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THE PLACE OF VIRTUE IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

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UTIFULLY, THE *NEW YORK TIMES* REPORTS EVERY SUNDAY ON WHICH BOOKS Americans are buying and reading. The Best Seller's List towards the back of the book review section of the paper functions as an indicator, a gauge of what Americans are searching for as they take care of their families, fulfill their responsibilities at their jobs, and try to get along with their neighbors. The presence of William Bennett's *The Book of Virtues* on that list for more than eighty consecutive weeks suggests that Americans are longing for wise counsel on how to live virtuous lives.

In the Introduction to his volume, Bennett observes:

“Today we speak about values and how it is important to ‘have them,’ as if they were beads on a string or marbles in a pouch. But these stories [those contained in his book] speak to morality and virtues not as something to be possessed, but as the central part of human nature, not as something to have but as some thing to be, the most important thing to be.”¹

Bennett's distinction between possessing something and being something is critical if we ever hope to discern what is a virtuous life. The distinction Bennett draws for his readers shows that a discussion about virtue is inescapably a discussion about philosophy. Shakespeare's Hamlet wondered aloud if it were better to be or not to be. The question Hamlet posed and entertained was a question concerning personal existence. Virtue, like life itself, is inexorably a matter of being and nature.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that virtue was a habit, disposed toward action by deliberate choice, being at the mean relative to us, and defined by reason and as a prudent man would define it.² We understand habit to be that which follows a regular pattern until it has become almost involuntary. Action, of course, is something done or performed. We choose to be virtuous; that is, we consciously prefer one course of action over another. Virtue, we assert, is a mean between excess and deficiency. It is tethered to and guided by reason. Finally, a judicious person is capable of recognizing virtue and naming it properly.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argued that ethical virtue does not arrive in us by nature. Ethical virtue is also not contrary to nature according to Aristotle. However, our nature does make it possible for us to receive virtue and to become more expert in practicing it.³ Aristotle's insistence that we are not born with virtue places emphasis rightly on the habitual character of virtue. Habit can thus be said to be of the very essence of virtue. Habit is not the matter but the substantial form of virtue.

St. Thomas Aquinas defined virtue in a similar way to Aristotle. He clearly saw it as a habit.⁴ The Angelic Doctor referred to virtue more accurately as an operative habit, that is, readied and adapted to specifically human action.⁵ Like Aristotle, Thomas associated virtue with the will and deliberate choice.⁶ With Aristotle, Thomas maintained that

moral virtue observes the mean.⁷ The Dominican friar noted virtue's close relationship to reason, not unlike the Greek master. Similarly, Aquinas upheld the necessity of prudence for human life.⁸

In the *Summa*, St. Thomas took up consideration of the cause of the virtues, more precisely, whether virtue is in us by nature. Thomas concluded that virtue is natural to man inchoatively. In the words of St. Thomas, there is a natural aptitude for virtue but not a perfection of it.⁹ Therefore, if perfected virtue is not innate, we can look forward to progress in virtue as long as we are exhorted to it and we expend the effort to attain it.

Leo XIII wrote the very first papal encyclical on the social question more than one hundred years ago. In *Rerum Novarum*, the Pope commented “the true work



Leo XIII

and nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue; that virtue is, moreover, the common inheritance of men, equally within the reach of high and low, rich and poor; and that virtue, and virtue alone, wherever found, will be followed by the rewards of everlasting happiness.”¹⁰ A little later in the document, the Holy Father remarked, “Since the end of society is to make man better, the chief good that society can possess is virtue.”¹¹ As Leo XIII made the conditions of the working classes the main focus of his encyclical, so did he also initiate the historic linkage between the Church's social teaching and virtue.

Historic is not the same as explicit, however. Following *Rerum Novarum*, we do not find in *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Mater et Magister*, *Pacem in Terris*, or *Populorum Progressio* any explicit reference to virtue. Indeed, not until Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* in 1981, do we find as explicit a reference to virtue that we find in *Rerum Novarum*. In *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II called work:

“a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’

Without this consideration it is impossible to understand the meaning of the virtue of industriousness, and more particularly it is impossible to understand why industriousness should be a virtue: for virtue, as a moral habit, is something whereby man becomes good as man.”¹²

As the various Popes from Leo XIII to John Paul II develop the principles of the Church's social teaching in their encyclicals, virtue is mostly implicit.

