

THE CARDINAL VIRTUES

IT WAS THE GREAT ST THOMAS AQUINAS WHO DEFINED THESE VIRTUES AS 'CARDINAL' IN THE FIRST PLACE.

Prudence

- Aristotle defined prudence as *recta ratio agibilium*, "right reason applied to practice."
- It is the virtue that allows us to judge correctly what is right and what is wrong in any given situation.
- When we mistake the evil for the good, we are not exercising prudence—in fact, we are showing our lack of it.
- Because it is so easy to fall into error, prudence requires us to seek the counsel of others, particularly those we know to be sound judges of morality.
- Disregarding the advice or warnings of others whose judgment does not coincide with ours is a sign of imprudence.

Justice

- Justice is "the constant and permanent determination to give everyone his or her rightful due." We say that "justice is blind," because it should not matter what we think of a particular person. If we owe him a debt, we must repay exactly what we owe.

- Justice is connected to the idea of rights. While we often use justice in a negative sense ("He got what he deserved"), justice in its proper sense is positive.
- Injustice occurs when we as individuals or by law deprive someone of that which he is owed. Legal rights can never outweigh natural ones.

Fortitude

- While this virtue is commonly called *courage*, it is not a kind of macho 'dare devil' kind of courage which we see in movies
- Fortitude allows us to overcome fear and to remain steady in the face of obstacles, but it is always reasoned and reasonable; the person exercising fortitude does not seek danger for danger's sake.
- Prudence and justice are the virtues through which we decide what needs to be done; fortitude gives us the strength to do it.
- Fortitude is the only one of the cardinal virtues that is also a gift of the Holy Spirit, allowing us to rise above our natural fears in defence of the Christian faith.

Temperance

- While fortitude is concerned with the restraint of fear so that we can act, temperance is the restraint of our desires or passions.

- Food, drink, and sex are all necessary for our survival, individually and as a species; yet a disordered desire for any of these goods can have disastrous consequences, physical and moral.
- Temperance is the virtue that attempts to keep us from excess, and, as such, requires the balancing of legitimate goods against our inordinate desire for them.
- Our legitimate use of such goods may be different at different times; temperance is the "golden mean" that helps us determine how far we can act on our desires.