Chapter 27

Likeness to God

Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

1 John 3:2–3

In a scene in The Brothers Karamazov shortly before Father Zossima's death, the elder gathers his fellow monks and those dear to him in his cell for a final conversation. He recalls that as a child he owned a book with beautiful pictures entitled A Hundred and Four Stories from the Old and New Testaments. From this book he learned to read, and as an old man he kept it on a shelf close to his bed. Father Zossima remembered the many tales of good and holy men and women, of Job and Esther and Jonah, the parables of Jesus, the conversion of Saul, and the lives of the saints Alexei and Mary of Egypt, stories that planted a mysterious seed in his heart. Some of these sacred tales, like the story of Job, he could not read "without tears." Like bright sparks in the darkness, these
stories of God’s holy people shone brightly in his memory. In them, says Father Zossima, he “beheld God’s glory.” “What is Christ’s word,” he asks, “without an example?”

Without examples, without imitation, there can be no human life or civilization, no art or culture, no virtue or holiness. The elementary activities of fashioning a clay pot or constructing a cabinet, of learning to speak or sculpting a statue have their beginnings in imitation. This truth is as old as humankind, but in the West it was the Greeks who helped us understand its place in the moral life, and in the Roman period it is nowhere displayed with greater art than in Plutarch’s Lives. “Virtuous deeds,” he wrote, “implant in those who search them out a zeal and yearning that leads to imitation. . . . The good creates a stir of activity towards itself and implants at once in the spectator an impulse toward action.”

By the time Christianity made its appearance in the Roman Empire, the practice of writing lives of virtuous men was well established. Only in the third century, however, did Christians begin to write lives of their holy men and women. There were, of course, heroic tales in the Scriptures, apocryphal acts recounted the wonders of the apostles, and martyrs’ acts celebrated the courage of these witnesses to Christ in their final hours. Yet the writing of edifying lives did not begin until later. The supreme model was Jesus, whose life was recorded in the gospels. “I have given you an example,” he said, “that you also should do as I have done” (John 13:15). Even Saint Paul, whose adventures would have been fit subjects for an edifying life (he was whipped with lashes, beaten three times with rods, stoned once, shipwrecked three times), invited imitation only because he followed the example of Christ. “Be imitators of me,” he wrote, “as I am
of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Others followed in his train. Ignatius of Antioch in the early second century exhorted the Philadelphians “to imitate Jesus Christ as he imitated the Father.”

In the middle of the third century, Pontus, a disciple of Cyprian of Carthage, the most illustrious bishop in the African church before Augustine, composed what may be considered the first life of a Christian saint. His *Passion and Life of Cyprian*, written shortly after Cyprian’s death as a martyr (ca. A.D. 259), was the work of a man who had served as deacon under Cyprian and knew him well. A more conventional disciple would have told Cyprian’s triumph in the style of other acts of the martyrs, but Pontus consciously breaks with convention. Cyprian, he says, “had much to teach independently of his martyrdom; what he did while he was alive should not be hidden from the world.” By writing the *Life* Pontus wished to hold up not only his valor at the end, but the “noble pattern” that was displayed in the deeds and accomplishments of Cyprian’s life. His entire life was worthy of preservation in “eternal memory.”

Pontus anticipated a seminal development in Christian history, the writing of lives as a way of teaching virtue. In the next century Athanasius of Alexandria would write a *Life of Antony*, the first Christian monk, that would set the pattern for later lives. Christians, of course, taught by precept (“You know what precepts we gave you through the Lord Jesus,” said Paul), but, like Plutarch, they knew that only deeds can stir the soul to action. Even a very partial listing of some of the many lives that appeared during the next three hundred years testifies to the vitality and breadth of this new genre of Christian literature: *Life of Pachomius*, Palladius’s store of lives in his *Lausiac History*, *Life of John Chrysostom*, Gerontius’s *Life of Melania* (the first
full life of a woman ascetic), Theodoret of Cyrus’s Religious History (lives of monks of Syria), Gregory the Great’s life of Benedict, Cyril of Scythopolis’s lives of the Palestinian monks, Sulpicius Severus’s Life of Martin of Tours, a soldier, the life of Daniel the Stylite and of John the Almsgiver, and on and on and on. They are many and varied. Some dwell on the eccentric and grotesque, telling of men who sat for years on pillars or dwelled in huts too narrow to stretch out in; others read like romances or adventure stories; still others depict fierce inner struggles and describe unexceptional and unheralded acts of mercy and almsgiving and love.

With few exceptions these lives hold up imitation as the path to virtue. In the Life of Antony Athanasius wrote that when people hear of Antony’s deeds they will want “to imitate him.” Imitation was, however, not simply a matter of mimicking the virtuous deeds of another person. Deeds were not isolated acts of mercy or justice disconnected from a person but signs of character, and moral instruction had to do with the formation of character. In a letter placed at the beginning of his Lausiac History, Palladius said, “Words and syllables do not constitute teaching. . . . Teaching consists of virtuous acts of conduct. . . . This is how Jesus taught. . . . His aim was the formation of character.” As Plutarch had recognized earlier, deeds need not mean great and noble displays of bravery of strength. “A slight thing, like a phrase or a jest,” he wrote, often reveal more of a person’s character than “battles where thousands fall.”

