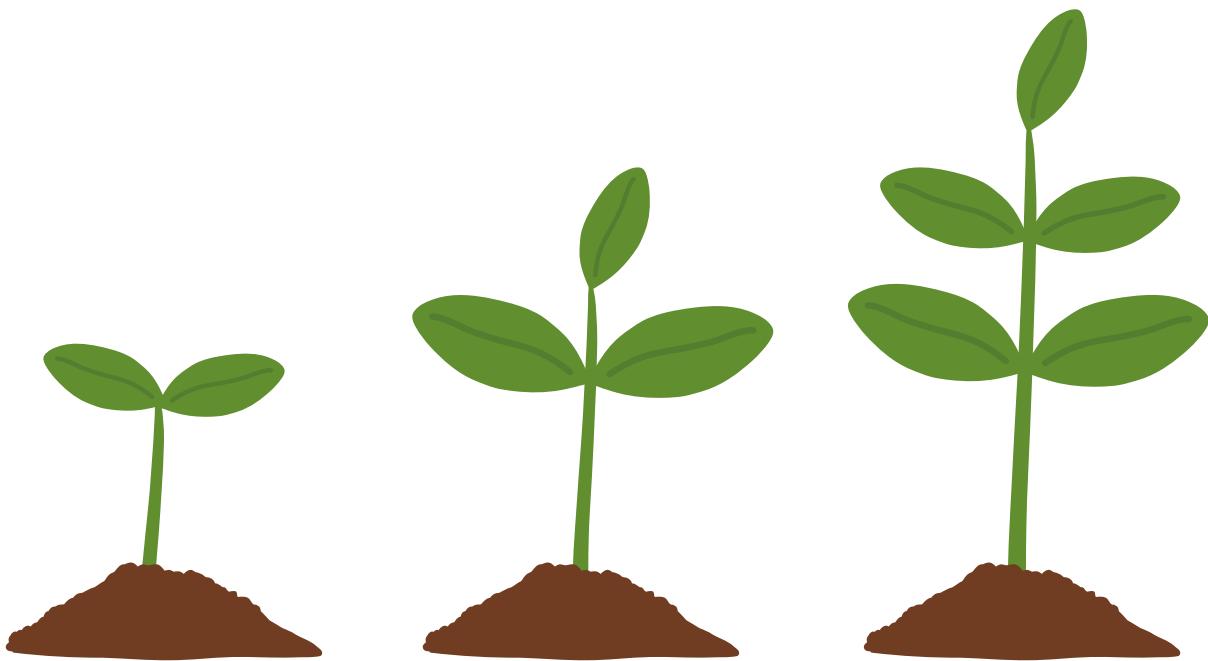


How to Grow Spiritually and Make Decisions Confidently



By Fr. Gregory Merkley

Introduction

The purpose of this booklet, put simply, is to help those who read it to follow God's will for their lives. It is intended for anyone who is sincerely open to learning more about how to follow God in their life and is aiming to be the best they can be, according to the mind of God which is made known through the Church.

This booklet came to be through many conversations with people who have sought this kind of information and found it helpful. Over time, the content was expanded with more ideas that seemed fitting and useful. The present form is the result of some additional edits with the hope that it helps provide direction, meaning, and purpose to anyone striving to live a Catholic Christian life.

That said, this booklet is not a perfect summary of how to be a saint. Nevertheless, it includes some useful advice that, if applied to your life, will bear much fruit. This advice is meant to be read always bearing this question in mind: *How can I put this into practice in my life?*



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As a former practical atheist, Fr. Merkley is passionate about spreading the Word of God as well as the Sacred Traditions of the Catholic Church that Jesus Christ founded on the Rock of Saint Peter (Matthew 16:18).

The Big Picture

**Love God and neighbour as much as possible—
“on these hang the whole law and the prophets.”**

see Matthew 22:40

This is the **final goal** of every Christian. This is God’s will for you, and summarizes everything He asks of us.

Four **sub-goals** that help us achieve our final goal can be summarized using the acronym VITA, the Latin word for “life.”

V - Virtues
I - Intimacy with God
T - Tasks and duties
A - Authority of the Church



Heinrich Hofmann, Christ and the Rich Young Ruler

Virtues

Learn what they are and practice them as much as possible.

- A **habit** is a behavioural tendency that we have because of our own repeated actions.
- A **virtue** is a good habit.
- A **vice** is a bad habit.
- We should strive to have as many and as strong virtues as possible, and to entirely eliminate our vices.
- To change our habits, we have to change our actions and do what we normally wouldn't do. This involves suffering, but it is extremely fruitful if we stick to it, and God will help us.
- The Church canonizes those as saints (who are our models) who have “heroic virtue”—e.g. heroic humility, heroic chastity, heroic fortitude, prudence, temperance, justice, etc. Think of Saint Mother Teresa’s charity and fortitude, for example. She gave of herself completely to others in a heroically virtuous fashion. We’re all called to this because we are made in the image and likeness of God, and Christians even more so by the Sacrament of Baptism.
- Likewise, we should aim to eliminate the seven capital sins in our life (pride, anger, lust, envy, gluttony, avarice/greed, sloth) and replace them with humility, gentleness, chastity, joy at others’ well-being, temperance, generosity, diligently working, etc.

