

Amoris Laetitia
Chapter 7: Towards a Better Education of Children
Families as Training Centers for Virtue

What are Virtues?

Following the Aristotelian tradition, Aquinas says that happiness lies in the life of virtue. The life of virtue is a life of happiness because virtue is an end unto itself which leads to happiness, and the virtuous life is greater participation in the life of God, who is perfect happiness. We can achieve imperfect human happiness in this life. The goal of virtues is to help us on our way to the perfect happiness that waits for us in heaven.

There are two classifications of virtues: cardinal and theological. The objects of cardinal virtues are inner worldly activities such as eating, drinking, engaging in sexual relations, distributing goods, making practical decisions, and facing difficulties. The objects of the theological virtues concern God directly.

Cardinal Virtues:

The following definitions are taken from Saint Thomas Aquinas.

Temperance: In a general sense, the term denotes a kind of moderation common to every moral virtue. In its more restricted sense, temperance concerns the moderation of physical pleasures, especially those associated with eating, drinking, and sex.

Prudence (Wisdom): A kind of intellectual aptitude that enables us to make judgments that are consonant with (and indeed ordered to) our proper end.

Fortitude: Fortitude is the habit that enables you to face difficulties well and overcome obstacles.

Acquired Fortitude: Warrior, Average Christian

Infused Fortitude: Martyr

Justice: The virtue of justice governs our relationships with others. Specifically, it denotes a sustained or constant willingness to extend to each person what he or she deserves.

Theological Virtues:

In keeping with Christian teaching, Aquinas acknowledges that we cannot achieve beatitude solely by means of our own virtuous efforts. Thus Aquinas insists that “it is necessary for man to receive from God some additional [habits], whereby he may be directed to supernatural happiness.” The habits to which he refers here are “infused” or theological virtues. They are given to us graciously by God and direct us to our “final and perfect good.”

Faith: Faith is “an act of intellect which assents to the divine truth at the command of the will, [which is] moved by God’s grace.”

Hope: The virtue whereby we trust God in obtaining final happiness (heaven).

- *Spe Salve* (Pope Benedict XVI): We also hope that good can come from suffering here on earth.

Charity: The virtue whereby we love God for his own sake. Aquinas thinks that love of neighbor is included in the love of God. For our neighbor is the natural image of God; thus we cannot love God unless we also love our neighbor.

Habits

We obtain these virtues by developing good habits in our lives. Aristotle and Aquinas define habit as an abiding quality a person has that characterizes who he is. They are more stable qualities than particular actions because they last longer and are more difficult to change. It is an abiding disposition that changes who a person is. Aristotle refers to them as a second nature because habits become a part of our nature. The habits that abide in us are what incline us to act in one way or the other. They represent a person's moral character. A virtue is a habit that inclines one to act in a good manner.

A common way of obtaining a habit is through repeated actions. A first step might involve overcoming a contrary habit. The next step would be repeating the act over and over to ingrain it. And the final step is when the habit becomes a part of who you are and you exercise it effortlessly. Once one possesses a certain type of habit, one is inclined to do more such actions in the future.

Sources:

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/aq-moral/#SH3a>

Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues, by William C. Mattison III, Brazos Press, 2008.

Amoris Laetitia

“Parents always influence the moral development of their children, for better or for worse” (259).

“The family is the first school of human values, where we learn the wise use of freedom” (274).

“The family is the primary setting for socialization, since it is where we first learn to relate to others, to listen and share, to be patient and show respect, to help one another live as one. The task of education is to make us sense that the world and society are also our home; it trains us how to live together in this greater home” (276).

“In a healthy family, this learning process usually takes place through the demands made by life in common” (275).

- “There is no social bond without this primary, every day, almost microscopic aspect of living side by side, crossing paths at different times of the day, being concerned about everything that affects us, helping one another with ordinary little things. Every day the family has to come up with new ways of appreciating and acknowledging its members” (276).

“Parents rely on schools to ensure the basic instruction of their children, but can never completely delegate the moral formation of their children to others” (263).

“Parents are also responsible for shaping the will of their children, fostering good habits and a natural inclination to goodness. This entails presenting certain ways of thinking and acting as desirable and worthwhile, as part of a gradual process of growth” (264).

“Today, it is less and less effective to demand something that calls for effort and sacrifice without clearly pointing to the benefits which it can bring” (265).

