

FATHER REGINALD E. MARTIN, O.P., DIRECTOR

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A SUMMER REFLECTION

Fr. Reginald Martin, O.P.

I begin this reflection on Corpus Christi, a celebration unique in our liturgical calendar. Every other feast commemorates an event or a person. Today we celebrate a doctrine. Catholics are often criticized for not taking the words of Scripture literally, but today's liturgy reminds us that when the priest repeats Jesus' words, "This is my Body, this is my Blood," these words mean exactly what they say.

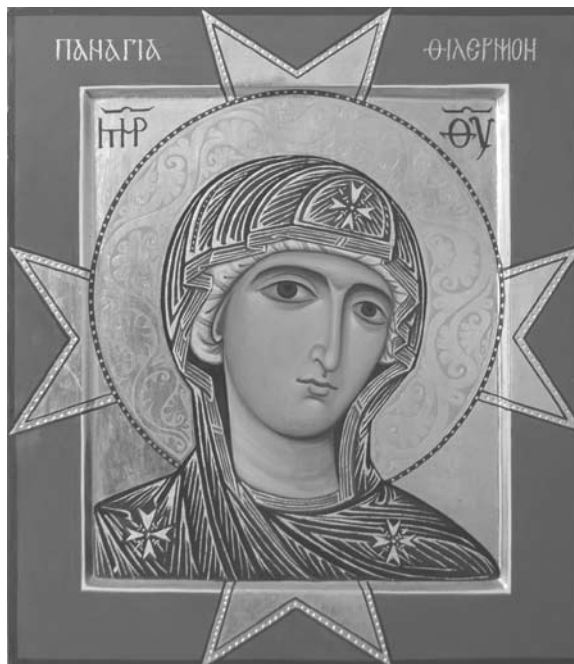
I write this shortly after returning from the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes, with members of the Order of Malta. Once again I was humbled and edified to serve individuals dedicated to *tuitio fidei* and *obsequium pauperum*—defense of the faith and care for the poor and sick. The days were remarkable, and each brought an opportunity to pray for, the many friends of the Rosary Center.

At every step of this pilgrimage, we were reminded of the watchful care of our Blessed Mother, who gave flesh and blood to our Savior, and who invites us to stand by her side at Calvary. This issue of *Light and Life* brings a reflection on Fortitude, the sanctifying habit that enables us to face our fears with courage and dignity. Mary's fortitude as she witnessed the brutal murder of her son should remind us that whatever challenging events we must endure, we have a companion ready to sympathize, comfort, and console.

Mary's life of obedient fortitude prepared her for the great gift of the Assumption. When Pius XII declared the doctrine of the Assumption he quoted St. John Damascene (late 7th C.), who preached,

It was necessary that she who had preserved her virginity inviolate in childbirth should also have her body kept free from all corruption after death. It was necessary that she who had carried the Creator as a child on her breast should dwell in the tabernacles of God.

We are all familiar with famous representations of Mary, and the Rosary Center is fortunate that Fr. Duffner, who directed our ministry for so long, was a good friend



The Holy Virgin of Philermo

Icon written by Philip Davydov

to the silhouette artist, Sr. Mary Jean Dorcy, who gave permission to use her work in our publications. Depictions of Mary are countless, but my chaplaincy to the Order of Malta has introduced me to a representation I was altogether unaware of, an icon of Mary, honored as "Our Lady of Philermo."

In a long series of battles, Muslim forces successfully drove Christians from the Holy Land. After their defeat at the Battle of Acre, in 1291, the Knights of St John of Jerusalem (later known as Knights of Malta), fled to Cyprus, where they remained until 1306. From there they succeeded in capturing Philermo, the mountain-top capital of Rhodes. Three years later, they completely controlled the island.

The Knights found an icon of Mary in a chapel atop Mt. Philermo. One legend says it was painted by St. Luke, believed to be responsible for many

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Moral Virtues: III FORTITUDE

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

FORTITUDE AND OTHER VIRTUES

As we have seen, the virtues share several characteristics. Each is a habitual disposition that makes its possessor good, and makes his or her actions good. Each virtue seeks a middle course between the opposites of excess and defect, and each demands a firmness of mind, so that the virtue may be practiced readily and repeatedly. Because this last quality – firmness of purpose – is the quality specific to the virtue of Fortitude, we can see that Fortitude is a necessary condition to every virtue.