The explicit appeal to virtue found in *Rerum Novarum* is replicated—happily for us—at another level of magisterial teaching. In 1989, J. Francis Stafford, the Archbishop of Denver, published a pastoral letter entitled *Virtue and the American Republic*. In this very fine document, Archbishop Stafford asserted:

the American experiment requires virtuous individuals, whose disciplining of their own lives creates the moral habits necessary for the great adventure of self-government. And it requires a new birth of public virtue: a new care for the common good, a new recognition that it is only in communities of virtue and character that the rights of individuals are secured.¹³

Archbishop Stafford, like the Popes before him, identifies virtue in its personal and communal dimensions as indispensable to proper moral thinking and acting.

The *New York Times* does not report who buys and reads the books on its Best Seller's List. It does not say, for instance, if the buyers and readers are men or women, young or old, rich or poor, white or black, well-educated or poorly educated. With runaway best sellers like *The Book of Virtues*, it is safe to presume that the appeal is very broad. It probably cuts across all of the usual lines of classification, perhaps even including ideology. Volumes like *The Book of Virtues* cannot be pigeon-holed so easily because their greatness rises above categories like gender, age, social status, race, and educational attainment. *The Book of Virtues* appeals not to that which separates but to that which unites.

Indubitably, man's reason separates him from all the other living creatures on this planet. But it is also the ability to reason which unites so many disparate peoples all over the world. It is reason which unites an American corporate executive with a Brazilian coffee-grower, an

Italian flight attendant with a French biochemist, a Scottish octogenarian with a Honduran teenager, a Canadian industrialist with a Salvadoran *campesino*, a German auto worker with a Peruvian school drop-out. Some reason at a very high level, others at a very minimal level, but all of us-barring genetic defect or some other disability, of course-reason. In the classical philosophical terminology, reason is both act and potency. It is something we employ and something we hold in reserve. It is something we can excel at or something we can stand to improve.

Ancients like Aristotle believed that reason could be used in service of the good. Aquinas, building on Aristotle, was no less convinced of reason's contribution to the good life. Based on figures like Aristotle and Aquinas, the West has long championed the remedy of ethical and moral problems by recourse to reason. Unfortunately, suspicion abounds today about reason's ability to solve wrenching social problems like out-of-wedlock births and violence at home and in the streets. When some propose abstinence and chastity education to counter the rising tide of teenage pregnancy, they are denounced for imposing their values on others in a pluralistic society. When others recommend self-control and restraint as a way of curbing violence, they are pilloried for intolerance to cultural values not their own.

Abstinence, modesty, self-control, and restraint are ethical virtues. One need not subscribe to a certain value system in order to acquire and practice these personal habits. What is necessary, though, is an esteem for reason and a belief that virtues bind even as value systems differ.

Historian Gertrude Himmelfarb has written an excellent volume entitled *The De-moralization of Society* in which she traces how the word "virtue" slipped out of parlance and was replaced by "values." She contends that a decisive shift took place when:

Friedrich Nietzsche began to speak of 'values' in its present sense-not as a verb, meaning to value or esteem something; nor as a singular noun, meaning the measure of a thing (the economic value of money, labor, or property); but in the plural, connoting the moral beliefs and attitudes of a society. Moreover, he used the word consciously, repeatedly, indeed insistently, to signify what he took to be the most profound event in human history. His 'transvaluation of values' was to be the final, ultimate revolution, a revolution against

both the classical virtues and the Judaic-Christian ones. The 'death of God' would mean the death of morality and the death of truth above all, the truth of any morality. There would be no good and evil, no virtue and vice. There would be only 'values.' And having degraded virtues into values, Nietzsche proceeded to de-value and trans-value them, to create a new set of values for his 'new man.'¹⁴



Himmelfarb then argues that Max Weber later used the word "values" matter-of-factly, as if it were part of the accepted vocabulary and of no great moment.¹⁵ Since the early twentieth century the word "values" has been regularly used in just about any kind of talk about ethics and morality. But just because it is part of the taken-for-granted world of moral discourse now, does not mean that we should stop analyzing how the word "values" is used, either deliberately or unwittingly. Himmelfarb observes the following:

Values brought with it the assumptions that all moral ideas are subjective and relative, that they are mere customs and conventions, that they have a purely instrumental, utilitarian purpose, and that they are peculiar to specific individuals and societies. (And, in the current intellectual climate, to specific classes, races, and sexes.)

So long as morality was couched in the language of 'virtue,' it had a firm, resolute character. The older philosophers might argue about the source of virtues, the kinds and relative importance of virtues, the relation between moral and intellectual virtues or classical and religious ones, or the bearing of private virtues upon public ones. They might even 'relativize' and 'historicize' virtues by recognizing that different virtues characterized different peoples at different times and places. But for a particular people at a particular time, the word 'virtue' carried with it a sense of gravity and authority, as 'values' does not.

