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# The Virtue for the Apostolate: Courage and a New Life in Christ

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Has anyone mentioned courage to you lately, in a homily, or a chat, or in some book? It's very rare. In classical books on morality, usually a few lines at most are devoted to courage. I am thinking, among others, of Father Haring's book, *The Law of Christ*. Out of 1,500 pages, only five are given to courage.

Courage is a poor relation among the virtues! Yet, we need it every day. This simple observation shows what a gap there can be between books and real life.

Everyone appreciates courageous people, even though the thought of courage frightens us a little, as we connect it with the idea of hard things. Courage seems like a virtue for adults, those who are humanly mature. Some authors, such as Louis Lavelle, go so far as to identify courage with a moral sentiment, suggesting that a human disposition becomes moral the moment it calls for courage. In our day, courage is especially needed in order to face conditions of life and thought that are forever changing and agitated, in the area of faith among others. So it is good for us to think about what courage demands of us.

## What Is Courage?

Ancient authors—I am thinking especially of Aristotle and Saint Thomas, whose writings are both classical and still relevant today—talked a good deal about courage. Two features dominate their analyses: courage is the virtue that supports us in difficulties, especially in the face of death, and courage makes us hold firmly to what is beautiful and reasonable.

There is no great problem here; courage is certainly strength of soul and firmness of heart when we are faced with the difficulties of life and the fears that assail us. It is easy to understand that we think of the height of courage as confrontation with death, since death threatens our very existence. To face one's own death without retreating, when it draws near and we feel its grip, to accept it calmly, lucidly, beyond fear—this is, indeed, the supreme act of courage.

Fortunately, death does not loom before us every day, even if we may have the occasional brush with it. So if we

thought of courage exclusively in connection with death, we would end by thinking we could never practice the virtue of courage except in extraordinary circumstances. I prefer to call attention to the ordinary, everyday courage that we are tempted to overlook because it lacks glamour, but which is nevertheless the most necessary kind. It is above all in humble daily life that courage is forged and exercised, the kind of courage that is right at our door and is required of everyone.

## Courage to Try

The first kind of courage is the courage to try. This is so essential that a philosopher of the last century, Maine de Biran, saw in it the primeval act of consciousness and of the human personality. This particular kind of courage deserves to be called *daily* because we need it in all our activities, every time an obstacle confronts us or laziness holds us back. Without the courage to try, no success, no progress, no education is possible.

This is a timely point, for many parents complain today that in school children are not being taught to make efforts and overcome difficulties. Teachers everywhere want to apply and spread the method of "assimilation," which claims to teach all languages painlessly. It is a beautiful illusion. Moreover, technical progress is proposing to diminish physical effort to the maximum degree. The ideal would seem to be to reduce our activity to pressing buttons. Television would willingly take over the activity of thinking. Forms of technological progress are useful, certainly, but they do not come without an insidious danger for us: that of unlearning the art of daily effort and the courage that makes men of us in the face of life.

Let us not look too hard, for ourselves or for our children, for ways of avoiding the difficulties of every day. They offer us repeated occasions for acquiring, without danger and at slight cost, that strength of soul without which there can be no virtue or human valor.

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It is this same courage that allows faith to plunge down and penetrate to the concrete reality of our life, and so become a lived faith. I daresay that without the experience issuing from such a bond between faith and courage, one cannot fully understand the Gospel, for it is precisely at this level of the real that the Lord placed Himself in order to speak with us.

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“Jesus Christ  
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### **Courage in Suffering**

Beyond our daily difficulties we encounter—and more frequently than we would like—one or another form of suffering. Not to curse suffering, not to flee it at any price, to look it in the face and accept it, not to let it degrade us to the point of bitterness and resentment; to allow ourselves, rather, to be shaped by it, with patience, until it has formed our heart and opened it to God and to others—that is courage. The experience of suffering undergone with courage is irreplaceable. We are not truly human until we have known it. It alone furnishes the key to the problem of evil that so often stuns or scandalizes us. Courage in the face of suffering opens for us the door of inner spirituality, of another life. It puts us in communication with other people at the deepest level. Without it, there can be no true understanding of others.

