



SESSION 13

Faith, Hope, and Charity



Cardinal and Theological Virtues, Raphael

SESSION OBJECTIVES

- To understand the theological virtues and the indispensable role they play in the Christian life
- To see how Scripture portrays the theological virtues at work in the lives of Abraham and Mary
- To witness how faith, hope, and love animate the lives of the martyrs and enable them to lay down their lives for Christ and his Church
- To appreciate how these virtues elevate the whole of our lives, reorient them to God, and make us ready and able to love and serve him now and in the life to come

STEP 1: Begin

OPENING PRAYER

O my God,
I love Thee above all things,
with my whole heart and soul,
because Thou art all good and worthy of all my love.
I love my neighbor as myself for the love of Thee.
I forgive all who have injured me,
and ask pardon of all whom I have injured.
Amen.

— *Act of Charity*

INTRODUCTION

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. There are three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. (CCC 1813)

It is a tremendous truth that we are invited to be children—sons and daughters—of the Most High God. Saint John marvels at this gift when he writes, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God.” And then, as though what he has written sounds utterly unbelievable, he emphasizes, “and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

And so we are! Grace poured into our souls transforms us into God’s adopted children. But how can we be made to act as his children? With such lofty ideals and high expectations, how could we ever live up to them? Is living the Christian life really possible?

Left to our own resources, we could never measure up to our status as children of God. But we are not left on our own! We are given resources and powers beyond our innate capacity, most fundamentally, the theological virtues. As the *Catechism* reminds us, “They are the pledge of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in the faculties of the human being.” And this means that God himself not only makes us into his children through grace, but he also elevates and strengthens our capacities so that we can live according to our new identity as his children.

In this session, we consider the gift of the theological virtues and how they animate the Christian life. What do these virtues do? What difference do they make? How do examples from Scripture and the lives of the saints display these virtues in action? The theological virtues send us on the adventure of the Christian life. By relying on God’s marvelous work within us, we can persevere and attain a glorious victory in Christ.

STEP 2: Learn

SETTING THE STAGE

Near a bend in the Mohawk River, patches of open fields and forest surround Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine in Auriesville, New York. The spartan, rustic quality of the place serves as a reminder of the simple and focused zeal of the missionaries and martyrs who are remembered here. Their lives and their heroic deaths give witness to what ultimately matters in this life: believing in Christ, hoping in his promises, and loving him above all things.

Faith, hope, and love transform us from the inside out and equip us to live as Christ’s disciples. But it’s not always easy to see what specific role they play or why they’re really necessary. What do these virtues contribute to the Christian life? What do they look like in action? And what can we do to foster their

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growth and to strengthen them? In this session, we look to scriptural models of the theological virtues and some heroic saints and martyrs. In each case, we find a concrete expression of what the Church teaches about the theological virtues: they make us capable of living and acting as God's children, as holy disciples, and as saints in the making.

I. The heart of our Christian life is faith, hope, and love

II. Salvation History: Abraham is the father of faith

- A. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1)
 - 1. With astounding faith, Abram believes God's promises, sets out for a new life, and welcomes a beloved son, through whom numerous descendants will come
 - 2. His faith shines in his willingness to believe in God and to hope in his promises, despite being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac
- B. Mary gives us an example of faith that parallels and perfects Abraham's
 - 1. Mary is the perfect embodiment of faith—her faith never wavers
 - 2. She is "the purest realization of faith" and the mother of all who believe in Jesus

III. Pilgrimage: The North American Martyrs were canonized in 1930 by Pope Pius XI

- A. Saints Isaac Jogues, René Goupil, and Jean de Lalande
 - 1. The Jesuits came as missionaries from the seventeenth century onward
 - 2. Saint Isaac Jogues modeled the theological virtues in his missions, his sufferings, and his courage, as did his companions Goupil and Lalande
- B. Saint Kateri Tekakwitha
 - 1. Smallpox took most of her family and disfigured her face when she was very young
 - 2. At age ten, she began to be instructed in the Catholic faith and later was baptized
 - 3. She consecrated herself to Christ, was persecuted for it, and lived out a life of profound faith, hope, and charity