Values, as we now understand that word, do not have to be virtues; they can be beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices, and idiosyncracies whatever any individual, group or society happens to value, at any time,

for any reason. One cannot say of virtues, as one can say of values, that anyone's virtues are as good as anyone else's, or that everyone has a right to his own virtues. Only values can lay that claim to moral equality and neutrality.¹⁶

It was near the end of the Victorian era that a wise Pope boldly proclaimed virtue to be the chief good of society. Leo XIII was even bolder in suggesting that all—not just a privileged few—could be virtuous. In the words of the Roman Pontiff, virtue is the common inheritance of men. Virtue, not value, was common to the late nineteenth century entrepreneur and his employee, and virtue, not value, is common now to the policy wonk and the ordinary citizen.

The appeal to virtue in papal social teaching confirms once again the ability of Catholic moral theology to speak well beyond its confessional boundaries. While the virtues tradition is routinely associated with Catholic moral theology, it would not be correct to call it an exclusively Catholic source of ethics. Because of the virtues tradition, the Catholic and the person without obedience to a creed meet on the same ground in ethical debate: they both possess the commitment to engage reason and will in such a way as to achieve some level of self-mastery. They can both agree that without self-mastery it is futile to think that our society can be better than it is right now. Indeed, the aggregate only improves to the extent that individual persons take seriously the altogether reasonable project to be virtuous. Together, then, virtuous men and women may bring about a change in the moral tenor of their society and their era.

Today a great many Americans are skittish about excluding candidates for public office based merely on previous morally offensive behavior. It is argued, for example, that private moral conduct of a certain kind should not automatically disqualify a person from holding the public trust. A candidate's personal morality does not have any bearing on his public oath, it is urged in some quarters. Some, not accepting this kind of thinking, counter that issues of personal morality are indeed related to public life by way of character. Candidates proposing themselves for public office are not judged by the electorate on their policies alone but on their character.

In his book titled *The Moral Sense*, James Q. Wilson considers the role exercised by character in ethical inquiry. Wilson maintains that “we do not judge people

(unless we do not know them well) by any single trait; we judge them as having a set of traits, a character. Now by character we mean two things: a distinctive combination of personal qualities by which someone is known (that is, personality), and moral strength or integrity.”¹⁷ Character is crucially important because it reveals that a single virtue—no matter how important or how superbly practiced—is not sufficient for an ethically complex world. An ensemble of virtues is necessary to succeed ethically. And it is character which holds the different virtues in balance and harmony.

In his pastoral letter *Virtue and the American Republic*, Archbishop Stafford refers to “communities of virtue” and “character.” The reference to character is very much needed at this time. Gertrude Himmelfarb explains:

Having displaced virtue from the central position it once occupied, as the defining attribute of the good life and the good society, we have relegated it to the bedroom or boudoir. When we now speak of virtue, we no longer think of the classical virtues of wisdom, justice, temperance, and courage, or the Christian ones of faith, hope, and charity, or even such Victorian ones as work, thrift, cleanliness, and self-reliance. Virtue is now understood in its sexual connotations of chastity and marital fidelity ... This mutation in the word ‘virtue’ has the effect first of narrowing the meaning of the word, reducing it to a matter of sexuality.¹⁸

Character shows its moral strength by embracing the virtue of chastity but not excluding other virtues either. As Gertrude Himmelfarb points out above, there are classical, Christian, and Victorian virtues. Chastity is but one of these, and properly speaking, it is an aspect of one of the cardinal virtues: temperance. Character is a blending of multiple virtues; for instance, the Christian character involves the integration of human virtues with the theological virtues. Character, then, is not only a corrective to the plainly evident reductionism of virtue but it also represents nature's capacity to receive the divine.

The formation of character requires a thoroughgoing commitment to hard work. More than the pursuit of a single virtue, building character demands complete dedication of the human spirit and submission to a fairly rigorous internal discipline. As important as human effort is in character development, however, it is not the only ingredient. Character is molded and shaped by a

transcendent element, too. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the grace of God purifies and elevates the efforts we make to be virtuous and noble of character.¹⁹ Christ's gift of salvation permits us to persevere in this great work and by a conscientious use of the sacraments and cooperation with the Holy Spirit, virtue is deepened and character is forged.²⁰

