

Virtue and Community

Christianity is an adventure, one on which we embark with Christ on our side, knowing that he has already won the victory. On this adventure he invites us to discover everything that makes life worth living: how good the world is, how much we can do in it, how great a gift it is, how much there is beyond our horizons, the vast potentials that reside within us, and the unexpected, surprising, and challenging ways they are brought about. Christ invites us to a new world, out there and within ourselves.

The adventure is simply to become a saint. But it's every bit an adventure: literally new places to see, people to know, friends to make, and enemies to vanquish. Christianity is as dramatic as it gets, and it is up front about it: it starts with death. That's what baptism is. Your old life is over because you're off to live another. It's saying yes to an adventure that means you'll never be the same again. Read the lives of the saints; they became different, and were born into another world, even *within* this world. Christianity is for everyone and meets you right where you are, but it doesn't leave you there. It's radical.

But most Christianity today is not. Whether you belong to the so-called liberal or conservative end of the Catholic spectrum, or somewhere in between, what you've been offered is in almost all cases pretty bland. And this is sad, because there are many, very committed, super-faithful folks on both the liberal and conservative side. But to be a good liberal Catholic has too often meant being for social justice and voting Democrat, and being a conservative Catholic has too often meant being sexually conservative and voting Republican. Yet for both, and for most of us in the middle, Catholicism tends to be about the same thing. It's about avoiding certain mortal sins, but otherwise living more or less the way everyone else does. One kind avoids abortion, birth-control, Communism, and sex of various kinds, the other avoid SUVs, war, and saying certain things about certain minorities.

In other words, for both groups, it's about rules. Don't touch this, don't say that. The idea is that there's a short list of sins that are really bad that I don't commit that keep me, in contrast to most others, in God's favor. What makes me unique as a *Catholic* – what we hang our “Catholic difference” on you might say – consists in not doing these things, and maybe going to Mass and saying some prayers, and of course being nice to people. If we follow these rules, grace will be dispensed automatically, and somehow, over time, we will get holier. At the very least, God will not be mad at us. We are safe.

But being safe, of course, is no adventure. It's cookie-cutter Christianity, and it makes cookie-cutter people – all alike – and usually all mostly like the secular culture around us. It's attractive, in a way, because, like all legalisms, it gives you a clear road map, with precise boundaries, so you can always guarantee your superiority, and control the outcome. And it's attractive, because, like all individualisms, you only have to worry about yourself. But, in the end, all that does is make a bunch of people who collectively don't do the same things, and hope not to for the rest of their lives.

Now, fortunately, this is not the Christian vision at all. The pursuit of the virtuous life is not about following rules. Of course, there are rules, which is to say there are divine laws. But it's important to think about rules and laws in the right way. We have rules for our behavior because there are things we call divine laws. But these are not arbitrary commands designed to see if we are worthy of Christ's love. That is a bad picture of both laws and Christ. Divine laws

are simply expressions of who God is. God is merciful, so, to be like God, don't be judgmental. God is just, so, to be like God, don't oppress the poor. God is pure, so, to be like God, don't hook up with other people's wives. These laws show up in our conscience, in the Bible, and in Church teaching, in order to tell us what God is like. They are meant to be signposts calling us to greater intimacy with Him. And, like any relationship, developing intimacy is a process of discovering the Other, and at the same time discovering yourself. In the Church we do this primarily in imitating the life of Jesus, and enacting it in the Mass and our lives. When we do that we find that, like light through diamond, God's will for us gets refracted into a million different colors, and touches all the infinite complexity of our lives. And that *is* an adventure because, with God's help, it's for *you* to figure out.

In other words, you can't be good just by not being bad. Sitting at home in your chair, safely not committing any sins, will not take you to the heights you are made for. Christ's call to the fishermen in the Gospel, to leave everything behind, get out of their boat and follow him, is, in one way or another, his call to all of us. The Apostles had to be remade by all their adventures: by leaving everything, by poverty, by Christ's teaching, by persecutions, and by their own fellowship. This means the Christian life is open-ended: you don't know what you're getting into. You don't know what all the answers will be. You don't know where you'll go, or what you'll do. If the drama of the Scriptures is any indication, it will not always be easy, and it will often not feel safe. Someone once said, after all, that it is in losing your life that you will find it, and it is in dying that you are born to eternal life.

And so, on this adventure, rules will not get us very far. We'll have to *find* the path along the way, and this for the very good reason that there is no set of rules that will cover every circumstance in life. Rules are fixed, life is infinitely variable; rules do not fit the world; *lives* fit the world. We have to *act* every day, and to be able to act *well*, without following a rule every step of the way is what Christians call the life of *virtue*. You'll have to *discover* and, in most cases, in light of the Gospel, judge for yourself what to do. You might say, then, that the Saints are those who get really good at not following the rules.

But judging for yourself does not mean judging alone. Because being a member of the Church means that Christian morality is going to involve more than just me and God. *Together*, we are going to have to think, and work, and strive, and reach, and change, and become something other than we are. That's what it means to progressively "put on Christ", and we cannot put him on without putting on his Body – the Church. That means other people. Like children growing up, growing in virtue takes good examples, which in part is why we have the lives of the saints. But it also, as every parent knows, takes people right around you every day that teach you how to live.

