there is no love, life is sad, it is sad loneliness. Thank you.

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5. Avarice (24 January 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are continuing our catechesis on vices and virtues, and today we will talk about greed, that form of attachment to money that keeps man from generosity.

It is not a sin that regards only people with large assets, but rather a transversal vice, which often has nothing to do with bank balances. It is a sickness of the heart, not of the wallet. The Desert Fathers' analysis of this evil showed that greed could even take hold of monks, who, after renouncing enormous inheritances, clung to objects of little value in the solitude of their cells: they would not lend them, they would not share them and they were even less willing to give them away. An attachment to little things, which takes away freedom. Those objects became a sort of fetish for them from which they could not detach themselves. A sort of regression to the state of children, who clutch their toy repeating, "It's mine! It's mine!". A distorted relationship with reality lurks within this claim, which can result in forms of compulsive hoarding and pathological accumulation.

To heal from this sickness, the monks proposed a drastic, though highly effective method: meditation on death. As much as one can accumulate goods in this world, we can be absolutely sure of one thing: they will not enter the coffin with us. We cannot take property with us! Here, the senselessness of this vice is revealed. The bond of possession we create with objects is only apparent, because we are not the masters of the world: this earth that we love is in truth not ours, and we move about it like strangers and pilgrims (cf. *Lev 25:23*).

These simple considerations allow us to see the folly of greed, but also its innermost *raison d'être*. It is an attempt to exorcise fear of death: it seeks securities that, in reality, crumble the very moment we hold them in our hand. Remember the parable of the foolish man, whose land had offered him a very abundant harvest, and so he lulled himself with thoughts of how to enlarge his storehouse to accommodate all the harvest. The man had calculated everything. He had planned for the future. He had not, however, considered the most certain variable in life: death. "Fool!" says the Gospel. "This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (*Lk 12:20*).

In other cases, it is thieves who provide this service to us. Even in the Gospel they make a good number of appearances and, although their work may be reprehensible, it can become a salutary admonition. Thus preaches Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and

where thieves do not break in and steal” (*Mt 6:19-20*). The same accounts of the Desert Fathers tell the story of a thief who surprises a monk in his sleep and steals the few possessions he had in his cell. When he wakes up, not at all disturbed by what had happened, the monk sets out on the thief’s trail and, when he finds him, instead of claiming the stolen goods, he hands over the few things that remained, saying: “You forgot to take these!”.

We, brothers and sisters, may be the masters of the goods we possess, but often the opposite happens: they eventually take possession of us. Some rich men are no longer free, they no longer even have the time to rest, they have to look over their shoulder because the accumulation of goods also demands their safekeeping. They are always anxious, because a patrimony is built with a great deal of sweat, but can disappear in a moment. They forget the Gospel preaching, which does not claim that riches in themselves are a sin, but they are certainly a liability. God is not poor: he is the Lord of everything, but, as Saint Paul writes, “Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (*2 Cor 8:9*).

This is what the miser does not understand. He could have been a source of blessing to many, but instead he slipped into the blind alley of misery. And the life of a miser is ugly. I remember the case of a man I had met in the other diocese, a very rich man, and his mother was sick. He was married. The brothers took turns caring for the mother, and the mother used to have a yoghurt in the morning. This man would give her half in the morning and the other half in the afternoon, to save half the yoghurt. This is greed, this is attachment to things. Then this man died, and the comments of the people who went to the vigil were: “But you can see that this man has nothing on him; he left everything”. And then, making a bit of a mockery, they would say: “No, no, they couldn’t close the coffin because he wanted to take everything with him”. This greed makes the others laugh: the fact that in the end, we must give our body and soul to the Lord and leave everything. Let us be careful! And let us be generous, generous with everyone and generous with those who need us most. Thank you.

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6. Wrath (31 January 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

These weeks we are addressing the topic of vices and virtues, and today we will pause to reflect on the vice of *wrath*. It is a particularly dark vice, and it is perhaps the easiest to detect from a physical point of view. A person dominated by wrath finds it difficult to hide this impulse: you can see it in the way their body moves, in the aggressiveness, the laboured breathing, and their grim and frowning expression.

In its most acute manifestation, wrath is a vice that concedes no respite. If it arises from an injustice suffered (or believed to be suffered), it is often unleashed not against the offender, but against the first unfortunate victim. There are men who withhold their rage in the workplace, appearing to be calm and composed, but at home, they become unbearable to their wives and children. Wrath is a pervasive vice: it is capable of depriving us of sleep, making us plot continuously in our mind, barring the way to reason and thought.

Wrath is a vice that *destroys human relationships*. It expresses the inability to accept the diversity of others, especially when their life choices diverge from our own. It does not stop at a person's misconduct, but throws everything into the cauldron: it is the other person, the other as he or she is, the other as such, who provokes anger and resentment. One begins to detest the tone of their voice, their trivial everyday gestures, their ways of reasoning and feeling.

By the time the relationship reaches this level of degeneration, lucidity has been lost. Wrath makes us lose lucidity because one of its characteristics is that sometimes it fails to mitigate with time. In these cases, even distance and silence, instead of easing the burden of mistakes, magnify it. For this reason, the Apostle Paul — as we have heard — recommends to his Christians to address the problem straight away, and to attempt reconciliation: “*Do not let the sun go down on your anger*” (Eph 4:26). It is important that everything dissipate immediately, before sundown. If some misunderstanding arises during the day, and two people can no longer understand each other, perceiving themselves suddenly far apart, the night must not be handed over to the devil. The vice would keep us awake in the dark, brooding over our reasons and the unspeakable mistakes that are never ours but always the other's. It is like that: when a person is dominated by wrath, they always say that the other person is the problem. They are never capable of recognizing their own defects, their own shortcomings.

In the Lord's prayer, Jesus makes us pray for our human relations, which are a minefield, a plane that is never in perfect equilibrium. In life, we have to deal

with trespassers who are at fault with us, just as we have not always loved everyone in the right measure. To some we have not returned the love that was due to them. We are all sinners, all of us, and we all have accounts to settle: do not forget this! That is why we all need to learn how to forgive so as to be forgiven. People do not stay together if they do not also practice the art of forgiveness, as far as this is humanly possible. Wrath is countered by benevolence, openness of heart, meekness and patience.

But, on the subject of wrath, there is one last thing to be said. It is a terrible vice, it was said, that is at the origin of wars and violence. The Proem of the Iliad describes the wrath of Achilles, which will be the cause of “infinite woes”. But not everything that stems from wrath is wrong. The ancients understood well that there is an irascible part of us that cannot and must not be denied. Passions are to some extent unconscious: they happen, they are life experiences. We are not responsible for the onset of wrath, but always for its development. And at times it is good for anger to be vented in the right way. If a person were never angry, if a person were never indignant before an injustice, if they did not feel something quivering in their gut at the oppression of the weak, it would mean that the person was not human, much less a Christian.

Holy indignation exists, which is not wrath but an inner movement, a holy indignation. Jesus experienced it several times in his life (cf. *Mk* 3: 5). He never responded to evil with evil, but he felt this emotion in his soul, and in the case of the merchants in the Temple, he performed a strong and prophetic action, dictated not by wrath, but by zeal for the house of the Lord (cf. *Mt* 21:12-13). We must distinguish well: zeal, holy indignation, is one thing; wrath, which is bad, is another.

It is up to us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to find the right measure for passions, to train them well so that they may turn to good and not to evil. Thank you.

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7. Sorrow (7 February 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our itinerary of catechesis on vices and virtues, today we will look at a rather ugly vice, sadness, understood as a despondency of the soul, a constant affliction that prevents people from feeling joy at their own existence.

First and foremost, it must be noted that, with regard to sadness, the Fathers had made an important distinction: There is, in fact, a sadness that befits Christian life, and that by God's grace, can be changed into joy. Obviously, this should not be rejected and is part of the journey of conversion. But there is a second kind of sadness that *creeps into the soul and prostrates it into a state of despondency*: it is this second kind of sadness that must be resolutely and assiduously fought, because it comes from the evil one. This distinction can also be seen in [the letter of] Saint Paul, who wrote to the Corinthians: "godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death" (2 Cor 7:10).