With their rustic heroes and homespun language the ancient lives are deceptively simple. In his lives of the holy men and women of Syria, Theodoret of Cyrus recounts the visit of a monk, Avitos, to Marcianos, another man of the desert. When
Avitos arrived Marcianos invited him to share dinner with him: “Come, my dear friend, let us have fellowship together at the table.” But Avitos declined, saying, “I don’t think I have ever eaten before evening. I often pass two or three days in succession without taking anything.” To which Marcianos, who was younger, replied (not without irony), “On my account change your custom today for my body is weak and I am not able to wait until evening.” Still Avitos refused, and Marcianos became disconsolate because he had disappointed his visitor: “I am disheartened and my soul is stung because you have expended much effort to come and look at a true ascetic.” Finally Avitos relented, and Marcianos said, “My dear friend. We both share the same existence and embrace the same way of life. We prefer work to rest, fasting to nourishment, and it is only in the evening that we eat, but we know that love is a much more precious possession than fasting. For the one is the work of divine law, the other of our own power. And it is proper to consider the divine law more precious than our own.”

The story is uncomplicated and the narration artful but the message subtle. Marcianos knew how “to distinguish the different parts of virtue,” says Theodoret. There was more to the lives than charming stories or pithy sayings. Like all skilled storytellers, the ancient hagiographers knew they must entertain as they instructed, yet they display an astute understanding of human nature.

*Medical Art for the Soul*

In the Roman world the closest analogy to the moral philosopher was the physician, one who, in the words of Cicero, practiced “a medical art for the soul.” Ethics was centered on the moral
agent, and the virtuous life was learned in a one-to-one relation with a tutor. Seneca wrote letters to Lucilius to guide his formation in virtue, and in a sermon (or moral lecture) on wealth, Clement of Alexandria exhorted his hearers to seek out a man of God as director and entrust themselves to him as to one who “sees to your cure.” To be sure, in early Christian literature there are treatises (or sections of treatises) that deal with such moral issues as lying, sexuality, marriage, and public amusements, and here and there one will find discussions of topics such as suicide, war, abortion, and homosexual acts. But the vast bulk of writings on ethics, whether Christian or pagan, has as its theme the formation of individual lives.\(^7\)

In a little work written in appreciation of Origen his disciple, Gregory the Wonderworker left an engaging account of what it meant to have Origen as teacher. Gregory says he had come to Palestine, where Origen was living, to have “fellowship with this man.” He was attracted by Origen’s great learning and fame as an interpreter of Scripture, but his essay accents Origen’s spiritual and moral qualities. From the time Gregory came to study with him Origen urged him to “adopt a philosophical life.” He said that “only those who practice a life genuinely befitting reasonable creatures and seek to live virtuously, who seek to know first who they are, and to strive for those things that are truly good and to shun those which are truly evil . . . are lovers of philosophy.”\(^8\)

The term for philosophy in the early centuries of the Roman Empire was *life, bios* in Greek, a word that is best translated in English as “way of life.” Philosophy was not simply a way of thinking about life; it was a way of instilling attitudes and training people to live a certain way. Musonius Rufus, a second-
century philosopher, said the task of philosophy is “to find out by discussion what is fitting and proper and then to carry it out in action.” When Justin Martyr embraced the Christian philosophy instead of the philosophy of Plato and Pythagoras, he said he had found a life that was “sure and fulfilling.” Clement of Alexandria, who wrote the first treatise on Christian ethics, entitled *The Tutur*, said that its purpose was to “heal the passions”: “The role of the tutor is to improve the soul, not to educate nor give information but to train someone in the virtuous life.” In another treatise Clement set forth the theological and philosophical grounds for the Christian life, yet his goal always remained the same, to form the soul in virtue.

In an original and insightful book entitled *Seelenfuhrung* (Directing the Soul), Paul Rabbow, a German scholar, made the imaginative suggestion that the best place to learn the techniques used by Roman moral philosophers (and Christians like Clement) to train their disciples in virtue was found in the exercises of Ignatius Loyola, the sixteenth-century founder of the Society of Jesus. Rabbow observed that the ancient texts embodied a system of “spiritual direction” in the form of moral exercises, cultivation of good habits, self-examination, meditation on edifying sayings, contemplation of noble examples, all under the watchful eye of a master. The philosopher Galen said that twice a day he pondered sayings attributed to Pythagoras, reading them over and reciting them aloud. His aim was not to understand certain metaphysical or moral truths but to practice self-control, for example, in matters of food, desire, drink, and the emotions. Philosophy demanded that its adherents engage in an “inner battle between the old and the new life.” In short, the
moral life required conversion of the affections as well as of one's behavior.