What sets Fortitude apart from the other virtues is the capacity it gives us to face hard tasks, and especially tasks that are dangerous. Fortitude strengthens our will to follow the good of reason despite our fear of bodily harm or hard work, and it places limits on our will when our will is moved to some rash action. St. Thomas Aquinas taught, “...Fortitude is about...curbing fear and moderating daring” (ST II-II, 123.3).

THE PROPER AIM OF FORTITUDE

This description needs to be understood carefully. We have all heard the term, “flight or fight.” This is the arena in which Fortitude manifests itself. To lessen daring, Fortitude moderates the blind human tendency to fight. To curb fear, Fortitude encourages us to fight, if a stern reply is an appropriate response. We must always remember that virtues seek the mean between extremes. Fortitude, like all the virtues, is a habit of self-mastery. It prods us to lay aside unreasonable fear, and directs us to rein in any temptation to unwise behavior through rash or hasty action.

If we ask which of these actions of Fortitude is the more important, St. Thomas argues from St. Augustine that fear of pain is a stronger motivating force than the desire for pleasure.

There is none that does not shun pain more than he desires pleasure. For we perceive that even the most untamed beasts are deterred from the greatest pleasure by the fear of pain (ST II-II, 123.11).

Therefore, in our everyday life, Fortitude manifests itself more often by assisting us to face our fears than by reducing our inclination to lash out blindly. This is because danger exercises its own dampening effect on our bravery. And because danger is more apt to incite our fear, urging us to run away, rather than to perform some act of foolhardy bravery, Fortitude usually concerns itself with enabling us to withstand fear in the face of some perceived danger.

A PARTICULAR BLESSING OF THE VIRTUE

Fortitude is particularly concerned with strengthening our will in the face of death, which is the greatest bodily evil we can suffer. By helping us to face death without fear, Fortitude necessarily enables us to confront with some degree of calm and assurance all those other, lesser fears and temptations toward weakness that frequently beset us. As we look at the saints, our examples in faith, we attribute the greatest Fortitude to the martyrs, those who offered up – or lost – their lives for their belief.

THE GREATEST GIFT

Jesus tells His disciples, “Greater love than this no one has, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn 15:13). These words remind us that Fortitude is a choice; the martyrs deliberately gave their lives because they found a greater value in loving God than in continuing to live in the world. The accounts of the martyrs’ deaths are all very clear about this: their sacrifice was a choice, freely given.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE MARTYRS

The account of the martyrdom of Sts. Perpetua and Felicity, who died in Carthage in 203, is a good example. The document that describes their death is remarkable. It is one of the earliest examples of Christian autobiography, and it is the earliest account of Christian life to be written by a woman.

Shortly before their death, the martyrs were given a public meal, which anyone could observe. The author who took over the account from St. Perpetua wrote,

The martyrs strove to make of it an agape, a love-feast, and to those who crowded round them they spoke of the judgments of God and the joy of their own sufferings. Their courage astonished the pagans and caused the conversion of many.

The account says that once they reached the arena, Perpetua was attacked by a fierce cow. The force of the attack stunned her, so she momentarily forgot where she was. When she once again realized what was happening, the author says “...she gathered her torn tunic round her, pinning up her hair lest she should seem to be mourning.”

These are not idle details, nor do they reveal a bizarre and inappropriate vanity. The author wants us to be very clear that this was no funeral, nor were the martyrs unwilling sacrificial victims. Perpetua wanted the spectators in the arena to know that she was mistress, not victim, of her fate.

Eventually, Perpetua was attacked by a soldier with a sword. His first blow caused great pain, but it did not kill her. At this point heroic Fortitude took over: Perpetua reached out, and aimed the point of the sword to her throat. She wanted to make certain the sacrifice of her life was done properly – and before she could lose her nerve.

REASONABLE AND UNREASONABLE FEAR

Thus far, in this reflection we have consistently contrasted Fortitude to fear, so let us now consider the fear that is opposed to Fortitude. To do this we must first distinguish between fear that can (and should) be avoided, and the fear that cannot.