There is, therefore, a friendly sadness that leads us to salvation. Think of the prodigal son from the parable: when he reaches the depths of his degeneracy, he feels great bitterness, and this prompts him to come to his senses and to decide to return home to his father (cf. Lk 15:11-20). It is a grace to lament over one's own sins, to remember the state of grace from which we have fallen, to weep because we have lost the purity in which God dreamed of us.

But there is a second sadness, which is instead an *ailment of the soul*. It arises in the human heart when a desire or hope vanishes. Here we can refer to the account of the disciples of Emmaus. Those two disciples leave Jerusalem with a disappointed heart, and they confide to the stranger who at one point accompanies them: "We had hoped that he — Jesus — was the one to redeem Israel" (Lk 24:21). The dynamic of sadness is linked to the *experience of loss*. Hopes arise in the heart of man, which are sometimes dashed. It can be the desire to possess something that instead we are unable to obtain, but it can also be something important, such as an emotional loss. When this happens, it is as if man's heart falls from a precipice, and the emotions he feels are discouragement, weakness of spirit, depression and anguish. We all go through ordeals that generate sadness in us, because life makes us conceive dreams that are then shattered. In this situation, after a time of turmoil, some cling to hope, but others wallow in melancholy, allowing it to fester in their hearts. Does one take pleasure in this? See: sadness is like *the pleasure of non-pleasure*; it is like taking a bitter candy, without sugar, unpleasant, and sucking on that candy. Sadness is taking pleasure in non-pleasure.

The monk Evagrius recounts that all vices aim at pleasure, however ephemeral it may be, whereas sadness enjoys the opposite: *lulling oneself into endless sadness*. Some prolonged griefs, in which a person continues to expand the void of one who is no longer there, are not proper to life in the Spirit. Certain bitter resentments, where a person always has a claim in mind that makes them take on the guise of the victim, do not produce a healthy life in us, let alone a Christian one. There is something in everyone's past that needs to be healed. Sadness can turn from being a natural emotion into an evil state of mind.

Sadness is a cunning demon. The Desert Fathers described it as a worm of the heart, which erodes and hollows out its host. This is a good image: it helps us understand. A worm in the heart that consumes and hollows out its host. So what should I do when I feel sad? Stop and look: is this a good sadness? Is it a sadness that is not so good? And react according to the nature of the sadness. Do not forget that sadness can be a very bad thing that leads us to pessimism, that leads us to a selfishness that is difficult to cure.

Brothers and sisters, we must beware of this sadness and think that Jesus brings us the joy of resurrection. As much as life may be filled with contradictions, defeated desires, unrealized dreams, lost friendships, thanks to Jesus' resurrection we can believe that *all will be saved*. Jesus rose again not only for himself, but also for us, to *redeem all the happiness* that has remained unfulfilled in our lives. Faith casts out fear, and the resurrection of Christ removes sadness like the stone from the tomb. For a Christian every day is an exercise in resurrection. In his famous novel, "The Diary of a Country Priest", Georges Bernanos, has the parish priest of Torcy say this: "Joy is in the gift of the Church, whatever joy is possible for this sad world to share. Whatever you did against the Church, has been done against joy". And another French writer, León Bloy, left us this wonderful phrase: "The only real sadness [...] is not to become a saint."

May the Spirit of the Risen Jesus help us to defeat sorrow with holiness.

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8. Acedia (14 February 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters,

Among all the capital sins, there is one that is often overlooked, perhaps because of its name, which is often incomprehensible to many: I am talking about *acedia*. This is why the term *acedia* is often substituted by another in the list of vices, one which is much more commonly used: sloth, or laziness. In reality, laziness is more an effect than a cause. When people are idle, indolent, apathetic, we say they are lazy. But as the wisdom of the ancient Desert Fathers teaches us, the root of this laziness is often *acedia*, which literally means “lack of care”, in Greek.

It is a very dangerous temptation, which one must not joke about. It is as though those who fall victim to it are crushed by a desire for death: they feel disgust at everything. Their relationship with God becomes boring to them, and even the holiest acts, those that used to warm their hearts in the past, now appear entirely useless to them. A person begins to regret the passing of time, and the youth that is irretrievably behind them.

Acedia is defined as the “noonday devil”: it grips us in the middle of the day, when fatigue is at its peak and the hours ahead of us seem monotonous, impossible to live. In a famous description, the monk Evagrius represents this temptation thus: “The eye of the slothful person is continually fixed on the windows, and in his mind he fantasizes about visitors [...] When he reads, the slothful person often yawns and is easily overcome by sleep, wrinkles his eyes, rubs his hands and, withdrawing his eyes from the book, stares at the wall; then turning them back to the book, he reads a little more [...]; finally, bowing his head, he places the book underneath it, and falls into a light sleep, until hunger awakens him and urges him to attend to his needs”; in conclusion, “the slothful man does not do God’s work with solicitude” (Evagrius Ponticus, *The Eight Spirits of Evil*, 14).

Contemporary readers perceive in these descriptions something that closely recalls the evil of depression, both from a psychological and a philosophical point of view. Indeed, for those who are gripped by *acedia*, life loses its significance, prayer becomes boring, and every battle seems meaningless. If in youth we nurtured passions, now they seem illogical, dreams that did not make us happy. So, we let ourselves go, and distraction, thoughtlessness, seem to be the only ways out: one would like to be numb, to have a completely empty mind. It is a little like dying in advance, and it is ugly.

Faced with this vice, which we recognize to be very dangerous, the masters of spirituality provide various remedies. I would like to note one that to me seems most important, and which I would call *the patience of faith*. Although in the

clutches of acedia, man's desire is to be "elsewhere", to escape from reality, one must instead have the courage to remain and to welcome God's presence in the "here and now", in my situation as it is. Monks say that for them the cell is the best teacher of life, because it is the place that concretely and daily speaks to you of your love story with the Lord. The demon of acedia wants to destroy precisely this simple joy of the here and now, this grateful wonder of reality. It wants to make you believe that it is all in vain, that nothing has meaning, that it is not worth taking care of anything or anyone. In life we meet slothful people, people about whom we say, "He is boring!", and we do not like to be with them; people who even have an attitude of boredom that is infectious. This is acedia.

How many people, in the grip of acedia, stirred by a faceless restlessness, have stupidly abandoned the good life they had embarked upon! The battle of acedia is a decisive one, that must be won at all costs. And it is a battle that did not spare even the saints, because in many of their diaries there are some pages that confide terrible moments, of genuine nights of the faith, when everything appears dark. These saints teach us to get through the night in patience, accepting *the poverty of faith*. They recommended, under the oppression of acedia, to maintain a smaller measure of commitment, to set goals more within reach, but at the same time to endure and persevere by leaning on Jesus, who never abandons us in temptation.

Faith, tormented by the test of acedia, does not lose its value. On the contrary, it is the true faith, the very human faith, which despite everything, despite the darkness that blinds it, still humbly believes. It is that faith that remains in the heart, like embers beneath the ashes. It always remains. And if one of us falls prey to this vice, or to the temptation of acedia, try to look within and fan the embers of faith; that is how we keep going.

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9. Envy and vainglory (28 February 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we examine two deadly vices that we find in the great lists that the spiritual tradition has left us: *envy* and *vainglory*.

Let us start with *envy*. If we read Holy Scripture (cf. *Gen 4*), it appears to us as one of the oldest vices: Cain's hatred of Abel is unleashed when he realizes that his brother's sacrifices are pleasing to God. Cain was the firstborn of Adam and Eve, he had taken the largest share of his father's inheritance; yet, it is enough for Abel, the younger brother, to succeed in a small feat, for Cain to become enraged. The face of the envious man is always sad: he's always looking down, he seems to be continually investigating the ground; but in reality, he sees nothing, because his mind is wrapped up in thoughts full of wickedness. Envy, if unchecked, leads to hatred of the other. Abel would be killed at the hands of Cain, who could not bear his brother's happiness.

