

The Virtues, Part 1: The Pursuit of Happiness

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

“Good morals lead to happiness.” To some of us, this statement might sound strange or suspicious. Some may associate the term “morals” with a life of constant self-denial that leads to heaven, but not to joy or happiness in this life. “Good morals” seem to evoke Puritanism or a life of suppressed emotions and bodily urges. Others may think that happiness is attained when people can follow their own path, their own philosophy of life, and not someone else’s understanding of ethics.

Our first reaction to this statement reveals the extent to which we have unknowingly accepted certain modern ethical assumptions that would look quite strange to Jesus and the saints. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus preached the beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit ... blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5). One can also translate the word “blessed” as “happy.” The beatitudes lead to happiness. Secondly, notice that Jesus spoke in the present tense. He promised that happiness can begin in this life, though it will only be complete in the next (“they will see God”). Finally, the Sermon on the Mount offers Jesus’ summary of the moral life. It stands at the heart of any authentic Christian ethic. Therefore, Jesus’ moral teachings lead to happiness. Good morals do lead to happiness, even this side of heaven.

Jesus told us *that* this is the case, but *how* can this be? We can begin to answer that question by considering our understanding of happiness. What is it? We can agree that in the depth of our hearts, we all seek happiness. Indeed, happiness is something which human beings desire above all else. People pursue a certain profession, wealth, a good marriage, a family, recreation and friendships because they believe that these will bring them (and others) happiness, not vice versa. The fact that everyone seeks happiness is a sign that the Creator himself has planted this longing in the depth of the human heart. This is good news. God wants us to pursue happiness, not misery.

But shouldn’t everyone be free to determine what happiness will be for them? Isn’t happiness relative? Perhaps it would be, if creation were a mere myth. Yet God has created every human being in his image and likeness (Genesis 1). God did not create an utterly chaotic world in which each being determines itself. Rather, he created the world through the Word, through Wisdom (John 1). The human being has an order inscribed within it that reflects this

Wisdom. Our human nature is not like a piece of plastic that we can mold however we want, but a reflection of divine Truth and Beauty.

What kind of order has God inscribed within us? He has made the human mind to know infinite truth, and he has made the human heart to love infinite goodness. God has created us to be restless until we come to a direct encounter with Truth and Love itself. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in you” (St. Augustine, *The Confessions*). Why is the human desire for money limitless, or why is physical pleasure never enough for those who pursue it wholeheartedly? Because some strive to fulfill their bottomless longing for truth and love through the attainment of limited, earthly goods. Finite things cannot satiate infinite longing. “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.” Jesus promises the fulfillment of happiness in the loving vision of God. The pure heart is not just a heart cleansed from sins of the flesh, but a heart whose singular aim is the love of God. The deepest longings of the human heart are for perfect truth and love. This is our objective happiness. It’s for everyone.

The aim of the Christian life is perfect happiness (life with God in heaven) and a foretaste of heaven in this life in the peace and joy of the Holy Spirit (blessed *are* the pure of heart). How do we attain this two-fold happiness? By living according to the pattern or order that God has inscribed within our very being. God has created us in such a way that when I act according to God’s ways, I move closer to partial happiness in this life and complete happiness in the next. My whole being bears the imprint of God’s wise order, so that, when I employ my body and soul as he intended, I begin to find my true fulfillment. This is the Christian paradox: pursuing *my* way to happiness actually leads to misery and despair, since I thus move away from God, who alone is infinite truth and love. But giving up my way to pursue *God’s* way leads to my authentic fulfillment.

When I employ my body, my emotions, heart and mind as God intended, I am living what we call the virtues. And the perfect teacher of the virtues is Jesus Christ. His words and deeds are the ultimate education in virtue, or the moral life. The purpose of God coming among us in Christ was to show us the path to happiness.

But what exactly is virtue? I will begin to answer that question next week.

The Virtues, Part 2: A Definition
By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, I discussed the universal pursuit of happiness whose single aim is communion with the God who is Love and Truth itself. Every human being seeks Love and Truth. God has made us in such a way that when we act according to his ways, we move closer to our objective happiness, which is life with God here and hereafter. Following God's ways is called living the virtues. But what exactly is virtue?

Let's begin by listing the classical virtues. First, we have faith, hope and love, which are gratuitous gifts from God. Then, there are the four "cardinal virtues:" prudence (or wisdom), justice, temperance and courage. In this series, we will focus on these four latter virtues, which are also called the "acquired virtues." What do these virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage have in common?

The cardinal or acquired virtues are semi-permanent qualities of the soul. They are like muscles of the soul. To acquire physical strength, I need to lift weights or jog on a regular basis. I do the same physical exercise over and over again. As I build muscle, I become a healthier human being. Similarly, our "soul muscles" means that we attain greater spiritual health by repeating the same wholesome actions over and over again. Consistently engaging in virtuous acts like being kind and generous to the poor forms lasting habits within us. After a while, being just to the poor becomes second nature. I simply do it, often without even thinking about it. The just person is not just one who avoids stealing, but one who consistently treats others with respect and dignity. He or she gains an in-built tendency to act justly. Such a person becomes more pleasing to God, and (with the gift of God's grace) moves closer to their ultimate aim, which is perfect communion with the Trinity.

The virtues combine to form good habits of action. They are not straightjackets or restrictions on us, but rather elevate and direct our natural capacities so that we may flourish as persons. The virtues train us to use the mind, the heart, the emotions and the body in the way that our loving Creator has made them to be used. Virtue is all about character formation. It means that we are the sum of our actions, not just our intentions. The road to despair is paved with good intentions, but the road to true happiness is paved with wholesome actions done for the right intentions.

A virtue is acquired gradually over time. It demands consistent effort. Once acquired, it is not easily lost. A person who has a tendency of lying will find it difficult to stop at once. We see the same difficulty in those who tend to overeat or easily lose their temper. On the other hand, a person who consistently practices truth telling will actually find it difficult to start lying on a regular basis. If someone were to accuse a known truth-teller of lying, we would probably disbelieve the accusation and say that it “goes against his or her nature.” Our very language alludes to the presence of virtue.

Virtue is not just about acting rightly. Virtue forms internal dispositions. The word “internal” refers to the mind, the heart and the emotions. The truly courageous person faces an obstacle with a certain ease, promptness and joy, not fear and trembling. Perhaps someone began developing courage by facing danger (the abusive language of a co-worker who constantly gossips) with fear and trembling. But by confronting evil (gossip at work) when it needs to be done over and over again, the fear gradually diminishes. Being courageous becomes easier. Doing what is good eventually brings a certain delight to the mind, heart and emotions. The virtues transform our emotions and direct our desires more and more in the way of God.

We can see that living the virtues means much more than following a set of rules. We have important rules such as the Ten Commandments to keep us from consuming spiritual junk food. An athlete has to eat well, and so does the Christian pursuing holiness. Keeping the Commandments is like keeping a good diet. It prevents the decay and death of the soul. Yet that is just the first step in character formation. A man can keep the sixth commandment perfectly by avoiding lust and adultery, yet if he cannot express affection for women in a healthy, appropriate way, he has not yet acquired the virtue of chastity (which is part of temperance).