IV. Catechesis: The theological virtues come from and direct us to God

- A. They unite us to God and adapt our human capacities to share in God's own life
- B. Through faith, we entrust ourselves to God and believe all that he has revealed and all that the Church teaches
- C. Through hope, we desire eternal life and trust in Christ's promises, not relying on ourselves
- D. Through charity, we love God above all else and love our neighbor as ourselves for love of God
 - 1. Charity animates and guides all of our actions and the other virtues
 - 2. It perfects and elevates our human love so that it can share in God's own love

We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day. But these are not enough without the great hope, which must surpass everything else. This great hope can only be God, who encompasses the whole of reality and who can bestow upon us what we, by ourselves, cannot attain. ... God is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who has loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety.

V. *Lectio divina*: 1 Corinthians 13

- A. Saint Paul often refers to the theological virtues, e.g., Colossians and 1 Thessalonians
- B. Love is patient, love is kind, love rejoices in the truth—it is the bottom line
- C. Make love your aim: meditate on God's love and then seek to be patient, kind, etc.

WORD MEANING:

Virtue

A firm and stable habit, or disposition, to do what is good; some virtues—such as the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude—can be acquired through repeated human actions, while others—such as the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity—are infused by God into the soul of the Christian.

STEP 3: Engage

- 1) Abraham's role as a patriarch begins with a monumental invitation from God. God asks him to leave behind what he knows and to head out into the unknown. Our lives today are different from Abraham's in many ways, but have you experienced (or are you currently experiencing) a similar moment in your own journey? What lessons from Abraham's life and faith might apply to your own situation? (Consider glancing over Genesis 12–22, which recounts much of Abraham's remarkable journey of faith.)

Naturally, the personal dimension of this question will prompt any number of responses. For some, it may be difficult to share in this personal way, which is just fine. If this is the case, an alternative is to invite them to think more generally about faith and what lessons of faith we can draw from Abraham. The goal of the question is twofold. First, to embrace the perspective that faith is truly an adventure; it can be tremendously exciting while also bringing fears and anxieties. And second, to see that this is normal and that, like Abraham, we grow into the adventure of faith. To appreciate better the dimension of adventure and to draw out some lessons, recall some of the major moments in Abraham's story (see Gen 12–22). As mentioned in the video, Abram doesn't seem to have perfect faith from the get-go considering that he brings Lot with him. But he still steps out in faith to follow God. His faith is tested and grows throughout his adventure with God as he travels, settles, fights, receives God's promises, and makes himself ready to sacrifice Isaac. Throughout the Christian life, faith asks us to take risks and make sacrifices for the Lord; some of these will be small, while others will likely be large. But this growth in faith doesn't happen all at once, and Abraham teaches us this as well. Other lessons might include Abraham's generosity, his determined intercession, his promptness in responding to the Lord's will, and so on. The overall point is that the Lord will lead us and guide us, like he guided Abraham, along a journey that prepares us for whatever he has in store—if only we will listen to him in prayer, trust in him, and follow him.

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- 2) The history of the Church is filled with stories of martyrs who gave the ultimate witness to Christ: laying down their own lives in the service of the Gospel. These incredible sacrifices can sometimes overshadow the reality that such displays of faith, hope, and charity begin in smaller ways, closer to home. As our Lord says, "He who is faithful in a very little faith is also faithful in much" (Luke 16:10). How can we be faithful in the little things to prepare ourselves for the bigger ways we might need to witness to our faith?

