

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*The bold is my addition. The article speaks for itself. This type of spirituality was not taught to me in seminary, rather I studied it on my own from St. Thomas Aquinas.*

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## **THE VIRTUES OF REFORM**

*Stephen P. White*  
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“**Virtue**” is a word that doesn’t get as much use as it ought to these days. When it is used, it’s often misused to mean something like “moral talent” – an innate quality that some people just have while others don’t. But virtue, unlike talent, isn’t something you are born with. **We all begin life, not as virtuous men and women, but as *tyrants*: morally innocent, perhaps, but tyrannical, nonetheless. God’s grace notwithstanding, growing in virtue requires a lot of work..**

The very idea of the **virtues** is antithetical to a certain modern sensibility, the reluctance to acknowledge that we are somehow *responsible* for becoming more than we already are. It’s much easier to simply assert ourselves and demand, with ever more vehemence, that we be celebrated for our inadequacies rather than called out of them. When mercy means never having to say you’re sorry, why go through the trouble of growing in virtue?

Perhaps this is one reason that talk of **virtue** is sometimes considered quaint. The old definitions of **virtue – a habit of soul in accord with reason and nature and moderation** – rest on concepts (nature? reason?) that are unintelligible to much of our contemporary world. Talk of “a still more excellent way” in some contexts, even within the Church, is practically a micro-aggression.

Pope Francis has rightly insisted that genuine reform must consist in more than protocols and procedures. However important and necessary recent administrative and legal reforms may be, the Church cannot regulate herself out of this crisis. **True reform always comes from fidelity to Christ and the Gospel.** *Without conversion to Christ, the best-crafted*

*reforms will prove ineffective.* Genuine renewal requires both paths to reform: structural and administrative changes, as well as ongoing conversion and growth in holiness.

While **holiness** and **virtue** are not exactly the same thing, the latter is the surest way to the former. Grace builds on and perfects nature. **The highest of the virtues, the theological virtues –faith, hope, and love – will better take root the more we possess the cardinal virtues: temperance, fortitude, prudence, and justice.** The need for these **virtues** can be seen most acutely in the consequences of their absence.

**Temperance** is the **virtue** by which one controls the appetites for natural goods like food and drink and sexual pleasure. Temperance consists, not only in mastering the appetites, but in knowing rightly which appetites are suitable given your state in life. So temperance isn't just about keeping control of bodily appetites, it is about knowing what these natural appetites are actually for, so that they can be directed accordingly.

A man who does not know what bodily desires are properly for will find it hard to acquire the **virtue** of directing them well. And he will have difficulty naming vice in those who are as intemperate as he. That the vices exemplified by the allegations against Bishop Michael J. Bransfield – sexual harassment of seminarians, excessive drinking, lavish spending – are found together shouldn't surprise anyone.

Then there is **fortitude**. Would anyone claim an abundance of this **virtue** among the higher clergy? Surely there are some courageous men among the bishops, but has the behavior of the bishops collectively shown a willingness to confront, head-on, the collapse of credibility they have brought upon themselves? Does any American Catholic doubt that a false collegiality –bishops refusing to correct their brother bishops – has become one of the hallmarks of the bishops' conference?



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Where are the bishops with the **courage** to say things in public that their brother bishops don't want said in public? **Where are the shepherds who value the souls of their flock more than they fear the disapproval of their brother bishops, or even Rome?** If the bishops can't bring themselves to be candid with each other, how can the flock ever believe they will be candid with us?

Of course, **fortitude** is more than a willingness to rock the boat or pick a fight; sometimes it demands the kind of **endurance** and **forbearance** that can appear to some as the opposite of **courage**. Knowing which kind of **fortitude** is required in which circumstances is part of **prudence**.

**Prudence** is a **virtue** to guide the other **virtues**. All the abuse prevention protocols and programs in the world are never going to eliminate the need for sound judgment from our bishops on very difficult questions.

How should the diocese respond to aggressive investigations by civil authorities? How should the bishop balance the demands of justice for abuse victims with his responsibility to safeguard the patrimony of his diocese? **How ought a bishop be a spiritual father to his priests** without compromising transparency and accountability, on the one hand, or succumbing to a corporatized, sanitized, human-resources model, on the other?

And how does a bishop distinguish genuine mistakes and errors in judgment from malfeasance, neglect, and malice? How do we? **Prudence**, it turns out, is a prerequisite for the fourth **cardinal virtue: justice**.

**Justice**. What a dearth of **justice** there has been in this whole sordid, interminable mess! How many victims were denied **justice** because their stories weren't believed? Or worse, because their stories were ignored?

How many friends and family members shared the suffering of a loved one who was abused, and then suffered again when the Church made a mockery of justice by neglecting the victims and protecting the abusers?

How much righteous anger from the faithful has been met with condescension or indifference from bishops who rarely suffer themselves from the consequences of their own malfeasance.

**Virtue** isn't just for the bishops, of course. It's for all of us. And the next generation of priests and bishops will come from somewhere. Those of us who will never wear a miter or carry crozier should never forget that, or our children may. If structural reforms are to bear fruit, they will need to be embodied and enlivened by men and women of integrity and virtue.

That is work for us all. It can't wait.

**\*Image:** *Seven Virtues* by Francesco Pesellino and workshop, c. 1450  
[[Birmingham Museum of Art](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, Alabama]

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