For the cardinal virtues, perfection is found in the mean or in the middle. The daredevil is not courageous, he is reckless. The Puritan is not temperate, but a suppressed individual incapable of enjoying creation as God intended. The mother who works 80-hour weeks at a wonderful non-profit organization is not growing in justice, but giving too much for one cause while neglecting her family. Rather, balancing the demands of her profession and the care of her family leads to growth in the virtue of justice.

We can see that the virtues are somewhat complex, yet utterly commonsensical. By learning to act virtuously, we become fulfilled human beings. Next week, we will ponder some elements of the virtuous act in greater detail.

The Virtues, Part 3: An Overview of Prudence

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

When you think of the term “prudence,” what is the first thing that comes to mind? Perhaps you imagine the shrewd businessperson. Prudent persons are cautious and look to minimize risks for themselves. Yet such prudence is far from the classical virtue that bears the same name.

Not only is true prudence or practical wisdom a strength of character, it is even biblically rooted. Wisdom begins with fear or reverence for God (Proverbs 1:7), that is, recognizing that God is wise and that my knowledge is quite limited. St. Paul often exhorts his readers to practice prudence (e.g. Ephesians 1:5). When properly understood and implemented, prudence leads to holiness.

So exactly what is this virtue of prudence? It is an acquired skill or capacity of the soul to make good decisions. It means having a tendency to make good choices day in and day out that truly lead me to my ultimate aim in life, which is happiness. Prudence is the ability to order all parts of life (little by little) toward our objective happiness, which is life with the God who is Love and Truth itself. The prudent parent recognizes when and how much to discipline a rebellious child. He or she has learned to discern the proper balance between showing kindness to a controlling relative and setting proper boundaries so as to keep one’s sanity.

We need prudence whenever we can make more than one good choice. Prudence does not ask whether or not I should lie or gossip in this or that situation. If this were the case, then we would fall back into the misconception that prudence means being politically shrewd. Prudence is not a sophisticated way of evading the Ten Commandments when it is convenient. Rather, prudence applies universal moral precepts (e.g. “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) in a situation where the best path is not absolutely obvious. With whom should I eat lunch? Which friendship should I cultivate, since I cannot be everyone’s friend? Which organization should benefit from my tithing? Prudence is so crucial for the development of human character because many decisions in life are messy and complex.

St. Thomas Aquinas points out that there is no virtue without prudence. Why is that? There is no virtue or holiness without truth. Truth is all about the unveiling of reality, or openness to reality (Josef Pieper, *The Cardinal Virtues*, p. 9). Prudence ultimately means being

in tune with the world and the order that God has inscribed in the world. Prudence means being in tune with God himself and his ways. Prudence means that God and his wisdom are the ultimate criteria of morality, not just good intentions, my needs or the expectations of society. Prudence presumes the ability to be still, contemplate and gaze upon reality. Do you want to grow in prudence? Then turn off your television more often and go for walks (I'm not joking). Try reducing the noise and busyness of life and learn to ponder with inner stillness the beauty of creation and human life.

Prudence presumes the most important foundational principle of the moral life: good must be done, and evil must be avoided. Our post-modern culture will respond that good and evil are essentially subjective. But in fact, no one lives according to this post-modern dogma of complete moral relativism. Virtually all post-modernists are convinced that racism is wrong and genocide is wicked. Everyone insists (correctly) that their individual rights must be respected, although we often disagree over exactly what those rights are. In practice, all of us ultimately presume that there is right and wrong. Indeed, the good must be done, and evil must be avoided. Such is the logic that God has inscribed in creation and in the human heart. Goodness is the path that leads to a deeper communion with God, and evil is that which leads away from him.

Prudence therefore presumes the objectivity of truth. That is why it becomes the "pilot of the soul" whereby the whole of our being is ordered to reality, truth and goodness. Prudence is the trained eye of the mind that discerns the path to a more wholesome way of life. Without the mind's trained eye, the other virtues go astray. My heart may be filled with a desire to be just towards the poor, but giving money to the homeless person about whom I know nothing instead of the homeless shelter may simply feed an addiction to alcohol. Without prudence, temperance simply becomes a form of aimless asceticism. Perhaps a feeling of shame for our sins drives us to withdraw from sources of pleasure to discipline our passions, instead of replacing unhealthy sources of pleasure (like internet pornography) with wholesome sources (like going ballroom dancing). Prudence enables a moderated asceticism to bear fruit in a new joy we find in the goodness of God's creation.

Yet we are just scratching the surface of this important virtue. There is a whole set of skills that come together as we acquire practical wisdom. I will discuss some of those skills next week.

The Virtues, Part 4: Some Aspects of Prudence

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The virtue of prudence or practical wisdom is in some ways the key to the moral life. With prudence, we learn to make good choices that bring greater peace and happiness. By it, we become in tune with the goodness and beauty of God that shines forth in creation. Prudence is a muscle of the soul whereby we learn to approach the complex parts of life that demand more than the simple application of the moral law (e.g. the Ten Commandments). Prudence does not create exceptions to God's law. Rather, it helps us to make daily decisions which bring us closer to God. After all, being a disciple of Christ is not about fulfilling the minimum, but ordering the whole of life according to Jesus' ways as best as we can.

Becoming wise or prudent involves gradually acquiring a set of spiritual skills or muscles. Let's ponder these aspects of prudence one at a time.

First, prudent persons are capable of taking an honest look at the past, at their memory. They do not try to suppress, omit or retouch past events. They can honestly say to themselves: "last time I did this, it really hurt her." We can already tell that some persons who have had a very painful past (e.g. a traumatic childhood) may need to work with a counselor for some time before they can truly acquire an advanced degree of practical wisdom. The virtues go hand-in-hand with emotional and psychological well-being.

Second, prudent persons have a certain docility to truth around them. They are able to take advice from others, though not with naiveté, since some people who want to give us advice have no business doing so. This docility is especially called for in relation to persons who are more experienced than we are, especially our elders (see Proverbs 4:1) or friends who have a knack for making good decisions. Prudence knows when to take counsel, and who can act as a true mentor. Practical wisdom is not closed-minded. It refuses a know-it-all attitude. True prudence is impossible to attain without authentic humility. Humility is the capacity and willingness to recognize my gifts and limitations and those of others as they truly are.

Third, prudent persons can bring a clear-sighted objectivity to a situation. They are able to rise above their emotions, the baggage of the past that may be related to a situation, and can calmly evaluate circumstances. They possess a capacity to step away from a situation. A certain objective calm enables them to ponder all the evident factors involved, without focusing on one

factor while ignoring the others or minimizing their true significance. It becomes evident that prudence is attained when we have also developed the other virtues to some extent. A person who cannot control their anger often cannot evaluate a situation objectively, with reason.

Fourth, prudence includes foresight, the habit of asking: how does this activity fit into the overall aim of my life? Does this decision really lead me into a deeper communion with God? Is this decision good for me as a professional musician *and* as a human being, or not? Prudence also foresees unintended consequences or potential outcomes of an action: “If I speak this truth to her right now, she will be deeply hurt, and our relationship may be broken.”

Fifth, prudence is a means between two extremes. Prudence is opposed to recklessness, the tendency to rush into a decision without pondering the situation adequately. The imprudent parent decides overnight to start home schooling because of an argument with one of their child’s teachers. But the other extreme is indecisiveness, which is also a vice. The prudent person refuses to put off important decisions indefinitely because absolute certitude is not at hand. In the past, Catholics often sought absolute certitude for many complex decisions in life by running to the priest with every moral dilemma (How much should I tithe? How long should I pray each day?), or blindly followed a spiritual director’s advice in discerning a vocation. But virtue ethics teaches us to make the best decisions that we can when the path of God is not always clear, and to live with the absence of 100% certitude. Exercising prudence does not always bring certitude, but it still leads to holiness.