At first, Gregory resisted Origen's efforts to change him. Though Origen's words "struck like an arrow" Gregory held back from practicing philosophy. He was not ready to undergo the discipline imposed by Origen. Instead, he preferred to spend his time "in argument and intellectual debate." Origen, however, expected more of him than cleverness and verbal agility. His aim was to "move the soul," and he challenged his disciples to open their hearts and allow their wills to be molded by the good. If someone claimed to have studied ethics and had not been changed, he had studied something else. In Gregory's apt phrase, Origen "taught us to practice justice and prudence."

Although learning precepts was part of the instruction (there is extant a set of precepts put together by a Christian philosopher from this period), what counted for more was the example of the master and the bonds of friendship formed with the disciple. This kind of relation, however, was rarely achieved in more casual human intercourse. Friendship, says Gregory, "is piercing and penetrating, an affable and affectionate disposition displayed in the teacher's words and his association with us." Through Origen's friendship with him, Gregory learned to love Christ, the Word, but he also began to love Origen, "the friend and interpreter of the Word." Only when "smitten by this love" was he persuaded to give up "those objects which stood in the way and to practice the philosophical life."

Gregory compares his new relation with Origen to the friendship between David and Jonathan, one of the most affecting stories of love in the Scriptures. As the soul of Jonathan was
attached to David, so was Gregory joined to Origen. Gregory
does not say the obvious, that as a disciple he admired and
cherished his teacher; rather he says that it was Origen’s love for
him, the teacher’s love for the student, that drove the relation:
“This David of ours holds us, binding us to him now, and from
the time we met him; even if we wish, we are not able to detach
ourselves from his bonds.” The master had first to know and
love his disciples before he could cultivate their souls and, like a
“skilled husbandman,” bring forth fruit from an “uncultivated
field.” To correct, reprove, exhort, and encourage his students,
the master had to know their habits, attitudes, and desires. Or-
gen’s love for his disciples was part of the process of formation.

“The most important thing of all,” writes Gregory, is the
“divine virtues” that form character and still the unruly passions
of the soul. Gregory specifically mentions the four cardinal vir-
tues, prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, to which he
adds religious devotion, “the mother of the virtues.” The goal is
to be “like God and to remain in him.” The section on the
virtues is the longest in the work, and there more than in any
other part of it Gregory is not satisfied with general comments.
He discusses the virtues in detail, and at the end he sums up
Origen’s teaching: “This remarkable man, friend, and herald of
the virtues . . . has, by his own virtue, made us love the beauty of
justice, whose golden face he truly showed us.” Origen, who
was himself an “example of a wise man,” taught us “by his own
conduct.” In an effort to help us “gain control over our inclina-
tions,” he instructed us, says Gregory, “more by what he did
than by what he said.”

Virtuous deeds are the form of the moral life, yet deeds in
themselves were not sufficient. To be moral, an act had to be
done for the right reason. Hence instruction also attended to the inner life. This task Origen carried out by "digging deeply and examining what was most inward, asking questions, setting forth ideas, listening to the responses" of his students. When he found anything "unfruitful and without profit in us," writes Gregory, he set about clearing the soil, turning it over, watering it, and using all his "skill and concern" that we might bring forth pleasant fruit. Without self-knowledge, "attentiveness to one's soul," in Gregory's phrase, virtue would languish. In one of his own writings Origen explained why the disposition of the agent is essential to the virtuous life. It is true, he says, that "if someone is just he pursues justice." But it does not follow that "if someone pursues justice, he is just." For one must "pursue justice justly." Origen explains that the adverb is essential, for it is possible to pursue justice unjustly. Some persons do things that are good, giving to the poor, for example, but only to be praised. They act out of vanity, not because they have the "disposition of justice.""13 Virtue required a conversion of the affections.

In the end, however, Gregory acknowledged that even the mighty Origen was unable by his skill to produce virtue in his students. Though he labored industriously he was hindered, says Gregory, by our thick and sluggish nature. Virtue is the work of God: "The virtues are very great and lofty, and can only be attained by someone in whom God has breathed his power."14

Imitation, the virtues, interior disposition, character, likeness to God—here was the soil in which early Christian ethics took root. Christian thinkers found the classical moral tradition congenial, and the philosophical framework adumbrated in Gregory's essay, at least in its general outlines, remained remarkably intact in Christian writers. Yet changes there were, and one place
to observe how Christians adapted and altered what they had received from the classical moral tradition can be seen in the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes

Jesus said, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). In some form this exhortation is echoed throughout the New Testament in the writings of Saint Paul (2 Cor. 7:1), in the Epistle to the Hebrews (12:14), and in 1 Peter: "As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:13). Whether the term is perfection or holiness, the New Testament presents Christian faith as life oriented toward an end, toward a goal, what in the language of ancient moral philosophy was called the final good, the *summum bonum*.