- Discussion, good communication with children

“The strengthening of the will and the repetition of specific actions are the building blocks of moral conduct; without the conscious, free, and valued repetition of certain patterns of good behavior, moral education does not take place. Mere desire, or an attraction to a certain value, is not enough to instill a virtue in the absence of those properly motivated acts” (266).

“Virtue is a conviction that has become a steadfast inner principle of operation. The virtuous life thus builds, strengthens, and shapes freedom, lest we become slaves of dehumanizing and antisocial inclinations. For human dignity itself demands that each of us ‘act out of conscious and free choice, as moved and drawn in a personal way from within’” (267).

Discipline

“It is important that discipline not lead to discouragement but be instead a stimulus to further progress” (270).

- “A child who does something wrong must be corrected, but never treated as an enemy or an object on which to take out one’s own frustrations” (269).

Patience

“Moral education entails asking of a child or a young person only those things that do not involve a disproportionate sacrifice and demanding only a degree of effort that will not lead to resentment or coercion.”

- “Otherwise, by demanding too much, we gain nothing. Once the child is free of our authority, he or she may possibly cease to do good” (271).

“In proposing values, we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration the child’s age and abilities, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods.”

- “Changing a child’s behavior involves a gradual process” (273).

Temperance and Chastity

“When children or adolescents are not helped to realize that some things have to be waited for, they can become obsessed with satisfying their immediate needs and develop the vice of ‘wanting it all now.’”

- “When we are taught to postpone some things until the right moment, we learn self-mastery and detachment from our impulses” (275).

“The Second Vatican Council spoke of a need for ‘a positive and prudent sex education’ to be imparted to children and adolescents ‘as they grow older,’ with ‘due weight being given to the advances in the psychological, pedagogical, and didactic sciences’ (280).

“Frequently, sex education deals primarily with ‘protection’ through the practice of ‘safe sex.’ Such expressions convey a negative attitude toward the natural procreative finality of sexuality, as if an eventual child were an enemy to be protected against” (283).

“The sexual urge can be directed through a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control capable of nurturing valuable capacities for joy and for loving encounter” (280).

“The important thing is to teach them sensitivity to different expressions of love, mutual concern and care, loving respect and deeply meaningful communication. All of these prepare them for an integral and generous gift of self that will be expressed, following a public commitment, in the gift of their bodies. Sexual union in marriage will thus appear as a sign of an all-inclusive commitment, enriched by everything that has preceded it” (283).

“The language of the body calls for a patient apprenticeship in learning to interpret and channel desires in view of authentic self-giving” (284).

“The young need to be helped to accept their own body as it was created” (285).

Media

“The educational process that occurs between parents and children can be helped or hindered by the increasing sophistication of the communications and entertainment media.”

- “When well-used, these media can be helpful for connecting family members who live far from one another.”
- “We know that sometimes they can keep people apart rather than together, as when at dinnertime everyone is surfing on a mobile phone, or when one spouse falls asleep waiting for the other who spends hours playing with an electronic device” (278).

“We cannot ignore the risks that these new forms of communication pose for children and adolescents; at times they can foster apathy and disconnect from the real world” (278).

“Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time” (260)

“In the family, we can also learn to be critical about certain messages sent by the various media. Sad to say, some television programs or forms of advertising often negatively influence and undercut the values inculcated in family life” (274).

Faith

“Faith is God’s gift, received in baptism, and not our own work, yet parents are the means that God uses for it to grow and develop” (287).

“We know that we do not own the gift, but that its care is entrusted to us. Yet our creative commitment is itself an offering which enables us to cooperate with God’s plan. For this reason, ‘couples and parents should be properly appreciated as active agents in catechesis’ (287).

“Handing on the faith presumes that parents themselves genuinely trust God, seek him, and sense their need for him, for only in this way does ‘one generation laud your works to another, and declare your mighty acts’ (Psalm 144:4), and ‘fathers make known to children your faithfulness’ (Isaiah 38:19)” (287).

“The home must continue to be the place where we learn to appreciate the meaning and beauty of the faith, to pray and to serve our neighbor” (287).

“Education in the faith has to adapt to each child since older resources and recipes do not always work. Children need symbols, actions, and stories. ... it is best to encourage their own experience of faith and to provide them with attractive testimonies that win them over by sheer beauty” (288).

“Parents desirous of nurturing the faith of their children are sensitive to their patterns of growth, for they know that spiritual experience is not imposed but freely proposed” (288).

- Do we seek to understand ‘where’ our children really are in their journey?
- Where is their soul? Do we really know? Do we want to know?