We can see that at a certain point, prudence reaches its limits. Life can become frustratingly complex. It is then that we need to turn to the experience of the saints and make them our mentors.

In the film, *A Man for All Seasons*, St. Thomas More encounters his overly zealous son-in-law, who is on a passionate quest for justice. He can see evil in the land, and he is determined to defeat it for the triumph of the good. He is willing to ignore the laws of the land when it comes to his pursuit of justice. Those who willingly cooperate with evil must not have any place to hide. Thomas More responds with passion himself: “And when you have cut down every law in the land in your pursuit of the devil, and he turns on you, what will you have left to hide behind? What will protect you from him?” Prudence refuses to take matters into our own hands. It ultimately trusts that God’s providence will triumph over evil. The saints manifest perfect prudence, and teach us that evil means can never lead to a lasting good.

The Virtues Part 5: An Intro to Temperance

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The word temperance has fallen on hard times. Today, it often seems to refer to limiting one's consumption of alcohol, or exercising a certain restraint in one's sexual activity. The classical virtue of temperance is much richer. Instead of self-control, temperance is better described as the proper ordering of sensual desire. Temperance is not so much about the suppression of feeling as a matter of properly directing our emotions and basic physical drives.

Temperance concerns our natural drives for the sensible goods that maintain life: food, drink, sleep, sex and physical companionship. We have a natural drive to seek these goods and enjoy them. But we can misuse these goods and grant them too much importance in life. Furthermore, one of the major effects of original sin is that we are not as disposed towards permanent goods like wisdom and friendship as we ought to be. Instead, we are more inclined to fulfill our desires for physical pleasure in ways that are not always good for us.

Contrary to what we might expect, true temperance actually intensifies our ability to enjoy the beauty of creation. It allows pleasure to overflow into joy. Pleasure is a physical sensation, but joy involves body and soul. The intemperate person transforms the beautiful things of the world into mere objects of pleasure, which is a distortion of reality. For nothing was created simply to bring the sensation of pleasure to this or that human being. The temperate person can find an appropriate physical delight in a beautiful object while also entering into the spiritual sensation of joy, of one's soul resting in the good. The temperate man can find more joy in looking at a beautiful woman than the intemperate man whose drive for pleasure deadens his openness to delight in beauty for its own sake. For the intemperate man simply seeks beauty because of the way that it makes him feel.

Intemperance manifests an excessive attachment to one's own opinion, since it clouds the judgment of reason, diminishing prudence. It gradually excludes the goods of the spirit. The intemperate person becomes so immersed in physical pleasure that he or she becomes blind to spiritual realities and their priority in life. This vice can eventually destroy the ability to contemplate reality as it is, replacing it with an illusory worldview. Intemperate persons are so driven by the need for physical pleasure that they can become incapable of practicing detachment, that is, to forego certain pleasures for a greater good. Sacrificial love becomes

almost impossible. They no longer encounter other persons and things as they are, but rather see them as means to sense stimulation. Self-interest has come to dominate, which brings about a life closed in on itself, one no longer open to the wonder of creation and the wisdom of others.

One of the most widespread roots of intemperance today is found in the tendency to over-consume certain types of entertainment, such television and the Internet. For what is often sought in these forms of media is a constant stimulation of the senses. Such excess weakens our capacity for true beauty. It breaks down our ability to be still and receptive, to be contemplative and open to reality. Thus, with each generation, the attention span continues to shrink.

Today's hyper-sensualized culture makes the virtue of temperance especially difficult to attain. More often than in past generations, we are faced with moments of intense temptations towards pleasures that have been taken out of their proper context. Or we are faced with pleasures that are proposed as ends in themselves, instead of as means to the enjoyment of God's beauty. When we are faced with great temptation, what are we to do?

The more intense the temptation, the wiser becomes the saying "flight, not fight." Sometimes, we simply need to turn away from a thought or an image and redirect our mind and imagination to what is wholesome. Yet flight is not always the answer. On a day-to-day basis, most temptations to intemperance tend to be not so intense. In fact, one sign that a person is growing in temperance is that they can gradually face more and more of their temptations. They can remain in a situation and "fight," that is, to redirect their focus so as to approach a potential source of vicious pleasure in a wholesome way. As a person grows in virtue, instead of turning away from the stunningly beautiful human body for fear of lust, he or she gradually learns to appreciate that beauty as a gift of God, while the heart refuses to give in to any lingering inclinations towards lust. But let us not fool ourselves. So much of what the mass media offers today can be so disordered and even demonic that often the only wise approach is to switch the television channel or Internet page.

It turns out that temperance is often bad for business, which is one reason that our capitalistic culture hardly fosters it. Temperance avoids excessive self-indulgence *and* Puritanism in the fulfillment of bodily desires. It makes us desire a certain balance. Next week, I'll discuss some other elements of that balance which reorders desire.

The Virtues Part 6: Further Aspects of Temperance

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, I noted that the virtue of temperance reorders our desire for physical pleasure and actually increases our ability to enjoy the beauty of creation. There are some further elements that dispose us towards that enjoyment of beauty, namely, our capacity to endure suffering, the attainment of humility, and the practice of fasting.

Our greatest pleasure comes through the sense of touch. We think of the pleasure that we gain through sexual intercourse, food or drink. Thus, in a way, temperance is above all the capacity of the soul to regulate the drive for pleasurable touch. Yet that same sense is also the primary path whereby we experience pain. So we see that our capacity to endure will greatly depend on temperance. The Christian disciple who at certain times in life is called the way of the Cross in a very literal way (through physical suffering) may only be able to do so with perseverance if he or she has developed the virtue of temperance to some extent. Temperance is the readiness to make very concrete sacrifices.

But sacrifice is almost impossible if we do not have hope in the future. Thus, temperance is closely connected to hope. Among other things, hope is a desire for and a firm expectation of the future enjoyment of spiritual goods. It enables us to practice delayed gratification. Hope is the opposite of despair. It is precisely despair which so easily leads a man or woman down the road of total intemperance. For if nothing better awaits us after this life, and if the best goods that we can reasonably expect to attain here and now are not spiritual (like wisdom and love), then unrestrained pleasure seeking becomes an artificial man-made heaven.

We have a natural desire for recognition and approval from others. It is a type of “sensual pleasure,” if we understand the term “sensual” broadly enough. Humility is the capacity to regulate that desire, to allow it its proper place while keeping it in check. Humility is part of temperance.

But how does humility perform this task? It does so primarily by leading us an accurate estimation of others and ourselves. Humility is essentially the ability to see myself as I truly am. It is the capacity to recognize my gifts and weakness accurately. Humility recognizes that all which is good in me comes from God. Humility also makes a fair estimation of others’ gifts and

weaknesses. It is a type of honesty. Thus, true humility can accept honors and recognition from others precisely when they match my gifts and talents, as long as I acknowledge their transcendent source in the Creator. Humility also seeks to bestow appropriate recognition to others for their actual accomplishments. Humility is not the desire to be invisible or a tendency to look down on myself.