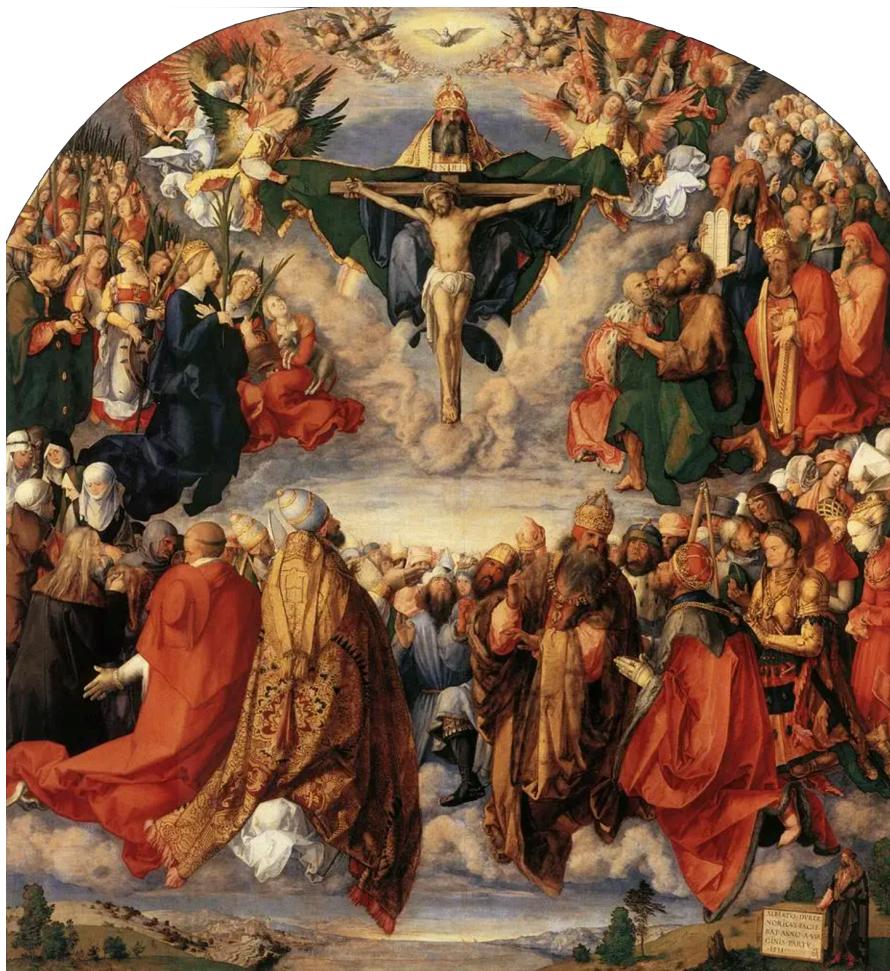


Giotto, The Seven Virtues in Capella dei Scrovegni

Intimacy with God

Develop an ever-deepening relationship with God through prayer, with increased quality and quantity—the latter depending on how much time you actually have, and perhaps decided with the help of your spiritual director.

- Prayer, faith, and love are all intimately bound together, and actually support and nourish each other. A person should strive to have as much time for prayer and contemplation as possible, according to one's duties and state in life.
- Prayer, faith, and love lead to greater joy and peace in the Lord Jesus.
- Holiness = a very close and personal intimacy with Jesus Christ and the Trinity in general, and doing God's will as you understand it at every present moment. Following God will make you happy, and is always best for you even when you may not feel it or see how it is.



Albrecht Dürer, Adoration of the Trinity

Tasks & Duties

Try to sanctify your work by executing the duties of your state in life as well as possible, and with as much love for God and neighbour as possible.

- Fulfilling exceptionally well the duties of our state in life means being a good father, mother, spouse, student, child, teacher, employee, employer, citizen, etc. Each of these has many further sub-components too, which need to be thought of.
- We should try to fulfill all our duties exceptionally well, for love of God and neighbour. This is called “sanctifying one’s work” and living according to one’s state in life. One is sanctified (becomes more holy) by sanctifying their work daily, which is God’s will for each one of us, no matter what our state in life is. Sanctify your work by doing it well, motivated by love of God (and out of love for God, love of neighbour).
- By doing this we grow in holiness and virtue, and bring joy to our Heavenly Father.
- If we are attentive, we will find we have many opportunities to practice growing in virtue. Your duties are often a “training ground” for all the virtues you want to grow in. See your duties as something to offer to God, offering up also the suffering or self-denial involved, and seeking to grow in virtue. Remember again that virtue is always ordered to love of God (and out of love for God, love of neighbour, and a rightly understood love of self—“Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt 22:39)).



Authority of the Church

Continue to learn the teachings of the Catholic Church and obey them as perfectly as possible.