This question aims to strengthen and encourage by confronting an important reality we might hesitate to acknowledge: it's not uncommon to have mixed feelings towards the martyrs. No doubt they're heroic in their witness, but such heroism can also be challenging. The strength of their conviction displays what it means to love God above all things, to entrust our lives entirely to him, and to believe in him and all that he has revealed. In other words, the martyrs demonstrate the radical truth of the theological virtues with a clarity that admits of no compromise. Sometimes we prefer more ambiguity so that we might compromise. Such is the distance between ourselves and the martyrs of the faith. But it is not a distance so great that there are no similarities between us and the martyrs; one of the most hopeful is that, like us, the greatest witnesses of the faith typically begin not with greatness through great things but greatness through small things. And here there is both hope and light for most of us: striving for greatness in the little things seems much more doable. In our day-to-day lives, we can certainly strive to do the ordinary tasks and go about our everyday interactions with great excellence, great love, great service, great patience, and so forth. Answers will vary according to personal circumstance, but hopefully concrete ideas and suggestions will be forthcoming. These ideas should connect with the exercise of the theological virtues—for example, serving others or speaking kindly to them can be done for love of God and not merely out of a superficial kindness or tolerance. In addition, the discussion should highlight how these smaller actions truly prepare us for larger actions, to bridge the gap between ourselves and the martyrs, a gap that is insignificant when measured against the power of God's grace.

- 3) The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are central to the Christian life. Though they are given to us by God, we can still work to grow in these virtues, especially by allowing them to be more and more deeply rooted in our minds and hearts. What are some things we can do to foster the growth of the theological virtues?

A variety of answers can be given to this question. Most of them will likely begin with general ideas about growing in holiness: praying, going to Mass, going to confession, etc. These are all great starting points. Some answers might get more specific, like asking God directly and particularly in prayer to strengthen these virtues, which is also something we ought to do. Ideally, some answers will also go in a direction that the *Catechism* takes when it discusses how the first commandment embraces the theological virtues (CCC 2086–2094). Faith needs to be nourished and protected, which means principally learning about the

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faith and avoiding situations that unnecessarily challenge faith. The former seems especially important: we must continue to learn about God, since the lover always wants to know more about the beloved. Hope requires acknowledging our own limits so that we can then rely more entirely on God and turn to him in prayer. And charity can be enkindled by turning our minds to God: who he is, and what he's done for us in love. Calling to mind God's marvelous works and his astonishing love fills our own hearts with gratitude and love. In these ways and others, we can allow the divine gifts of faith, hope, and charity to become more deeply rooted within us.

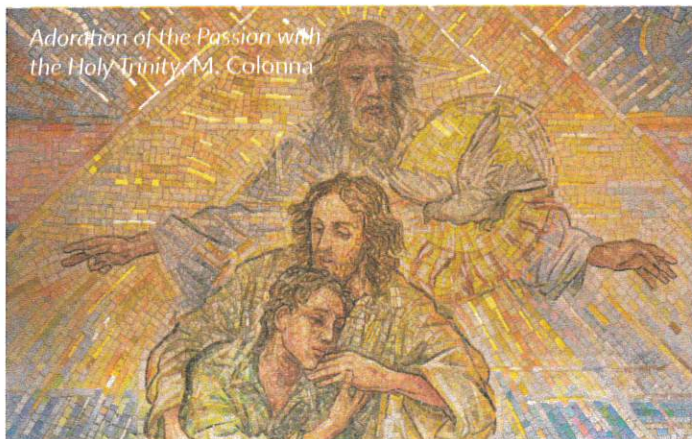
STEP 4: Conclude

It is truly a gift that we are called the *children* of God, and it is because of this gift that our everyday actions should reflect this title. Through the gift of the theological virtues, God's own life and grace work within us to make us capable and ready to act as children of the heavenly Father ought to act. Like Abraham, and like the greatest witnesses of the faith, we too are enabled and empowered to offer a radical yes to God and to his holy will, not only in our words but also in our lives. And when we do, we walk as children of the Father, moving step by step toward eternal life, where faith will give way to vision, and hope will give way to enjoyment—but love will remain and will increase forever with God in Heaven (see 1 Corinthians 13:8–13).

CLOSING PRAYER

O God, all powerful,
Who knows all things,
Who has neither beginning nor end,
Who dost give, preserve, and reward all virtues;
deign to make me steadfast on the solid foundation of
faith, to protect me with the impregnable shield of hope,
and to adorn me with the wedding garment of charity.
Amen.

— Saint Thomas Aquinas, from a Prayer for the Virtues



MEMORY VERSE

We give thanks to
God always for you all,
constantly mentioning
you in our prayers,
remembering before our
God and Father your work
of faith and labor of love
and steadfastness of hope
in our Lord Jesus Christ.