In the phrase "be ye perfect" the term for "perfect" derives from the Greek word for goal, *telos*, from which comes the word *teleology*. That human actions are to be understood in relation to ends is an inheritance from the Greeks. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle observed that every activity or undertaking is directed at some good, and that good we desire for its own sake, for which all other things are done, is the "supreme good." Echoing Aristotle, Cicero, the Roman statesmen, gave one of his treatises on ethics the title "On Ends" (*De finibus*). In it he argued that human actions are praiseworthy only if they are directed toward worthy ends, the highest of which is the supreme good, that goal which is not itself a means to something else.  

When Christianity came on the scene there was already in place a well-developed system of moral formation in the Greco-
Roman world. Its aim was to lead people toward a happy life. By happiness the ancients meant something quite different from what we understand today. For us the term happiness has come to mean “feeling good” or enjoying certain pleasures, a transient state that arrives and departs as circumstances change or fortune intervenes. For the ancients, happiness was a possession of the soul, something that one acquired and that, once acquired, could not easily be taken away. Happiness designated the supreme aim of human life, in the language of ancient philosophy, living in accord with nature, in harmony with our deepest aspirations as human beings. Moral philosophy was promissory, it dealt with what could be. For this reason ethics in antiquity was a matter less of what one ought to do according to universal notions of right and wrong than of what kind of person one can become by living a certain way. Hence it had to do with deeds practiced over the course of a lifetime and the disposition of the soul. The bumper sticker “Do random acts of kindness” would have seemed risible to the ancients.

The church fathers noted that the beatitudes begin with the term happy, a key term in ancient philosophy. Modern English translations of the beatitudes usually translate the word as “blessed,” as in “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” But the beatitude is better translated as “Happy are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” To Christian thinkers schooled in ancient moral philosophy it appeared that, according to Jesus, happiness was the goal of human life, a serendipitous congruence of the Bible and the wisdom of the Greeks and Romans. On this interpretation the beatitudes depicted the character of a person who was happy, and in some writers the string of beatitudes were seen as steps leading to that goal. At the
beginning of his *Homilies on the Beatitudes* Gregory of Nyssa said his first task is to explain the meaning of the term *hapax*. “Happiness, in my view,” he writes, echoing Aristotle, “is possession of all things considered good.” He also noticed that the first word of the first psalm is “happy”: “Happy is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.” Gregory writes, “Just as the art of the physician looks to health, and the aim of farming is to provide for life, so also the practice of virtue has as its aim that the one who lives virtuously will become happy.”

In describing the moral life in terms of its goal, that is, teleologically, Gregory shows himself very much the Greek philosopher. But Christian ethics was also formed by a distinctively theological understanding derived from Scriptures. The saying from the Sermon on the Mount, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48), presents the moral life as oriented not to the “supreme good” but to God. God is the highest good, “the source of our bliss . . . and the goal of our striving,” as Augustine said, and it is only in communion with God that human lives are brought to fulfillment.” Jesus’ words, let it be remembered, are drawn from the book of Leviticus, where the language is explicitly religious, even cultic: “You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2).

The Bible as understood by early Christian thinkers not only spoke about the goal of the moral life, by its account of the creation of human beings in God’s image, it also showed, as we have seen, that the end was anticipated in the beginning. The only *telos* that can bring genuine happiness is life with God, or, more precisely, a “return to fellowship with God.” In a revealing passage in the *City of God* Augustine says, “By our election of him as our goal—or rather our re-election (for we had lost him by
our neglect), we direct our course towards him with love.” We
turned away from the God who made us to follow our own way.
As a consequence, evil has been “mixed in our nature,” said
Gregory, and we are “prone to sin.” Though human beings were
made in the image of God, sin had defaced the image, and
human nature “has been transformed and made ugly . . . and
joined to the evil family of the father of sin.” Because of the
inescapable fact of sin, indeed, its rootedness in human life,
ethics could never be a matter of perfecting the good that is
within us. The “return to God” must begin in “repentance,” in
turning away from sin.  

For Christians the moral life and the religious life were com-
plementary. Although thinking about the moral life moved
within a conceptual framework inherited from Greek and Latin
moralists, Christian thinkers redefined the goal by making fel-
lowship with the living God the end, revised the beginning by
introducing the biblical teaching that we are made in the image
of God, and complicated the middle with talk of the intract-
bility and inevitability of sin. Without an understanding of the
ancient moralists Aristotle, Seneca, Cicero, and Epictetus, one
cannot enter the world of early Christian ethics, yet as soon as
one takes in hand the essays of Clement or Tertullian or Am-
brose or reads the sermons of Gregory of Nyssa or Augustine, it
is clear that something new is afoot.

