

Fortitude: Gateway to Christian Perfection

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You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.  
–Matthew 5:48

## **Introduction**

As Christians, we are called to perfection. This is no doubt a lofty goal and a daunting challenge. Yet our ultimate happiness rests in perfection; namely, in the all holy and Triune God, toward whom all of our activities should tend. In striving to properly order our actions we must, by God’s grace, cultivate each of the virtues to the best of our ability. This is no easy task, for “the gate is narrow and the way is hard” which leads to perfection (Matt. 7:14). Any believer who wishes to walk this rocky path requires fortitude. Christian fortitude is epitomized in martyrdom, the act which every disciple must seek to emulate in his or her daily life in order to facilitate growth in virtue and, ultimately, enjoy eternal beatitude.

## **Defining Terms**

*Fortitude* (or *bravery, courage*) is “the cardinal virtue that enables us to face difficulty well.”<sup>1</sup> Fortitude is unique among the cardinal virtues in that it is also one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, this gift enables us to have greater “constancy in the pursuit of the good” (CCC, 1808). The good is known by our intellect through reason, but the will is often inclined to act irrationally when faced with various obstacles—greatest among these being the fear of death. The purpose of fortitude is to harmonize our intellect and will by removing these obstacles, thereby allowing us to more easily pursue the

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<sup>1</sup> William C Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 67.

good.<sup>2</sup> Without this integration of will and intellect, any attempt to “seek first the kingdom and his righteousness” would be doomed to fail (Matt. 6:33).

*Christian disciples* are followers of Jesus Christ, those called to “conform themselves to him until he is formed in them” (CCC, 562). To this end they strive to live the faith and preach it to others. In doing so, they must be willing to follow Christ and serve as his witnesses even amidst persecution.<sup>3</sup> The disciple of Jesus is commanded to “deny himself and take up his cross daily” if he aspires to follow the Lord (Luke 9:23). Christians are called to love God and neighbor wholeheartedly, and to dedicate every aspect of their lives, both big and small, to the service of others.

### **Martyrdom as Christian Perfection**

That which is known is best understood when viewed in its highest mode. The preeminent act of fortitude and the paradigmatic act of the Christian believer are one in the same: martyrdom. Christian martyrdom is “the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith: it means bearing witness even unto death . . . through an act of fortitude” (CCC, 2473). Martyrs exhibit exemplary fortitude, fortitude in its highest and most praiseworthy expression, since they not only willingly accept death, but do so for the sake of God, the highest good.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, martyrdom is “the most perfect of human acts” in that it is “the greatest proof of the perfection of charity,” since in accepting martyrdom one demonstrates that they love God more than life itself.

More than being the most perfect of acts in this life, martyrdom is the gateway to perfection in the world to come, for the martyr is “assured of an immediate entrance into glory.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST), II-II, q. 123, a. 1.

<sup>3</sup> CCC, 1816.

<sup>4</sup> Aquinas, ST, II-II, q. 123, a. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy and Dicharry, “Martyr,” 228.

In other words, a moment of maximal courage brings with it the guarantee of eternal blessedness. Now, although martyrdom is certainly the supremely representational act of the Christian disciple, it is also clearly not the average experience of the typical believer. Most Christians will never be granted the opportunity to accept the martyr's crown. However, all disciples have the potential to be what one might call *living martyrs*.

### **The Living Martyrdom of Love**

Not all Christians are called to formal martyrdom, but every Christian is called to love—and not just any “love,” but a love which consumes one’s whole being and expresses itself in serving others. This love is called *charity*, which the *Catechism* defines as “the theological virtue by which we love God above all things for his own sake, and our neighbor as ourselves for the love of God” (CCC, 1822). Charity is the highest form of love, and according to Jesus it finds its fullest expression when “a man lay[s] down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). These words, fulfilled in Christ’s own crucifixion, reveal charity’s self-sacrificial nature. To be truly charitable one must have the courage to imitate Christ in forsaking all—even one’s own life—for the sake of the other. With this in mind, charity could be characterized simply as a brave love. This brave love enables us to become living martyrs who “die every day” (1 Cor. 15:31) by giving ourselves totally to the service of others. Thus, we cannot have authentic love without fortitude; and, without love, we cannot be just.