Envy is an evil that has been investigated not only in the Christian sphere: it has attracted the attention of philosophers and wise men of every culture. At its core is a relationship of hate and love: one desires the evil for the other, but secretly desires to be like him. The other is the epiphany of what we would like to be, and what we actually are not. Their good fortune seems to us an injustice: surely, we think to ourselves, we would be much more deserving of their successes or good fortune!

At the root of this vice is a false idea of God: we do not accept that God has his own "math", different from ours. For example, in Jesus' parable about the workers called by the master to go into the vineyard at different times of the day, those in the first hour believe they are entitled to a higher wage than those who arrived last; but the master gives everyone the same pay, and says, "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or *do you begrudge my generosity?*" (Mt 20:15). We would like to impose our own selfish logic on God; instead, the logic of God is love. The good things he gives us are meant to be shared. This is why Saint Paul exhorts Christians, "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor" (Rm 12:10). Here is the remedy for envy!

And now we come to the second vice we are examining today: *vainglory*. It goes hand-in-hand with the demon of envy, and together these two vices are characteristic of a person who aspires to be the centre of the world, free to exploit everything and everyone, the object of all praise and love. Vainglory is an inflated and baseless self-esteem. The vainglorious person possesses an unwieldy "I": they

have no empathy and take no notice of the fact that there are other people in the world besides them. Their relationships are always a means to an end, characterized by dominating the other. Their person, their accomplishments, their achievements must be put on display for everyone: they are perpetual beggars for attention. And if at times their qualities are not recognized, they become fiercely angry. Others are unfair, they do not understand, they are not up to it. In his writings, Evagrius Ponticus describes the bitter story of a certain monk struck by vainglory. It happened that, after his first successes in the spiritual life, he already felt that he had made it, so he rushed into the world to receive its praise. But he did not realize that he was only at the beginning of the spiritual path, and that a temptation was lurking that would soon bring him down.

To heal the vainglorious, spiritual teachers do not suggest many remedies. For in the end, the evil of vanity has its remedy in itself: the praise the vainglorious person hoped to reap from the world will soon turn against him or her. And how many people, deluded by a false self-image, have then fallen into sins of which they would soon be ashamed!

The finest instruction for overcoming vainglory can be found in Saint Paul's testimony. The Apostle always reckoned with a defect that he could never overcome. Three times he asked the Lord to deliver him from that torment, but finally Jesus answered him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness". From that day Paul was set free. And his conclusion should also become ours: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor 12:9).

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10. Pride (6 March 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In our catechetical journey on vices and virtues, today we come to the last of the vices: *pride*. The ancient Greeks defined it with a word that could be translated as “excessive splendour”. Indeed, pride is self-exaltation, conceit, vanity. The term also appears in that series of vices that Jesus lists to explain that evil always comes from the heart of man (cf. *Mk 7:22*). The proud man is one who thinks he is much more than he really is; one who frets about being recognized as greater than others, always wants to see his own merits recognized, and despises others, deeming them inferior to himself.

From this first description, we see how the vice of pride is very close to that of vainglory, which we presented last time. However, if vainglory is a disease of the human self, it is still a childish disease when compared to the havoc pride is capable of. In analyzing the follies of man, the monks of antiquity recognized a certain order in the sequence of evils: one begins with the greater sins, such as gluttony, and arrives at the more disturbing monsters. *Of all vices, pride is the great queen*. It is no accident that, in the *Divine Comedy*, Dante placed it in the very first level of purgatory: those who give in to this vice are far from God, and the correction of this evil requires time and effort, more than any other battle to which the Christian is called.

In fact, within this evil lies the radical sin, the absurd claim to be like God. The sin of our first ancestors, recounted in the book of Genesis, is for all intents and purposes a sin of pride. The tempter tells them, “when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (*Gn 3:5*). Writers on spirituality are especially attentive in describing the consequences of pride in everyday life, to illustrate how it ruins human relationships, to point out how this evil poisons that feeling of fraternity that should instead unite men.

Here then is the long list of symptoms that reveal a person’s succumbing to the vice of pride. It is an evil with an obvious physical appearance: the proud man is haughty, he has a “stiff neck,” that is, he has a stiff neck that does not bend. He is a man easily led to scornful judgment: with no reason, he passes irrevocable judgments on others, who seem to him hopelessly inept and incapable. In his haughtiness, he forgets that Jesus assigned us very few moral precepts in the Gospels, but on one of them he was uncompromising: never judge. You realize that you are dealing with a proud person when, on offering him a little constructive criticism, or making a completely harmless remark, he reacts in an exaggerated manner, as if someone had offended his majesty: he goes into a rage, shouts, interrupts relations with others in a resentful manner.

There is little one can do with a person suffering from pride. It is impossible to talk to them, much less correct them, because ultimately they are no longer present to themselves. One just has to be patient with them, because one day their edifice will collapse. An Italian proverb goes, “Pride goes on horseback and comes back on foot”. In the Gospels, Jesus deals with a lot of proud people, and he often exposed this vice even in people who hid it very well. Peter flaunts his full-throated faithfulness: “Even if everyone forsakes you, I will not!” (cf. *Mt* 26:33). Instead, he would soon be like the others, fearful in the face of death that he did not imagine could be so close. And so the second Peter, the one who no longer lifts his chin but weeps salty tears, will be healed by Jesus and will finally be fit to bear the burden of the Church. Before he flaunted a presumption that was better not flaunted; now he is a faithful disciple whom, as a parable says, the master can put “in charge of all his possessions” (*Lk* 12:44).

Salvation comes through humility, the true remedy for every act of pride. In the *Magnificat*, Mary sings of the God who by his power scatters the proud in the sick thoughts of their hearts. It is useless to steal anything from God, as the proud hope to do, because after all he wants to give us everything. This is why the apostle James, to his community wounded by infighting originating in pride, writes, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (*Jas* 4:6).

So, dear brothers and sisters, let us take advantage of this Lent to fight against our pride.

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11. Virtuous action (13 March 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

After having concluded our overview of vices, it is now time to take a look at the flip side, which is in opposition to the experience of evil. The human heart can indulge evil passions, it can pay heed to harmful temptations disguised in persuasive garb, but it can also oppose all of this. However arduous this may be, the human being is made for goodness, which truly fulfils him, and he is also able to practise this art, causing certain dispositions to become permanent in him or her. Reflection on this wondrous possibility of ours forms a classic chapter in moral philosophy: the chapter of *virtue*.

The Roman philosophers called it *virtus*, the Greeks *aretè*. The Latin term highlights above all that the virtuous person is strong, courageous, capable of discipline and asceticism. Thus, the practise of virtues is the fruit of long germination, requiring effort and even suffering. The Greek word, *aretè*, instead indicates something that excels, something that emerges, that elicits admiration. The virtuous person therefore does not become warped by distortion, but remains faithful to his own vocation, fully realizing himself.

We would be off-course if we thought that saints were the exceptions of humanity: a sort of restricted circle of champions who live beyond the limits of our species. Instead, from the perspective we have just introduced regarding virtues, saints are people who become themselves fully, who fulfil the vocation proper to every man or woman. What a happy world it would be if justice, respect, mutual benevolence, kindness of heart and hope were the shared normality, and not a rare anomaly! This is why, in these dramatic times of ours in which we often have to come to terms with the worst of humanity, the chapter on virtuous action should be rediscovered and practised by all. In a distorted world, we must remember the form in which we were shaped, the image of God that is forever imprinted upon us.

But how can we *define* the concept of virtue? The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers us a precise and concise definition: “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (no. 1803). It is therefore not an improvised or somewhat random good that falls from heaven sporadically. History shows us that even criminals have performed good deeds in moments of lucidity. These deeds are certainly inscribed in the “book of God”, but virtue is something else. It is a goodness that stems from the slow maturation of a person, to the point that it becomes an inner characteristic. Virtue is a *habitus* of freedom. If we are free in every action, and we are called to choose between good and evil each time, then virtue is what enables us to have a tendency towards the right choice.