*Divine Poverty*

For the Greeks the goal of the moral life was “likeness to God,”
and Christian thinkers welcomed the language of likeness to
God or “divinization.” In the opening paragraphs of *The Tutor*
Clement says that the goal toward which the instructor, Christ,
leads his pupils is "likeness to God." The notion of likeness to God was an inheritance from the Greeks, but it was also found in the Bible, most notably in the oft-cited passage in 1 John, "We know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). As we saw in chapter 3, when the Platonic notion of likeness to God was filtered through the language of the Bible it acquired overtones that were alien to Greek notions, and in time the content of the phrase was transformed. For the God of the Bible, of whom Jesus said, "Be ye perfect as your father in heaven is perfect," had been revealed in the person of Christ. Hence, when Clement explained "likeness to God" he found himself speaking about "imitation of Christ." 19

For Clement’s contemporaries "likeness to God" meant practicing the virtues. Christian writers agreed. Yet they were uncomfortable speaking about the virtues without invoking Christ and the Holy Spirit as the guide to perfection. 20 The model given to imitate was drawn not from notions of divine perfection but from the perfect life of a human being, Jesus Christ, God in human flesh. Gregory of Nyssa wondered aloud whether it made sense to urge human beings to be like God. Though he believed that the "end of the virtuous life is to become like God," nevertheless he asks, Can human beings be like God, who "alone has immortality and who dwells in unapproachable light"? (1 Tim. 6:15–16). If the perfection of God can never be ours, likeness to God, it would seem, is beyond our reach.

Some things about God can, however, be imitated. The one divine attribute Gregory singles out is the poverty mentioned by Jesus in the beatitude "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This poverty is found in "voluntary humility," he says. Saint Paul directs our attention to God, "who
being rich, for us became poor that we through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Even though everything else associated with the divine nature is beyond our capability, says Gregory, humility is within our grasp, indeed, it is the mark of true virtue. Only through humility can we free ourselves from the distinctively human sins of pride and arrogance. Therefore, says Gregory, we “imitate God” by becoming humble.  

Gregory reminds his hearers of the well-known passage in Philippians 2 about Christ’s humiliation: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus; who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.” What greater poverty, writes Gregory, than for the divine Son to take on human flesh and, sharing our nature, become a servant. The good comes to us through space and time. The goal remains likeness to God, but God has become visible in the person of Jesus Christ. Let his example, he invites his congregation, “be the measure of your humility.”

But Gregory goes further. Christ was not only the model, but also the goal. He observed that justice (or righteousness), the term used in the fourth beatitude, “those who hunger and thirst for justice,” and in the eighth, “persecuted for the sake of justice,” is used of Christ elsewhere in the Bible. In 1 Corinthians, Paul says that Christ Jesus is “our wisdom, our justice and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). In the beatitudes, then, justice does not simply mean “give to each according to his worth,” what is called distributive justice, but a higher form of justice, “the justice of God which is truly to be desired,” Christ, who is “justice itself.”

Gregory was puzzled by the wording of the eighth beatitude, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, for
thems is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10). How could persecution be a good? Happiness, according to Aristotle, requires “the gifts of fortune.” Gregory answers that this is why the beatitude reads not simply, “Happy are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice,” but adds the phrase “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” If one is to be happy, one must possess the good. There must be an end beyond being persecuted (which itself is not a good). Hence Gregory asks, “What is it that we will obtain? What is the prize? What is the crown? It seems to me that for which we hope is nothing other than the Lord himself. For He himself is the judge of those who contend, and the crown of those who win. He is the one who distributes the inheritance, he himself is the good inheritance. He is the good portion and the giver of the portion, he is the one who makes rich and is himself the riches. He shows you the treasure and is himself your treasure. . . . According to his promise those who have been persecuted for his sake shall be happy, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Happiness is possessing Christ. The beatitudes are not simply moral maxims, but invitations by Christ to his disciples “to ascend with him” that they might enjoy “fellowship with the God of all creation.”

Virtue can never be simply a matter of spiritual athleticism. It is possessed in Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit. Christian life is trinitarian, oriented toward God the supreme good, formed by the life of Christ, and moved toward the good by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Again Gregory goes right to the heart of the matter. In his little essay on the Holy Spirit he says that only the Spirit has the power to bestow the good, by which he means moral good. For whatever is good comes from God through the Son and is perfected by the Holy Spirit. How can one “cleave to
God," he asks, unless the Holy Spirit works in us? And let it not be forgotten that the virtues were practiced in a community nurtured by the sacraments. In baptism, says Ambrose, the Spirit is poured out, the "spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and devotion, the spirit of holy fear" (Isa. 11:2–3). These virtues, says Ambrose, are no less important than the cardinal virtues, for nothing contributes more to a holy life than devotion to God, knowledge of God, and fear of God.25

Cardinal Virtues and Some

In the ancient world the chief virtues, what came to be called the cardinal virtues, were four: prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Long before the beginning of Christianity these virtues had achieved a prominent place in moral discourse. As early as Clement of Alexandria, Christian writers began to appropriate the cardinal virtues as a vehicle for presenting the distinctive marks of the moral life. As we have seen, Christian writers, however, claimed that the cardinal virtues were not the exclusive property of the Greeks or Romans, for they were also found in the Bible. The Wisdom of Solomon mentions them explicitly: “And if any one loves righteousness, her labors are virtues; for she teaches self-control [temperance] and prudence, justice and courage [fortitude]; nothing in life is more profitable for men than these” (Wisdom 8:7). Clement cites this text to accent the priority of the cardinal virtues and, with some playfulness, suggests that the Greeks learned them from the Hebrews.26

The cardinal virtues quickly acquired a privileged status within Christian tradition. In the fourth century when Ambrose bishop of Milan wrote a general treatise on ethics, he not only
took the title from Cicero’s essay, *De Officiis*, but also organized his book, as had Cicero, around the cardinal virtues. Yet as soon as one moves beyond the introductory paragraphs and looks at Ambrose’s discussion of specific virtues as well as at the examples he used to illustrate them, Cicero is displaced by the Scriptures.