Yet, I doubt that courage in suffering can come to term and produce its best fruits without faith. Left to our own strength, we can endure suffering, keep a stiff upper lip as long as it lasts, and even profit by it to affirm our character, but we will not know how to triumph completely over it. Jesus Christ was the only one who knew how to embrace

all human suffering. He overcame it so completely that it became the servant of His glory and the instrument of our redemption and healing. More powerful than the skill of alchemists who strive to transmute metals to gold, the courage of faith transforms suffering into a road to true life and a source of the surest interior joy. “Count it all joy, my brethren,” wrote the Apostle James (James 1:2-4), “when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness (courage). And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

### **Courage in Times of Fear**

Then there is fear. Fear in all its forms—and it is more changeable than a chameleon—is the direct opposite of courage. We often say we are not afraid, for that would be to admit a weakness; and yet fear almost always lurks in the depths of our souls like an inseparable companion.

Who does not fear the opinion of others and what they might say of us? Who has the courage to follow the truth that has ripened in our hearts rather than conform to the dominant opinion in our circle, whether conservative or aggressive? Each time two people meet and eye each other, fear is there, just below the surface. “What does she think of me? What is he trying to gain from me?” It takes courage to quiet this underground murmur and show ourselves as we truly are. Without a little of this courage, all our relationships will be undermined and falsified by fear.

### **Courage To Live in the Present**

The fear of the future can sidetrack us in the midst of our multiple daily cares. Our present is dotted with a multitude of “ifs” that we project in advance and make us anxious: if this should happen, or that, or the other, ad infinitum. Why, for example, do we always assign “the good times” to the past, if not because the past is once and for all fixed and freed from all our fears? Inversely, it also happens that we may start racing toward a better future, to escape the dissatisfactions and fears of the present. Whether we turn in one direction or the other, it is the present that we fear. To have the courage to live in the present, even when fear assails us—that is true virtue. Courage is the virtue of the present, of the real, for only the present exists and it is from the present that the future flows, on the present that it builds.

It is not so easy to live in the present, for when we want to grasp it we feel it slipping through our fingers like sand and carrying us into the unknown. It is useless for us to

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plead, “O Time, cease your flight!” for we cannot hold it back even for an instant. Sometimes, from the depths of our unconscious, fears rise up that have accumulated through long years; they combine and form a mass of indistinct, faceless disturbances that weigh us down and almost submerge us. If we want to overcome this kind of fear in a peaceful acceptance of ourselves as we are, without fatalism or despair, we need a new faith in someone stronger than ourselves. We need confidence in the One who has called us into being and who draws us to Himself, the One who is flawless and eternal Being. The Lord invites us to love the little scrap of existence He has entrusted to us, which is like a fragile skiff on the tossing ocean of the world. For it is by means of this that we shall one day come to the Promised Land, guided by the sure compass of faith. Let us be courageous mariners whom no tempest can turn off our course and who know how to profit by the fair weather that comes our way. It is a strange thing, but we need courage even to welcome good weather with joy. It is as if we are so filled with fear that we can hardly believe in the joy that is there.

### **Courage To Endure**

Finally, there is the courage to endure: perseverance. Perseverance binds together our past and present in their incessant ebb and flow, so as to build a solid future. Regardless of what some false prophets say, there is no future worth our pains without perseverance and faithfulness. No solid building, no work of value can be constructed, speaking from either a human or a spiritual vantage point, without our unflagging effort in time and our vigorous resistance to the forces of wear and tear and disintegration that bear down on us. It takes a long time to produce a man, and only the one who perseveres to the end will reach the Kingdom. Without the courage to endure, no enterprise that is worth the name will last; the fairest promises will dissolve into idle boasts. The test of time is, for us, the touchstone of reality. “My truth,” wrote Saint-Exupery, “must be firm, and who will love you if you veer and change your loves everyday, and what will become of your great schemes? Continuity alone will bring your efforts to ripeness.”