Now we can also understand the essence of pride. It is a refusal to acknowledge my status as a creature, even if I profess to believe in a Creator God. It claims a personal strength to be simply my own, when in fact comes from another. It also denies my need for salvation, for a healing and divine friendship that goes beyond our natural capacities. Pride makes myself the central focus, instead of allowing others to recognize the gifts of God in me precisely as gifts. Thus, the same recognition can be bestowed on two equally gifted persons. One can receive them virtuously, by acknowledging their true source, while the other commits a vice in accepting the honor, when he or she denies the true origin of their accomplishments.

The Christian tradition proposes particular spiritual exercises for the development of certain virtues. For example, we train ourselves to endure pain and grow in humility when we practice fasting, one of the pillars of the Lenten season that we just completed. Fasting reorders our inner desires. It is not intended as a form of self-punishment, but as a path to heal our emotions that can at times behave as if anarchy reigned in the body.

All Christians who are physically able are called to fast at certain times of the year, especially (but not just) during Lent. This is because fasting has an immense power to detach us from our disordered desires for sensible goods, preparing heart and mind for contemplation, including the study of God's Word and prayer. These are spiritual exercises that call for a certain stillness of the soul, which is precisely what fasting helps to attain, a truth that virtually all non-Christian religions will also teach us.

Yet here, too, we must seek moderation. In a surprising passage, St. Thomas Aquinas notes that those who abstain from wine to the point of depressing their spirits commit a sin. We might want to respond that such a philosophy is typically Italian (Aquinas was from the region of Naples). But in fact Thomas reminds us of the deeper Christian conviction of the goodness of creation. For those who are not alcoholics and enjoy the taste of wine, abstaining too much from such licit delights as the fruit of the grape would lead us to offend the goodness of God's creation! How far true temperance takes us from Puritanism.

The Virtues, Part 7: Understanding Sexual Addictions

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Sex addicts, you say? You mean pedophiles, right? No, I also mean men (and women) who cannot help but look at those lewd pictures on the Internet. Sexual addictions are rampant in our hyper-technological culture. Many pious Christians have become consumers. They need help, but probably don't realize it. Maybe one of your loved ones is in trouble. Or maybe you need help. The first step in dealing with the problem is to gain some knowledge of sexual addictions. For this purpose, I will draw especially on the wisdom of Dr. Mark Laaser and his book *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addictions*. I trust your better judgment in deciding which of your children may be ready to read this article.

The behavior of sex addicts has three main building blocks. The first is fantasy. When fantasy is exciting enough, the brain produces adrenaline, which elevates one's mood. Fantasies can also produce chemicals in the brain's pleasure center called catecholamines, which allow one to escape unwanted emotions and reduce stress. Fantasizing becomes the equivalent of injecting a drug needle into your arm.

The second building block for sex addicts is pornography. Pornography is the display of nudity or sexual activity for the purpose of raising the viewer's sexual feelings. Where do people view Internet pornography? Priests and religious who are addicts tend to view it in their cells. For adult laymen (and women), the workplace is quite common. Many also view it at home when they're alone. Children can often easily access pornography on school and public library computers. The average child sees Internet pornography before the age of 10! These images viewed at such a young age become deeply imbedded in their memories.

Pornography does great harm by creating a false set of expectations in its viewers. The bodies viewed on the Internet are just so beautiful. Often only the slender make the cut for this homemade video. And if a performer's natural beauty is still inadequate, computer technology will come to the rescue. Unlike that hesitant wife, the Internet performer willingly puts on that enticing piece of clothing. It's her job! Her other behavior also responds to the viewer's expectations. That's what she's paid to do (or perhaps forced to do). The action can go on for hours.

Then the addict has to exit the virtual fantasy world and return to real life. Almost always, his wife does not look nearly as good as *them*. Furthermore, the adrenaline rush of forbidden sex is so great, precisely because it is forbidden. But sex with one's spouse is actually expected. The brain hardly gets the same stimulation from something so licit. The addict has trained his brain to demand its kicks. Refusing the urge becomes ever more difficult. Also, the addict's image of the other gender often becomes warped.

The third building block of sex addicts is masturbation, which is the virtually inevitable outcome of fantasies and pornography. It also causes the brain to release catecholamines, to which the brain can become addicted. Acting out this way usually leads to deep feelings of shame.

Besides, the lonesome sexual act takes sex out of its proper context. God made us with sexual organs and feelings in such a way that the pleasure of the sexual act is to be accompanied by emotional and spiritual intimacy. The body and soul are literally wired so that physical and spiritual union go together. But when the physical act is completely severed from an act of full interpersonal communion, the result is growing loneliness. In a solitary sexual act, my body is behaving in a way that my soul and emotions now expect real intimacy. But in fact, there is no intimacy whatsoever. All one gets is pleasure. After the act, the sex addict is left with more guilt and loneliness. But his brain is being trained to demand relief from these emotions in a particular way. Hence the cycle of fantasy, pornography and masturbation begins all over again. The shame will probably get worse. Depression often follows.

Sexual addictions leave deep wounds in the souls and bodies of their victims. Sex addicts become emotionally handicapped. They have learned to engage in sex without intimacy, perhaps starting with frequent solitary acts. Soon, they turn their spouses into sex objects. Precisely because the man no longer approaches his wife as a person with dignity, the emotional exchange diminishes radically. Whereas their marital act may have been deeply satisfying before and strengthened the marriage bond, it now primarily becomes a pleasure event. Even if the wife does not know that her husband is a sex addict, she will often begin to sense that something is wrong. More and more, sex will feel dirty to her. Divorce may be around the corner.

The emotional handicap produced by addiction can become a serious and long-lasting wound for the addict. His own inescapable feeling of shame hinders him from being emotionally honest with himself, which in turn makes emotional honesty with others very difficult. Not only

can good marriages go south. An addiction to sex and Internet pornography can radically diminish a single young person's chances for a happy, long-lasting marriage, unless they get help.

Sexual addictions are real and very destructive. So if someone may be addicted, what can be done? I'll discuss the healing process in next week's newsletter.

The Virtues, Part 8: Healing Sexual Addictions

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

Last week, I discussed the nature of sexual addictions. The cycle of sexual fantasies, indulgence in pornography and acting out leaves deep wounds in the souls and brains of men and women. But there is hope for everyone. Competent counselors tell us that even the most addicted can be healed. I'll again be drawing on the wisdom of Dr. Mark Laaser's work *Healing the Wounds of Sexual Addictions*.

Like alcoholics, sex addicts can "stay dry" for many months. Through sheer will power or other means, they learn to avoid fantasies, pornography and acting out. But like alcoholics who stay dry, the addiction is still there. It may diminish over those months, but the emotional handicap remains. The brain is still addicted to the psychological high. Symptoms often include depression, excessive anger and deep shame. These wounds will remain to a great extent unless the addict seeks healing. The first step toward healing is diagnosis.

Clearly, a lack of frequent unhealthy sexual behavior is just one criterion for diagnosis. Other adequate criteria would include answers to the following questions. Have you tried limiting what you know is wrong in your sexual behavior? Do you resort to sex to escape or relieve anxiety? Do you feel that the "right relationship" would help you to stop lusting, masturbating or being so promiscuous? An affirmative answer to one of these questions may indicate concern.