St. Thomas turns to Aristotle, who wrote, “*a man would be insane...if nothing, not even earthquakes nor deluges, inspired him with fear*” (ST II-II, 125.1). He adds, “*Reason dictates that we should shun the evils that we cannot withstand*” (Ibid, ad 3). Fortitude does not equip us to face natural catastrophes without flinching; it rather concerns itself primarily with the spirit with which we face dangers and difficult undertaking. Chief among these is our death, whether from illness, old age, accident, or weakness.

Human reason teaches that each of us will die. Fear causes us to shrink before this inevitability, reminding us that when we die we lose something we love – our life in this world, and all the good things our life holds for us. Fortitude commands us to face the fact of our death calmly, and to accept a reality that our reason tells us we cannot avoid.

A CAUTIOUS BRAVERY

But this is not to say that Fortitude is mere boldness, even though boldness may appear to be a noble defiance of some present danger. The virtues seek the mean between extremes, so if Fortitude equips us to face our death with equanimity, it also obliges us to “watch out,” and to care for ourselves to whatever extent that is possible.

If we ignore danger through pride, disregard for ourselves, or simple ignorance we are not practicing Fortitude; in fact, we are ignoring the virtue and doing nothing more than courting unnecessary harm. In one of his homilies, St. Ambrose eloquently described the genuine, appropriate calm that accompanies the virtue of Fortitude,

The brave man is not unmindful of what may be likely to happen; he takes measures beforehand, and looks out as from the...tower of his mind, so as to encounter the future by his forethought, lest he should say afterwards: This befell me because I did not think it could possibly happen (ST II-II, 123.9. obj.2).

Fortitude disposes us to face unexpected – and unpleasant – contingencies, but the perfection of this skill, like that of any virtue, requires repetition and practice.

Thus, the more we train ourselves to face bravely the hard work or dangers we can foresee, the more apt we are to act bravely – by “second nature” – when some unexpected threat presents itself. Fortitude gives us a certain perspective. If we can school ourselves to face the fact of our death with calm, the many other, lesser, challenges that confront us will assume their proper dimensions.

THE FRUITS OF FORTITUDE

Allied to Fortitude are Confidence, which preserves in us a hopeful spirit when we face some large undertaking, and Accomplishment, by which we use our reason (and the virtues we have developed and honed through practice) to achieve the end we propose. Patience disposes us to put up with difficulties so that we can accomplish some good thing, even when our goal seems long in coming, and Perseverance helps keep our energy focused on some well-considered plan. These secondary virtues are ultimately designed to help us face the prospect of our death, but they also come to our everyday assistance, when we face fears less daunting than the fear of death.

The greatness of heart we name “magnanimity” is another close ally of Fortitude. It gives us the will to reach out for great things precisely because they are great, and, therefore, often quite daunting. Honors are given to those who accomplish heroic acts, but our greatness of heart – while it is not unaware of honor – is (or should be) more moved by the noble act to be done than the rewards that may accompany it. As with all the virtues, Magnanimity seeks the middle path between extremes, cautioning us not to begin tasks we have no hope of completing, yet urging us to spend our money and our strengths where they will accomplish the most for the common good.

VICES OPPOSED TO FORTITUDE

Opposed to Fortitude, by way of excess, are Presumption, which deludes us into imagining we can accomplish something without the aid of another, specifically God; likewise Ambition, which is an excessive love of honor. We encounter further defects in Fortitude when we allow unreasonable fear to prevent our doing some good thing, e.g., when we refuse to spend either the money or the effort suitable for a good work, or when we waste our resources and pay more than an effort is worth. These vices may seem oddly contrasted to Fortitude, but they are contrary to the parts of Fortitude that encourage us to take calculated risks to accomplish some noble task.

THE BLESSING OF FORTITUDE

In the Sermon on the Mount Our Savior said, “*Blessed are they that suffer persecution for the sake of Justice, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matt. 5:10). St. Thomas Aquinas links this beatitude to the virtue of Fortitude, for Fortitude equips us to cling to truth and justice in the face of assault. St. Thomas, not surprisingly, applies the

beatitude particularly to the martyrs who are the heroes of our faith, but our everyday experience reveals many situations in which we are called to face persecution, even if it does not result in our death.