If virtue is such a beautiful gift, a question immediately arises: *how can we obtain it?* The answer to this question is not simple, it is complex.

For the Christian, the first aid is God's *grace*. Indeed, the Holy Spirit acts in us who were baptized, working in our soul to lead it to a virtuous life. How many Christians have reached holiness through tears, finding they could not overcome some of their weaknesses! But they experienced that God completed their work of good which for them had been only a rough sketch. Grace always precedes our moral commitment.

Moreover, we must never forget a very rich lesson from the wisdom of the ancients, which tells us that *virtue grows and can be cultivated*. And for this to happen, the first gift to ask of the Spirit is precisely *wisdom*. The human being is not a free territory for the conquest of pleasures, emotions, instincts and passions, without the ability to do anything against these sometimes chaotic forces, that dwell within. A priceless gift we possess is open-mindedness. It is the wisdom that can learn from mistakes in order to direct life well. It also takes good will: the capacity to choose the good, to form ourselves with ascetic exercise, shunning excesses.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is how we begin our journey through the virtues, in this serene universe that is challenging, but decisive for our happiness.

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12. Prudence (20 March 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are devoting today's catechesis to the virtue of *prudence*. Along with justice, fortitude and temperance, it is one of the so-called cardinal virtues, which are not the exclusive prerogative of Christians, but rather belong to the heritage of ancient wisdom, in particular of the Greek philosophers. Therefore, one of the most interesting themes in the work of encounter and inculturation was precisely that of the virtues.

In medieval writings, the presentation of the virtues is not simply a list of the positive qualities of the soul. Returning to the classical authors in the light of Christian revelation, theologians imagined the septenary of virtues — three theological and four cardinal — as a sort of living organism, in which each virtue has a harmonious space to occupy. There are essential virtues and accessory virtues, like pillars, columns and capitals. Indeed, perhaps nothing better renders the idea of the harmony between man and his continual aspiration towards good than the architecture of a medieval cathedral.

So, let us begin with prudence. It is not the virtue of the timorous person, always hesitant about what action to take. No, this is a mistaken interpretation. It is not even merely caution. Granting primacy to prudence means that the action of man is in the hands of his *intelligence and freedom*. The prudent person is creative: he or she reasons, evaluates, tries to understand the complexity of reality and does not allow him or herself to be overwhelmed by emotions, idleness, pressures and illusions.

In a world dominated by appearances, by superficial thoughts, by the triviality of both good and bad, the ancient lesson of prudence deserves to be revived.

Saint Thomas, in the wake of Aristotle, called it “*recta ratio agibilium*”. It is the capacity to govern actions in order to direct them towards good; for this reason, it is dubbed the “coachman of the virtues”. Prudent are those who are able to choose. As long as it remains on paper, life is always easy, but in the midst of the wind and waves of daily life it is another matter; often we are uncertain and do not know which way to go. The prudent do not choose at random: first of all, they know what they want, then they weigh the situation, seek advice, and with a broad outlook and inner freedom, they choose upon which path to embark. That is not to say they do not make mistakes: after all, we are all human; but at least they avoid major setbacks. Unfortunately, in every environment there is someone who tends to dismiss problems with superficial jokes, or to incite controversy. Prudence is instead the quality of those who are called to govern: they know that

to administer is difficult, that there are many points of view and one must try to harmonize them, that one must do not the good of some but of all.

Prudence also teaches that, as they say, “the perfect is the enemy of the good”. Indeed, too much zeal in some situations can cause disasters: it can ruin a construction that would have needed gradualness; it can give rise to conflicts and misunderstandings; it can even trigger violence.

The prudent person knows how to safeguard the *memory of the past*, not out of fear for the future, but because he or she knows that tradition is a patrimony of wisdom. Life is made up of a constant overlapping of old and new things, and it is not good always to think that the world begins with us, that we have to deal with problems starting from scratch. And the prudent person is also *far-sighted*. Once one has decided on the goal to strive for, it is necessary to obtain all the means to reach it.

Many passages from the Gospel help educate us in prudence. For example: prudent is the man who builds his house on the rock, and imprudent the one who builds his on sand (cf. *Mt 7:24-27*). Wise are the damsels who carry oil for their lamps and foolish those who do not (cf. *Mt 25:1-13*). The Christian life is a combination of simplicity and shrewdness. Preparing his disciples for the mission, Jesus says: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (*Mt 10:16*). As if to say that God does not only want us to be saints, he wants us to be *intelligent saints*, because without prudence it takes but a moment to make a wrong turn!

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13. Patience (27 March 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Last Sunday we listened to the account of the Passion of the Lord. Jesus responds to the suffering he endures with a virtue that, although not included among the traditional ones, is so important: the virtue of *patience*. It has to do with the forbearance of what one suffers. It is not a coincidence that *patience* has the same root as *passion*. And it is precisely in the Passion that Christ's patience emerges, as he accepts being arrested, beaten and unjustly condemned, with meekness and mildness. He does not complain before Pilate. He bears being insulted, spat upon and flogged by the soldiers. He carries the weight of the cross. He forgives those who nail him to the wood, and while on the cross, he does not respond to provocation, but rather offers mercy. This is Jesus' patience. All this tells us that Jesus' patience does not consist in a stoic resistance to suffering, but rather, is *the fruit of a greater love*.

In the so-called "Hymn to Charity" (cf. *1 Cor 13:4-7*), the Apostle Paul closely links *love and patience*. Indeed, in describing the first quality of charity, he uses a word that is translated as "magnanimous" or "patient". Charity is magnanimous, it is patient. It expresses a surprising concept, which frequently appears in the Bible: faced with our infidelity, God shows himself to be "slow to anger" (cf. *Ex 34:6*; cf. *Nm 14:18*): instead of venting his distaste for man's evil and sin, he reveals himself to be greater, always ready to start afresh with infinite patience. For Paul, this is the first feature of God's love, which proposes forgiveness in the face of sin. But not only that: it is the first trait of every great love, which knows how to respond to evil with good, and does not withdraw in anger and despondency, but rather perseveres and tries again. The patience that starts over. Thus love is at the root of patience, as Saint Augustine says: "Each one of the just is in that measure for endurance of any ills more brave, in what measure in him the love of God is mightier" (*De patientia*, XVII).

One might say, then, that there is no better witness to Jesus' love than encountering a *patient Christian*. But let us also think of the many mothers and fathers, workers, doctors and nurses, the sick, who grace the world with saintly patience, every day, in hiddenness! As the Scripture affirms, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty" (*Pr 16:32*). However, we have to be honest: we often lack patience. In everyday life we are impatient, all of us. We need it as an "essential vitamin" in order to get by, but it is instinctive for us to lose our patience and respond to evil with evil. It is difficult to stay calm, to control our instincts, to refrain from bad responses, to defuse quarrels and conflicts in the family, at work, or in the Christian community. The response is immediate; we are not capable of being patient.

However, let us remember that patience is not only a need, it is *a calling*. If Christ is patient, then Christians are called to be patient. And this demands that we go against the tide with respect to today's widespread mentality, dominated by rushing and by [wanting] "everything straight away", in which, rather than waiting for situations to mature, people are put under pressure, in the expectation that they will change immediately. Let us not forget that rushing and impatience are enemies of spiritual life. Why? God is love, and those who love do not tire, they are not irascible; they do not give ultimatums. God is patient, God knows how to wait. Think about the account of the merciful Father, who awaits his son who has left home. He suffers patiently, impatient only to embrace him as soon as he sees him return (cf. *Lk* 15:21). Or think of the parable of the wheat and the weeds, in which the Lord is not in a hurry to uproot evil before its time, so that nothing is lost (cf. *Mt* 13:29-30). Patience lets us save everything.