— 1 THESSALONIANS 1:2-3

What this child asks for is Love. She knows only one thing: to love You, O Jesus. Astounding works are forbidden to her. ... But how will she prove her love since love is proved by works? Well, the little child will strew flowers, she will perfume the royal throne with their sweet scents, and she will sing in her silvery tones the canticle of Love.

—From Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's autobiography, *Story of a Soul*

Commit

CALL TO CONVERSION

The saints present a concrete expression of what it means to follow Christ. Their heroism is meant to be an inspiration and a goal. This goal involves putting all of ourselves in the service of Jesus Christ. What does it look like to respond to Christ's invitation with the whole of our lives and all of our abilities?

The cardinal and theological virtues perfect the various powers that we exercise in the project of life and discipleship. The four cardinal virtues—prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude—harmonize and direct our mind, will, and body so that we can pursue the good with clarity and conviction. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity elevate these same virtues by reorienting our minds and hearts directly to the triune God, so we can come to know, trust, love, and serve him in a way that exceeds our natural abilities.

Beyond these seven virtues, Christians are also given the Gifts of the Holy Spirit, received at Baptism and fortified at Confirmation. These gifts make us ready for and docile to the special promptings of the Holy Spirit. They perfect our ability to act in a truly divinized way. We can see this in the saints, who often seem to act spontaneously and without reflection in a way that is—in comparison with the ordinary—both surprising and surpassing. They have been made supple instruments in the hands of the Lord through the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

This remarkable and beautiful picture depicts of Christian perfection. But it can seem far off. How do we get there? By showing faithfulness in the little things: prayer, the sacraments, acts of generosity and love. When we perform these small but important actions, the virtues take deeper and deeper root within us, and we grow receptive to the action of the Holy Spirit. Let us recommit ourselves to the vision of holiness the Lord has in store for us, and let us rely on his grace to make this vision a reality in us.



TREASURES FROM TRADITION

If virtue leads us to the happy life, then I would not define virtue in any other way than as the perfect love of God. For in speaking of virtue as fourfold, one refers, as I understand it to the various dispositions of love itself. ... Now since this love, as I have said, is not love of things in general, but rather love of God, ... we can define the virtues thus: temperance is love preserving itself whole and unblemished for God, fortitude is love enduring all things willingly for the sake of God, justice is love serving God alone and, therefore, ruling well those things subject to man, and prudence is love discriminating rightly between those things which aid it in reaching God and those things which might hinder it.

— Saint Augustine, *Way of Life of the Catholic Church*, chap. 15



Saint Joan of Arc, Hillingford

The Christian life is not fundamentally about extreme penance or the appearance of being virtuous. Instead, as Saint Augustine emphasizes, the Christian life is ultimately about love—and not just any love, but the love of Christ, poured into our own hearts in a way that shapes everything we do.

Still, Saint Augustine also emphasizes the cardinal virtues, so called because they are the “hinge” virtues upon which the whole moral life depends. Rather than driving us to extremes or prompting superficially impressive actions, the cardinal virtues “make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. ... They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love” (CCC 1804).

The transformation of character that the cardinal virtues bring about is noble and worthy, but our

character is brought to a still higher perfection in and through the theological virtues. The theological virtues don't do away with the need for the cardinal virtues. Instead, the theological virtues elevate and reorient our whole lives, including the cardinal virtues, which the theological virtues enlist and build upon so that they become part of the Christian's “equipment” for the journey ahead. Saint Paul says, “Take the whole armor of God” (Ephesians 6:13), and he goes on to describe the Christian as outfitted with a number of virtues. Ultimately, as Saint Augustine describes, charity becomes the motive, force, and overall form of the Christian expression and performance of all the virtues.

FOR FURTHER READING

John 3, Romans 5:1–5, and 1 John 4

Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 1803–1832 and 2086–2094

Benedict XVI, encyclical letters, *Deus caritas est* and *Spe salvi*

Francis, encyclical letter, *Lumen fidei*

Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love and A Brief Reader on the Virtues of the Human Heart*