The Church's *Catechism* reminds us that the everlasting happiness we seek through our words, habits, and actions, is our reward for making decisive moral choices. We must love God above all things. Fortitude commands us to use our lives and our resources to foster the common good. We must dare to be great, without desiring fame and, once reason has determined us on a course, we must follow it without counting the cost. Fortitude is our guide in the quest for the day to day heroism Christ calls us to demonstrate, if we are serious about following Him.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE SAINTS

The brief life of St. Therese of Lisieux is an example worth considering in this regard. She committed herself, she said, to doing "*small things*," a vocation we completely misunderstand if we imagine this meant she planned to spend – or waste – her time on inconsequential projects.

What St. Therese demonstrates is a determination, in spite of temptations to the contrary, to see Christ in every atom of creation. "*To pick up a pin for love*," she said, "*can save a soul*." The challenge, obviously, lies not in picking up the pin; the effort is to find Christ's love hiding behind such an insignificant act. Fortitude prepares us for greatness, and we find the opportunities for greatness wherever we find need.

OUR CALL TO GREATNESS

The virtues dispose us to behave rightly in specific circumstances, and most of us will not be called either to a life of cloistered heroism (like St. Therese) or to offer our lives in witness to the truth, as were the martyrs. Nevertheless, Fortitude calls us to be resolute in our faith, and demonstrates that heroism is the tool that equips us to discern opportunities for greatness, however apparently inconsequential they may seem, and to embrace our vocation to face it with care, freedom, and calm. ■

A SUMMER REFLECTION

Continued from page 1

representations of Christ's Mother. Another legend described the painting's miraculously making its way to Rhodes in the 8th Century. Whatever the case, when the icon came into the Knights' possession, they deemed it one of their greatest treasures.

Muslim forces under Suleiman drove the Knights from Rhodes, in 1523. The Knights lodged in various places under Papal protection until 1530, when Charles V offered them the island of Malta, from which they hoped to counteract growing Muslim power in the Mediterranean.

The Knights brought the painting to Malta, where it was venerated until Napoleon captured Malta, in 1798. The future emperor allowed the Master of the Order to take the painting with him, into exile. The rest of the Order's

treasures were loaded onto ships that were lost when the British defeated the French at the Battle of the Nile.

The painting was given to the Russian Czar, Paul I, who served, briefly, as Master of the Knights. When he died, in 1801, the painting was sent to St. Petersburg, where it survived the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Devout members of the Russian imperial family took the icon to Copenhagen in 1919. In 1931 they carried it to Yugoslavia, and a decade later, entrusted it for safekeeping with the monks of an Orthodox monastery in Montenegro.

The icon then vanished, presumed to be a casualty of communist upheavals after World War II. At this point, accounts of the icon's fate differ. Some argue the Yugoslav dictator, Joseph Tito, placed it in a museum, although it was never displayed. Others claim that monks of the Monastery of the Nativity, in Montenegro, preserved the icon until after the fall of communism, when they brought it, and other precious artifacts, out of hiding. The painting now hangs in the National Museum of Cetinje, capital of Montenegro.

Members of the Order of Malta whom I serve as chaplain have organized themselves under the patronage of Our Lady of Philermo. On September 8, the feast of the birth of the Virgin Mary, they pay special honor to Our Lady of Philermo, for that is the day, in 1565, Christian forces arrived in Malta to relieve the Knights, who were under siege from Suleiman.

The eventful history of the icon of Our Lady of Philermo served as inspiration for Dashiell Hammet's novel, *The Maltese Falcon*. When we celebrate the feast of Our Lady's birth in September, I hope the painting's adventures will remind Rosary Confraternity members of the special protection our merciful God offers us through the protection and example of Mary.

To write, in June, of events we will celebrate three months hence is an interesting experience. But whatever we encounter between now and September, Christ's presence – especially in the sacrament of His Body and Blood – is our spiritual magnet, providing focus for our lives, and reminding us that the Eucharist invites us to become what we believe. Every other food is changed to become a part of us; the Eucharist transforms us into the Body and Blood of Christ.

This is an astounding gift, but consider its implications. By touching the Body of Christ in the Eucharist we touch the entire humanity of Our Savior. This necessarily includes the human memories of Jesus, among them the affectionate recollections of life with His – and our – mother.

St. John Damascene tells us the Assumption was a "*necessary*" reward for Mary's perfectly aligning her will to Her Son's. The everlasting life she enjoys – body and soul – in Christ's company, is a reward our faith invites us to look forward to, if we are willing to listen to Mary's words to the servants at Cana and "*do whatever He tells you*."