But brothers and sisters, how can one *grow in patience*? Since, as Saint Paul teaches us, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal* 5:22), one must ask for it from the Spirit of Christ. He gives us the meek strength of patience — patience is a meek strength — because "Christian virtue is not only a matter of doing good, but of tolerating evil as well" (Augustine, *Sermons*, 46, 13). In these days especially, it will do us good to contemplate the Crucified One, to assimilate his patience. Another good exercise is to take to him the most bothersome people, asking for the grace to put into practice towards them that work of mercy so well known, yet so disregarded: patiently enduring troublesome people. And it is not easy. Let us think about whether we do this: patiently tolerate troublesome people. It begins by asking to look at them with compassion, with God's gaze, knowing how to distinguish their faces from their faults. We have the habit of cataloguing people according to the mistakes they make. No, this is not good. Let us seek people by their faces, their heart, and not their mistakes.

Lastly, in order to cultivate patience, a virtue which gives breath to life, it is good to *broaden one's outlook*. For example, by not restricting the field of the world to our own troubles, as the *Imitation of Christ* invites us to do: "Well may you remember the very painful woes of others, that you may bear your own little ones the more easily", recalling that "with God nothing that is suffered for His sake, no matter how small, can pass without reward" (III, 19). And again, when we feel we are in the grip of adversity, as Job teaches us, it is good to open ourselves with hope to the newness of God, in the unwavering confidence that he does not disappoint our expectations. Patience, and knowing how to bear troubles.

And here today, at this audience, there are two people, two fathers: one Israeli and the other, Arab. Both of them lost their daughters in the war, and they are friends. They do not look at the wickedness of war, but rather they look at the friendship between two men who care about each other and have experienced the same crucifixion. Let us think of the beautiful witness of these two people who have suffered the war in the Holy Land in the loss of their daughters. Dear brothers, thank you for your witness.

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14. Justice (3 April 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, Happy Easter, good morning!

Here we are at the second of the cardinal virtues: today we will talk about *justice*. It is the quintessential social virtue. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines it as “the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour” (no. 1807). This is justice. Often, when justice is mentioned, the motto that represents it is also quoted: “*unicuique suum*” — that is, “to each his own”. It is the virtue of law, that seeks to regulate relations between people equitably.

It is represented allegorically by the scales, because it aims to “even the score” between people, especially when they risk being distorted by some imbalance. Its purpose is that everyone in society be treated in accordance with the dignity proper to them. But the ancient masters had already taught that in order for this to occur, other virtuous attitudes are also necessary, such as benevolence, respect, gratitude, affability, and honesty: virtues that contribute to a good coexistence between people. Justice is a virtue for the good coexistence of people.

We all understand that justice is fundamental for peaceful coexistence in society: a world without laws respecting rights would be a world in which it is impossible to live; it would resemble a jungle. Without justice, there is no peace. Without justice, there is no peace. Indeed, if justice is not respected, conflicts arise. Without justice, the law of the prevalence of the strong over the weak becomes entrenched, and this is not just.

But justice is a virtue that acts on both a large and small scale. It has to do not only with the courtroom, but also with the ethics that characterize our daily lives. It establishes sincere relations with others: it realizes the precept of the Gospel, according to which Christian speech is “simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil” (*Mt 5:37*). Half-truths, double-talk intended to deceive one’s neighbour, the reticence that conceals true intentions, are not attitudes in keeping with justice. The righteous person is upright, simple and straightforward. He does not wear masks, he presents himself for what he is and he speaks the truth. The words “thank you” are often on his lips. He knows that no matter how generous we strive to be, we always remain indebted to our neighbour. If we love, it is also because we were loved first.

In tradition we can find countless descriptions of the righteous person. Let us look at some of them. The righteous person reveres laws and respects them, knowing that they constitute a barrier protecting the defenceless from the tyranny of the powerful. The righteous person does not only think of his own individual well-

being, but desires the good of society as a whole. Therefore, he does not give in to the temptation to think only of himself and of taking care of his own affairs, however legitimate they may be, as if they were the only thing that exists in the world. The virtue of justice makes it clear — and places this need in the heart — that there can be no true good for oneself if there is not also the good of all.

Therefore, the righteous person keeps watch over his own behaviour, so that it is not harmful to others. If he makes a mistake, he apologizes. The righteous man always apologizes. In some situations, he goes so far as to sacrifice a personal good to make it available to the community. He desires an orderly society, where people give lustre to the office they hold, and not the office that gives lustre to people. He abhors special treatments and does not trade favours. He loves responsibility and is exemplary in promoting legality. That [legality] indeed, is the path of justice, the antidote to corruption: how important it is to educate people, especially the young, in the culture of legality! It is the way to prevent the cancer of corruption and to eradicate crime, pulling the rug from under its feet.

Furthermore, the righteous person shuns harmful behaviour such as slander, perjury, fraud, usury, mockery and dishonesty. The righteous person keeps his word, returns what he has borrowed, pays fair wages to all labourers: a man who does not pay fair wages to workers is not just, he is unjust. He is careful not to make reckless judgments of his neighbours, and defends the reputation and good name of others.

None of us knows if the righteous people in our world are numerous or if they are as rare as precious pearls. But they are people who draw grace and blessings both upon themselves and upon the world in which they live. They are not losers compared to those who are “cunning and shrewd”, for, as Scripture says, “He who pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honour” (*Pr* 21:21). The righteous are not moralists who don the robe of the censor, but upright people who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (*Mt* 5:6), dreamers who yearn in their hearts for universal brotherhood. And, today especially, we are all in great need of this dream. We need to be righteous men and women, and this will make us happy.

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15. Fortitude (10 April 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today's catechesis is dedicated to the third of the cardinal virtues, namely *fortitude*. Let us begin with the description given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "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" (1808). This is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says about the virtue of fortitude.

Here, then, is the most "combative" of the virtues. If the first of the cardinal virtues, that is, prudence, was primarily associated with man's reason; and while justice found its in the will, this third virtue, fortitude, is often linked by scholastic authors to what the ancients called the "irascible appetite". Ancient thought did not imagine a man without passions: he would be a stone. And passions are not necessarily the residue of a sin; but they must be educated, they must be channelled, they must be purified with the water of Baptism, or better with the fire of the Holy Spirit. A Christian without courage, who does not turn his own strength to good, who does not bother anyone, is a useless Christian. Let us think about this! Jesus is not a diaphanous, ascetic God, who does not know human emotions. Quite the contrary. Faced with the death of his friend Lazarus, he breaks down in tears, and his impassioned spirit is apparent in some of his expressions, such as when he says: "I came to cast fire upon the earth, and would that it were already kindled!" (*Lk* 12:49); and confronted with the trade in the temple, he reacted with force (cf. *Mt.* 21:12-13). Jesus had passion.

But let us now look for an existential description of this important virtue that helps us be fruitful in life. The ancients — both the Greek philosophers and Christian theologians — recognized a twofold development in the virtue of fortitude: one *passive*, another *active*.

The first is directed *within ourselves*. There are internal enemies we must defeat, which go by the name of anxiety, anguish, fear, guilt: all forces that stir in our innermost selves and in some situations paralyse us. How many fighters succumb before they even begin the challenge! Because they are not aware of these internal enemies. Fortitude is first and foremost a victory against ourselves. Most of the fears that arise within us are unrealistic, and do not come true at all. It is better, then, to invoke the Holy Spirit and face everything with patient fortitude: one problem at a time, as we are able, but not alone! The Lord is with us, if we

trust in him and sincerely seek the good. Then in every situation we can count on God's providence which shields and armours us.

And then there is the second movement of the virtue of fortitude, this time of a more active nature. In addition to internal trials, there are *external enemies*, which are *life's trials*, persecutions, difficulties that we did not expect and that surprise us. Indeed, we can try to predict what will happen to us, but to a large extent reality is made up of imponderable events, and in this sea sometimes our boat is tossed about by the waves. Fortitude, then, makes us resilient sailors, who are not frightened or discouraged.