The second step involves cutting off all Internet Pornography. An alcoholic cannot become sober in a bar, and neither can you or your loved one if porn is just two clicks away. There are a number of Internet filters that can block all such traffic. It is crucial that such images be blocked completely. Three software programs that may be worth considering are *Net Nanny*, *Safe Eyes* and *Cyber Patrol*, though I am in no position to fully endorse any one Internet filter. The key to making such programs effective is to ask a loved one who can keep confidence and be non-judgmental to act as the administrator for the software. Otherwise, the addict can simply turn off the filter.

Here, I also want to appeal to parents with children ages 6 and older in their homes. If your children have access to the Internet in your home and you do not have a filter that blocks all pornography, then you are unknowingly storing a bottle of spiritual poison in the kitchen cabinet.

Many young people's sexual addictions begin by viewing such material on the family computer. For responsible parents, an Internet filter at home is a must. Why risk having your child discover this material on accident?

The third step toward healing is getting educated. There are numerous excellent educational websites, including Sexaholics Anonymous (www.sa.org), Dr. Laaser's www.faithfulandtrueministries.com, and, for loved ones of addicts, S-Anon (www.sanon.org). There are also a growing number of excellent books on sexual addictions, such as "the white book" by SA.

The fourth step toward healing is getting help from others. Almost no sex addict has been known to heal him or herself. Sooner or later, attending meetings of Sexaholics Anonymous (SA) will probably be a necessary step. To my knowledge, SA is the only 12-step group for sex addicts whose guiding principles are completely in harmony with our Catholic faith. SA assures each member's anonymity and has 36 different meetings in the Seattle area. For some people, a group setting is too embarrassing at first. Perhaps they need to begin by seeing a counselor. In fact, at least some work with a counselor is often a crucial part of the healing process. Counseling references can be attained from the priests at Blessed Sacrament, from participants at local SA groups, or from the local SA hotline: (206) 548-9538. Finally, it is important to find a counselor who shares our Christian moral values or can work within them.

It is often crucial for spouses of addicts to have some involvement in the healing process. One way may be by joining S-Anon, which is specifically for the loved ones of sex addicts. Some participation in the counseling session that the addicted spouse attends may also be very helpful.

As Christians, we also seek healing from the wounds of sin through prayer. The gift of God's grace enables the natural means of healing discussed above to take root more quickly and fruitfully. As Catholics, we are blessed with two powerful spiritual means of healing in the Eucharist and Confession. Regular prayer before the Eucharist has been known to help bring gradual yet real healing for sexual wounds. The flesh of Jesus heals our flesh. Finally, regular confession of sexual sins is a powerful instrument that gives many people new strength to fight temptation. In this sacrament, the crucified Jesus takes the burden of shame and guilt from our shoulders and embraces us with his love. For our Lord loves everyone, especially the sex addict who wants to be healed.

The Virtues, Part 9: Some Facts About Sex & Marriage

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In the eyes of many people today, the Catholic Church's teaching on sex is simply outdated. The idea that sex only belongs within marriage sounds so medieval. Furthermore, it seems to contradict common sense.

The first objection that many would offer to the Church's traditional understanding of sex is that a religious institution has no business telling two responsible adults who are in love how they should express that love for one another. Why can't the Church be respectful of the personal decisions that adult men and women make?

A second objection to the Church's traditional position is that living together before marriage seems to be a very effective way of deciding whether two people should marry. Many members of Generations X and Y grew up with divorced parents. One of the greatest fears that young people have today is of a bad future marriage ending in divorce. We also don't want our children to experience the pain that many of us have gone through. So living together and seeing whether someone is emotionally and sexually compatible with a potential fiancé seems very logical. After all, we don't buy a new car before taking it for a test drive. Why not do the same with sex and life under the same roof?

How could the Catholic Church possibly respond to these weighty objections? Before simply dismissing the Church's teaching, perhaps we can calmly consider a few facts.

1. Couples who sleep together before they are married have a divorce rate three times as high as couples who saved that gift for the wedding night.¹
2. Co-habiting couples that marry are about twice as likely to divorce as couples who do not live together before marriage.² In fact, the divorce rate of cohabiting couples is about eighty percent.³

¹ J.D. Teachman, J. Thomas, and K. Paasch, "Legal Status and the Stability of Coresidential Unions," *Demography*, November 1991, 571-83.

² Larry A. Bumpass and James A. Sweet, *Cohabitation, Marriage and Union Stability*, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Madison – Wisconsin, 1995.

³ Elizabeth Thompson and Ugo Colella, "Cohabitation and Marital Stability: Quality or Commitment?" *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 54, 1992, p. 266.

3. Women who cohabited before marriage are about three times as likely to cheat on their husbands within marriage than women who did not cohabit.⁴
4. The U.S. Justice Department found that women who cohabit are three times as likely to be assaulted by a live-in boyfriend than by a husband.⁵
5. Co-habiting couples are less sexually satisfied in marriage than those who waited for marriage.⁶
6. Non-virgin brides are sixty percent more likely to end up divorced than women who enter marriage as virgins.⁷

In other words, sociology tells us that if you want to radically *increase* the chance that your future marriage will end in divorce, that your future spouse will cheat on you and that sex in marriage will be worse ... then be sure to live together before marriage!

Also, new scientific studies suggest that if a woman has multiple sexual partners in her lifetime, her levels of oxytocin will decline, which in turn can damage her ability to bond. Oxytocin seems to act as a human “superglue,” helping a mother to bond with her infant. It is also released during sexual arousal, where it also works as a “superglue.”⁸ For married couples that have saved themselves for one another, oxytocin helps to maintain the “high” of sex.

Both science and sociology tell us that saving sex for marriage causes the chances for divorce, abuse and infidelity to plummet and leads to more satisfying sex. The facts strongly suggest that keeping sex inside of marriage leads to greater happiness, but taking sex outside of marriage brings about all kinds of problems. And while science and sociology cannot prove the Catholic Church’s moral teaching to be true, both suggest that the Church might be on to something. We’ll look at what that something is in next week’s newsletter.

⁴ Koray Tanfer and Renata Forste, "Sexual Exclusivity Among Dating, Cohabiting, and Married Women," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, February 1996, 33-47.

⁵ Chuck Colson, "The Truth About Cohabiting Before Marriage," Prison Fellowship Ministries, 1995.

⁶ Edward O. Laumann and Robert T. Michaels, *Sex, Love and Health in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 239-269, 364.

⁷ Joan R. Kahn and Kathryn A. London, "Premarital Sex and the Risk of Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 53 (November 1991).

⁸ *Neural Oxytocinergic systems as Genomic Targets for Hormones and as Modulators of Hormone-Dependant Behaviors*, Rockefeller University NY, 1999.

The Virtues, Part 10: Anthropology & Sexuality

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In last week's newsletter, I mentioned the surprising fact that sex before marriage radically increases the chances of a bad future marriage. It turns out that the Catholic understanding of sex and marriage is not as out-of-touch as many voices in our culture claim. Perhaps one reason that the Catholic teaching on human sexuality is profoundly misunderstood today is that a particular anthropology or vision of the human being underlies the Catholic view. This anthropology is far different from those which dominate today's culture. I think that ultimately our approach to human sexuality will inevitably reflect one of four types of anthropology.

