

THE CARDINAL VIRTUE OF FORTITUDE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

This is the third in a series of four reflections on the Cardinal Virtues, presented by Fr. Anthony Barratt, STL, PHD, ChD, from the Upstate New York Area

I am pretty sure that most people, if not everyone, would agree that this virtue is sorely needed and desired much in our current times and that it has certainly been tested! What is more, this virtue (like temperance) is a prerequisite for and allows the other virtues of prudence and justice that we have discussed, to flourish. At the same time, as St. Ambrose comments, “fortitude is informed by prudence and justice” because it trusts not in itself, but looks instead to the good. It is also related to our last virtue of temperance, since fortitude helps us in our greatest difficulties and struggles, whereas, as we shall see, temperance helps us to enjoy the goods and joys of life appropriately.

The *Catechism* (n. 1808) teaches that “it 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.” Our quote gives us some important pointers as to how fortitude is a virtue and not just some sort of reckless bravado that endangers us and may well also endanger others. Fortitude always has the good and justice as its aim and destination. We can see this in the amazing example of so many martyrs. They showed great courage and fortitude, often suffering horrible deaths in witness to Christ. But, as St. Augustine reminds us: “it was not the injury but the cause that made them martyrs.”

What can ensure the firmness and constancy that we find in our *Catechism* definition? The answer is, of course, God’s love for us. We have the model of this in Our Lord’s own Passion, both in terms of Jesus’ own fortitude, but also in what His passion, death and resurrection gives to us. Fortitude is possible when we recall God’s love for us and that our final purpose or destiny is not in this world, but in the life to come. We can remember Jesus’ words: “He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.” (Matthew 10: 39). This can give us great spiritual strength and courage. All this is why St. Paul can write: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8: 31-39).

Incidentally, that is why we can link fortitude with “the fear of the Lord.” Realizing that God loves us, but also that God is in charge and that God is awesome, means that we can be constant, and even courageous, in the pursuit of the good. We will not be deflected from this pursuit, for example, by a fear of losing popularity or even the respect of others. St. John Vianney once asked this question: “Do you know what the Devil’s first temptation is to the person who wants to serve God with dedication? It is human respect!” In a related way, fortitude helps us to be generous and magnanimous, as we are not obsessed or blinded with our status or our own security. Instead, we realize that everything is gift and that we are called to lay up treasures in heaven rather than on earth (Matthew 6: 19-21).

These points are also useful in understanding what fortitude is *not*. This is important, as fortitude is often misunderstood, or it is confused with other actions or attitudes. For example, fortitude is not an absence of fear or being fearless; rather, it guides and moderates the emotion of fear.

Fortitude helps us to see clearly the circumstances, dangers and fears that we may face, but then to act courageously. In fact, as the popular saying goes, fortitude is “fear that has said its prayers.” Furthermore, it is not an absence, nor an ignoring of our vulnerability, but rather presupposes it (otherwise how would it be courageous or having fortitude!). It is also not suffering for its own sake, nor is it a resigned acceptance of the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” (Shakespeare: Hamlet).

Fortitude is a wonderful virtue and, as we acknowledged above, one that is much needed and desired in our present circumstances. One fruit of fortitude is *endurance*, not as a passive resignation or acceptance, but rather as an active disposition of the heart and soul. We endure something for something greater or better. In a similar way, fortitude helps us to be *constant* and faithful in our relationship with God, especially when we seem to face many difficulties or disappointments. As St. Theresa of Kolkata would say, we are asked to be faithful, not successful and, as is said in a prayer attributed to her, “...do it anyway!”

Patience is another fruit of fortitude. Again, care is needed in how we see this patience. It is not some shrugging of the shoulders or rolling of the eyes. Like endurance it is active and involves preserving cheerfulness and a positive attitude, of being a person of hope, and, of having a serenity of spirit, even in the most difficult situations. All these fruits help us, of course, but they also ensure that we are able to help others by being strong, focused and resolute. St. Hildegard of Bingen puts it beautifully: Patience “is the pillar which nothing can soften.”

Perhaps we can leave the final words with St. Theresa of Avila about how fortitude enables us to reach our true purpose. She faced huge obstacles and difficulties and yet she wrote:

“it is most important that they should begin well by making an earnest and most determined resolve not to rest until they reach their goal, whatever may come, whatever may happen to them, however hard they may have to labor, whoever may complain of them, whether they reach their goal or die on the road, or have no heart to confront the trials which they meet, whether the very world dissolves before them.”

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