Fortitude is a fundamental virtue because it *takes the challenge of evil in the world seriously*. Some pretend it does not exist, that everything is going fine, that human will is not sometimes blind, that dark forces that bring death do not lurk in history. But it suffices to leaf through a history book, or unfortunately even the newspapers, to discover the nefarious deeds of which we are partly victims and partly perpetrators: wars, violence, slavery, oppression of the poor, wounds that have never healed and continue to bleed. The virtue of fortitude makes us react and cry out "no", an emphatic "no" to all of this. In our comfortable Western world, which has watered everything down somewhat, which has transformed the pursuit of perfection into a simple organic development, which has no need for struggle because everything looks the same, we sometimes feel a healthy nostalgia for prophets. But disruptive, visionary people are very rare. There is a need for someone who can rouse us from the soft place in which we have lain down and make us resolutely repeat our "no" to evil and to everything that leads to indifference. "No" to evil and "no" to indifference; "yes" to progress, to the path that moves us forward, and for this we must fight.

Let us therefore rediscover in the Gospel Jesus' fortitude, and learn it from the witness of the saints. Thank you!

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16. Temperance (17 April 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I will talk about the fourth and final cardinal virtue: *temperance*. With the other three, this virtue shares a history that goes far back in time and does not only belong to Christians. For the Greeks, the practice of the virtues had happiness as its objective. The philosopher Aristotle wrote his most important treatise on ethics, addressing it to his son Nicomachus, to instruct him in the art of living. Why does everyone seek happiness, even though so few achieve it? This is the question. To answer it, Aristotle turns to the theme of virtues, among which *enkráteia*, that is, temperance, takes a prominent place. The Greek term literally means “power over oneself”. Temperance is a power over oneself. This virtue is thus the capacity for self-mastery, the art of not letting oneself be overcome by rebellious passions, of establishing order in what Manzoni calls “the jumble of the human heart”.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that “temperance is the moral virtue that moderates the attraction of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods”. The *Catechism* continues, “It ensures the will’s mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limits of what is honourable. The temperate person directs the sensitive appetites toward what is good and maintains a healthy discretion, and does not follow the base desires, but restrains the appetites” (cf. 1809).

Therefore, temperance, as the Italian word says, is the virtue of the right measure. In every situation, one behaves wisely, because people who act always moved by impulse or exuberance are ultimately unreliable. People without temperance are always unreliable. In a world where many people boast about saying what they think, the temperate person instead prefers to think about what he says. Do you understand the difference? Not saying whatever comes into my mind, like so... no: thinking about what I have to say. He does not make empty promises but makes commitments to the extent that he can fulfil them.

The temperate person acts judiciously also with regards to pleasures. The free course of impulses and total license accorded to pleasures end up backfiring on us, plunging us into a state of boredom. How many people who have wanted to try everything voraciously have found themselves losing the taste for everything! It is better, then, to seek the right measure. For example, in order to appreciate a good wine, tasting it in small sips is better than swallowing it all in one go. We all know this.

The temperate person knows how to weigh words and dose them well. He thinks about what he says. He does not allow a moment's anger to ruin relationships and friendships that can then only be rebuilt with difficulty. Especially in family life, where inhibitions are lower, we all run the risk of not keeping tensions, irritations and anger in check. There is a time to speak and a time to be silent, but both require the right measure. And this applies to many things, for instance being with others and being alone.

If the temperate person knows how to control his own irascibility, this does not mean we always find him with a peaceful and smiling face. Indeed, at times it is necessary to be indignant, but always in the right way. These are the words: the *just measure*, the *right way*. A word of rebuke is at times healthier than a sour, rancorous silence. The temperate person knows that nothing is more uncomfortable than correcting another person, but he also knows that it is necessary; otherwise, one offers free reign to evil. In some cases, the temperate person succeeds in holding extremes together: he affirms absolute principles, asserts non-negotiable values, but also knows how to understand people, and he shows empathy for them. He shows empathy.

The gift of the temperate person is therefore balance, a quality as precious as it is rare. Indeed, everything in our world pushes to excess. Instead, temperance combines well with Gospel values such as littleness, discretion, modesty, meekness. The temperate person appreciates the respect of others but does not make it the sole criterion for every action and every word. He is sensitive, he is able to cry and is not ashamed about it, but he does not weep over himself. In defeat, he rises up again; in victory, he is capable of returning to his former reserved life. He does not seek applause but knows that he needs others.

Brothers and sisters, it is not true that temperance makes one grey and joyless. On the contrary, it lets one enjoy the goods of life better: staying together at the table, the tenderness of certain friendships, confidence with wise people, wonder at the beauty of creation. Happiness with temperance is the joyfulness that flourishes in the heart of those who recognize and value what counts most in life. Let us pray to the Lord that He might give us this gift: the gift of maturity, of age, of emotional maturity, of social maturity. The gift of temperance.

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17. The life of grace according to the Spirit (24 April 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In recent weeks we reflected on the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. They are the four cardinal virtues. As we emphasized several times, these four virtues belong to a very ancient wisdom that predates even Christianity. Even before Christ, honesty was preached as a civic duty, wisdom as the rule for actions, courage as the fundamental ingredient for a life that tends towards the good, and moderation as the necessary measure not to be overwhelmed by excesses. This patrimony that is so ancient, the patrimony of humanity, was not replaced by Christianity, but rather brought into focus, enhanced, purified and integrated in the faith.

There is therefore in the heart of every man and woman the capacity to seek the good. The Holy Spirit is given so that those who receive it can clearly distinguish good from evil, have the strength to adhere to good by shunning evil, and, in so doing, achieve full self-realization.

But in the journey that we are all making towards the fullness of life, which belongs to the destiny of every person — the destiny of each person is fullness, to be full of life — Christians enjoy special assistance from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus. It is implemented through the gift of *three other, distinctly Christian, virtues*, which are often mentioned *together* in the New Testament writings. These essential elements, which characterize the life of the Christian, are three virtues that we will now say together: *faith, hope and charity*. Let's say them together: [together] faith, hope... I don't hear anything! Louder! [together] Faith, hope, and charity! Good job!

Christian writers soon called them “theological” virtues, insofar as they are received and lived out in relationship with God, to differentiate them from the other four, called “cardinal” insofar as they constitute the “hinge” [It., “cardine”] of a good life. These three are received at Baptism and come from the Holy Spirit. The one and the other, both the theological and the cardinal, mentioned together in so many systematic reflections, have thus composed a wonderful septenary, which is often contrasted with the list of the seven deadly sins. This is how the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the action of the theological virtues: “The theological virtues are the foundation of Christian moral activity; they animate it and give it its special character. They inform and give life to all the moral virtues. They are infused by God into the souls of the faithful to make them capable of acting as his children and of meriting eternal life. They are the pledge of the

presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being” (n. 1813).

While the risk of the cardinal virtues is of generating men and women who are heroic in doing good, but all alone, isolated, the great gift of the theological virtues is existence *lived in the Holy Spirit*. The Christian is never alone. He does good not because of a titanic effort of personal commitment, but because, as a humble disciple, he walks in the footsteps of Jesus, the Master. He goes forward on the way. The Christian has the theological virtues, which are the great antidote to self-sufficiency. How often do certain morally irreproachable men and women run the risk of becoming conceited and arrogant in the eyes of those who know them! It is a danger that the Gospel rightly warns us against, when Jesus advises the disciples: “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (*Lk 17:10*). Pride is a poison, a powerful poison: a drop of it is enough to spoil a whole life marked by goodness. A person may have performed a mountain of good deeds, may have reaped accolades and praise, but if he has done all this only for himself, to exalt himself, can he still call himself a virtuous person? No!

Good is not only an end, but also a means. Goodness needs a lot of discretion, a lot of kindness. Above all, goodness needs to be stripped of that sometimes too cumbersome presence that is our ego. When our “I” is at the centre of everything, everything is ruined. If we perform every action in life only for ourselves, is this motivation really so important? The poor “I” takes hold of everything and thus pride is born.