Cicero had written that prudence (or wisdom) consisted in “knowledge of the truth.” Lacking a desire to know the truth, he said, one could not be virtuous. Ambrose agreed, and in his discussion of prudence he follows Cicero closely, even citing his definition. Ambrose, however, says that the prime example of prudence is Abraham because he “believed in God.” Prudence or wisdom is identified with knowing God and hence with faith. If one does not know God and trust him one cannot be wise, that is, possess the virtue of prudence. It is the fool who says “there is no God.” A wise person would never make such a statement, for “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.”

Although Ambrose uses the philosophical term prudence (*prudentia*), he prefers the word that is more frequent in the Bible, wisdom (*sapientia*). In the Scriptures wisdom is not a human achievement, but a gift from God and is granted only to those who know and worship God. Nothing, says Ambrose, is more important for human beings than to “revere God.” Those who are wise, according to the Wisdom of Solomon, “obtain friendship with God.” The wise man or woman lives in an intimate relation with God, and no one possessed greater wisdom than Jacob, who wrestled with God, for “he had seen God face to face” (Gen. 32:30).²⁷

Similarly, in dealing with justice, Ambrose gives the virtue a distinctively theological cast. Like prudence, justice begins in reverence and devotion. Justice, he writes, is “first directed to-
ward God.” Only when God is given his due is it possible to deal justly with others, that is, to love them. Ambrose subtly shifts the emphasis toward the biblical teaching of love of neighbor. For Cicero justice had a retributive side and was measured by the way one had been treated. Hence it was wrong to harm another person “unless one is provoked by wrong.” Ambrose disputes this view and supports his argument with a whimsical interpretation of a passage from the gospels. According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus sent messengers ahead of him to enter a Samaritan village, “the people would not receive him.” In response the disciples James and John said to Jesus, “Do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them.” Jesus, however, rebuked them and without a further word took the disciples to another city. Ambrose takes Jesus’ action to mean that Christ came to bring grace, not harm.28

As these examples indicate, Ambrose realized that Christians could not appropriate the classical tradition without significant modification. Yet he saw the wisdom in the writings of the Roman moralists and sought to adapt their thinking to Christian use. In his effort to reconcile the classical tradition with Christianity, Ambrose is not always successful. The language of the Scriptures, for example, faith and love, sometimes pull him in another direction, and biblical saints fit uncomfortably in the classical categories. Ambrose is less a philosopher interested in critical analysis than a teacher with an eye on what works. Perhaps for this very reason his treatise had enormous influence on later Christian tradition. It is quite remarkable that a prominent bishop, writing more than three hundred years after the beginning of Christianity, would adopt the work of the great Roman statesman to present a comprehensive approach to ethics. By
drawing on the scheme of the cardinal virtues, Ambrose was able to pour biblical language and biblical themes into a well-tested system of moral instruction. Not the least of his accomplishments was to secure a place within Christian tradition for the virtues as the framework for teaching ethics.

As indispensable as the cardinal virtues were for presenting the moral life, however, when measured by the Bible the list of four seemed partial and incomplete. If one looks at the several catalogues of the gifts of the Spirit in the Scriptures, one way the Bible speaks about the virtues, the list one comes up with is quite different from the classical catalogue. “The fruit of the Spirit,” writes Paul in Galatians, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22).

“Self-control” could perhaps be read as “temperance”; with some stretch “faithfulness” could be rendered as “fortitude”; and perhaps “kindness” could be understood as “justice.” But Paul’s catalogue in Galatians, as well as other lists in the Scriptures (Isaiah 11:2, for example), cannot easily be reduced to the cardinal virtues. Accordingly, the catalogue of virtues was expanded and not only by the addition of the “theological virtues,” faith, hope, and charity.

I was reminded of this extension one morning a few years ago as I was praying in the cathedral of Christ Church in Oxford, England. During the singing of the morning office I noticed several large medallions set in the stone floor at the front of the apse. From where I was sitting I could see that one was prudencia, then I noticed temperantia and fortitud. I knew there had to be a fourth, justitia, and after the service I went to the front of the church. To my surprise I noticed there were five, not four,
medallions. The fourth was indeed justitia but the fifth was misericordia, mercy. Whoever designed the cathedral understood that the four cardinal virtues did not say everything Christians believed about the moral life.

