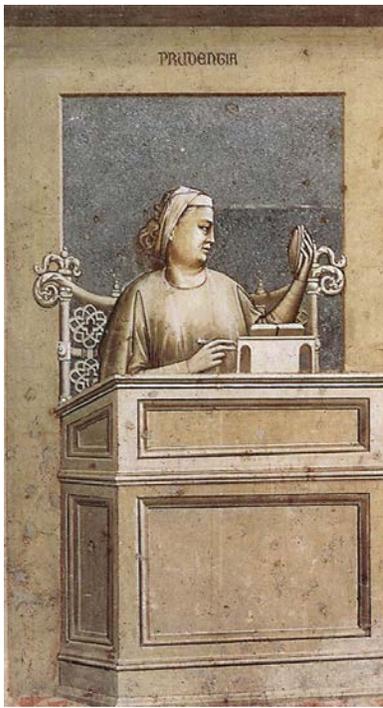




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AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM C. MATTISON III

William C. Mattison III, author of *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Brazos Press, 2008), provided **Church Life** with the following written interview on virtue in the Church and the world today. Here, it serves to contextualize and introduce a chapter Mattison contributed to the collection *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, eds. David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), which is reprinted in this issue with the publisher's permission.



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1) Why is the formation of virtue essential to a robust practice of discipleship?

Where to begin? Formation in virtue is absolutely crucial. One way to get at it is this. Our faith is thoroughly Incarnational. God becomes man that we might participate in the divine nature. Thus fullness of life—salvation—is not simply something that happens to us, although it is of course God’s initiative and only possible through God’s grace. It is also, however, something in which we participate. We are transformed, sanctified, by God’s grace to live life in Christ.

Now virtues are those stable dispositions to do certain sorts of activities well. They qualify our capacities, and make us who we are as a sort of “second nature.” Thus formation in virtue—and particularly graced or “infused” virtue—is our participation in the divine nature, truly begun in this life though complete only in the next. Put in this context, few things are more important than formation in virtue!

2) In your own assessment, how do you undertake formation into virtue today, especially with the undergraduates that you work with at Catholic University?

The ancients were a bit more aware than we are today of the importance of friendship in our lives. Shared life with friends was regarded as a high point of a truly fulfilling life. As Christians, we of course share this affirmation, rooted in the social nature of the human person. And it is even more central from the perspective of Christianity, since our triune God is a self-giving, loving communion of Persons who invites all people into that loving communion, a community that is the eschatological communion of saints and instantiated in this life as the Church. [St. Thomas] Aquinas so appreciated this ancient insight into the importance of friendship that he adopted Aristotle’s thought on it to explain the central virtue of the Christian life, charity. Pope Francis has recently pondered its importance for the transmission of faith in his [Apostolic Letter] *Lumen Fidei*.

What has any of this to do with formation in virtue? People are formed by their friends, by their communities. They can of course be formed poorly (de-formed), obtaining habits we call vices. But friendships and communities are also venues for formation into virtue, those habits that enable true human flourishing. I regard the sustenance of such friendships and community as a central task in Catholic education. It occurs in the classroom, in student life, across the university, and in the inauguration of students into traditions of thought where our intellectual lives are sustained. Most students leave college and cherish the friendships they have made, and that professor or two who was so formative on them. Again, these venues can be corrosive as seen in recent news accounts of horrendous behavior among college students in fraternities. But I take it as my task as a professor to build friendships with students, and to sustain classroom environments of humble and charitable intellectual rigor. As Associate Dean of Undergraduates for our school I take great care to nurture community among our theology students. I enjoy and support such friendship with my colleagues, faculty, and staff. These personal encounters are not mere window dressing to the academic endeavor. They are crucial for character (including intellectual) formation. A Catholic university must make it its mission to nourish friendship, an endeavor that is constitutive of our ultimate destiny of supernatural union with God, but also at a more immediate level accessible to and enjoyed by our community member friends of varying or even no faith.

3) Are there models of this formation that you see already in the Church or world today? Where?

Thank God, I see this everywhere. I see it in theological communities such as our undergraduates at Catholic University, or our doctoral students in formation. I see it in programs thriving at universities. At Notre Dame you have two obvious examples: ACE and Echo, where recent college graduates give away their lives in service while living in communities that nourish their spiritual and intellectual lives, with strong leadership and marked by that most noble indicator of human flourishing, joy.

4) In our last issue, Cyril O'Regan had this to say about sanctity in the modern world:

Contemporary secular culture is both relativistic and iconoclastic. It is relativistic in two different ways, although these ways usually go together. On the one hand, the secular world wants to refer to the bevy of forms of sainthood and excellence throughout history and suggest that different cultures and societies have different constructions.