The theological virtues are of great help in correcting all these situations, which sometimes become painful. They are especially so in times of falling, because even those with good moral intentions sometimes fall. We all fall in life because we are all sinners. In the same way that even those who practice virtue daily sometimes make mistakes. We all make mistakes in life: intelligence is not always clear, will is not always firm, passions are not always governed, courage does not always overcome fear. But if we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit — Interior Master — He revives the theological virtues in us: then, if we have lost confidence, God reopens us to faith. With the strength of the Spirit, if we have lost confidence, God reopens us to faith. If we are discouraged, God awakens hope in us, and if our heart is hardened, God softens it with his love. Thank you.

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18. Faith (1 May 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today I would like to talk about the virtue of *faith*. Together with charity and hope, this virtue is described as *theological*. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity. Why are they theological? Because they can be lived out only thanks to the gift of God. The three theological virtues are the great gifts that God gives to our moral capacity. Without them, we could be prudent, just, strong and temperate, but we would not have eyes that see even in the dark, we would not have a heart that loves even when it is not loved, we would not have a hope that dares against all hope.

What is faith? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that faith is the act by which the human being freely commits himself to God (n. 1814). In this faith, Abraham was the great father. When he agreed to leave the land of his ancestors to head for the land that God would show him, he would probably have been judged insane: why leave the known for the unknown, the certain for the uncertain? But why do this? Is he insane? But Abraham sets off, as if he could see the invisible. This is what the Bible says about Abraham: “He went out, not knowing where he was to go”. This is beautiful. And it will again be the invisible that makes him go up the mountain with his son Isaac, the only son of the promise, who only at the last moment will be spared from sacrifice. In this faith, Abraham becomes the father of a long line of descendants. Faith made him fruitful.

A man of faith would be Moses. Welcoming God’s voice even when more than one doubt could have shaken him, he continued to stand firm and to trust in the Lord, and even to defend the people who were so often lacking in faith.

A woman of faith would be the Virgin Mary. Receiving the annunciation of the Angel, which many would have dismissed as too demanding and risky, she answered, “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (*Lk* 1:38). And, with her heart full of faith, with her heart full of trust in God, Mary set out on a path of which she knew neither the route nor the dangers.

Faith is the virtue that makes the Christian. Because to be Christians is not first and foremost about accepting a culture, with the values that accompany it, but being Christian means welcoming and cherishing a bond, a bond with God: God and I, myself and the amiable face of Jesus. This bond is what makes us Christians.

Speaking of faith, an episode from the Gospel comes to mind. Jesus' disciples are crossing the lake, and they are surprised by the storm. They think they can get by with the strength of their arms, with the resources of their experience, but the boat starts to fill up with water and they are seized by panic (cf. *Mk* 4:35-41). They do not realize that they have the solution before their very eyes: Jesus is there with them on the boat, in the midst of the storm, and Jesus is asleep, says the Gospel. When they finally awaken him, fearful and even angry that he would let them die, Jesus rebukes them: "Why are you afraid? *Have you no faith?*" (*Mk* 4:40).

Here, then, is the great enemy of faith: it is not intelligence, nor is it reason, as, alas, some continue obsessively to repeat; but the great enemy of faith is fear. For this reason, faith is the first gift to welcome in the Christian life: a gift that must be welcomed and asked for daily, so that it may be renewed in us. It is seemingly a small gift, yet it is the essential one. When we were brought to the baptismal font, our parents, after announcing the name they had chosen for us, were asked by the priest — this happened at our Baptism — "What do you ask of God's Church?" And the parents answered: "Faith, baptism!".

For Christian parents, aware of the grace that was granted to them, that is the gift to ask for their child: faith. With it, parents know that, even in the midst of life's trials, their child will not drown in fear. See, the enemy is fear. They also know that, when the child ceases to have a parent on this earth, he will continue to have a God the Father in heaven, who will never abandon him. Our love is so fragile, and only God's love conquers death.

Certainly, as the Apostle says, not all have faith (cf. *2 Thess* 3:2), and we too, who are believers, often realize that we have only a short supply. Often Jesus can rebuke us, as he did with his disciples, for being "men of little faith". But it is the happiest gift, the only virtue we are permitted to envy. Because those who have faith have a force within them that is beyond merely human; indeed, faith "triggers" grace in us and opens the mind to the mystery of God. As Jesus once said, "If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea', and it would obey you" (*Lk* 17:6). Therefore, let us too, like the disciples, repeat to him: Lord, "increase our faith!" (*Lk* 17:5). It is a beautiful prayer! Shall we say it all together? "Lord, increase our faith". Let us say it together: [everyone] "Lord, increase our faith". Too quiet... a bit louder: [everyone] "Lord, increase our faith!". Thank you.

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19. Hope (8 May 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters!

In the last catechesis we began to reflect on the theological virtues. There are three of them: faith, hope and charity. Last time, we reflected on faith. Now it is the turn of 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” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1817). These words confirm that hope is the answer offered to our heart, when the absolute question arises in us: “What will become of me? What is the purpose of the journey? What is the destiny of the world?”

We all realize that a negative answer to these questions causes sadness. If there is no meaning to life’s journey, if there is nothing at the beginning and at the end, then we wonder why on earth we should walk: man’s desperation, the sensation of the pointlessness of everything, arises from this. And many may rebel: “I strove to be virtuous, to be prudent, just, strong, temperate. I was a man or woman of faith.... What was the use of my fight, if everything ends here?”. If hope is lacking, all the other virtues run the risk of crumbling and turning into ashes. If there were no reliable tomorrow, no bright horizon, one would only have to conclude that virtue is a futile effort. “Only when the future is certain as a positive reality does it become possible to live the present as well”, said Benedict XVI (Encyclical Letter *Spe salvi*, 2, 2).

Christians have hope not through their own merit. If they believe in the future, it is because Christ died and rose again and gave us his Spirit. “Redemption is offered to us in the sense that we have been given hope, trustworthy hope, by virtue of which we can face our present” (*ibid.*, 1). In this sense, once again, we say that hope is a theological virtue: it does not emanate from us. It is not an obstinacy we want to convince ourselves of, but rather, a gift that comes directly from God.

The Apostle Paul presents the new logic of the Christian experience to the many doubting Christians who had not been completely reborn to hope: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:17-19). It is as if he had said: if you believe in the Resurrection of Christ, then you know with certainty that no defeat and no death is forever. But if you do not believe in the Resurrection of Christ, then everything becomes hollow, even the preaching of the Apostles.

Hope is a virtue against which we often sin: in our bad nostalgia, in our melancholy, when we think that the happiness of the past is buried forever. We sin against hope when we become despondent over our sins, forgetting that God is merciful and greater than our heart. And let us not forget this, brothers and sisters: God forgives everything, God forgives always. We are the ones who tire of asking for forgiveness. But let us not forget this truth: God forgives everything, God always forgives. We sin against hope when we become despondent over our sins; we sin against hope when the autumn in us cancels out the spring; when God's love ceases to be an eternal fire and we do not have the courage to make decisions that commit us for a lifetime.

The world today is in great need of this Christian virtue! The world needs hope, just as it greatly needs patience, a virtue that journeys hand-in-hand with hope. Patient men are weavers of goodness. They stubbornly desire peace, and even if some of them are hasty and would like everything, straight away, patience is capable of waiting. Even when around us many have succumbed to disillusionment, those who are inspired by hope and are patient are able to get through the darkest of nights. Hope and patience go together.

Hope is the virtue of those who are young at heart; and here age does not matter because there are also elderly people whose eyes are filled with light, who live permanently striving towards the future. Think of the two great elderly people of the Gospel, Simeon and Anna: they never tired of waiting and they saw the last stretch of their earthly journey blessed by the encounter with the Messiah, whom they recognized in Jesus, brought to the Temple by his parents. What grace if it were like that for all of us! If after a long pilgrimage, setting down our saddlebags and staff, our heart were filled with a joy never before felt, and we too could exclaim: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel". (*Lk 2:29-32*).