- “He who hears you, hears me” (Luke 10:16). We must trust the authority of the Church. As Cardinal Ratzinger said, God desires us to have a docile submission of intellect and will to the Church's teachings.
- “If you love me, you will obey my commandments” (John 14:15). If we love Jesus, we should obey Christ's teachings which He makes known through Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.
- “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34).
 - Loving others means seeking what is truly good for others, always wanting to do what is truly best for others (spiritually, materially, temporally, emotionally, etc.) regardless of what it costs—and ultimately trying to be holy and help others to be holy.
 - Love is a choice—a deliberate act of the will to choose to think, will, or do the good for another. We are made in God's image and likeness, and God is love, so we are made to love and be loved. Hence we are happy if we love, and are unhappy if we don't. Loving often comes with sacrifice and suffering, but there is also a much deeper joy—a joy which is on a whole other level than what the world can ever offer you.
 - The holiest people are the happiest people, but no one can be happy unless they embrace the cross. “I used to run from the cross, but then I embraced it, and now I love it” (a paraphrase of Saint John Vianney, patron saint of priests). You cannot be happy without the cross; you simply must embrace it to be happy and fruitful.
 - To learn more about how to love through self-denial, read Appendix 1.
- If you have more questions about the Catholic faith, check out Catholic Answers at www.catholic.com.



Pietro Perugino, Delivery of the Keys

A person should always be working on one or more of the above. VITA should be at the centre of your life. Remember that even holy leisure, recreation, appropriate rest, and proper exercise are all also, in a sense, a “duty”—a responsibility we have out of love for God and neighbour as well!

What else is required to achieve our final goal (living out the two greatest commandments) and its sub-goals?

- Knowing what the Bible says (this requires a great investment of time and effort to study this).
- Knowing what the Church teaches (this also requires a great investment of time and effort to study this).
- Intentionally learning and understanding the Bible and the Church’s teachings, and applying them to your life as you think most prudent (this takes thinking time and very sincere prayer time).
- Being aware that emotions or subconscious feelings are not a reliable way to know and follow God’s plan. Rather, we are called to live by faith—trusting what God has revealed through the Church—and govern our emotions with reason that is enlightened by faith. Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches many useful things on this.
- Living by faith means:
 - Asking God to guide us at all times by the Holy Spirit. We should know that we may not always see or feel this in action. Nevertheless, we trust God is working even if we don’t detect anything with our senses. This is a key part of living by faith, and is taught by many saints, including Saint John of the Cross, a Doctor of the Church on prayer.
 - We follow what Scripture, the Church, and reason suggest as the most loving things to do, rather than anything we merely feel like doing. Our feelings are not nearly as reliable guides to proper action in God’s sight as is deliberate and intentional obedience to the Church’s teachings in a spirit of detached faith, trusting in God’s guidance as we do our best.
 - Learning deeply and intentionally the content of faith (Scripture and Tradition), and then using reason to apply it to your own life. This requires the virtue of prudence (“practical wisdom”). Practicing it helps develop this virtue.

- Making the best decisions we can with the time and knowledge we have, knowing that we don't always know exactly what God's will is, nor do we have all the information we wish we had to make decisions. As we get more experience, we monitor and adjust our behaviour in the future. This is the way we get better at many things over time. God doesn't expect total perfection in all things—true perfection is giving our whole self totally for love of God and neighbour, with purity of intention, not holding anything back, doing what we think is most loving, even if those things still seem very imperfect, and being willing to face whatever God may allow in the future.
- Doing what Saint John of the Cross says about faith and feelings. In particular, his advice is to never follow our emotions/passions/feelings (these are all used interchangeably in the Catholic lexicon), but instead, to do the best thing we can think of based on our current understanding of faith and reason as applied to our particular situation.

Why is this? Since it is so easy for the devil or our own fallen nature to deceive us, Jesus is more pleased with this approach. Saint John of the Cross says that even if God were saying something to us, and we chose something else either because of a proper obedience to a legitimate authority over us (e.g. pastor, bishop, employer, spiritual director, etc.), or because faith and reason seemed to suggest something else to us, then if we did that, God would actually be more pleased, and would give us an even greater grace in a more ordinary way, because He is so extremely pleased that we are living and acting by faith.



Saint John of the Cross

When it comes to making decisions,

ask God and Our Lady to guide you and to inspire all your thoughts, words, and actions. Then engage in practicing what is written above. With VITA at the centre of your life and the above requirements attended to, you can make decisions with confidence and trust in God. Remember the following:

- Always keep your final goals in mind: glorifying God, striving for an ever-greater intimacy with Him, and seeking to maximally love God and neighbour as much as possible.
- Make the best decision you can in light of your current understanding of Scripture/Tradition/reason (which includes being very logical based on the facts you know or at least currently believe). Know that you will never have all the information to make a perfect decision, but that even if God is saying something to you, if you simply make the best decision you can regardless of what you feel, He is very pleased and will give you an even greater grace in a more ordinary way.
- Following this process repeatedly over time will lead you to greater and greater love and virtue in every area of your life, and will help you to achieve the final goals. This is what will ultimately make you happy and also make your life fruitful in much good done for love of God and neighbour.
- Ask God, the saints, and your guardian angel to guide and inspire you. Believe they will help you, even if you don't see how they are helping you. Then simply follow the process noted above (as in, think of what seems most likely to be the most loving thing you can think of in light of faith and reason, and then do it regardless of the cost, constantly learning as you go).