This means that virtue and vice, saints and sinners, are in the first place kinds of *communities*. There are only individual sinners and saints because their communities have made them that way. The kind of people we are around will determine the kind of people we are. The habits of our primary society will be our habits. In other words, "Bad company," Saint Paul says, "corrupts good character." The reverse is also true. Yet we are so used to thinking as isolated individuals that it is very hard to see just how alike each other most of us are! And that's because people that live together, that share habits and language and physical environments, also share character.

And so it is that the Church's great masters of the moral and spiritual life have always placed their teaching in the context of communities with distinctive practices. For that, after all, is what the Church is. No one has been more influential a teacher of the virtues than St. Thomas Aquinas. Yet sometimes St. Thomas's lists of virtues and vices, as well as those found in many prayer books, are read as if we were meant to get these virtues simply by sitting down, looking inward at our own soul, and trying really hard. If you do this, and follow the right rules, it might seem, you've done what God wants. But this is not at all what St Thomas, nor the Church, has in mind. Thomas did his writing in the context of a medieval friary, and it presumes that cultivating these virtues took place in *that* rich and complex set of community practices: not only the Eucharist, but practices such as hospitality, caring for the sick, sharing meals, raising children (ideally not their own), corporate prayer, growing food, as well as all the corporeal and spiritual works of mercy. His writings on the virtues are a call to community, a call to turn outward, not to more intensive focus on yourself.

The Christian life, then, is about holiness, but holiness doesn't happen outside of communities of Christian practice. And this is yet another thing the Catholic Worker offers us. Let's take one example of the way this played out in Maurin's vision. He said that in hospitality houses people learned "the art of human contacts." In the face of the social individualism of his own day, it was clear that it was increasingly easy for people to shelter themselves with modern conveniences, buy themselves peace and quiet, and exempt themselves from the difficult task of learning to live with other people, especially the poor. But he also knew this was spiritually dangerous. For it is easy, when it is just me, myself, and I, to take a pretty rosy view of myself. I don't anger easily, I think about God regularly, I am tolerant, not judgmental, impatient, proprietary or greedy, I am "for" the poor, and in general I'm a fairly competent master of my soul.

But a hospitality house demands negotiations with our neighbors that are not on our own terms. We come to see that our serene sense of virtue was largely based on the premise of our own control. Time and again members or visitors to hospitality houses (and I certainly include myself here) report finding parts of themselves that they didn't know existed: frustration, cynicism of others, even certain racist or classist attitudes. What life at the house has unearthed, that is, was our own pride, and a host of other vices. We think we are better than the people we live with. And we didn't know it until we had our virtue tested by being around other people, and especially around people who were really different than us. The first thing, then, community trains us in is humility. We come to know not just that we were wrong about our superiority and our own virtue, not just that there's plenty of work to do on our own souls, but also that precisely the people, often the poor, whose habits we instinctively despise, are exactly those people we need in order to grow in virtue. We find that we are often *worse* than the poor, and that it is not that they need our help, but that we need theirs.

Our vices were festering in our isolation, and we didn't know it. Life together gives us a way of recognizing that, and an arena for becoming more like Christ. And of course what we do in this arena is train ourselves. Virtues are not produced by thinking hard, or even just praying hard, but by doing certain actions over and over. We use our bodies to get to our souls. Like anything human, practice, with God's help, makes perfect. Dorothy Day used to say that she had stopped worrying about what people *said*, and only put stock in what they *did*. In a hospitality

house, or with a Christ room, there is ample opportunity for all the divine practices outlined in the Gospels. We can practice over and over again giving to those who beg, bearing insults patiently, turning the other cheek, forgiving offences, and, in general, as Peter said, “being who you want your neighbor to be.” The first time we give a meal to a stranger, or do his nasty laundry, we may be obsessed by how good we are, and how unworthy they are. We may be super annoyed, often angry. But by the five-hundredth time, with a little attention, we may have trained ourselves, and actually internalized, all the ways that *we* are unworthy and nasty. That’s a step towards being a saint.

And, obviously, we can’t train ourselves in these sorts of practices all alone. Community not only provides support, camaraderie, guidance and feedback. Rather, in community, we each make up part of the fabric of what the Gospel is, because we all perform the Gospel *together*, or not at all. If you read the Sermon on the Mount, it describes a way of life that requires action, training, practice, but all these things also require other people. You simply *can’t* do them just you and God. Dorothy was fond of telling people that when we stand before God one thing he’ll ask us is, “Where are the others?”

The goods of the Church are only available in common. This is another way of saying that the object of God’s salvation is, not private individuals, but the Church itself. We will be saved as members of it – not so much in an abstract or spiritual sense, of “choosing the true religion,” and certainly not in the sense that God arbitrarily damns all others, but because only here are both the graces and practices necessary to make us Church-people – members of Christ himself. This is what the old saying “there is no salvation outside the Church” means. Close-knit fellowship is not just a desirable appendage of Christian practice, but is itself at the heart of redemption. The measure of virtue is not just a certain attitude toward God, but the way action is embedded in the Church.