I would call the first two types of anthropology "dualist." Dualism proposes that I am essentially a soul that lives in a body. Dualism can lead to two radically different approaches to sexuality. In ancient times, under the influence of Platonic philosophers, dualism often meant a certain disregard for the body. The flesh was thought to weigh down the soul, preventing it from reaching contemplative heights. The soul naturally soars to the heavens to contemplate truth, but the body and its passions distract us time and again, inclining us to indulge in the pleasures of the physical universe. Sexual behavior and desires were basically to be avoided, since they distract the soul from its purely spiritual destiny. Unfortunately, this attitude sometimes influenced certain Christian thinkers and spiritualities. Let's call this first type of anthropology "Platonic Dualism."

A second dualistic approach to the human being and sexuality is probably more common today. It says that the body exists precisely as a tool for me (the soul) to gain satisfaction and pleasure. Since the body isn't really me, since what really counts is what I do with my soul (i.e. having good intentions), then what I do with the body is not morally significant. Therefore, if my soul's intention is to find love and happiness, then I am basically doing a good thing, and I can employ the body however I want to pursue that overall good intention. If I (the soul) mean well, then I can act in pursuit of that intention in any variety of ways. For example, I can keep changing sex partners until I find happiness, as long as I (the soul) intend to treat those partners with love. This philosophy is closely intertwined with the Cartesian and Baconian approach to the physical universe as a realm to be mastered and dominated by the human being. Nature is

here to be conquered by us through technology. Descartes and other philosophers like Kant introduced a radical division between the soul and the body, between the person and the flesh. Many of us are children of this anthropology, though we probably do not realize it. Perhaps we can call this second type of anthropology “Modern Dualism.”

We can call the third type of anthropology “materialist.” It holds that the human being is nothing but the body and the brain. This vision of the human being may often be connected to the assumption that we are merely the random result of unguided evolution. If I am a body with a brain, then a reasonable goal in society would seem to be for as many people as possible to find as much physical pleasure and comfort as possible. When it comes to sex, more is better, and the identity of the sex partner should simply be a matter of choice. A materialist anthropology essentially denies the Judeo-Christian understanding that human beings are persons with God-given dignity. That means sex is all about pleasure and reproduction (when desired), but has nothing to do with the value of the person. From a materialist perspective, personhood is philosophical fiction anyway, since science can never prove personhood.

The fourth type of anthropology holds that the human being is essentially a soul-body composite. We can call this anthropology “holistic” or “sacramental.” It tells us that I am not a soul, but rather body and soul together. The body is an essential part of the person. The body is not a tool to be used, nor a collection of matter to be mastered by technology. Because the body is part of me, what I do with the body always has meaning and value, regardless of whether my soul has good or bad intentions. Furthermore, the body is the revelation of the person, a manifestation of my inmost being. The body and the body alone makes visible the contents of the invisible human heart. The human person was created for friendship and love, and the only way we can express love for others is through the body. If the human person truly is soul and body, then the good intentions of my soul are not enough to make a sexual act morally good. Rather, one must always also ask, “What does my body express to the other person in this act?”

Clearly, the one anthropology that is in harmony with faith in the Incarnate Word is the fourth type. In next week’s newsletter, we will see the consequences of this holistic anthropology for our understanding of healthy human sexuality.

The Virtues, Part 11: Sex & The Gift Of Self

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

A Christian understanding of sex and marriage needs to be grounded in the teachings of Jesus. Jesus in turn rooted his teaching in Genesis, when Adam and Eve became “one flesh” (Matthew 19). They recognized in the other’s naked body the full manifestation of a person. A person is one who is made to give himself away in love. That’s what it means to be made in God’s image, for God is self-giving love. When they gave themselves completely to each other without shame, Adam and Eve became “one flesh.”

God has “wired” us in such a way that the gift of complete physical intimacy should be accompanied by emotional and spiritual intimacy. The naked body is a sign of the naked spirit. For the naked body given to another says: “Here I am, all of me, just for you.” But the body is not a tool of my spirit. Rather, I am spirit and body together. Therefore, the gift of my body to another is only true when it is a gift of the whole person. For the body is an essential part of me, the person. The gift of the body demands the gift of the spirit, of heart, mind and feelings. If the body says, “Here I am, all of me,” then my heart needs to say the same: “I unite my will to yours, to seek your good and mine together.” The mind need also say, “I think of you as my greatest treasure in this world, and of no one else.” And unless there is some emotional intimacy among the couple, sex will eventually become very unsatisfying. We know that a lack of emotional intimacy among married couples is a major cause of divorce. When sex is not a true communion of persons, a sharing of thoughts, feelings and the body, then the holistic union of man and woman begins to break down.

So in what context do we find the complete gift of self to the other, the gift of heart, mind and body? It is nowhere else but marriage. Think about it. Only in marriage do mind and heart say, “Only you are my greatest treasure in this world for the rest of our lives.” To give oneself in complete physical intimacy while withholding the union of heart and mind is to tell a lie with the body. My heart and mind say, “I am yours for a while, for as long as we’re in love.” But in sexual union, my flesh says, “I am utterly joined to you,” while my heart and mind say something different. This is why pre-marital and extra-marital sex are sinful: they are lies of the body. They impede the communion of persons, the communion of spirit and body. If I try to justify physical sexual union without the complete gift of the spirit that is only found in

marriage, I inevitably fall back into dualism, into treating the body as a tool of my spirit. I inevitably say, “I can give my whole body to another without giving my whole heart and mind.” I divide body and soul, splitting the person in two. Such a lie cannot lead to lasting happiness.

Adam and Eve were naked and had no shame. They were ready to give themselves completely to the other, holding nothing back. They realized what it means to be an image of God: total, self-giving love. This is what the body expresses in sex. Therefore, if the gift of self is complete, then it includes the gift of fertility. In sex, the body says: “I give you all of myself, including the gift of my fruitfulness, whatever fertility God has given me to give to you.” The gift of oneself to the spouse includes openness to the gift of God that comes in procreation, the gift of children. When we intentionally impede the gift of fertility, we stop giving ourselves completely. Then, sex no longer “speaks” the complete gift of self. I no longer live as God’s image.

You may wonder, “Are you saying I have to have ten children?” No, I’m not. God made the female body to be fertile only a few days of the month. I can give myself away with the fruitfulness that God has given me this day. That is why the Church encourages *Natural Family Planning* (NFP), working within God’s plan of creation for the gift of oneself. You can learn about NFP in our parish.

Now we also see why the Church sees marriage between man and woman as the one proper context for sexual intercourse. Homosexual partners cannot give themselves completely to each other. Neither can receive the other’s fruitfulness. The same holds true for masturbation, which is inherently sterile. Also, masturbation is completely cut off from any intimacy. Such an act is a bodily lie, which is why it brings such shame.

The Church calls every person who is not married to respect the meaning of the sexual act as an expression of complete self-gift. All of us single persons, whether heterosexual or homosexual, are called to love others and ourselves with celibate chastity. Sex is for man and woman in marriage, the one place where two persons give themselves to each other completely. Sex is too good to be practiced anywhere else.

For more information, see Christopher West’s “Good News About Sex & Marriage”

The Virtues, Part 12: The Foundation of Justice

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

When we think of the word justice, most of us think of social justice, a phrase that conjures up images of feeding the hungry. This image is not false, but it demonstrates that our conception of justice has become too narrow. In the classical Christian tradition, justice concerns much more than helping the poor.