Tertullian of Carthage, a contemporary of Clement of Alexandria, wrote an essay on patience. Unlike Clement, who had written a general work on the moral life, Tertullian’s approach is piecemeal. He wrote treatises on, among other things, idolatry, on the spectacles in the ancient amphitheatres loved by the Romans, on modesty, on marriage. But the work that never fails to charm and edify is his little meditation On Patience. It is the first treatise in the history of the church on a specific virtue, and the choice is significant. Not only is patience explicitly mentioned in the Scriptures, for example, in the passage from Galatians cited above, but it was not considered a virtue by the ancients. Cicero and Seneca had written admiringly of the virtue of endurance, by which they meant perseverance in adversity, but said nothing about patience as Tertullian understood it.

Tertullian had in mind what the King James translation of the Bible called “long suffering,” an attribute of God, as in the phrase, “slow to anger”: “The Lord is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression” (Num. 14:18). The first epistle of Peter says that “God’s patience [that is, long suffering] waited in the day of Noah” (1 Pet. 3:20), and out of mercy God refrained from punishing those who had done wrong. Tertullian’s claim is that patience is not confined to God. In the wisdom books, for example, this divine quality becomes a virtue attributed to human beings: “He who is slow to anger has great understanding” (Prov. 14:29).
The chief example of patience, however, is "God himself," and Tertullian begins his treatise with a discussion of divine patience. God scatters light across the world to the just and the unjust, he allows the earth to yield fruit to the worthy and unworthy, he bears the sins and wrongdoing of men, he restrains his wrath as evil men go about their life oblivious to God. The most visible sign of God's patience, however, is the Incarnation. For God allowed himself to be conceived in the womb of a woman and waited patiently for the months to pass before the birth of Christ. When God is born as a human being he patiently underwent the various stages of childhood and adolescence leading to maturity. And when Christ reached adulthood he did not rush to be recognized and even allowed himself to be baptized by his own servant. The supreme example of patience was Christ's passion, says Tertullian, an observation that was echoed centuries later by Augustine in a sermon on the Lord's Passion. "The passion of our Lord," he wrote, "is a lesson in patience." All this shows, says Tertullian, that "it is God's nature to be patient." Conversely, impatience becomes the primal sin, and the chief example of impatience is the devil. "Who," says Tertullian, ever committed adultery "without the impatience of lust?" 25

For Tertullian the singular mark of patience is not endurance or fortitude but hope. To be impatient, says Tertullian, is to live without hope. Patience is grounded in the Resurrection. It is life oriented toward a future that is God's doing, and its sign is longing, not so much to be released from the ills of the present, but in anticipation of the good to come. Hence patience becomes the key to the other virtues, including love, which can never be learned, he says, "without the exercise of patience." In a beauti-
ful passage toward the end of his treatise, in his inimitable aphoristic prose, Tertullian sums up the work of patience:

Patience outfits faith, guides peace, assists love, equips humility, waits for penitence, seals confession, keeps the flesh in check, preserves the spirit, bridles the tongue, restrains the hands, tramples temptation underfoot, removes what causes us to stumble, brings martyrdom to perfection; it lightens the care of the poor, teaches moderation to the rich, lifts the burdens of the sick, delights the believer, welcomes the unbeliever, commends the servant to his master and his master to God, adorns women and gives grace to men; patience is loved in children, praised in youth, admired in the elderly. It is beautiful in either sex and at every age of life. . . . Her countenance is tranquil and peaceful, her brow serene. . . . Patience sits on the throne of the most gentle and peaceful Spirit. . . . For where God is there is his progeny, patience. When God’s Spirit descends patience is always at his side.  

On Patience is a work of spiritual discernment wholly out of character of the author. Tertullian himself was not a patient man, yet he showcased a dimension of the moral life that could easily have been shoved to the periphery. His prescience is evident in the generations after him. The two other major writers of Christian North Africa, Cyprian in the third century and Augustine in the fifth, also wrote books on the virtue of patience. By introducing his readers to a virtue that was modeled on the biblical portrayal of God’s relation to the world and to human beings, Tertullian redefined what it means to be “like God.”
Cardinal Virtues as Forms of Love

The most thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the virtues took place in Saint Augustine. Like Ambrose, Augustine assumed that the cardinal virtues—he called them "four virtues that are useful for life"—were the framework in which to present the form of the moral life. But as he sought to imprint them with the contours of the church's faith they underwent a transformation. For Augustine the starting point of the Christian life (as well as its end) was the love of God. He understood the words of Jesus "You shall love the Lord your God" as a command ("Love the Lord your God") and as a goal (only in loving God will we find happiness). This is why Saint Paul said, "All things work together for good to them who love God" (Rom. 8:29).\(^3\)

Like other Christian thinkers, Augustine believed that happiness was found in likeness to God, and, like Gregory of Nyssa, he knew that likeness to God did not mean becoming divine but cleaving to God and living in fellowship with God. As we draw near to God we are filled with his life and light and holiness. Augustine, however, was forced to think more systematically about the wellsprings of Christian life because of the challenge of Pelagius, and his writings give close attention to how human beings are able to turn toward God and hold fast to the good. He is also more conscious than others of the persistence of inner conflict within the life of the Christian: "Whoever thinks that in this mortal life a person may so disperse the mists of bodily and carnal imaginings as to possess the unclouded light of changeless truth, and to cleave to it with the unswerving constancy of a spirit wholly estranged from the common ways of life—such a person understands neither what he seeks, nor who he is who seeks it."\(^3\) For this reason the commandments, the Sermon on
the Mount, and free will are insufficient to make one virtuous. A person must love the good and delight in it and be bound to God by the tethers of affection.

