

THE CARDINAL VIRTUE OF TEMPERANCE (MODERATION) IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

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

We now come to the fourth and final cardinal virtue, namely the virtue of temperance or, as it is sometimes called, moderation. As the *Catechism* (n. 1810) tells us, all the virtues are, “acquired by education, deliberate acts and perseverance [and that they are] purified and elevated by divine grace.” However, temperance has some particular characteristics. St. Thomas Aquinas observes that it is perhaps the most inward-looking of the virtues and it is not so much the cause of good, but more like the prerequisite for good.

This virtue is often only understood in a very narrow way; or it is either totally ignored, or treated as though it is the only virtue worth having. So, how do we define it, understand it and, most importantly live it? Looking at the *Catechism* again, temperance is defined as: “the moral virtue that moderates the attractions of pleasures and provides balance in the use of created goods. It ensures the will’s mastery over instincts and keeps desires within the limit of what is honorable” (n. 1809).

This definition is very helpful, but it is also very concentrated, so we will need to unpack it. A good way to do this is to focus on some of the key words in the definition. We notice first that this virtue *moderates* things. So, it does not nullify or destroy pleasures. It is not a “kill-joy” virtue; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It celebrates the truth that what God has made is indeed “good” (Genesis 1: 25), but that an excess or over indulging in the good things of creation or our passions can be bad for us. As St. John Paul II comments: “temperance ensures that our body and senses fulfill their proper function in our human nature.”

This is where our second key word comes in: *balance*. Moderation or temperance helps to keep everything in harmony and balance; with no one thing taking over or dominating our life, or our appetites. This, after all, is one of the reasons that we fast at times (such as during Lent); as a reminder of what is important and to make sure that we do not give undue importance to certain things. This would be true for obvious things such as food or alcohol, but also for so many other matters, for example the TV, the computer or the smart phone. An exercise in moderation would involve being honest about how many hours we spend a day looking at the TV, or the computer, or our total screen time on the smart phone...

We could extend our understanding of this virtue and the balance and perspective that it brings even further. I believe that all the changes that have come with the pandemic have helped us to see this truth more clearly. The pandemic has been terrible on so many levels, but, perhaps, it has helped us to see what is important in life. For example, we could be a workaholic, but this may lead us to neglect ourselves and others (and God!). It is not that work is bad, but rather that it has become out of control. Then there are our “appetites” or interests. Our whole life-style could be intemperate, as we run after the latest fad or fashion, whatever our passion or interests may be, and in this we sadly become totally self-adsorbed.

Another key word in the definition is *mastery*, as well as the word *limit*. Just as temperance is not a kill-joy virtue, nor does it suggest that we should have no passions or that we ignore all our desires. Again, quite the opposite is true! Instead, moderation is there to ensure that these very human and good passions and desires do not get out of control or run wild. We all know how damaging and destructive that can be. Instead, moderation can keep these passions and desires in balance and in proportion. It also makes sure that passions and desires lead us in the right direction, or, as the Catechism puts it, that we remain “honorable”.

A good example of this is the passion of anger. Anger is a very human passion, of course. In itself, is perhaps neither good nor bad. Indeed, it can be a force for the good as in a “righteous anger” when we see an injustice. However, the issue comes when anger gets out of control and when it breaks those limits of what is good and honorable. In fact, without temperance or moderation, we can easily not just be angry from time to time, but, sadly, we can actually become an angry (and even worse) loveless person.

There are many other examples. Our sexual drive is part of what is the best of us, yet, if it becomes immoderate, then it can take over our lives and even lead us to treat others as objects simply for our gratification. Curiosity is part of our human nature and has led to many great discoveries and advances. However, if it is out of control, or not honorable, then it can quickly become some sort of voyeurism, or direct us to dabble in dangerous things such as the occult.

Many spiritual writers have stressed the importance of temperance, especially when we can see the wonderful fruits of this virtue: chastity, continence, humility, gentleness, respect for others, an inner harmony, serenity and peace, authentically enjoying the good things of creation etc. We find such thoughts in Shakespeare’s Hamlet: “...for in the very torrent, tempest and whirlwind of passions, you must acquire and beget a temperance, that may give it smoothness.” Finally, we might conclude that the virtue of temperance helps us to have a “purity of heart” and the wonderful result, as our Lord in the Beatitude teaches, is that we shall see God (Mt. 5: 8).

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