

One

The Nature of Fortitude

The third Cardinal Virtue is *Fortitude*, also known as courage or bravery.

This is the virtue that enables us to overcome our fears and to do the right thing even when we don't want to.

Fortitude prompts us to take action or keep going, even when we're threatened by significant suffering and loss. Because we know that the good we're pursuing and protecting is more important than the good we're risking.

Just like St. Maximilian Kolbe who knew that union with God, faithfulness to the truth, and a willingness to forgive and that saving another human life were all more important than saving his career and all he had built, or preserving relationships or protecting his health or even saving his own life. Because courage is the willingness to sacrifice lesser things for the sake of greater ones

So, Kolbe spoke the truth and it got him sent to Auschwitz by the Nazis and Kolbe forgave those who tortured him in the death camp and he gave away his food rations to other prisoners, and finally, Kolbe traded places with a man condemned to death.

Kolbe could do this because he was a man of courage. Am I? How would I know?

Two

Overcoming the Fear to Lose *All* Goods and the Fear to Lose *Any* Good

Courage or Fortitude is about overcoming fear in order to do the right thing. And fear is always a fear that we will lose some good thing or the importance of some good.

Now, the primary human fear is the fear of death because death represents the loss of every created good, everything in this world.

That's why Our Lord says that no one has greater love than this, to lay down his life for his friend. Because in laying down our lives, we are laying down all earthly goods at our disposal.

So to be really brave, we *can't* be dominated by a fear of death. If we are, then as the book of Hebrews says, we will be kept in slavery to the devil all our lives.

But if we are willing to die and lose *all* earthly goods for the right cause, then we should be willing to lose *some* earthly goods for the right cause too.

To really be brave, we have to look around at everything we care about – family, friends, job, reputation, health, financial security – and we have to ask God to give us the grace so that, if need be, we can do the right thing even if it means letting go of the things that matter deeply to us.

Because that's what courage means.

Three

Not Fearlessness

We said that fortitude is about overcoming fear in order to do what's right. But that doesn't mean that the brave person, the person with fortitude, is fearless. Quite the contrary, if somebody is fearless, it means he *doesn't* have fortitude. That's because fear is based on love. The only

thing that makes any of us afraid is when there's something we love, and we're afraid to lose it. Which means, if you had no fears, it would be a sign that you had no love. And having no love isn't a virtue, it's a vice.

No, what makes a person brave isn't that they have no fears. It's that their fears, like their loves, have been put in the right order so that you love and fear losing greater things over lesser things. And then you are willing to pursue and cling to the greater goods, even if it means losing the lesser goods.

At the end of the day, courage is an expression of prudence and prudence says to prioritize what matters most. So, courage is the willingness to sacrifice lesser things for the sake of greater.

Four

Loving Most That Which is Best

So if you want to be brave, you have to start by figuring out your priorities.

What matters most? What do you love the most? What do you fear losing the most?

The answers to those questions should all be the same. The answer to all those questions should be God. He is, objectively, the most important thing there is. The best thing. So you should love Him the most. You should fear losing Him the most.

That's why Scripture says that, "the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord."

It could also say that the beginning of Courage is fear of the Lord. Because you can only be prudent and brave if you prioritize God above

all things. That will make you fear losing Him the most. And that will make you willing to sacrifice everything for Him, if need be, which is the virtue of Fortitude.

Again, examining our fears will reveal what we love. So what do you fear the most? Do you worry most about your career? Or your kids? Or finances? Or your reputation? Or health?

If that's what worries you the most, then your priorities are out of whack. In which case you're going to have a hard time being brave. But if you want union with God most and fear losing him the most, then you have the beginning of wisdom and the beginning of courage.

Five

Ordering your fears, ordering your loves

We have to love created things. Our lives, our kids, our friendships, the jobs, the material goods God has blessed us with. It's good to love those things, and it's right that we should fear losing them. If we didn't fear losing them, it wouldn't be a sign of courage, it would just be a lack of appreciation. But we have to know that true happiness and salvation are only to be found in God.

The things of this world will eventually let us down and leave us empty. God won't. The created persons in our lives can't save us and we can't save them. But God can.

So however much we love created things, we have to love God more. However much we fear losing some good thing, we have to fear losing God more.

Once we have those loves and fears prioritized, we will know how and when to sacrifice. Because virtue is just getting our loves in order.

Love the lesser things less and love the greater things more, for virtue is rightly ordered love.