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Very Human, Very Divine (IV): We – the “Habitat” of the Virtues

"The bonds we create with others are often the force that nourishes our own personal growth." A new article in the series on the human virtues.

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God does not live alone. He is a family, a Trinity of persons united by love – an inexhaustible source of life, a font of unceasing self-giving and

communication. Each divine Person lives freely and entirely for the others, looking at the others, in joyous dependence. Our God, Benedict XVI said, is “a *Being-for* (the Father), a *Being-from* (the Son) and a *Being-with* (the Holy Spirit).”[1] This same structure also shines forth in everything that has come from his hands. And in a very special way, in the human being. The Trinitarian life is engraved in the depths of our being. Our existence is only authentically human, and authentically divine, if it develops according to these Trinitarian coordinates of communion: *from* God and *from* others; *with* God and *with* others; *for* God and *for* others.

The tightrope walker

All the virtues, even the smallest and seemingly most insignificant, aim at growing in communion with others. It is true that, to the extent that they

provide us with a certain mastery over particular aspects of our being as persons, the virtues (from *virtus*, strength) empower us. Intertwined with each other, they make us more truly ourselves. However, their goal is not an individual perfection, because happiness is never an isolated path. The virtues enable us “to express love: the love by which the human person becomes a gift and, through this gift, develops fully the very meaning of his or her being.”^[2] An authentic virtue is not attained outside of or *despite* others. Rather, the path is just the opposite: that of growing in freedom for the others – a freedom that enables us to commit ourselves, to give ourselves to those around us. Virtue, in the end, consists in *possessing oneself in order to give oneself*. That is its true strength, its true power.

We can imagine a tightrope walker crossing on a high cable as the public

looks on with apprehension. Day after day he covers the same route, from one side of the wire to the other. His life is one of both daring and caution; he fears falling, but enjoys the height and the risk. Seeking to overcome his limits, his goal requires strenuous training. He needs a skill that can only be acquired by overcoming his vertigo day after day, repeating the exercise time after time.

Similarly, to become persons who are virtuous — who are ordered or grateful, for example — we will need to overcome resistance, with time and training. What is our motivation to try to put things in their proper place or to thank someone graciously? Only if we know that someone we love is waiting for us at the end of the wire, will it be worth taking the risk of falling. Our aim is not merely to attain our own personal harmony or perfection.

Hence all the virtues have as their horizon being open to others. They are both personal and, at the same time, they foster communion with others and strengthen our ties with them.

Being-from: the gift of depending on others

Some self-help books offer keys to living at peace with oneself, and identify happiness with a full and independent life – as if depending on others were a hindrance to personal development. But if we look again at the Trinity, we realize that this isn't true. God the Son proceeds from the Father and receives his entire being from Him. This sonship leads Jesus to always carry out joyfully the Father's will (cf. *Jn* 4:34). In an analogous way, as God's creatures (and even more so if we have received Baptism, which incorporates us into Jesus' life), our existence has a filial character. We

didn't give ourselves life. We were brought into the world by other persons who didn't as yet know us. And these relationships of filiation – children of God and children of our parents – give rise to all the other human relationships in our life. We are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, and we are a family.

Thus at the deepest core of the human person we find a radical dependence. Our existence unfolds *from* Another and *from* others. This reality is especially visible when we consider spousal love, which entails living totally united to another person and “depending” so fully on the mutual affection between them that one cannot live without the other. Hence needing others doesn't stifle our freedom; on the contrary, it ennobles us and leads to a fuller joy. Realizing that we have received love and can return it fills our life with meaning.

Furthermore, virtues can only be acquired in an environment of relationships: their “habitat” is the “we.” Our inner dispositions are educated in contact with others. This is what parents do when they teach their children how to behave: “Son, aren’t you thankful for what you’ve received?” “Son, you should put things in their right place.” We grow thanks to the advice we receive; thanks to conversations that illumine our reason with firm principles. Principles which, when they shape our life, foster the virtues and facilitate understanding where the good is, and how to achieve it.

In this process, the example of the people around us is an important source of learning. A virtuous atmosphere in the family or workplace is a nursery of virtues. And unfortunately the opposite is also the case: where no effort is made to create a healthy

atmosphere, it is more difficult to grow humanly. A home where excess is avoided educates children in temperance; a mother who cares for details teaches her children the value of small things. The same thing happens among friends, among co-workers and in any human community. It is part of our evangelizing mission to create around us an environment that helps people to discover and grow on this path. This is what the Church does by presenting the lives of the saints as a model for us. There we aren't presented with the theory, but with the virtues embodied in a specific person; there we see that it is truly possible to let God and the others enter into our life.