Antonio de Pereda, Angel of the Guard

Here are four reasons

that, in any instance, can motivate you to do the right thing—the thing you think is most loving and hence the “best” thing to do:

1. A good action is worth doing in its own right because it will have good consequences.
2. This good action builds virtue(s), making you more likely to do that good thing again as it becomes a more stable disposition.
3. Doing the right thing has supernatural merit, which can be offered up as a form of prayer (when united to the sacrifice of Christ Jesus on the cross), and thus has even further positive consequences. This can be done habitually without having to explicitly articulate your offering it every time. For example, “Dear God, please take all I ever suffer as habitually united to the one sacrifice of Christ offered up for the salvation of all, and dispose of this powerful prayer and sacrifice as the Blessed Virgin Mary prefers. Amen.” You can also always add particular intentions if you’d like to. For example, “Today let all the sufferings I experience go towards my child’s conversion (or spiritual advancement, etc.).”
4. The good thing has ripple effects you cannot foresee that will echo into eternity, thus cascading into an infinite array of positive consequences you can’t even imagine (think of stones thrown into a pond).



No matter what you choose,

even if you make a mistake, God can redeem it and bring an even greater good out of it—always—so never despair. Remember:

- “All things work to the good of those who love God” (Romans 8:28). If God allows an apparent evil, be sure He is promising a much greater good in the long run, even if you don’t see or understand it right now. God only permits evil to bring about a greater good (cf. Saint Augustine).
- “Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” (Romans 5:20). If we fall, if we return to God trusting in His love and mercy and seeking to repent, God will raise us up even higher than we were before we fell. (Jesus said these words to Saint Faustina, which she wrote in her diary, which I very strongly recommend reading at some point.)
- God can redeem absolutely everything. No brokenness, failing, imperfection, mistake, sin, or anything is beyond God’s redemption.
- God never wants us to lose our peace or be afraid.

This whole process of growing in the spiritual life is made more fruitful and successful if you put these into practice:

- A** Remember often just how much God loves you—He wants your good in every possible way, and that is infinitely more than we can imagine. This should fill us with expectant faith and hope knowing all day long that He is longing to show us His love and to bless us, and He will do this in thousands of ways every day, even if we do not see it. We should think about God’s presence with us all day, and His infinite love every day.
- B** Be completely detached from all things—possessions, relationships, status, power, pleasure, success, etc.
- C** Do not put a limit on how much you are willing to suffer. Those who are willing to suffer without limit will grow much faster and be much more fruitful for love of God and neighbour. Love and suffer without limit, and your growth in the spiritual life will be without limit.

D Always be willing to sacrifice lesser goods for greater ones (this is often the choice we will have to make in day-to-day life). We should remember that sin is not just doing the bad when we could've done the good, but sin is doing the good when we could've done the great (a quote from the well-known Catholic speaker, Jeff Cavins).

E Remember that God will make all your efforts and suffering very fruitful—and all suffering offered up to God is a very powerful form of prayer for any intention you'd like to offer it for. There is no wasted suffering when it is united to Christ's suffering and offered up, through Him, to the Father.

F Strive to make mortification, or loving self-denial, a part of your life. You can read more about this in Appendix 1.

G Have the habit of speaking with God very intimately, from the depths of your heart, with no filter. The same should be done with anyone else we want to speak to in prayer (any person of the Trinity, Mary, our guardian angel, any of our favourite saints, etc.). Sometimes when praying before the Blessed Sacrament, it is helpful to remind ourselves of who it is that is there in the Tabernacle. It is Jesus. If you have a picture of Jesus, it could be helpful on occasion to hold that image up in front of you in front of the Tabernacle, to help you visualize and remember just who it is that is there with you—the God of the universe—Jesus Christ in His loving and Sacred Humanity. We have to remember in prayer that we are acting in relation to other persons (and most of the time, Divine Persons). If we lose a sense of the personal nature of prayer (that you are relating to someone else), this can be a sign of things not being as they rightly should.



H Have a spiritual regimen and a strong prayer life, e.g. praying the rosary every day, as well as as much prayer time as you can muster, which will lead you to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and His mother, the Queen of Peace. The more time spent in prayer and especially in the presence of the Most Holy Eucharist, the more happy, peaceful, and joyful you will be. You will find yourself able to think and make decisions more clearly. God will also make things come together for you, and you'll be surprised at how much time you still have even when you give God much time for prayer.

It is often better to pray earlier in the day—or better, rather, when you are most aware and alert. This can also be nice because it a) sets a good tone for the day, and b) means you aren't worrying about when you will fit your prayer into your day. As the day goes on, this question can sometimes become a source of anxiety for people who haven't done their prayers and are starting to feel a time crunch.

No matter what your state in life is, it is a great goal to strive to pray for an hour a day. However, for some, this may be truly impossible. Nevertheless, it is a goal one should not excuse themselves from easily. Creative and effective use of time will allow you to, here and there, add prayer to your day, whether alone or with others (like your family). For example, a car ride can become prayer time if you pray the rosary on the way. Praying as a family can also lead to this. While our works and duties done for love of God are a form of prayer, a person still needs to have a certain amount of explicit prayer time every day. Priests and religious, of course, should pray much more than one hour a day, unless there is a legitimate reason preventing them (i.e. reasonable obedience in light of emergencies). This prayer time is best done before the Blessed Sacrament whenever possible, but if not, one can pray anywhere. It can be one whole hour, or spread about in smaller pieces. An examination of conscience each night is also important, and should be part of one's daily prayer routine and prayer time.