Justice is the virtue of relationships. It is the communal virtue par excellence. It is essentially ordered to another. Justice takes us beyond our egos, beyond ourselves, and pushes us to consider the dignity and needs of others. The other virtues only perfect a person in those things that belong to him or her (e.g. temperance orders my desires for pleasure, etc.). But the virtue of justice perfects the human being in relation to others. This means that justice, along with charity, will encompass everything about our relations with others.

Justice is the virtue that enables a person to give to each one his or her “due.” But what is this due? It is “what belongs to someone,” which translates the Latin word *ius*. It is most often rendered as “right,” though even this term can be misleading. You and I have this right simply because of the kinds of beings that we are. We are human beings, and we received this right from our source of being, God himself. Creation is the foundation of human rights. This right or *ius* is hard to define. We can mostly describe it. It ultimately refers to our human dignity that demands the respect of others. Someone’s right is the dignity of personhood. Justice is the developed tendency to respect another as a person, as a being with dignity. Notice that the other’s right does not depend on society bestowing it to them. Rather, we are called to acknowledge the right or due that already exists.

To act justly is to render someone his or her due. That is, justice is acting according to the reality of things. The virtue of justice presumes the virtue of prudence whereby I recognize things as they are. Justice presumes the human ability to recognize an objective reality. If truth were merely subjective, then nothing would ever be due to another unless I wanted it to be so. Relativism leads to the destruction of all justice. But in fact, no one lives according to this post-modern dogma of complete relativism. Virtually all post-modernists are convinced that racism is wrong and genocide is wicked. Everyone insists (correctly) that their individual rights must be

respected, although we often disagree over exactly what those rights are. In practice, all of us ultimately presume that objective right and wrong do exist and that we can come to know it. Otherwise, only cultural prejudice would prevent the racist from acting according to his or her beliefs. This is important. Only a society that has the confidence to discover some truth about the human being, including the innate dignity or “due” of every human being, can ultimately be a just society.

We can define justice as the constant and perpetual will to render to each his or her right or due. The “realm” of virtue includes everything that pertains to relations with others. The whole field of external action pertains to the virtue of justice. All external actions are either just or unjust, though of course, some acts can go well beyond being just (an act of charity). Giving my employer a full eight-hour day, driving my car responsibly and speaking to others with respect are all acts of justice.

But justice does not simply pertain to my relation with other individuals. It also pertains to my relation with society. In fact, every due owed to another individual also pertains to society. When an individual’s debt is withheld, for example, by tearing down another’s reputation through gossip, society is also wounded. The harmonious order between a society’s members that is necessary for the community’s well-being is harmed. This means that the social or common good is always connected to the individual good. This notion of the common good is extremely difficult to grasp in our hyper-individualistic culture. Basically, the common good is the collection of social conditions that allow human beings to flourish and find their true fulfillment as creatures made in God’s image. For example, when I keep informed about politics and participate in it by voting, I am contributing to the common good, by seeking to shape a political community rooted in truth and love. Voting is an act of justice.

The Ten Commandments provide a crucial part of the content of justice. They teach us how to relate to God and to our neighbors. The worship of God is a form of justice, since it is part of the way I relate to another, in this case, the divine other. The Commandments concretize and point to the virtuous act. To be just towards God and neighbor means to observe the Ten Commandments. However, they are not a complete summary of the content of justice, as we will see. That is why we need the teachings of Christ and his saints. By reflecting on the life of Jesus and the saints, we discover justice lived out in the concrete.

The Virtues, Part 13: Justice & Human Rights

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In last week's newsletter, I mentioned that justice is founded upon the recognition of the other's "right." This brings us to the question of human rights. Our culture is saturated with rights talk. Often, rights discourse includes a set of assumptions that can be in tension if not outright contradiction with a Christian understanding of the human being. Therefore, before we explore particular rights, we need an understanding of the fundamental principles upon which a Christian vision of human rights rests.

In his encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII refers to some of these basic principles: "Any human society ... must lay down as a foundation this principle, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And as these rights are universal and inviolable so they cannot in any way be surrendered." First, personhood is foundational. Personhood is defined by our inherent rationality and freedom. We are different from all the other creatures of the world. Secondly, we have not just rights, but also obligations. Rights are a two-way street. Finally, certain rights are absolute: they always apply, everywhere and in every circumstance.

Why do we have rights and duties? Because the human being is born for relationships. Our humanity is both the source of our rights and the source of our being "social animals." That is why rights and duties are intertwined in the Catholic tradition. Both of them have their foundation in the natural law, in the order that God has inscribed within each human being. This means that the foundation of rights is not ideology or majority opinion. That is why each human being has the duty to recognize the rights of others.

Rights are both negative (protective) and positive (calling forth an action, a response). The individual owes something to society. Rights are rights to participate in the life of a community. Society does not simply owe the individual the right to be left alone. Participation in a community is essential for human dignity. We should therefore see rights not so much as claims that we make against other individuals and society, but rather as guiding principles that manifest our proper place and dignity within the communities to which we belong. Rights are

ordered to the common good, to the flourishing of every person, not me constructing a private sphere of action where everyone leaves me alone.

In the classical liberal tradition of the West, rights are rooted in the liberty of the individual person (John Locke). This vision of man sees us as essentially complete, isolated creatures that first exist by ourselves and then decide to join this or that community. It reduces the person to a being with unique wants and desires but ignores the purpose and goal of human life. It sees duties in society as threats to individual autonomy. Duties of communal participation and action become a burden to be endured so that each of us can have our individual rights upheld. Such an anthropology eventually erodes friendship, family and the many forms of community that are indispensable for human flourishing.

The Catholic human rights tradition is distinct from this approach. The classical liberal human rights tradition replaces the fundamental order inscribed by the Creator within our human nature with the demands of the individual. It places the human being at the center, in abstraction from God and the cosmos. One could argue that this philosophy which makes the individual human being the center and foundation of politics and human rights in abstraction from the Creator and the cosmos has helped lead us to the ecological crisis we are experiencing today.

We live at a time when rights keep proliferating. Many of these new rights claims are rooted in an atomistic understanding of the human being, a vision of the person who inhabits his or her private world of self-constructed truth in abstraction from history, community, tradition and nature. Ironically, many of these new rights claims undermine the permanence of rights. Instead of rights being an objective reality that we recognize to be present in each human being because they are persons, rights become subject to our personal desires and tastes. The trouble is that desires and tastes change. Human rights are too important to give them such a weak foundation.

Instead, our Judeo-Christian tradition invites us to understand human rights in the context of community, the cosmos and the Creator. Our rights can never be isolated from the community without which we cannot live. Our rights must be contextualized in the cosmos, otherwise, we would have the right to use up and destroy the cosmos. The right to pursue the truth is the opportunity to seek objective truth, not to construct any truth for ourselves. Rights proceed *from* our identity as persons made in God's image and likeness. Rights are *for* our well-being attained through life in relationship, enjoyment of and care for the cosmos, and the discovery of the truth

of God. Without this web of relationships, human rights become impoverished and ultimately lose their foundation.