Being-with: the joy of accompanying others

The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, is the Love

shared and sent to *be with* us.[3] He is “the inexhaustible source of God’s life in us,”[4] of the life that can only unfold as interpersonal communion. Truly we men and women don’t simply live: we *live with*. Our existence is a *being-with* those around us. There is life only where there is communion. The bonds we create with others are often the force that nourishes our own personal growth.

Although some ways of thinking and living in our day and age hold up a model of the independent and, in a certain sense, self-sufficient person, the Word of God tells us that we are not castaways who survive in isolation, but people in constant need of others. Saint Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are all part of the same unity: *You are the body of Christ and individually members of it* (1 Cor 12:27). We are tied together by strong threads of grace and love, also

with those who have gone before us and those who will follow us on the path to God. As the Catechism of the Church says: “In this solidarity with all men, living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all.”^[5] We will be better persons to the extent that we help each other, depending on and accompanying others.

We are not alone in our effort to acquire the virtues. As Saint Josemaría said, “in some way we are always either helping or hindering each other. We are all links in the same chain.”^[6] Our life is a fabric woven of relationships and encounters, a *being-with* others: “The power of charity! If you live that blessed fraternal spirit your mutual weakness will also be a support to keep you upright in the fulfilment of duty: just as in a house of cards, one card supports another.”^[7]

Sensing the closeness of people who offer us their support, and whom we in turn support, is a source of joy. Accompanying others and being accompanied by them is the hallmark of a truly Christian existence. Let us recall the disciples from Emmaus. If they hadn't met that mysterious Traveler who opened their eyes, they would have remained trapped in their bewilderment (cf. *Lk 24:13-17*).

Having people close to us who are ready to encourage us and raise us up when we fall, is a spur for us to keep going forward. When we help others to achieve the best version of themselves, we do the same thing Jesus did for the two disciples leaving Jerusalem. When we are surrounded by people who love us and who we trust, it is easier for us to grow.

All the virtues have a relational character, even those that seem most individual. Fortitude or temperance,

for example, also direct us towards others, since these virtues enable us to share the good we have discovered. The virtues open the door to a generous encounter with others and facilitate our self-giving to them. No one can be virtuous and closed in on themselves: that would be only an appearance of virtue. “No virtue worthy of its name can foster selfishness. Every virtue necessarily works to the good both of our own soul and to the good of those around us.”[8]

Being-for: the joy of serving others

The Father is the source of Trinitarian life. Everything in Him is a gift to the Son, a fullness that gives freely all that He has, with a love that is both paternal and maternal (cf. *Mt* 23:37; *Ps* 131:2). This divine fatherhood is the source of all fatherhood (cf. *Eph* 3:15), a gift that God entrusts to each of us, so that we

too may be the origin of life for others. We are all called to be fathers or mothers: a disciple is the “son” of his teacher; a friend is the “father” and “son” of his friends, etc. We are all sons and daughters and, at the same time, we become mature persons to the extent that we are preparing ourselves to be fathers or mothers, each in accord with his or her personal vocation.

Each person truly finds himself or herself only when we escape from our self-enclosure and give ourselves to others. The Second Vatican Council stresses once and again, as though repeating a message especially opportune for our time, that “man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself.”^[9] Only then are we truly happy. “To give oneself sincerely to others is so effective that God rewards it with a humility filled with joy.”^[10] This joy of *being-for* others overflows in

specific acts of self-giving, service and understanding. We have many opportunities each day: when we are quick to do someone a favor, when we judge with mercy the behavior of others, when we are a person others can always rely on for their needs... This was how the first Christians lived, which the pagans found so surprising that they exclaimed: “Look how they love one another ... look how they are willing to die for each other.”[11]

Mary also cares diligently for those around her, with complete self-forgetfulness. Our Lady looks after Elizabeth in the final stages of her pregnancy; in Cana she is concerned about the happy outcome of the wedding; on Calvary she accompanies her Son with great serenity amid all the suffering. In Mary “we find security and also strength in order to continue bringing her Son’s consolation to

those in need of it.”[12] All the grace and virtue of the Mother of Christ is spontaneously directed to others because, for those who want to follow Jesus, there is no good that is not transformed into the good of all.

Jose Manuel Antuña

[1] Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and the World Religions*.

[2] Saint John Paul II, Audience, 16 January 1980.

[3] Cf. Richard of Saint Víctor, *De Trinitate*, III, 2-4.

[4] Francis, General Audience, 8 May 2013.

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 953.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 76.

[7] Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 462.

[8] *Friends of God*, no. 76.

[9] Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 24.

[10] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 591.

[11] Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, 39, 1-18.

[12] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, *Letter*, 29 April 2020.

José Manuel Antuña

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