### **Courage To Be True**

Everyone admires courage, but here we are looking especially at a virile courage, strength of character and willpower. Habitually, we overlook another feature of courage, without which it can be confused with brutal force: Aristotle said that courage is at the service of the beautiful and noble. Saint Thomas refined this by saying that

it must be at the service of reason. Gladly do I add: courage is at the service of truth.

There are many types of courage:

- There is the courage of people who have a fiery temperament and boiling blood. Usually, it does not last long and can easily switch to cowardice if the resistance holds firm.
- There is also the courage of the optimist who has often met with success, the courage acquired by habit and training, as found in professional soldiers, who have acquired assurance through experiencing their own strength, and confidence in their arms.
- There is the courage of ignorance, and this is doubtless the most frequent kind and very useful to us, for how could we live if we were aware of all the dangers and evils that we are constantly threatened by?
- There is the courage of people of character, as described by Charles de Gaulle in “The Son of the Sword”: “Coming to grips with an event, the man of character stands on his own two feet. His instinct is to put his mark on the situation, take responsibility for it, make it his business ... Difficulty attracts the man of character. In confronting it he finds self-fulfillment. Whatever may come, he seeks the grim joy of being responsible.” This courage fully deserves its name. It is the virile courage often identified with virtue itself. (The Latin *virtus* (“virtue”) comes from *vir* (“man”).) It really goes with extraordinary personalities, those whom the ancients called heroes and whom we call great men.

### **Courage of the Spirit**

There is, however, a courage that surpasses all these in depth and nobility, and which is, nonetheless, within the reach of all. I call it *spiritual courage*. The heart of spiritual courage is formed by a love of Truth. To say yes to Truth and to follow wherever it leads calls for the greatest courage. In fact, as Saint John put it, when the light shines in us, it reveals our inner darkness and shows up our sin. It forces us out of our protective shell and makes us turn over a new leaf. It insists that we die to ourselves like the grain of wheat thrown into the ground to be reborn to another, unknown life. There is no birthing more painful than this passage from shadows into the light, from the old man to the new. It is understandable that some lack the courage to submit to so penetrating a light. Yet, to achieve this, it is enough for one to be humble. This is a paradox: there is more courage in the humility that exposes itself to spiritual light and bows its

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head before it than in the tough line of courage taken by the man who depends on himself to confront difficulties or rebels against them. With spiritual courage, we enter another world, the supernatural, accessible only to one who has faith in someone other than himself, someone greater and more courageous than himself.

### **Courage of Faith**

This is the courage, properly speaking, of faith: to accept in the first place that the light of Christ shall penetrate our intimate being with all its hidden corners, to eradicate the ego of shadow and sin that clings to our very flesh and bones. This calls for a surgical operation, done in full consciousness without an anesthetic. Then, with this light, the very courage of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, enters our heart and strengthens it against all obstacles and fears, giving us a little of that assurance that sustained the apostles when they bore witness to Jesus. Witnessing to the faith for Christ is the specific action of Christian

courage and it reaches its peak in martyrdom. Saint Thomas, in his treatise on courage, connects martyrdom with this virtue as its proper and highest act.

Make no mistake, the courage of faith, even when it faces death, is beyond any simply human courage. It joins, in a sometimes baffling mixture, the awareness of our own weakness and lack of courage with a very firm, unshakable confidence in the grace of God. Saint Paul bears witness to this when he writes to the Corinthians, "I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:5).

### **How Do We Practice the Courage of Faith?**

As our chances of martyrdom are rather rare, let us take a look at the more frequent instances where we need to practice the courage of faith.



Photo: The Crosiers / Gene Plaisted, OSC

It takes courage to go to Confession, to recognize our faults, to bring our defects out into the light and admit them to a priest, and then to struggle against them without let up, in spite of falls.