The Virtues, Part 14: Some Basic Human Rights

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

The modern era has in many ways been the age of human rights. It is an accomplishment that we Christians should be proud of. For the doctrine of human rights is ultimately rooted in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human being as a person made in God's image, a free, intelligent creature with inherent dignity. Belief in human rights took many centuries to come to fruition, yet its roots are found in the ancient Judeo-Christian heritage.

But what are our rights anyway? In 1963, Pope John XXIII offered a summary answer to that question in his beautiful encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. First, every human being has a right to live. Here is the most fundamental right, the right of the innocent not to be harmed or killed. Of course, society has the right to defend itself, so a human being can lose his or her right to live when they directly threaten the life of another, as in times of war. But the innocent have an inalienable right to live. All other rights depend on this one, since a right to education is meaningless if I do not have the right to live.

Second, every person has the right to freedom in investigating the truth. We can also call this the right to one's conscience, the right to follow what one perceives to be good and true to the best of one's ability. The human being was created for truth and love, but truth discovered in a fully human way, meaning, freely and not by force.

John XXIII and Vatican II (in *Dignitatis Humanae*) link the right to search for the truth with the right to religious freedom. For religious freedom is the right to worship God in accordance with the right dictates of one's conscience, to profess one's religion both in private and in public. Here we see the theoretical foundation of Pope John Paul II's support for the construction of Rome's first mosque. Sadly, many well-meaning Catholics object to the construction of mosques in Western lands, thus denying Muslims their God-given right to worship.

Notice that this right includes the freedom to speak of one's religion in public. It is important that Catholics advocate for the recognition of this right, especially in a culture that can often seek to eliminate any discussion of religious convictions from the work place or other public realms in the name of forbidding "proselytism" (a word that can easily be abused) or the

separation of church and state (which is often misunderstood). A culture that practices such exclusion is in fact imposing a secular, agnostic philosophy by default.

Now the right to live is not just the right to survive. It implies a right to one's bodily and psychological well-being. John XXIII mentions the right to food, clothing, shelter, medical care and rest. He adds the right to share in the benefits of culture and the right to a living wage that enables a family to live with the dignity befitting persons. In other words, rights are not just about "freedom from" coercion, but a "freedom for" living with dignity. That means our duty towards others is not just the obligation to leave them alone, but also a duty to help bring about a just society where the fullness of human rights are upheld.

Vatican II (in *Gaudium et Spes*) and John XXIII also speak of the right to education, one closely intertwined with the right to seek the truth. This right enables human beings to discover and fulfill their natural God-given potential. It offers them the necessary tools to find the truth about the world and the human person. The education of children is a right that falls primarily to parents. They have the right to expect schoolteachers not to indoctrinate their children in religious and ethical views that contradict their own beliefs. The parents' right to oversee their children's education precedes the right of the state.

There are many other rights we could mention: the right to free speech, to private property, to equal treatment, and so on. Clearly, there is a hierarchy among human rights. For example, the right to rest is not as important as the right to life. In their political activism, Catholic laypersons are called to use prudence to discern which of the most important rights are threatened the most, and which of these threats can be diminished most effectively in the near future through political action.

Clearly, if the state is to judge the validity of various rights claims, it needs an ethical standard of judgment independent of any particular religion or secular ideology. Certain religious practices are simply not acceptable. Otherwise, we would have no basis to expect the polygamists at the Texas compound to give up their teenage wives. But for human rights to have meaning, the state must use a standard that does not simply reflect the will of the majority or the ideology of a cultural elite. The state must use a standard that is trans-cultural and accessible to reason. Another name for this standard is "the natural law." That is what I will discuss next time.

The Virtues, Part 15: The Natural Law

By Fr. Bernhard Blankenhorn, OP

In the last two newsletter articles, I discussed human rights and our responsibility to recognize these rights. For every human being is accountable to a moral standard that is higher than the will of the majority. This higher standard is called the natural law. Because of this law, societies cannot invent or delete basic human rights. Rather, they must recognize and honor the rights which pre-exist every culture.

But what is the natural law anyway? Many contemporary thinkers reject the idea outright, probably because they misunderstand it. It is not a purely Christian invention. Natural law philosophy emerged from ancient Greco-Roman philosophers like Aristotle and Cicero, the Bible and the Christian tradition. Virtually every major culture in history has assumed its basic principles.

The first building block of the natural law is the affirmation that the human being is capable of understanding the universe and himself. Reality is intelligible and accessible to us. We do not construct it. Some relativists may protest that this is our opinion, that everyone constructs their own reality. This objection is nonsensical. None of us could communicate with each other if we did not share a common reality accessible to us.

Secondly, in encountering the real world, all of us can understand that the good must be done and evil avoided. We often disagree about what constitutes particular goods and evils, but that we should do the good, whatever it is, cannot be disputed. For every human being naturally seeks their good, their happiness or fulfillment.

Thirdly, every human being is naturally inclined to seek certain goods. All of us seek to be, to live, to find truth and love. Even here, some would want to disagree. Do not some people seek death? Indeed, we can think of suicidal persons. Yet our society takes it for granted that we need to offer them help. We need to provide them counseling or anti-depressant drugs. Without thinking about it, we assume that it is good to live. Of course, this is different from the dying person who is no longer physically capable of life, who accepts death as the natural course of things. Finally, we all seek truth and love, even if we disagree over exactly what these are. No one is looking for hate or a false vision of the universe. In fact, the fulfillment that every human being naturally seeks is to live in the presence or possession of truth, love and peace.

Now we understand more deeply what the natural law is founded upon. Its basis is our natural inclinations to certain goods like life and truth. These inclinations are expressions of God's wisdom. Yet even agnostics can recognize their presence in themselves. They too naturally seek life, truth and love.

The natural law also moves us to live according to more specific standards of ethics. The natural inclination to live calls us to respect all human life, unless another human being (or nation) threatens my life (or my nation's safety). I may not kill, except in self-defense. The same holds true for any government. Thus, for many centuries, the Church accepted the death penalty in societies where it was the one sure way to keep citizens safe from a convicted murderer. In a society like our own, this condition no longer exists, so John Paul II has called for an end to the death penalty.

The natural desire for life and peace calls me to respect the well-being of my neighbors. I may not harm them, except in self-defense. I may not injure their person nor take their property, unless they have committed an injustice against me. The same holds true for the state. It can only imprison a person after convicting them of a crime through a fair trial. When individuals or states do otherwise, we are outraged, precisely because this truth is deeply ingrained within our very being: do no harm, except in self-defense. However, private property is a good subordinate to the good of life, so the starving person may take another's property to survive!

Since we are naturally ordered to seek truth, the natural law also leads us to truth-telling. No matter how inconvenient, lies are unethical, contradicting the legitimate desire of every person for truth. Yet not everyone has the right to any truth. The Nazis had no right to know that Anne Frank was hiding in a Dutch family's basement, so that family had no obligation to reveal this truth when the Nazis asked.

There are other parts of the natural law, such as marriage being between one man and one woman (not two men, or polygamy, etc.) based on fundamental inclinations to pro-creation and healthy family life. But that is a topic for another day.

As Christian disciples, each of us is called to deepen our awareness of this natural law that the Creator has inscribed in the heart of every human being (Romans 2:15). God calls us to hold our society accountable. When a nation takes life unjustly (through a war that is not in self-defense) or allows its citizens to take innocent life (i.e. the unborn, euthanasia), then the most basic principles of ethics are undermined. Then the very survival of a just society is threatened.