

THE VIRTUES – THE WAY OF HOLINESS

Have on hand: O.F.S. Rule



Carlo Crivelli: Blood of Christ, ca. 1480-1486

Someone should read the opening paragraph of St. Francis' *Earlier Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance*, the Prologue to the *O.F.S. Rule*.

Then . . .

After the reading, we reflect: St. Francis' words are a call to holiness, a call to use the means of identifying with Jesus Christ Himself. This is our vocation, to be all we have been created to be – to live in the image and likeness of God Himself. This is what Christ has been trying to teach us; this is what Francis came to realize in his own life.

Our Opening Prayer:

**O God, strength of those who hope in you,
graciously hear our pleas,
and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing,
grant us always the help of your grace,
that in following your commands
we may please you by our resolve and our deeds.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹**

Francis wrote *A Salutation of the Virtues*: “Hail, Queen Wisdom! May the Lord protect You, with Your Sister, holy pure Simplicity! Lady holy Poverty, may the Lord protect You, with Your Sister, holy Humility! Lady holy Charity, may the Lord protect You, with Your Sister, holy Obedience. Most holy Virtues, may the Lord protect all of You from Whom You come and proceed.

“There is surely no one in the whole world who can possess any one of You without dying first. Whoever possesses one and does not offend the others possesses all. Whoever offends one does not possess any and offends all. And each one confounds vice and sin.

“Holy Wisdom confounds Satan and all his cunning. Pure holy Simplicity confounds all the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of the body. Holy Poverty confounds the desire for riches, greed, and the cares of this world. Holy Humility confounds pride, all people who are in the world and all that is in the world. Holy Charity confounds every diabolical and carnal temptation and every carnal fear. Holy Obedience confounds every corporal and carnal wish, binds its mortified body to obedience of the Spirit and obedience to one's brother, so that it is subject and submissive to everyone in the world, not only to people but to every beast and wild animal as well that they may do whatever they want with it insofar as it has been given to them from above by the Lord.”²

Among St. Francis' 28 *Admonitions* is this insight: “Where there is charity and wisdom, there is neither fear nor ignorance. Where there is patience and humility, there is neither anger nor disturbance. Where there is poverty with joy, there is neither greed nor avarice. Where there is rest and meditation, there is neither anxiety nor restlessness. Where there is fear of the Lord to guard

an entrance, there the enemy cannot have a place to enter. Where there is a heart full of mercy and discernment, there is neither excess nor hardness of heart.”³

Similarly, Francis’ *Admonition XVI* encourages us: “Blessed are the clean in heart, for they will see God. The truly clean of heart are those who look down upon earthly things, seek those of heaven, and, with a clean heart and spirit, never cease adoring and seeing the Lord God living and true.”⁴

On the topic of obedience, Thomas of Celano writes: “Accepting the command of holy obedience with much joy and gladness, they [the brothers being sent on mission] humbly prostrated themselves on the ground before Saint Francis. Embracing them, he spoke sweetly and devotedly to each one: ‘Cast your care upon the Lord, and he will sustain you.’ He used to say this phrase whenever he transferred brothers by obedience.”⁵



As St. Francis studied Jesus, he found all these virtues in Jesus Christ, sent by the Father and revealed in the Gospels. Jesus, both God and man, became the model for how Francis himself was to live.

A virtue may be defined as the *Catechism* states in §1803: “A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good.” §1810: “Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace.” As Secular Franciscans, we pray that our lives give witness that we want to practice the virtues Christ lived by and has taught us, and which St. Francis so admirably put into practice in his life.

Giotto di Bondone: The Madonna Enthroned with Saints and Virtues, ca. 1315-1320 [St. John the Baptist is to the left, while St. Francis is to the right. The female figures with polygonal haloes are virtues. In front of St. John is **Hope**, with hands raised, while in front of St. Francis is **Charity**, heart in hand. **Faith** is front and center in red, holding aloft an angel with her right hand, holding down a demon with her left. The other four figures, L-R, are **Humility**, (eyes downcast), **Prudence** (the mirror she held is no longer visible), **Fortitude** (with armor, sword, and shield), and **Obedience** (focused on the Madonna and Child)].

- Q1. What are virtues? How do I explain what a virtue is to someone who asks?
- Q2. How many virtues does St. Francis list? Give a clear explanation for as many as you can.
- Q3. What fundamental virtues were given to us as “starters” at Baptism? How essential are these? When do I use them either explicitly or implicitly?
- Q4. What virtues were given to us with the Sacrament of Confirmation? How often am I aware of trying to use them?
- Q5. In our spiritual life, is it better (more wholesome) to concentrate on practicing virtues, rather than trying to eradicate vices? What is the practical difference?
- Q6. Discuss one or two outstanding virtues that impress you about your favorite saint.
- Q7. How do these individual virtues compare to societal values today?

For further reading, consult the *Catechism*, §1803 - §1845.

¹ *Roman Missal*, Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

² FA:ED, *The Undated Writings, A Salutation of the Virtues*, Vol. I, pp. 164-165

³ FA:ED, *The Undated Writings, The Admonitions*, Vol. I, pp. 136-137: XXVII: Virtue Puts Vice to Flight

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 134: XVI: Cleanness of Heart

⁵ FA:ED, *The Life of Saint Francis, First Book*, 1228-1229, Vol. I, p. 207, v. 29