Justice is the cardinal virtue which “concerns giving others their due.”<sup>6</sup> Justice is the habit of being in right relationship with both God and neighbor. But how do we give others their due and foster right relationship with them? As stated above, to do so requires love—love which

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<sup>6</sup> Mattison, *Moral Theology*, 136.

expresses itself toward neighbor as service and toward God as adoration. Christ exemplified perfect service of neighbor and pure adoration of God in his crucifixion, bringing about an ironic twist whereby the image of a condemned criminal became the symbol and model of the supremely just man. Once again, this discussion of fortitude finds its way back to the *crux* of all virtue: the Cross. The Cross is the needle by which all of the virtues are woven together. In the Cross one finds perfect fortitude (a life willingly laid down), perfect charity (for the sake of others), and perfect justice (so as to restore proper relationship between God and men). If a disciple then seeks these things, if he seeks perfection, he must ask only one question of himself: “Do I have the courage to embrace the Cross?”

### **Suffering: The Narrow Gate**

The Cross is the path to perfection because suffering is the narrow gateway to growth in holiness. Consider this exhortation from the opening chapter of the epistle of James:

Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Here the Christian disciple finds a simple recipe for perfection. The diverse trials which test our faith produce steadfastness, the “full effect” of which is total, complete perfection. However, this begs a question. It is plain to all that every single human being, without exception, experiences various and sundry trials and tribulations. Yet, so few of us have achieved perfection. If James is correct, how can this be? A similar passage from Paul’s epistle to the Romans helps to shed light on this issue.

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:3-5)

The formula here is a bit more fleshed out. We are to rejoice in our sufferings because they ultimately form our character and instill hope (one of the theological virtues) within us. Yet the initial product of these sufferings is endurance, which is the principal act of fortitude.<sup>7</sup> This means merely being assailed by suffering does not bring one to perfection, only a virtuous response to our trials can do so. In other words, the way to be perfected by our sufferings is to respond to them in the manner of Christ. If we respond to our sufferings as did Christ, only then may we hope to be perfected as he is perfect. In fact, Scripture reveals that our eventual, eternal beatitude is entirely contingent on our suffering virtuously in imitation of Christ. Returning to Romans, we read that the same Spirit who infuses our souls with love also makes us “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (Romans 8:17). *Provided we suffer with him*. These striking words stir up a burning question within us: how can we possibly suffer with Jesus? His Passion was so intense, even our greatest sufferings seem trivial by comparison.

### **The Martyrdom of the Daily Cross**

“He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). Even if our sufferings are “very little” compared to those of Christ, we must accept them faithfully. Each little cross the Lord gives us to carry is an opportunity for us to demonstrate our love for him. Whether we are dealing with health problems, family squabbles, or financial strife, we can embrace these struggles in a meritorious manner when our character has been formed by the

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<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 123, a. 6.

virtue of fortitude. The *Catechism* elucidates this point by using the example of one's occupation.

By enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, man collaborates in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work. He shows himself to be a disciple of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish. (*CCC*, 2427)

Not only does the Christian prove himself a disciple by enduring his daily trials, in doing so he is—astonishingly—participating in a real sense in Christ's redemption of mankind. Paul speaks of this profound mystery in his epistle to the Colossians when he says that through his fleshly sufferings he “complete[s] what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). How could anything be lacking in Christ's afflictions? What is lacking is precisely our participation, the participation of the mystical body in the sufferings of its head. To be perfect we must not only endure our sufferings virtuously, nor we must merely suffer with Christ—we must suffer *as Christ*. We must suffer for others, we must love bravely enough to die for others as Christ died for us.

## **Conclusion**

The proper end of every human action is eternal beatitude, an intimate union with the Tri-Personal God. God, who is love, initiated this union by becoming man in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. As a man, he exhibited a courageous love for his fellow men, laying down his life for them on the Cross. To be perfect, to obtain union with him, we must do likewise—and this requires the brave love of fortitude, by which we are empowered to carry our daily crosses in a meritorious manner. As the formal martyr is assured entrance into glory by a moment of maximum courage, so too shall we be by a lifetime of steadfast endurance.

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