

Retreat on Heroic Virtue

DAY 1

“You Must, therefore, Be Perfect...” (Mt. 5,49) Heroic Virtue: The Sign of Perfection

- universal call to holiness, to become saints

Who has been recognized as Saints

- martyrs: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." (*Jn 15:13*)
- confessors: unbloody martyrs who excelled in doctrine or penance (monks, ascetics)
- around 5th century, voice of the people, i.e. fame of sanctity, miracles after death
- the 7 virtues: examined in a systematic way, St. Bonaventure, 1482,
- heroic virtue: St. Teresa of Avila, process in 1602. (although term “heroic virtue” was already used by St. Augustine)
- Benedict XIV (1740-58) *De Servorum Dei beatificatione et beatorum canonizatione*

What is a virtue?

- Good habit formed by repeating good acts. (acquired virtue)
 - distinguish between acquired and infused

Number of Virtues: 7 – Faith, Hope, Charity, Prudence, Justice, Temperance (humility, chastity), Fortitude

All other virtues, he affirms, can be reduced to these.

What is heroic virtue?

The term heroic, or hero, is not ecclesiastical in origin. It comes originally from

Greek mythology. It was used to describe the demigods, those born from one divine parent and one human parent. It was then used to describe illustrious men, famous for their outstanding abilities and achievements, who, after their death, were thought to attain the level of the demigods. It was thus adopted by ecclesiastical writers, St. Augustine and, following him, the Medieval Scholastics, to describe the saints who, by their superior virtues and deeds, such as martyrdom, rose to heights above other men and made themselves ever more similar to God.

Heroic virtue is not *essentially* different from common virtue. Heroic virtue consists in the *perfect* operation of the virtues and, as such, would indicate that nature has been entirely purified of the passions. The wayfarer can never be entirely free from disordered passions, but the man who has them largely in check, who feels their sting less frequently and with less vehemence, possesses a sign of heroic virtue.

One of the effects of practicing virtue to an heroic degree is that it renders man similar to Christ. Through personal effort and God's grace, man can reach the point of acquiring such a dominion over himself and docility to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit that he becomes ever more Christ-like. This stable disposition to right action is called heroic virtue.

The action of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit is the **formal cause** of and constitutive element to the practice of heroic virtue. The Gifts, which are expressed by the Prophet (*Isa* 11:2) wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord, and attributed to the Messiah, are likewise shared by the faithful who are grafted into Him and justified by baptism. The Gifts elevate virtue above the human mode of operating. Thus, without the accompanying action of the Gifts, there is no heroic virtue.

The Gifts are necessary because even the action of the infused virtues (faith, hope, charity) are marked by timidity, incertitude, and man's essential imperfection.

Furthermore, normally speaking, the soul must already possess the virtues in a certain degree in order to receive the motion of the Holy Spirit.

Heroic virtue is due to both the Holy Spirit and man, God's grace and man's cooperation with it. On one part we have a supernatural cause, the Gifts, actual grace or the instinct of the Holy Spirit; on the other part a natural cause, man's faculties, good habits, the common virtues.

How can we determine whether an act was heroic or not? An heroic act is that which is done under the predominant influence of the Holy Spirit. This, of course, cannot be observed.

One must consider the circumstances in order to determine the heroicness of an act, for an act may be deemed heroic according to the difficulty of the object of the act per se:

- e.g. saving someone who is being attacked by a rabid dog (heroic fortitude, but intention must be supernatural, motivated by supernatural charity, not natural)

- or according to the difficulty due to the circumstances surrounding the act, i.e., something easy in and of itself may become difficult and require heroic virtue due to the time and place or the age and condition of the person.

- something easy in itself, professing the faith, becomes difficult at the risk of one's life, job, friends.

- e.g. the only girl in the class living chastely and is mocked by classmates, for years.

- the poor who don't have meat available to eat vs. someone rich who abstains 3 times week for 50 yrs.

Moreover, we may consider not only a single act which may require heroic virtue, but also an entire work, that per se is not difficult, but is performed over a considerable span of time, thus requiring heroic virtue.

- e.g. St. Leopold Mandic, P. Pio, martyrs of the confessional, many hours, everyday, for many years.

Finally, we may consider the manner in which the act is performed. For example, a relatively common act done with great charity can be considered heroic.

- e.g. St. Therese of Lisieux, picking up a pin out of love for Jesus.

Heroic virtue is marked by promptness and facility, understood especially in regard to the higher part of the soul; it does not exclude difficulty in the less elevated part, as the mystery of Gethsemane shows. there may be suffering involved and great difficulty to be overcome; but heroic charity promptly surmounts them.

Likewise holy joy is another distinctive sign of the action of the Holy Spirit but this does not exclude sorrow and sadness in the lower faculties; it is even at times accompanied by extreme dejection, which is religiously offered to God. The joy of suffering for our Lord even increases with suffering, and for that reason it is the sign of a very great grace.

Conc. – Always practice the virtues as best as we can to dispose ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in them the fire of your love.

Hail Mary...

Our Lady, Spouse of the Holy Spirit and Queen of All Saints, pray for us.

cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 1.
cf. AUGUSTINE, *De civitate Dei*, X, 21.

