

COLUMNISTS

Virtues enable us to accomplish good

I begin this week a series of columns on the theological and moral, or cardinal, virtues: faith, hope and charity; and prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. This first column is on the notion of virtue itself.

One of the basic principles of medieval Catholic theology is that grace builds on nature. The sanctifying presence of God (grace) does not destroy or replace our humanity (nature); grace elevates human nature and orients it toward eternal union with God.

Therefore, the call to holiness that every Christian receives from Christ is not a call to become something super human or other than human, as if our humanity were of no ultimate worth. Rather, it is a call to human wholeness, that is, to reach our full potential as human beings, to become all that God intended us to be.

Our response to the call to holiness is not a once and for all act. It is a lifetime process that gradually shapes us into a person of character, that is, a person who takes responsibility for her or his actions and who has the capacity for healthy relationships with others.

The goodness of our actions, however, is not determined by our conformity to rules and laws. Indeed, there are many situations in life for which no particular rules or laws even exist. Persons of character are those who can intelligently and



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

sometimes courageously respond to such situations, without recourse to rules and laws.

We do not set out to acquire moral goodness by the performance of certain actions. We perform those actions because, in the circumstances, they seem to be the right thing to do. They enrich and strengthen our relationships with God, our neighbor and the world.

But our actions not only affect our relationships; they also form our character. In doing actions that particular situations call for, we are shaped over time into morally good people.

It also works the other way, of course. A person who perpetrates a serious injustice against another hasn't just broken a commandment, for which he or she can be forgiven later in confession. Every time a person does an injury to another, there are at least two people injured: the

victim of the action and the person doing the action. In other words, the more we do things that harm our relationships with others, the more we harm ourselves as human beings.

The goodness of our actions, therefore, is determined by their impact on our relationships with God, our neighbor, the world and even ourselves. Moral goodness (or evil) is not determined by laws and rules. Laws and rules only codify what conscience already recognizes as good (or evil). The Catholic moral tradition has always stressed this concept of character, especially in its treatment of the theological and moral (cardinal) virtues. Our character emerges from the network of our virtues (or vices, if we have a bad character).

A virtue is literally a power (Latin, "virtus") to accomplish moral good, and to do so joyfully and consistently, in spite of obstacles and sacrifices.

Made possible by divine grace and our own human efforts in cooperation with grace, virtues are powers that enable us to establish and develop healthy relationships with God, our neighbor, the world and ourselves.

Virtues also prompt us to act in such a way as to exclude extreme forms of action, in keeping with another medieval principle: "In medio stat virtus" ("virtue stands in the middle").

For example, people may "hope" so

strongly in their eternal salvation that they begin to take it for granted. This extreme is known as presumption.

On the other hand, others may be so discouraged about the possibility of their achieving salvation that they lapse into the opposite extreme of despair.

The virtue of hope "stands in the middle" of presumption and despair. It is confidence in the love and mercy of God (as opposed to despair), but it also accepts responsibility for cooperating with grace (as opposed to presumption).

In the end, all virtues are relational. The theological virtues of faith, hope and charity are called general virtues, because they pertain to all of our relationships: with God, neighbor, world and self.

The moral (cardinal) virtues of justice, fortitude and temperance are called particular virtues, because they pertain to some, but not all, of our relationships.

Justice pertains to our relationships with our neighbor. Fortitude and temperance pertain, primarily, but not exclusively, to our relationship with ourselves.

Prudence is in a category by itself. St. Thomas Aquinas called it the rudder virtue because it steers all of the other virtues.

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Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

We have much to offer God

Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 6:1-15. (R1) 2 Kings 4:42-44. (R2) Ephesians 4:1-6.

A mother superior lay dying in her convent. The sisters nursing her decided to put a shot of whiskey in the milk they gave her each day to invigorate her. Despite a week or so of this treatment, Mother Superior came to die. The sisters gathered around her bed and asked her if she had any last words for them. The mother superior whispered, "Don't sell that cow."

Likewise, we ought never let God go — a God who out of compassion could feed, and did feed, over 10,000 people with five loaves of bread and two fish. In this wondrous miracle of Jesus, we must note that Jesus did not create the bread from nothing. He multiplied the bread that had been given him by a lad.

A prison chaplain ministered to the prisoners each week. He developed a trusting and loyal relationship with them. Then one Sunday the chaplain announced that he was going to the Holy Land, that he had saved long for this, that it was a lifelong dream. He told the prisoners that he wouldn't see them for a couple of weeks; but he assured them of his prayers and concern.

The prisoners were happy for him and gathered around and hugged him, patted him on the back, shook his hand and wished him well.

A little later, when the chaplain was



a word
for
sunday

By FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

ready to leave, one of the prisoners awkwardly came forward with a package hastily wrapped. The fellow said, "We didn't have time or money to get you a gift, but we want you to think of us while you are away, and this is the best we can do. Don't open it now, but wait till you get home. It's all we have to give you."

When the chaplain got home, he opened the package. Inside, he found his wallet, his pen, his watch, his glasses case and his pocketknife. When the prisoners had gathered around him to congratulate him, they had picked his every pocket. Then wrapping it all up, they gave it back to him as a sign of their love, saying, "It's all we have to give."

The chaplain was delighted with the gift even if the gift was his in the beginning. In the same way, God waits for us to put something into his hand to work with even though all things are his already. In order

for a miracle to happen, we must give of ourselves, our time and our resources. Even if we don't think we have anything to give, if we give the little we have of ourselves, the seemingly impossible can become possible.

At Cana all that the servants gave was water, but it was enough. Here, a lad gave only five loaves, it too was enough. Often all God asks of us is to give of ourselves, to give the little that we do have. Miracles do happen when we have first of all done everything we can to help ourselves. If we do our best, God will do the rest.

We all are familiar with Band-Aids. They were invented in 1920 by a man named Earle Dickson who worked for the bandage firm, Johnson & Johnson. Earle had married a woman who was a little clumsy. Often, while making meals, she would cut or burn herself. The bandages that Johnson & Johnson made were too big for covering his wife's small injuries, so Earle created a small, sticky bandage for her. They were named Band-Aids and they are used all over the world today.

Band-Aids were created by Earle Dickson because he loved his wife and wanted to help her. Jesus' miracle of feeding the multitudes was a Band-Aid. Jesus was always using Band-Aids: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, raising the dead, casting out demons.

And why? Because he loves us all so

much.

God has so many blessings to pour out on all of us if only we try to serve him. Jesus said to his Apostles, "Get the people to recline." Sometimes to receive God's blessings, all he asks is that we sit and wait and receive what he has to offer, as did the crowd fed with five loaves and two fish.

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Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, July 28

Exodus 32:15-24, 30-34;
Matthew 13:31-35

Tuesday, July 29

Exodus 33:7-11, 34:5-9, 28;
John 11:19-27 or Luke 10:38-42

Wednesday, July 30

Exodus 34:29-35;
Matthew 13:44-46

Thursday, July 31

Exodus 40:16-21, 34-38;
Matthew 13:47-53

Friday, August 1

Leviticus 23:1, 4-11, 15-16, 27,
34-37; Matthew 13:54-58

Saturday, August 2

Leviticus 25: 1, 8-17;
Matthew 14:1-12

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Kids' Answers
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Genesis, Exodus,
Joshua, Esther,
Psalms, Proverbs,
Isaiah, Daniel,
Jonah, Malachi