For an excellent video on having a good rule of life, watch “Rule of Life - Fr Ripperger” (https://youtu.be/JWsaw_VyYQ8?si=Wf3Xpzm9HSVakiZf).

Some possible items for a daily spiritual regimen include:

- Daily Mass
- Rosary
- The Liturgy of the Hours (especially Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, which are the principal hours. You can use divineoffice.org, or [iBreviary](http://ibreviary.com) for help.)
- Daily spiritual reading (10-15 minutes a day), e.g. writings of the saints, spiritual classics, or books by great contemporary authors
- Examination of conscience



- Specific acts of self denial, even just one or two a day of any kind. This builds the virtue of mortification, which is the good habit of being able to do what you may not feel like doing in the moment, enabling you to love without regarding how much suffering is involved. It also trains you not to follow your emotions or passions but reason enlightened by the content of the Catholic faith.
- A review of the day with God—how He spoke to you and how you responded (e.g. 5 of these), things to be thankful for (e.g. 5 of these)

Possible weekly items include:

- Confession (at least once a month, ideally once every week. Saint John Paul II went each day, as did many other holy saints.)
- Some sort of ministry in your parish, getting involved, etc.
- Sunday Mass (which is required for all Catholics unless they have a very grave reason preventing them from attending a Sunday Mass)

If it helps, try using the Hallow App—a great app that can help you build the habit of prayer in your day. Many people have said this has been a game-changer in their prayer life, especially if they struggle with setting time aside for prayer and keeping focused. There is a free version; give it a try if you think it might help you. If not, leave it.

You can fill and print out a tracking sheet that helps you keep track of your spiritual regimen. This regimen can be modified over time to better suit your situation. You may want to print it and post it where you'll see it each day, to help you stay faithful to it. See Appendix 2 for examples.

Note that this will look different for different states and stages of life.

Every morning, make some of your first words (why not the first words?), “Good morning, Jesus.” Saint Mother Teresa did this each morning. It can powerfully remind you right from the beginning of your day who is most important that day and who you are most meant to be in a deep, intimate, and loving relationship with—no matter what happened yesterday or will happen today. Watch it change your life as you practice it more and more.

J Your spiritual reading should always be the best you can choose. We only have so much time in this life, so we should choose to only watch and read the very best. Some books I recommend include: *The Imitation of Christ*, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, *Saint Faustina's Diary*, *Story of a Soul (The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse)*, *Divine Intimacy*, *In Sinu Jesu*, *Love and Responsibility*, *33 Days to Morning Glory* (or *Saint Louis Marie de Montfort's guide to total consecration to Mary*), *33 Days to Merciful Love*, *33 Days to Greater Glory* and anything else you think will help you to grow in holiness, virtue, and a deeper and more intimate relationship with the Holy Trinity. The greatest spiritual classics and writings or lives of the saints are your best investment in reading time. Generally, it is a much better use of time to read time-tested classics than to read many new things—though there certainly are some very good contemporary books. It is also usually better to read fewer books, but more deeply, rather than reading more books quickly and superficially—then they have much less of an impact on you. In reality, even one masterpiece deeply digested can be enough to make you a saint. *The Imitation of Christ* was like this for many saints, like *Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*, who studied it from her youth and virtually memorized the entire book.

K Make multiple Spiritual Communions a day. This is not just for those who cannot receive Holy Communion. *Saint Maximilian Kolbe* made a Spiritual Communion every 15 minutes, beginning on the hour. It is a wonderful way to deepen your communion with Christ. Remember that a Spiritual Communion can give you the same graces as a Sacramental Communion if you are rightly disposed (source: *Fr. Chad Ripperger*). A common formula for making a Spiritual Communion is here:

My Jesus,
I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.
I love You above all things,
and I desire to receive You into my soul.
Since I cannot at this moment receive You sacramentally,
come at least spiritually into my heart.
I embrace You as if You were already there
and unite myself wholly to You.
Never permit me to be separated from You.
Amen.



L Beginning and ending each prayer with prayers like this (composed by Saint Josemaria Escrivá) can help you focus your prayer and make it far more fruitful. Note that we should always come out of our prayer times with concrete, practical resolutions—ways our life will change! The more—as long as they are pretty realistic—the better! Frequently, though not always, this will centre around virtues to work on, or particular tasks or duties to take up or improve on.

Prayer at the beginning of prayer time:

My Lord and my God,
I firmly believe that you are here;
that you see me, that you hear me.
I adore you with profound reverence;
I beg your pardon of my sins,
and the grace to make
this time of prayer fruitful.
My Immaculate Mother,
Saint Joseph my father and lord,
my guardian angel,
intercede for me.
Amen.

Prayer at the end of your prayer time:

I thank you, my God,
for the good resolutions,
affections and inspirations
that you have communicated to me
in this meditation.
I beg your help
for putting them into effect.
My Immaculate Mother,
Saint Joseph my father and lord,
my guardian angel,
intercede for me.
Amen.

