

# INTRODUCTION

What would happen if you and I were to be more virtuous? Let's practice some virtues this Lent and see who we become by Holy Week! Virtue means "force." This sounds strange, since you can't force anyone to do good: though parents, spouses, and pastors may try. The "force" virtue exerts is the power of the Holy Spirit—who doesn't oblige us to do right either. Rather, we receive a persistent invitational grace which, if accepted, makes virtuous living possible and desirable.

The habit of virtue makes goodness easier and more natural. Thomas Aquinas viewed practicing virtues as a way of "modification"—a process of soul-sculpting. What do you hope to see when the artwork of your soul is complete? Virtues are tools to fashion that outcome.

About those tools. There's no exhaustive list of Catholic virtues. We do recognize three *theological* virtues (faith, hope, love) from Saint Paul's radiant words on what lasts after the world passes away (1 Cor 13:13). We also acknowledge four *cardinal* virtues serving as hinge points for a moral life (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance). Clement of Alexandria drew these four from the Book of Wisdom (Wis 8:7), and Saint Ambrose dubbed them as cardinal (literally, "hinge"). In no way do these two lists imply that a life of virtue is a seven-and-done business. But they make a great start. We'll discover more virtues on the journey of these forty days.

TWENTY-THIRD PUBLICATIONS *A division of Bayard*  
977 Hartford Turnpike Unit A, Waterford, CT 06385 • (860) 437-3012  
or (800) 321-0411 • [www.twentythirdpublications.com](http://www.twentythirdpublications.com)

ISBN 978-1-62785-733-8 • Copyright © 2023 Alice Camille. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission of the publisher. Write to the Permissions Editor.

Printed in the USA • Cover image: ©stock.adobe.com / Mike Thompson

**FEBRUARY 22** Ash Wednesday / *day of fasting and abstinence*

JOEL 2:12-18 • 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-6:2 • MATTHEW 6:1-6, 16-18

# Stillness

“Sit still.” As children, we squirmed all the more when hearing these words. Our bodies don’t seem built for stillness. Doggone it, we want to move!

Life involves motion. Clocks sweep through seconds, hours. We grow up and old. Our active years are a whirlwind of pursuit: school, work, entertainments, gatherings. Our thoughts are in motion too: daydreaming, planning, remembering.

Eventually, we tire. We want the world to stop spinning for just a while so we can catch up and catch our breath. That’s where stillness comes in. It’s the pause that allows muscles to recover. Stillness is the virtue of no-thing that supplies context to the many things whirling around us. Lent is a summons to stillness.

“Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46:11). This advice reminds us that the noise of existence isn’t the God we follow. God isn’t found until we stop running away.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Choose a favorite chair. Find a quiet spot. Make a daily appointment with stillness.

**PRAYER** *You know who and where I am. Remind me to pause to locate you.*

*Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*

2 CORINTHIANS 6:2B

# Prudence

We began with an easy virtue. Who doesn't want to sit down? Today, Moses plunges us into tougher stuff, prompting us toward the first cardinal virtue: discerning how to proceed once we're on our feet again. Prudence can be confused with prudery, unattractively equated with preachy types. But prudence is the "rudder" virtue steering all the rest. Prudence is stillness with teeth, pause with a purpose. Before blindly bushwhacking forward with a machete of effort, why not consider where we hope to wind up at the end of all this activity?

*"See, I have today set before you life and good, death and evil."*

DEUTERONOMY 30:15

The church embraces a culture of life in a society dancing with death. Can we agree it's good stewardship to take care of our health: body, mind, and spirit? To care for our sisters and brothers as well? To defend children, the elderly, and those who bear special challenges? Isn't a world of justice and peace more desirable than a realm of inequality and aggression? Prudence says: Stop. Pray. Be guided. Then act.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Relationships, finances, work, recreation all go better with prudence. Pause regularly to adjust your rudder!

**PRAYER** *Lord, teach me to do the two-step with you: discern, then move. Think, then act.*

**FEBRUARY 24** Friday after Ash Wednesday / day of abstinence

ISAIAH 58:1-9A • MATTHEW 9:14-15

# Justice

Fasting can seem pointless. What good is it to deny ourselves today what we can enjoy tomorrow? Why abstain from meat on Fridays only to enjoy a meal just as lovely without it? The reason to fast is simple: it's a sacrifice. It's uncomfortable. It reminds us that many don't choose to be hungry. Fasting awakens the call to justice.

Justice is the second cardinal ("hinge") virtue. It's the response of a grateful heart. The God who gives us everything cannot be reimbursed and doesn't ask to be. God requires only that we live justly. We express this justice in three basic forms: commutative, distributive, and social. Commutative justice involves reciprocal fairness between groups: bosses and workers, businesses and consumers. Distributive justice is about sharing resources between haves and have-nots. Social justice implies the full participation and protection of all members of society. When the common good is served in all these ways, justice is a reality, and peace is finally possible.