Brothers and sisters, let us go ahead and ask for the grace to have hope, hope with patience. Always towards that definitive encounter; always thinking that the Lord is near us, that death will never ever be victorious. Let us go ahead and ask the Lord to give us this great virtue of hope, accompanied by patience. Thank you.

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20. Charity (15 May 2024)

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Today we will talk about the third theological virtue, *charity*. The other two, let us remember, were faith and hope: today we will talk about the third, charity. It is the culmination of the entire itinerary we have undertaken with the catecheses on the virtues. To think of charity immediately expands the heart, and it expands the mind, it evokes the inspired words of Saint Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Concluding that wonderful hymn, Saint Paul cites the triad of the theological virtues and exclaims: “So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (*1 Cor 13:13*).

Paul addresses these words to a community that is anything but perfect in fraternal love: the Christians of Corinth were rather litigious, there were internal divisions, and there were those who claimed to always be right and did not listen to others, regarding them as their inferiors. Paul reminds them that knowledge puffs up, whereas charity builds up (cf. *1 Cor 8:1*). The Apostle then speaks of a scandal that touches even the moment of greatest union for a Christian community, the “Lord’s supper”, the Eucharistic celebration: even there, there are divisions, and there are those who take advantage of this to eat and drink, excluding those who have nothing (cf. *1 Cor 11:18-22*). In the face of this, Paul gives a stark judgement: “When you meet together, it is not the Lord’s supper that you eat” (v. 20), you have another ritual, which is pagan, it is not the Lord’s supper.

Who knows, perhaps in the community of Corinth, no-one thought they had committed a sin, and those harsh words by the Apostle sounded somewhat incomprehensible to them. They were probably all convinced that they were good people, and if questioned on love, they would have answered that love was certainly a very important value for them, just like friendship or the family. In our days too, love is on the lips of many “influencers” and in the refrains of many songs. We speak a lot about love, but what is love?

“But what about the *other* love?”, Paul seems to ask to his Christians of Corinth. Not the love that rises, but the one that descends; not the one that takes, but the one that gives; not the one that appears, but the one that is hidden. Paul is concerned that in Corinth — as among us today too — there is confusion and that there is actually no trace of the theological virtue of love, the one that comes to us only from God. And even if people ensure to us with words that they are good people and that they love their family and friends, in reality they know very little about the love of God.

The Christians of antiquity had several Greek words at their disposal to define love. In the end, the word “*agape*” emerged, which we normally translate as “charity”. Because in truth Christians are capable of all the forms of love in the world: they too fall in love, more or less as happens to everyone. They too experience the benevolence that is felt in friendship. They too feel love for their country and the universal love for all humanity. But there is a greater love, a love which comes from God and is directed towards God, which enables us to love God, to become his friends. It enables us to love our neighbours as God loves them, with the desire to share the friendship with God. Because of Christ, this love drives us where we would not humanly go: it is the love for the poor, for what is not lovable, for those who do not care for us and are ungrateful. It is love for what no one would love, even for one’s enemy. Even for the enemy. This is “theological”: this comes from God, it is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preaches: “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (*Lk* 6:32-33). And he concludes: “But love your enemies” — we are used to speaking badly of our enemies — “love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish” (v. 35). Let us remember this: “Love your enemies and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return”. Let us not forget this!

In these words, love reveals itself as a theological virtue and assumes the name of charity. Love is charity. We immediately realize that it is a difficult, indeed impossible love to practice if one does not live in God. Our human nature makes us love spontaneously what is good and beautiful. In the name of an ideal or a great affection we can even be generous and perform heroic acts. But the love of God goes beyond these criteria. Christian love embraces what is not lovable, it offers forgiveness — how difficult it is to forgive! How much love it takes to forgive! — Christian love blesses those who curse, whereas, faced with an insult or a curse, we are accustomed to replying with another insult, with another curse. It is a love so ardent that it seems almost impossible, and yet it is the only thing that will remain of us. Love is the “narrow gate” through which we will pass in order to enter the Kingdom of God. Because at the twilight of life, we will not be judged on generic love; we will be judged precisely on charity, on the real love we had. And Jesus says this to us, which is so beautiful: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Mt* 25:40). This is the beautiful thing, the greatest thing about love. Onwards and upwards!

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21. Humility (22 May 2024)

We will conclude this series of catecheses by looking at a virtue which is not part of the seven cardinal and theological virtues, but which is at the base of Christian life. This virtue is *humility*, the great antagonist of the most mortal of sins, namely pride. Whereas pride and arrogance swell the human heart, making us appear to be more than we are, humility restores everything to its correct dimension: we are wonderful creatures, but we are limited, with qualities and flaws. From the beginning, the Bible reminds us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return (cf. *Gen 3:19*); indeed, “humble” derives from *humus*, that is, earth. And yet delusions of omnipotence, which are so dangerous, often arise in the human heart, and this does us a great deal of harm.

It takes very little to free ourselves from the demon of pride. Contemplating a starry sky is enough to restore the correct measure, as the Psalm says: “When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?” (8:3-4). Modern science enables us to extend the horizon much, much farther, and to feel the mystery that surrounds us and inhabits us, even more [intensely].

Blessed are the people who guard this perception of their smallness in their heart! These people are shielded from an ugly vice: arrogance. In his Beatitudes, Jesus leads precisely with them: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven” (*Mt 5:3*). It is the first Beatitude because it is at the base of the ones that follow: indeed, meekness, mercy and purity of heart stem from that inner sense of smallness. Humility is the gateway to all the virtues.

In the first pages of the Gospels, humility and poverty of spirit seem to be the source of everything. The angel’s announcement does not happen at Jerusalem’s doors, but in a remote village in Galilee, that was so insignificant that people used to say, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (*Jn 1:46*). But it is precisely from there that the world was reborn. The chosen heroine was not a little princess who grew up coddled, but an unknown girl: Mary. She was the first one to be astonished when the angel delivered God’s announcement to her. And her wonder stands out in her song of praise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for *he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden*” (*Lk 1:46-48*). God is — so to speak — attracted by Mary’s smallness, which is above all an inner smallness. And he is also attracted by our smallness, when we accept it. She certainly had many other qualities, which appear a few at a time throughout the Gospels’ narrative, but this is the only one that is named: humility.

From then on, Mary was careful not to take centre stage. Her first decision after the angelic annunciation was to go and help, to go and serve her cousin. Mary headed towards the mountains of Judea to visit Elizabeth: she assisted her in the last months of her pregnancy. But who saw this gesture? No one, other than God. The Virgin did not seem to ever want to emerge from this concealment. Just as when a woman's voice from the crowd proclaims her blessedness: "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked!" (*Lk 11:27*). But Jesus immediately replies: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (*Lk 11:28*). Not even the most sacred truth of her life — being the Mother of God — became a reason for her to boast before mankind. In a world marked by the pursuit of appearance, of flaunting one's superiority over others, Mary walks decisively, by the sole power of God's grace, in the opposite direction.

We can imagine that she too experienced difficult moments, days when her faith advanced in darkness. But this never made her humility waver, which in Mary was a rock-solid virtue. I want to highlight this: humility is a rock-solid virtue. Let us think of Mary: she was always small, always without self-importance, always free of ambition. This smallness of hers was her invincible strength: it was she who remained at the foot of the cross, while the illusion of a triumphant Messiah was being shattered. In the days leading up to Pentecost, it was Mary who gathered up the flock of disciples, after they had been unable to keep vigil over Jesus for just one hour, and had abandoned him when the storm came.

Brothers and sisters, humility is everything. It is what saves us from the Evil One, and from the danger of becoming his accomplices. And humility is the source of peace in the world and in the Church. Where there is no humility, there is war, there is discord, there is division. God has given us an example of [humility] in Jesus and Mary, so that it may be our salvation and happiness. And humility is precisely the way, the path to salvation. Thank you!

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