M Constantly entrust everything to Mary and her Immaculate Heart. If you entrust or consecrate everything you do (your plans, thoughts, words, actions, events, problems, difficulties, decisions, etc.) and especially yourself to her, she will guide everything and—if she has 100% authority to do whatever she wants with your life—she'll make you a saint. I very strongly recommend total consecration to Jesus through Mary using the easy-to-follow book 33 Days to Morning Glory by Fr. Michael E. Gaitley, or the guide originally prepared by Saint Louis Marie de Montfort, True Devotion to Mary.

N Get enough food, water, exercise, rest, and sleep. This may require sacrificing less important things (this includes legitimately good things that are of lower significance) to create more time for these very important parts of being a human. Overall, an appropriate diet, exercise, and good amounts of sleep will help you to make better choices, and to be a more intentional and loving person.

O Live a well-ordered life. It is often very helpful, for example, to have a default weekly and/or daily template schedule, which you can keep using and adapt as it is necessary and helpful. Each week, you might plan your upcoming week. As part of living a well-ordered life, it is very important to schedule more than enough sleep, consistent times of rising and sleeping, exercise, and especially prayer. Try to give God your best time for prayer. Book things in at the times you do them best (e.g. if you pray best in the morning, try to arrange that if possible. Don't save prayer for when you're tired, can barely focus, or will be distracted). You may want to batch similar types of things into one time period, for example, checking your emails or social media only twice a day, at set times. Constantly task-switching will diminish your focus and efficiency. It is best to schedule the most mentally demanding things when your mind is most clear (for many, that is in the morning after they've rested well). On the other hand, schedule in the least mentally demanding things when your mental resources tend to be weakest. Use these tips only as they help you.

P Get a spiritual director, or at the very least, spend as much time as you can with other Catholics who are seeking to be holy and live out their faith (both of these is even better than just doing one of them, if it's possible!). If you get a spiritual director, it is normal to meet with your director once a month for an hour or so, depending on your needs.

Q Remember: "Work like it all depends on you, and pray like it all depends on God" (Saint Augustine). As long as you do your best, relying on God, Mary, and your guardian angel to help you, but also doing the very best you can with all your own efforts, things will be OK and you'll continue to grow greatly in the spiritual life.

R Avoid "occasions of sin"—places, situations, or circumstances that you know may make you more likely to commit a sin and do anything against what God's plan is.

S Be intentional and deliberate about trying to grow in virtue. To learn more about what some key virtues are, see Appendix 4.



T Search for and use the best Catholic resources of every kind to grow stronger in your faith, knowledge, prayer, and virtue.

- A short list is available in Appendix 3.
- A great app is Relevant Radio, especially its daily podcast of the modern spiritual classic, *In Conversation with God*, which is a reflection on the daily readings. This can help form you if you listen to it each day. You could also read the series.
- One of the best resources today is www.formed.org. If you need a code, let me know and I'll offer you one. It's like a "Catholic Netflix" and is very enjoyable and useful.



FORMED

U In homilies, it is best to try to "see beyond the preacher." That is, try to really listen to the words, the content, the meaning, and try to grow as much as possible from what is being preached—regardless of how dynamic or monotone the preacher may be. God is still speaking through them. Therefore, hear what God is trying to say to you and teach you.

V It is very powerful to make good and frequent use of sacramentals (see the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* paragraphs 1667–1679). Sacramentals dispose those who use them to receive grace—so if you want more grace, you should use sacramentals. These include:

- The Miraculous Medal (ideally worn around the neck, but can be used other ways too)
- Wearing the Brown Scapular
- Praying the Rosary often, and keeping it on your person
- Keeping a crucifix on you (especially a Benedictine crucifix which has been properly blessed and exorcised by a priest)
- Holy Water (1962 Old Rite Holy Water is said to be stronger by most exorcists, so it is greatly recommended)
 - This can be kept on your person, in your room, or sprinkled occasionally throughout your personal spaces. All of these are recommended by the Church.



W Be willing to forgive at all times—forgiving others, forgiving yourself, and forgiving God (as you may feel you need to, even if we know God has never and can never do anything wrong at all). To forgive doesn't mean that something a person did against you was OK, but to say that, in a sense, you are "cancelling the debt," just as Jesus taught us to pray in the Our Father, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus used the language of "debt" to speak about sin, but He does not mean for us to say that bad things that were done to us are OK.

X If you are ever wanting to have a sort of "default idea" that you can use to remind yourself of what is most important, it can be useful to use what the saints would call a "memento mori." That is Latin for "a reminder of death." For example, Saint Augustine and many others kept a skull on their desk to remind themselves that they would die one day and thus to use their time as well as possible. Some people in the the Middle Ages wore necklaces with a small skeleton inside to perform a similar function.

"Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on forever and never see the grave." (Psalm 49:7-9)

It's not meant to sound morbid, but death, judgement, heaven, and hell—the "four last things"—are simply reality. Thus it can be useful for us to frequently remember that we too will die one day, and we do not know the day nor the hour. Remembering this often can help you cut away your less useful thoughts, ideas, and plans, and focus instead on what is more important—your eternal salvation, loving God and neighbour as much as possible, and being the saint (canonized or not) that God is calling you to be. You will never get your time back, and you will have to account for how you use the time that God has given you. This can be a useful thought to recall at least once a day.