Virtue and character bring to the fore the connection in Church social teaching between nature and grace and between reason and revelation. As Aristotle and Aquinas made clear, virtue is not innate; we must be trained in it. Moreover, the regular practice of virtue holds the promise of a growth in moral stature. However, growth in moral stature is not just our own achievement; it is the power of grace at work in us. From the vantage point of Christian ethics, then nature is not bypassed or eclipsed but is renewed and transformed by grace. Neither is human nature co-opted or overcome by grace. As the Catechism wisely states, "the grace of Christ is not in the slightest way a rival of our freedom when this freedom accords with the sense of the true and the good that God has put in the human heart. On the contrary, as Christian experience attests especially in prayer, the more docile we are to the promptings of grace, the more we grow in inner freedom and confidence during trials, such as those we face in the pressures and constraints of the outer world."²¹ Reason allows us the prospect of ethical greatness, individually and corporately. But reason is not the only route to ethical greatness. Revelation opens the way to ethical greatness too. As the Second Vatican Council instructs:

Christian revelation contributes greatly to the promotion of [a] communion between persons, and at the same time leads us to a deeper understanding of the laws of social life which the Creator has written into man's spiritual and moral nature.²²

In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII asserted that the chief good which society can possess is virtue. Modern society, especially in the West, holds by contrast that the chief good of society is the possession of material things. The acquisitive spirit and not the virtuous spirit is characteristic of contemporary society. Therefore, those who pursue virtue in a serious manner should be prepared to make some sacrifices. Alasdair MacIntyre, in

his book *After Virtue*, writes:

The possession of the virtues may perfectly well hinder us in achieving external goods. I need to emphasize at this point that external goods genuinely are goods. Not only are they characteristic objects of human desire, whose allocation is what gives point to the virtues of justice and of generosity, but no one can despise them altogether without a certain hypocrisy. Yet notoriously the cultivation of truthfulness, justice and courage will often, the world being what it contingently is, bar us from being rich or famous or powerful. Thus although we may hope that we can not only achieve the standards of excellence and the internal goods of certain practices by possessing the virtues and become rich, famous and powerful, the virtues are always a potential stumbling block to this comfortable ambition. We should therefore expect that, if in a particular society the pursuit of external goods were to become dominant, the concept of the virtues might suffer first attrition and then perhaps something near total effacement.²³

The encouragement of virtue is simultaneously an invitation to conversion. The conversion to which we are called may not just entail a renunciation of material possessions as MacIntyre says above. It will, however, most assuredly require a redirection of the human spirit. The human spirit which had formerly been a slave to vice is now freed to serve the good. Even when vice is not at issue, there must still be an arousal or stirring of the human spirit out of the state of foolishness or indifference. From foolishness and indifference, there is a conversion to wisdom and love. Wisdom and love, then, are inexorably related to virtue. In the Old Testament, King Solomon searches for wisdom. Of his quest for wisdom, the sacred author advises, "If it be virtue you love, why, virtues are the fruit of her labors, since it is she who teaches temperance and prudence, justice and fortitude; nothing in life is more serviceable to me than these."²⁴

Pope John Paul II adverts to conversion in his remarkable encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. When discussing the formation of conscience, the Holy Father insists upon "a continuous conversion to what is true and to


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what is good ...It is the heart converted to the Lord and to the love of what is good which is really the source of true judgments of conscience."²⁵ He, too, refers to a rootedness in and development of virtuous attitudes: prudence and the other cardinal virtues, and even before these the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.²⁶

The intractableness of certain social problems in society and the steady rise of others has clearly necessitated a reexamination of ethical education. As we realize the severe limitations of the value-centered approach

and the damage wrought by reliance on it, the virtues tradition offers hope and promise for ethical redirection. Inspiration for the ethical redirection can be sought and found in the Church's social teaching. With some luck, those who have read William Bennett's book and have found in it what they were looking for may soon make an acquaintance with Catholic social teaching. We need not wait for luck, however. Men and women of faith and conviction can make that introduction now.



NOTES

- 1 William J. Bennett, ed., *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1993), p. 14.
- 2 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Book B, 6, 1107a.
- 3 Ibid., Book B, 1, 1103a.
- 4 Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Part II (First Part, Treatise on Habits), Q 55.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., Q 56.
- 7 Ibid., Q 64.
- 8 Ibid., Q 57.
- 9 Ibid., Q 63.
- 10 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 24.
- 11 Ibid., 34.
- 12 Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 9.
- 13 J. Francis Stafford, *Virtue and the American Republic*, 37.
- 14 Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-moralization of Society* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 10.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., p. 11.
- 17 James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), p. 240.
- 18 Himmelfarb, p. 15.
- 19 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1810.
- 20 Ibid., 1811.
- 21 Ibid., 1742.
- 22 *Gaudium et Spes*, 23.
- 23 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 196.