It takes courage simply to believe, and to go on believing, in a world that accepts only material, tangible, purely human values, and that has become allergic to the spiritual and supernatural. To make the leap of faith, to throw oneself somehow wholly into the Word of the Lord, is the greatest risk and takes the greatest courage possible. It is no easier today than it was in former times. As Kierkegaard wrote, "the highest passion in man is faith, and no generation begins where the preceding one left off; each generation starts all over again." It is an adventure like no other, to plunge into the mystery of faith, into the desert of interior solitude where only God sees us, and where he draws us in order to speak with us, when so many human voices deafen our ears, trying to hold us back.

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It takes courage to build one's life on the unknown territory of God and to put one's hope in "things above, where the Risen Christ is seated," when so many interests, values, tasks and needs compete for our attention here below. It takes real audacity and even a touch of madness, that we see in those who bury themselves in cloisters for their whole lives and who dare to look useless for Christ's sake in a world that values only the productive.

It takes courage to articulate to others the truth of the faith that enlightens us, to profess the Credo which has been confided to us and to transmit it, whatever the divergent opinions raised up around us. Does it not take courage even to talk about the Lord in our daily conversations?

It takes courage to meet the small needs of every day, to carry out our simple and monotonous work, in a spirit of faith, and to be naïve enough to believe that the light of the Lord penetrates even there, just as the light of the sun shines in our kitchen, our office.

It takes courage to carry on firmly and to persevere when storms arise and shake us up interiorly and exteriorly, when fidelity is shattered by the very ones who were constituted its guardians, and God seems to be silent, to the point where we perceive that the courage that remains to us unaccountably comes from His hand, discreetly sustaining us and preparing, in the midst of our trial, the flash of a new light.

It takes courage... You can go on with the list, for the courage issuing from faith adapts itself to all events, conforms itself to every life. It is for each person to discover his own courage.

### **Jesus, the Courageous One**

It is good for us, in closing, to cast a glance at the Lord himself, for He is the object of our faith and the model of our courage. We can even say that He is our courage, for in the midst of trial we sense that He is there, that it is He who, within us, at the heart of our faith, cleaves to the good. Christian courage is a courage filled with the joy of knowing that the Lord is with us. "God is my strength and my shield, in him my heart trusts" (Ps 28:7).

The courage of the Lord showed most clearly in His Passion. He needed courage even to announce to His disciples that He would suffer in Jerusalem. Peter rebelled at this idea and the others understood nothing. Already they were abandoning Him to His Passion.

The height of Christ's courage appeared in His agony, where weakness invaded His soul in the form of sadness and fear. At this moment, the intimate bond that united Him to the Father seemed to break, increasing His anguish.

Here, the courage of Jesus consisted in saying—and His words revealed the depths of His being—"Father, not my will but thine be done!" The courage to be nothing more than what the other willed, to let Himself sink into Him, was the courage of love. Then Jesus could say, "It is done. The hour has come." He approached the Passion with a calm, sovereign courage, in a silence that would remain unbroken save for the sublime testimony, the origin of all the others, when, before the High Priest, He declared Himself to be the Son of God. This witness would be the reason for His condemnation.

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Jesus the courageous! This is a change from sentimental rosewater statues. Like an audacious warrior, Jesus has confronted our fears, sufferings, miseries, all the way back to the primeval phantoms that haunted man's unconscious, back to death, our ancient enemy. Let not this courage of Jesus affright us, if He calls us to follow and imitate Him, for ever since the Passion, He Himself stands beside His disciples at the lowest ebb of their faith. He gives them the assurance that no power of the enemy can overcome them because His grace is there, acting within them. He gradually changes their sadness into joy, their fears into hope, and their very faults into occasions of grace.

It seems to me this is what the courage of faith is: it comes from the Lord Himself, when we welcome His Word and His sacraments as our light and our truth. It is at the same time audacious and humble, wholly concrete in its works and spiritual in its source, profoundly human, sensible and sweet, and yet resistant and hard as rock. ■