Augustine wrote essays on moral topics, but it was in the debate with Pelagius, and to a lesser extent with the Manichees, that his thinking on the Christian life took form. For Pelagius the practice of virtue rested on free choice, the capacity of human beings to choose right or wrong. When the will is instructed by the commandments and the teaching of Jesus (free will and the commandments were gifts from God and hence works of grace), human beings could live virtuously. If Jesus taught that human beings should be perfect, he argued, then perfection was within our grasp. In fact, some of the saints in the Old Testament had lived a perfect life, for example, Job, whom the Scriptures call a “blameless and upright man” (Job 1:8).

Augustine, of course, wrote a small library of books against Pelagius and his followers, but his central argument is captured in a trenchant paragraph in his treatise On the Spirit and the Letter. Against Pelagius he argued that something more is needed than free will and the commandments. We must be changed from within, and that takes place only when we are endowed with the Holy Spirit. For the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit is to engender love for God. When the heart is fired “to cleave to the creator,” a person is able to do good and hold fast to it. “There can be no devotion and no good unless it be delighted in and loved,” he wrote. The two biblical texts that frame Augustine’s discussion are Psalm 73:28, “For me it is good to cleave to God,” and a passage from Romans: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). In contrast to most other exegetes,
ancient as well as modern, Augustine consistently takes Romans 5 to refer to the love we have for God, not to God’s love for us. Though idiosyncratic, his interpretation is plausible. In 5:5 Paul employs a moral vocabulary to illustrate the consequences of faith: “suffering that produces endurance, and endurance that produces character, and character that produces hope.” Saint Paul’s wording, “Love has been poured into our hearts,” suggests that love is something we have received and becomes our own. Again and again Augustine returns to this passage from Romans, and his point is always the same: the love that turns us toward God and draws us close to God is the gift of the Holy Spirit: “Through love we become conformed to God and this conforming, this fashioning . . . is the work of the Holy Spirit.”

For Augustine, love, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, is the soul’s movement, the will’s energy, the wind that fills the sails of virtue and leads us to embrace the good. Virtue, he writes, “is nothing else than perfect love of God” and can be brought to perfection only in love. If so, he reasons, the virtues can be understood as forms of love. Temperance can be understood as love “giving itself fully to that which is loved,” fortitude is “love bearing all things for the sake of that which one loves,” justice “is serving only the loved object,” and prudence is “love wisely distinguishing what hinders and what helps it.” Admittedly the definitions are somewhat artificial, and because Augustine makes the virtues forms of love, one wonders whether he has emptied them of their distinctive character, in effect, displacing them by a single virtue, love.

Thomas Aquinas gently chided Augustine for collapsing the cardinal virtues into forms of love and tried to put the best
construction on his words. According to Saint Thomas, what Augustine meant was not that each virtue is "love simply," but that it depends in some way on love. Thomas's reservations are well founded, and he makes up what is lacking in Augustine by presenting in detail the distinctive marks of each virtue. As a moral theologian, he wished to recover aspects of the classical tradition that had been forgotten. Augustine, however, lived at a time when this tradition was still intact, and he sought to orient it to the language of the Bible and the God of the Bible. The classical tradition was oriented toward ends, in particular the goal of happiness, and the virtues offered a way to speak concretely about the form of the moral life. But the Triune God was not an end in the conventional sense. Likeness to God was not a goal that could be reached in this life, and, as we shall see in the final chapter, the God who was sought continued to be sought even when he was found. God is not an inert, passive destination. By sending Christ, God had come near and displayed human life in a new way and by sending the Holy Spirit had drawn human beings toward himself. God was the goal but also the way. Though the ancient vessel was useful (Augustine's word), it could not contain the rich and fragrant wine of the Gospel.

Jesus had said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." For early Christians the moral life was the religious life, a life oriented to God in love. Virtue was about the ordering of one's love, and the first and greatest love, the love that animates all other loves, is the love of God. Only in seeking God, in following God, in holding on to God is virtue possible. Saint Bernard wrote, "Virtue is that by which one seeks continuously and
eagerly for one’s Maker and when one finds him, adheres to him with all one’s might.” The virtues work through love, for the sake of love, and receive their grace and strength from love. Seek not this good or that good, says Augustine, but the “good of every good” and cleave to it in love.36 When love is fixed on God virtue becomes radiant.