... On the other, the secularist also wants to suggest that sainthood represents an idiom of excess and fanaticism that is dangerously uncontrollable, and thus should be discouraged if not shunned. Benedict keeps in mind both Pascal and Newman on this point: Pascal when he says that the new world order emerging in the seventeenth century is that of *l'homme moyen sensuel* ("the average sensual man") and Newman in the nineteenth century when he suggests that under the umbrella of enlightened Christianity the saint has been replaced by the

citizen, the good enough person whose virtues fundamentally amount to socially approved vices, such as making money and lots of it.

How do we distinguish between true virtue and “socially approved vices”? How do we distinguish this for students or those involved in parish life?

I am quite hopeful in the ability to distinguish true virtue from its varying verisimilitudes ranging from lesser completion to downright vices. I recognize that the power of social deformation is enormous, that individuals have extraordinary capacity for self-deception, and that committed “principled” nihilists or relativists may not be amenable to the following approach. But I usually find that people engaging in common reflection on the goods they seek and the ways their practices achieve and instantiate those goals is very fruitful. Those of us in education—and indeed all Christians called to the mission that is evangelization—must sustain that hope. In the classroom this involves conversation and inquiry—always buttressed by the resources in our and other traditions—toward specifying the goods we seek and critically examining how our practices with regard to material goods, sexuality, rectifying injustices, etc. achieve those goals. With our families, fellow students, parishioners, and other friends, this reflection is less formal but still essential to living a reflective and authentic life.

5) You speak of the cardinal virtues as “the path to the good life in this world.” Where does one start in engaging society, and young

people especially, in a dialogue that might transform the predominant idea of what the “good life” actually looks like? How does one convince others that this is the “good life” to be pursued in the first place?

This harkens back to the previous question. St. Thomas Aquinas was convinced that all people seek to do good and avoid evil. This natural inclination in us is ineradicable. Now of course people can go awry (at times horribly so) in this endeavor. But one of the ramifications of this claim is that one does not have to convince people of the importance of seeking a “good life”: they are already seeking it. They may not call it this. Or they may uphold a vision of it that is not truly good. But as described in the previous question, our current practices with regard to a whole range of activities can be raised up and examined as they reveal our vision (explicit or not) of the good life. On the basis of such humble and rigorous examination of our and others’ practices, true dialogue ensues.

As to how transform the predominant (presumably lacking?) vision of the good life, education can be a great asset. Yet even more fundamental is the power of witness, particularly in the context of family and friendship. We see this very clearly in my favorite gospel, Matthew. Jesus periodically offers longer discourses where we see Christ the Teacher in action. The most famous is of course the Sermon on the Mount (on which I am just completing a book!). But after each such discourse, Matthew recounts Jesus’ ministry, his life-giving encounters with a multitude of people in a variety of contexts. For instance, he taught

us the beatitudes at the start of the Sermon, but most importantly he lived them. Indeed they are a sort of self-portrait of Jesus. Jesus' witness of God's love and transforming personal encounters are his most effective teaching tools. And he invites his disciples to share in this endeavor, as the Church does today.

6) In this chapter, you speak of virtue as a vehicle for explaining how grace can transform human action. Can you elaborate on this?

The mysterious dynamics of how God's grace transforms our lives are impossible to fully comprehend. But our generation is particularly lacking when it comes to language about God's grace. In rejecting an earlier generation's more mechanistic and static language of grace, we now too often eschew any specificity in speaking about how God changes us in a manner that comes from without us, but is not wholly without our participation. Though eventually leading to some abuse, Scholastic language about the multitude of ways God works in our lives is illuminating. One such way is through habitual cooperative grace. God grants to us ("infuses") capacities to know and choose consistently in a manner toward our supernatural destiny of union with God. There are the infused virtues. They include the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. They also include graced versions of the cardinal virtues: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. We commonly hear that God does not call the qualified, but qualifies the called. The infused virtues are at the heart of that

qualification process!

7) If you could control what image or association came to mind when every person heard or saw the word "virtue," what would you choose?

What a great question, despite the dangerous temptation of mind control language! I suppose I'd go back to its etymology. I'd like people to think of "excellence," which is the Greek origin of the word. The moral life, the life of virtue, is about "being excellent." Language of morality in the modern period (especially after Kant) has taken on the unfortunate connotation of obligation, and imposition from the outside. But the good life, the virtuous life, is really about thriving, about being excellent. When Christ says "I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10), he is talking about the virtuous life. Live life fully! Be excellent!