*Is this not, rather,  
the fast that I  
choose:...sharing  
your bread with  
the hungry,  
bringing the  
afflicted and the  
homeless into  
your house?*

ISAIAH 58:6A, 7

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Deny yourself today. Reflect on how you can contribute to the three paths of justice.

**PRAYER** *You are the source of all goodness. Give me a heart that desires the good life for all.*

**FEBRUARY 25** Saturday after Ash Wednesday

ISAIAH 58:9B-14 • LUKE 5:27-32

# Detachment

At times we can be emotion junkies. We feel passionately about things and imagine this means we're caring people who are fully alive. Passions are helpful when courage is required. But sometimes, being all wound up in the pathos of what's going on around us is just an excuse for our egos to get more exercise.

What may be called for is the spiritual practice of detachment. It means what it says: not attaching like mad to goals, groups, and situations, but rather allowing for a little holy distancing. Early monks discerned that much of what we call "caring" has no religious value but is merely self-indulgence. I have to admit, in my twenties and thirties, detachment sounded like a ludicrous proposal, equal to indifference. It's easier for older folks to acknowledge the value of sacred space between us and our emotions. Detachment isn't a rejection of creation and its wonderfulness. It's a liberation from our often disordered obsessions. Genuine commitment to anyone or anything requires detachment from the flashing lights and siren calls of all that jazz out there.

*[Jesus said to Levi], "Follow me." And leaving everything behind, he got up and followed him.*

LUKE 5:27B-28

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Do my passions lead me closer to God or closer to worldly concerns?

**PRAYER** *Source of love, guide me to caring about the things worth caring about.*

## FEBRUARY 26 First Sunday of Lent

GENESIS 2:7-9; 3:1-7 • ROMANS 5:12-19 • MATTHEW 4:1-11

# Temperance

We've heard the advice repeatedly: *moderation in all things*. There are dozens of places in the Bible where moderation is urged in matters of eating and drinking, sexual expression, collecting possessions, loving money, fits of anger, being quarrelsome, pursuing rivalry, or indulging melancholy. The point being, too much of anything is too much.

*He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was hungry.*

MATTHEW 4:2

Temperance is a third hinge virtue that assists in discerning how to detach from fruitless investments. Most of us won't go on a forty-day fast, as Jesus did at the start of his mission. Nor is it required in exercising temperance. The Bible defines this virtue as "self-control" and "modesty." The idea isn't that the body is the enemy of the spirit. It's that equilibrium is better than going off the deep end! Developing the whole person is better than being lopsidedly other-worldly or uber-worldly. Temperance is a modest proposal. Enjoy yourself. Mindfully.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Are there aspects of moderation that currently elude me? Do I work or play too much, eat or own too much, rage or mourn too much?

**PRAYER** *Life is a balancing act. Lord, keep my head and heart, body and soul in balance.*

**FEBRUARY 27** Monday of the First Week

LEVITICUS 19:1-2, 11-18 • MATTHEW 25:31-46

# Holiness

What do you picture when you think of a holy person? Some of us immediately imagine a poser, someone trying to impress others or perhaps God with how spiritually lovely they are. Or maybe what come to mind are images of the saints: perfection in plaster whose great mortal challenges are happily behind them.

*Be holy, for I,  
the LORD your  
God, am holy.*

LEVITICUS 19:2B

I prefer the idea of holiness as something palpable when I'm in the presence of a genuinely holy person. "I'm not like that," I reflect as I consider their manner and behavior. "And I want to be." Holiness has been described as a participation in the life of God. Sit with that notion for a minute. Is participation in the life of God even possible?

If not, then why take communion? Why be part of the church, aka the body of Christ? We participate in divine life when we do as God does—which includes the practice of virtues. Aren't you glad you came along for the ride this Lent?

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Who has provided you with an example of holy living? How do/did they live?

**PRAYER** *Holy God, I am not like you. But I want to be. Give me the grace to share in your life.*

**FEBRUARY 28** Tuesday of the First Week

ISAIAH 55:10-11 • MATTHEW 6:7-15

# Fruitfulness

I'm willing to bet that anyone reading along here this Lent is trying very hard to live well. To do the right thing. To be a good person. All this "trying," however, is measured against an inflexible standard in the gospels: fruitfulness. Jesus says we're known by our fruits. And fruits come in two kinds, healthy and rotten.

God's word is always fruitful. God speaks; things come into being. Creation, healing, restoration, and new life emerge from the divine word. It's not the same with us. We speak, and the words may be deceptive, half-hearted, or not followed through on. We say what others want to hear. We say what makes us seem nice. We say what we imagine will win an argument. Such fruits can be very rotten.

