

MUSINGS

FROM THE

EDITOR



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A classic model of ethical education, as performed within high schools and colleges alike, is to present some sort of ethical dilemma, inviting students to discern the right course of action. The gift of this pedagogical approach is a summoning of the student to rehearse a rational and intelligent response to human action within the world. How would you respond to a friend who steals? To an encounter with drugs or alcohol? To the temptations of high finance?

Of course, the problem with such an approach is that it ignores the larger (and more important) question that pertains to “ethical” engagement in the world in the first place: how does my identity shape what I do within the world? How is it that the practices that make up my life, my day-to-day ordering of a world, dispose me to choose truth, goodness, and beauty? What are the narratives of human flourishing that I draw upon in ordering this life? These fundamental questions pertaining to “the moral life” are not merely a matter of rationality but a question of spiritual and human formation alike. In other words, how does what I do every day shape who I become? How does this formation of my identity inform my action within the world?

In taking up the topic of virtue and the New Evangelization in this issue of our journal, it is precisely these questions that occupy our attention. Too often, even among those who practice the art of evangelization in Catholicism, the emphasis is placed on some radical intellectual, affective, or religious conversion that necessarily changes the calculus of one’s decisions. The subtle nature of practice, of forming and reforming

habits, is passed over as mere cultural Catholicism or superstitious practice. The lifelong fostering of intellectual, moral, and religious virtue is dismissed at the expense of the “moment” of conversion. In such a perspective, for example, daily Eucharistic worship is only *really* valuable after one has come to a personal experience of Christ’s love. Or, perhaps, only if one is fully aware of what exactly one is “doing” in such Eucharistic worship. In both cases, some prior “experience” (whether emotional or rational) must precede the mundaneness of practice itself. There is little room here for the subtle ways that daily practice forms us into a way of life; into practices of virtue.

Yet, as John Henry Newman writes in “Holiness Necessary for Future Blessedness”:

The more numerous are our acts of charity, self-denial, and forbearance, of course the more will our minds be schooled into a charitable, self-denying, and forbearing temper. The more frequent are our prayers, the more humble, patient, and religious are our daily deeds, this communion with God, these holy works,

will be the means of making our hearts holy, and of preparing us for the future presence of God. Outward acts, done on principle, create inward habits.¹

For Newman, there is a two-fold problem with the dismissal of practice's power in forming identity. The first is an idolatry of the intellect, one in which every decision in human life must be subject to rational debate and discourse. That there is some "objective" place outside of specific stories or tradition-laden practices whereby we can discern what is good, true, and beautiful within the world. But as he writes in his *Oxford University Sermons*:

It is plain in what sense Faith is a moral principle. It is created in the mind, not so much by facts, as by probabilities; and since probabilities have no definite ascertained value, and are reducible to no scientific standard, what are such to each individual depends on his moral temperament. A good and a bad man will think very different things probable. In the judgment of a rightly disposed mind, objects are desirable and attainable which irreligious men will consider to be but fancies.²

It is only through taking up a perspective within the world by embracing certain practices and narratives as incarnate in the life of faith that certain judgments may be made. For example, is it the right the thing to do to give up one's life for the sake of another? One can only answer this question out of those narratives and practices, which make up our sense of "rightness" to begin with. If for example, we believe the good life is achieving maximum pleasure in all things, then it would not be the "right thing" to give up one's life for the sake of another (unless, this giving up of life would result in ultimate pleasure). On the other hand, if one has read the Gospels within the life of the Church, then it is entirely possible that the truly happy life, the good life, could be obtained through an act of total self-giving

love, even unto death. Naked reason, floating above all stories and formative practices, will not reveal this. Only immersion into specific stories and certain practices embedded, in this case, within the Christian tradition:

A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition. Within a tradition the pursuit of goods extends through generations, something through many generations. Hence the individual's search for his or her good is generally and characteristically conducted within a context defined by those traditions of which the individual's life is a part, and this is true both of those goods which are internal to practices and of the goods of a single life.³

Yet, Newman is not simply concerned about the idolatry of reason. Rather, there is also an idolatry of experience, of the emotional life. Once again, turning to Newman's preaching:

These remarks may suffice to show the relation which excited feelings bear to true religious principle. They are sometimes natural, sometimes suitable; but they are not religion itself. They come and go. They are not to be counted on, or encouraged; for, as in St. Peter's case, they may supplant true faith, and lead to self-deception. They will gradually lose their place within us as our obedience becomes confirmed;—partly because those men are kept in perfect peace, and sheltered from all agitating feelings, whose minds are stayed on God;—partly because these feelings themselves are fixed into habits by the power of faith, and instead of coming and going, and agitating the mind from their suddenness, they are permanently retained so far as there is any thing good in them, and give a deeper colour and a more energetic expression to the Christian character.⁴

The problem, for Newman, is when one “measures” one’s religious identity before God by the affections experienced by the believer. Only when such affections are present, his opponent might argue, is one in a religious state of mind. For this reason, it is the obtaining of these feelings, these pious thoughts, which are evidence of the transformation of identity. Yet, again, Newman turns to the power of practice itself in forming Christian identity. The goal is not the experiencing of constant emotion but a consistency of religious character that infuses the life of the believer: “One secret act of self-denial, one sacrifice of inclination to duty, is worth all the mere good thoughts, warm feelings, passionate prayers, in which idle people indulge themselves.”⁵

Thus, this issue of *Church Life* is not simply a study of virtue ethics. The themes extend far beyond the ethical life to the very formation of Christian identity through immersion into narrative and practice alike, the creation of habits. The language of the New Evangelization, if it is to have staying power within the Church, cannot succumb to either the idolatry of reason or emotion alike. Virtues are formed through the taking up of practices that shape our vision of the world. That slow work of disposing oneself to the gift of grace.

Ultimately, the language of virtue is not oriented simply to those dispositions that we generate within ourselves. Instead, such virtue formation is the creation of a space in which the Spirit can act in human history, in which the natural orientation of our lives might become supernatural. Parents who each evening invite their young children to kiss an icon are developing natural “habits” within their child. Each of the children will become habituated to kissing this icon, the event prescribed in the family bedtime ritual; the children first loving the practice because the parents do. Yet, it is this very natural habit of kissing an icon every evening, of establishing a mundane culture of prayer within a family, in which future spaces of divine communion are

opened up for these children. In which friendship with God becomes possible.

Our treatment of virtue in this issue, therefore, is not simply a matter of ethics, of forming Christians to do the right thing. Rather, it is a matter of assessing how the mundaneness of practice, of immersing ourselves within the narrative of divine love, can change our identities. Not in one moment of conversion but in a lifetime given over to practicing Catholicism.



NOTES

- 1 John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 10.
- 2 John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), X.35.2.
- 3 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 222.
- 4 John Henry Newman, “Religious Emotion” in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 119–20.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 122.