



THE NEED FOR THE GOOD

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C.S. Lewis once said that courage is the “form of every virtue at its testing point.” It is easy to forget that figures such as Lewis, Tolkien, and even Chesterton, did not write during a time of Christian ascendancy.

Lewis was denied a chair (a full professorship) at Oxford for years precisely because of his embarrassingly public profession of faith. To the “learned” sceptics around him, it made him seem “less than serious.”

Tolkien was a devout, practicing Catholic, but was never as public as Lewis. Lewis wrote popular books on the topic and gave radio addresses. All of that is a reminder that courage was a virtue in daily demand in their lives.

Universities have long been hot-beds of unbelief as well as places where mediocre men and women can do great damage to the careers of giants. We do not live in exceptional times in that regard.

The same pettiness and meanness have found ways of trickling down into other parts of the culture, infecting Christians as well. Every virtue requires the practice of courage (another virtue) if it is to find expression.

It is interesting that the topic of virtue was the one matter on which Christians of the early Church and the educated pagans around them agreed. Indeed, the list of virtues that came to be a hallmark of ascetic writings in the Fathers was pretty much the same list found earlier in the works of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics. In general, what constituted a “good man” was much the same whether seen from the point of view of a Christian or a pagan philosopher.

The short list of the virtues is instructive:

- Prudence – the ability to discern the appropriate course of action to be taken in a given situation at the appropriate time
- Courage – fortitude, forbearance, strength, endurance, the ability to confront fear, uncertainty, and intimidation
- Temperance – the practice of self-control, discretion, and moderation, tempering the appetites

- Justice – fairness, being equitable with others

Christian writers added the “theological virtues” to that earlier list: faith, hope, and love.

When we read of Roman soldiers being so deeply moved by the courage and faith of suffering martyrs that they renounced the gods and leapt into the arena in order to die with them, we are seeing a case of men who were already committed to courage and justice who would rather die with the innocent than be united with the wicked.

It is difficult to preach to those who have little virtue.

Virtue is a word that asks the question of “what kind of person” we are. What *kind* of person leaps into an arena in order to die with the innocent? What *kind* of person leaves everything he has in order to follow Christ? What *kind* of person shares what he has with those who have less? What *kind* of person speaks the truth when a lie would be richly rewarded?

Virtue is a way that we can measure a *faith in its depths*. It is not theological sophistication that measures character – it is virtue.

I recall my father’s conversion to the Orthodox Church. He abruptly left the Episcopal Church after the decision to ordain a practicing homosexual as a bishop (2003). The day he left, he met with an Orthodox priest and asked to be received. The next day, he went to see the priest at his Episcopal Church to tell him what he was doing and why (he was not the sort of man to “ghost” another). He asked the priest, “Can you look up how much I owe on my pledge for the year?”

The priest responded, “Jim, when most people leave the Church, they don’t pay the rest of their pledge.” My father responded, “That pledge was between me and God.” He paid it. He was 79 years old at the time.

I was well aware of my father’s faults and had the temerity as a teen to point them out to him from time to time. I could never have accused him of cowardice. I do not say the same about prudence or temperance.

Those came slowly to him. But he was the kind of man whose conscience would not be silenced for any reason of convenience. He belonged to what is now called the "Greatest Generation." They endured hard times. Some, like him, were never far from those times at any point in their lives.

When we think about the world in which we live, and how the faith survives, we do well to ask about virtue and character. What kind of people endure difficult challenges to their faith? What kind of community fosters virtue in its members?

It is interesting to me, in thinking of Lewis and Tolkien, that they both lost their mothers when they were young. Tolkien was orphaned, and Lewis was shipped off to horrible boarding schools.

When they met, Lewis was not yet a Christian. However, I suspect that his character was already formed. I do not think we can point to specific communities for how they became good men. Oddly, I think we have to say that they read good books. Many of those books were tales of ancient heroes.

What kind of community fosters virtue in its members? First and foremost, I think, it is a community that tells good stories of good men and good women. It is the task of the Church both to tell and to become the good story.

The Church is the sacrament of virtue and that place where every virtue finds its true home. Character and virtue ask questions that have very little to do with success.

The greatest failures of Christianity in the modern world have not been failures to "succeed." They have been failures of *character*, when "success" and worldly concerns have overwhelmed doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason.

God give us courage!

Father Stephen Freeman is a priest of the Orthodox Church in America, serving as Rector of [St. Anne Orthodox Church](#) in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He is also author of [Everywhere Present](#) and the [Glory to God](#) podcast series.

The photo shows, "The Good Samaritan," by Maximilien Luce, painted in 1896.

