

An everyday virtue

By Sister Prudence Allen, RSM
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"Our perfection does not consist in performing extraordinary actions, but rather in performing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions of every day," said Mother Catherine McAuley, the 19th-century foundress of the Sisters of Mercy.

Is it possible to be courageous in the ordinary actions of every day? Or is courage found only in extraordinary acts? Philosophers for centuries enjoyed thinking about this question.

Plato, the Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C., thought courage was the virtue of soldiers. Aristotle agreed: "The courageous man will be one who is fearless in the face of an honorable death, or of some sudden threat of death; and it is in war that such situations chiefly occur."

Aristotle gave a detailed analysis of the virtue of courage. It fell between the extremes of rashness and cowardliness, he argued. A person who had no fear would lack as much courage as one paralyzed by fear.

For Aristotle, only the person "who faces and fears (or feels confident about) the right things for the right reason and in the right way and at the right time is courageous."

The Greek philosopher also believed that different acts might be more courageous for some people than others, because not everyone fears the same things.

St. Thomas Aquinas in the 12th-century called courage a cardinal virtue. He described courage as the capacity to choose to overcome our fears so that we might act in the most reasonable way.

Two aspects of courage were emphasized by St. Thomas. They were drawn from the earlier association of courage with battles: attack and endurance. The courageous person, then, attacks a problem with the right amount of force, remaining steadfast.

A contemporary approach to courage is offered by Peter Geach, a Catholic philosopher from Leeds, England. Fearing that people more and more think virtue is reserved to heroes, Geach argues that courage is "an everyday virtue."

In his recent work titled "The Virtues," Geach offers examples of ordinary situations in which courage is found.

First, the laborer's courage: "Without a great deal of patient endurance and of courage in emergencies coal would not be mined nor steel forged nor the seas fished."

Then there is the courage of mothers: "People would often not be born but for the courage of their mothers; this truth is more obvious nowadays when motherhood is more a matter of choice."

Children have frequent opportunities for courage: "Nobody who was thoroughly cowardly would play physically demanding games, or climb a mountain, or ride a horse or bicycle."

Finally, every person needs courage in times of serious illness or death. "Courage is what we all need in the end; we all have to die, and for none of us can the possibility be excluded of dying nastily, in great pain or after a long disabling illness."

What makes courage a Christian virtue? Jesus spoke to his disciples about courage the night before he died: "You will suffer in the world. But take courage! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

When we try to overcome fears, to develop plans for our lives or to remain steadfast out of love for Christ, then the source of courage springs from God rather than simply the strength of our will.

Courage, Geach says, "is constantly needed in the ordinary course of the world." I think Mother McAuley would have agreed. Perhaps that is why she thought that perfection consists in performing extraordinarily well the ordinary actions of every day.

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life heroes

my hopes; I have full confidence that now as always Christ will be exalted through me, whether I live or die. For, to me, 'life' means Christ; hence dying is so much gain.

"If, on the other hand, I am to go on living in the flesh, that means productive toil for me — and I do not know which to prefer. I am strongly attracted by both: I long to be freed from this life and to be with Christ, for that is the far better thing; yet it is more urgent that I remain alive for your sakes" (Philippians 1:20-24).

This is courage. Its source? "In him who is the source of my strength I have strength for everything" (Philippians 4:13).

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FOOD...

...for thought

It is not difficult to discover what is complicated about courage. Courage can be risky.

A courageous venture all too readily becomes an adventure — especially when at the outset its outcome isn't clear.

For example, after they have broken down it takes courage to reopen the lines of communication in a marriage, a friendship, a work relationship. Taking that important first step seems risky. For in attempting to reopen lines of communication, a person tends rightly or wrongly to sense a risk: the risk that instead of opening up, the lines of communication will further shut down.

The other possible outcome, however, is what makes courage interesting in such cases of interpersonal communication. For the attempt to reopen lines of communication just might reopen them.

Often courage is regarded as the special strength to defend and protect oneself or someone else. And it can take a good bit of courage to be a good protector.

But consider the risky first step taken by a person who wants to reopen lines of communication in a valued relationship. Isn't this a way of exercising creativity, of bringing something fresh and vital to bear on the relationship? Did you

ever think of courage as a way of being creative? Did you ever think of it as a way for God's Spirit to break through into your life?

Often, too, courage is regarded as an inner gift, a quality possessed by the individual person. Some might carry this a step further, suggesting courage is a quality you're born with or that you have to at least arrive at early on in life; in other words, that you either have it or you don't.

But consider again that risky first step taken by a husband or wife trying to reopen the lines of communication in their marriage. Doesn't it sometimes happen that one person gives courage to the other? Doesn't it sometimes happen that a person shares courage with others, enabling courage to grow where it was least expected?

Courage may be risky. But that doesn't mean it is reckless. Courage often needs to be exercised with care. Especially — but not only — in serious matters the courageous step may need to be prayerfully planned in advance.

Courage holds many layers of meaning. When you think about it, courage is expressed in many ways, some of them rather ordinary.

What does courage mean to you? When is it needed most?

...for discussion

1. Think of occasions when courage is needed under ordinary and perhaps non-spectacular circumstances in daily life. What are some of those occasions?

2. Do you think of courage as a quality you must be born with — or at least must possess by an early age if you're ever to have it? Why? Why not?

3. Think of a public figure who was courageous. Who comes first to mind?

4. What do you think gives courage a Christian dimension? How might courage help in carrying out one's Christian life?

5. What is it that makes the exercise of courage difficult?

SECOND HELPINGS

"The Story of the Church," by Norbertine Father Alfred McBride, is a unique kind of history book. In lively ways, the stories of key events and people in the church's nearly 2,000-year history are told. From St. Paul to Trappist Father Thomas Merton, from St. Augustine to St. Joan of Arc and Dorothy Day, the stories here are about a church that always "has housed an unruly family of saints, sinners and ordinary folks. Its history is the record of a boisterous lot of people — inspiring, infuriating, sometimes frustratingly dull and often engagingly charming," writes Father McBride. He is the popular religious educator who is president of the University of Albuquerque. (St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1815 Republic St., Cincinnati, Ohio 45210. Paperback, \$7.95.)