Saint Ignatius of Loyola says that in making decisions, it can be helpful to ask, "At the time of my death, what will I most wish that I did?"

Y Remember that Jesus has very few completely faithful friends who will do anything for Him. If you seek to become one of those friends, He will be greatly consoled, and He will draw closer to you. He deeply thirsts for your friendship. He thirsts for you—passionately and infinitely. Slake His thirst for love. That should be your desire. It will become our desire as we seek to grow in holiness—receiving and drinking in all His incomprehensible and infinite deluge of love—which is for you. Saint John Marie Vianney says that if we knew how much God loved us, we would die of joy. It infinitely surpasses anything you can imagine—no matter how hard you try. Drink deeply of God's infinite, passionate, personal love for you in your prayer—and it will set you on fire to love Love with all your heart. What is the greatest tragedy in the eyes of the saints? “Love is not loved!” (Saint Francis of Assisi) The two greatest tragedies in the world today are these, I suspect: 1) Love (i.e. God Himself) is not loved. 2) Not all people become saints. “Unless souls are saved, nothing is saved” (Venerable Archbishop Fulton Sheen). This should be our final goal—glorifying God, and saving our own soul, as well all those under our influence.

Z Avoid over-perfectionism. Sometimes we experience paralysis by analysis, and don't begin something because we are afraid of it not being good enough. Rather, GK Chesterton says that “Anything worth doing is worth doing imperfectly.” Just start it—and don't let your pride of being or appearing perfect stop you from doing things. Imagine the best possible way your day could go, and carry it out as best you can, and repeat. Be at peace as you try your best. You will have peace if you spare no effort or sacrifice to truly do your best for love of God and neighbour. Don't worry if you see room to grow—that is normal! As you gain life experience and continue practicing, you can modify and adapt how you do things. Avoid perfectionism and do your best—your best will get better and better, so just keep putting time and effort in. Put more time and effort into things, and ask God's blessing on it, and then be at peace with the results if you tried your best.

$$\text{Success} = \text{Effort} \times \text{Time}$$

Therefore, put only time and effort into the most worthwhile things in God's sight. “Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and your neighbour as yourself.”

If you make a mistake, be at peace. We all make mistakes. Here are some examples: Fr. Greg is not the best cook, and therefore makes mistakes in that regard, which might dismay others. He is also not the best public speaker, and can be socially awkward. When he's tired, he can forget things. Even with imperfections, however, we must remember that as long as we did our true best at the moment, then that is fine—mistakes are bound to happen. Even when we do our best, sometimes we learn afterwards that a different course of action would've been better. This does not mean we've sinned. It means we could've made a better decision. However, if that was the best decision we could make at that point in time, since we only had so much time and knowledge at that moment, then we still did our best—God is very pleased, and now we know even more so we can improve (and also be humble)! This is how we grow—we keep making the best decisions we can, sometimes experimenting a little (especially when we are unsure of what to do), and as we observe the results, we monitor the consequences and continue to reevaluate our methods for doing various things. This is normal and will continue, at least in many ways, until we die. Don't be dismayed by this, and don't be afraid of making mistakes—just do your best, and be at peace with the consequences, being detached from them and entrusting them to God, especially through Mary! If you did your best, you did God's will, and He is pleased. Just do your very best for love of God and neighbour!



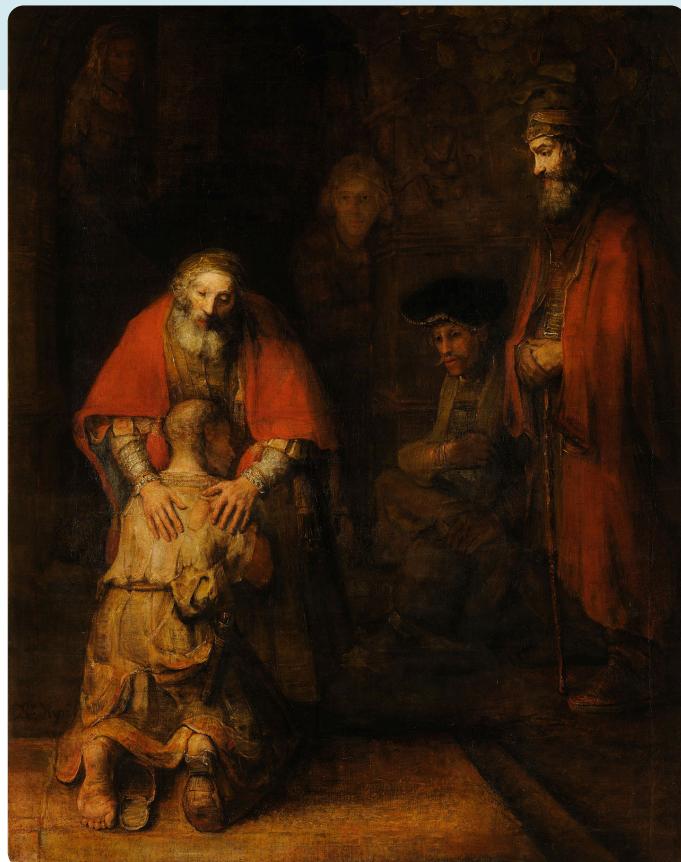
The disciples fail to cast out demons in Raphael's Transfiguration

Remember the Final Goal

**Love God and neighbour as much as possible—
“on these hang the whole law and the prophets.”**

see Matthew 22:40

And when you feel you aren't “doing good enough,” please remember that all God asks of us is our best. He is so very pleased with this! And even if we haven't done our best, God is always willing to forgive us, restore us to right relationship, and lift us even higher than where we were before we fell. Just remember that our best is enough, and our best may not be as good as you want it to be, but it is so pleasing to God. Allow this to give you peace as you strive for holiness!