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are the ones we believers aim for: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These nine fruits from Galatians 5:22-23 spring from a fertile life attentive to the indwelling Spirit. Maybe we should "try" less and listen more.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Which fruits of the Spirit come naturally to me? Which need more attention?

**PRAYER** *Spirit of Holiness, make your home in me.  
Grow your fruits in me.*

*[My word] shall  
not return to me  
empty, but shall  
do what pleases  
me, achieving  
the end for which  
I sent it.*

ISAIAH 55:11



## MARCH 1 Wednesday of the First Week

JONAH 3:1-10 • LUKE 11:29-32

# Contrition

*I'm sorry.* Two easy words we teach to children, yet how often do we use them ourselves? Most of us are aware when we've spoken carelessly or hurtfully. We know when we step beyond integrity's boundaries. And we know that the spirit of contrition is vital to authentic faith. We start each Mass with a penitential rite to clear a path to hearing God's word and receiving God's life within us. We have a whole sacrament dedicated to the lively expression of a contrite heart. You can't get far in Catholic living without stumbling across a ritual way of saying *I'm sorry.*

*The people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast and all of them, great and small, put on sackcloth.*

JONAH 3:5

Sackcloth and ashes are out of fashion. So is standing in the public square wearing a scarlet letter announcing the error of our ways. But words still work quite well. *I hurt you. You didn't deserve that. I was unfair. I need to ask your forgiveness.* Whether it's God, a friend, or ourselves waiting for these words, let's not waste too much time between the offense and the reconciling.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** What have I done or failed to do? Who's waiting to hear from my contrite heart?

**PRAYER** *Compassionate God, I do wrong and fail to do good. And I am heartily sorry for this.*

# Trust

In a difficult season of my life, I felt shut down. My emotions went numb. With family and friends I was withdrawn. The things that used to excite me held no interest. I went to work, came home, ate supper, went to bed. Lather, rinse, repeat.

*“To the one  
who knocks,  
the door will  
be opened.”*

MATTHEW 7:8B

In this sort of half-life, it's hard to pray. Pray about what, for what? God appears distant, even part of the problem. For five months I wandered about in this bleak existence. Then I had a dream in which friends came to my house and built me a new door. They stood in front of it, giggling. I had to come out of the house to see what was so funny. It was a crazy door, made of too many kinds of wood, painted too many colors. It was a silly door, an outrageous door. And try as I might, I couldn't repress the laughter myself.

When I awoke, my feelings were back online. I felt hungry. I had passed through a door of some kind, from self-protection to trust. That door is always there.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Sometimes we knock. Sometimes it's Jesus who's knocking. Who is knocking today?

**PRAYER** *When I am lost, Good Shepherd, come find me.  
Open the way to new life.*

**MARCH 3** Friday of the First Week / *day of abstinence*

EZEKIEL 18:21-18 • MATTHEW 5:20-26

# Mercy

We're not better than God. Maybe that sounds obvious. Yet how often we imagine God—the primary source of love and compassion—as judgmental, unyielding, and punishing! We don't treat people we love this way. We know how to give good things to our children, as Jesus points out. If deeply imperfect folks like us can be fair and caring, can't God be relied on to do even more? God desires to show us mercy.

*If the wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed...he shall surely live. He shall not die!*

EZEKIEL 18:21

Our love of God is measured by how well we imitate the mercy shown to us. You probably know the corporal works of mercy by heart: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, comfort the imprisoned, bury the dead. These are joined by spiritual works of mercy: correct the errant, teach the ignorant, counsel the doubter, comfort the aggrieved, bear wrongs patiently, forgive injuries, pray for the living and the dead. Showing mercy, in other words, is more than feeling sympathy. Mercy is a “work”; it is caring in motion. Make mercy your sacrifice today.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** Mercy's checklist has fourteen items. How many do I practice?

**PRAYER** *God, your mercy is wide as the sea, always ready to recover me when I fail you.*

# Singleheartedness

Once, during a job interview, the religious sister who was considering me for the position threw my resume down on her desk in evident frustration. “Looking at everything you’ve done so far, I can’t figure out what it is you mean to be doing, or even who you’re trying to be. So tell me: *do you know?*”

*“But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”*

MATTHEW 5:44

I wasn’t prepared for this question. And had to admit to myself, if not to her, that I’d honestly never put the question to myself before that moment. What is my life for? What is my purpose?

The trait of singleheartedness involves having a dedicated unity of purpose. Often it takes us a few decades to get focused on what might be called our vocation. Whether we’re married, single, or celibate isn’t the question. Why are we here? What are we doing here? If we ask ourselves this question, the answer may prove surprising.

**FOR CONTEMPLATION** It’s not about the tasks I perform or the role I play. Who do I intend to be?

**PRAYER** *You’re the God who gathers what has been scattered. Help me find integrity of heart.*