Rembrandt, The Return of the Prodigal Son

APPENDIX 1

Understanding Mortifications

Mortification: A deliberate act of the will by which one goes against their natural inclinations (i.e. their own will, their feelings, what they feel like doing, etc.) to choose a greater good which is more conducive to the glory of God, growth in virtue, a better fulfillment of one's duties, and the salvation of souls. All mortifications or acts of self-denial should be joined to the virtue of charity—they should be oriented towards love of God and neighbour as their final purpose.

Some examples of mortifications:

- A person wants to see or talk to someone, but it is unnecessary and they have homework, emails, or some other duty to catch up on. In this case, the person should choose to catch up on their duties, since those are God's will, even if they don't want to and would rather spend time talking to or being with someone else. This goes for any activity that one wants to do but is not necessary. Choosing to do what rather is necessary is the holier way of living. The definition of "necessary" is certainly subjective to the person, but they should not be overly quick to ascribe necessity to things which don't deserve to be called necessary.
- A person exercises even though it is painful, thus suffering for some greater good (i.e. greater physical and mental wellbeing, which is ordered to better service of God and neighbour through better alertness, higher energy, greater capacity to carry out tasks more efficiently, etc.). The sufferings offered up in this exercise should be embraced and offered up in union with Christ's, and thus are loving both by natural and supernatural means. Note: In this example, exercise could be replaced with study, reading, or learning, which are bound up with living a more contemplative life, even when living within the world.
- A person wants to eat or drink more than what is healthy or prudent for them, but having become more experienced in knowing what a good amount and type of food/drink are for them, they resist the desire, and thus grow in the virtue of temperance.
- You are spending time with someone who wants to do a certain activity that you don't want to do—but it is clear that it will actually be good for them and/or make them happy and does, in fact, appear prudent for you to do. The mortification here would be to choose to do that thing they want to do and not reveal that you do not enjoy it (unless you think it is truly good in this situation), but embrace it with the joy of self-sacrificial and self-giving love.
- A person, instead of needlessly spending money for things they don't need, saves their money and uses it as a means to do more good works of the kind they see as best.
- A person has duties to do, and thus rejects temptations to look needlessly at certain technology, media, or other devices so they can focus on their duties better, pray better, etc.

Appendix 1 | Understanding Mortifications

According to the definition above and these examples, you may already be doing several mortifications a day. Thus, if you were working to hit a certain level of mortifications a day, the denoting of doing two of them could be taken to mean that you intentionally choose to do this twice a day, and they should not be mortifications that you habitually do already. Hence two mortifications is actually relatively easy according to this definition—you are simply expected to do your best to do two mortifications a day which are both consciously done and are not currently habitual actions for you.

The end of all mortification, and the virtue of mortification (it is a virtue!) is to have as perfectly as possible a governance over all of your emotions, physical appetites, faculties of the soul, etc., so as to be most free and empowered to always decide the most loving thing you can think of in the moment, and then execute/do that, no matter what the cost is. The mortified person lives on the cross perpetually, in a cruciform life—which is truly the most freeing and the most joyful of lives, contrary to both popular opinion and some people's first initial reaction to this style of life. A mortified life is made stronger and more attractive by reflecting on the passion of Jesus Christ, and desiring to unite yourself with him very intimately in his total gift of himself to the Father, through the Holy Spirit and Mary, and to the Church in like manner. It is also the way to live the most fruitful of lives. The mortified person does not care how much they must suffer to do what they truly think is best—even though at times, health/mental suffering will be factors in making that very decision of what is the most loving thing to do in a given circumstance.

The virtue of obedience is also ordered, in part, towards a greater growth in the virtues of humility and mortification.

“Realize that you must lead a dying life; the more a man dies to himself, the more he begins to live unto God.”

(The Imitation of Christ: Book Two, “The Royal Road of the Holy Cross” by Thomas à Kempis)

APPENDIX 2A

Generic Spiritual Regimen Chart

Month:

Daily 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

Month:

Daily 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31

Additional notes:

- You can use short forms to denote each aspect of your spiritual regimen if necessary.
- Faithfulness is much more important than the quantity of your spiritual regimen items.
- This regimen should help you grow in holiness, and thus help you do your duties of your state in life.
 - e.g. Doing duties as perfectly as possible as a parent, spouse, employee, student, citizen, etc.
- You are not required to fill in all 10 items, but you are welcome to if you have that many or more.

APPENDIX 2B

Filled-In Spiritual Regimen Chart

Month:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31
M. Offrng																															
D. Mass																															
Lectio																															
Rosary																															
DM Chplt																															
Sp. Rdng																															
TheoRdng																															
LOTH																															
5/5																															
Examen C																															

Legend and Explanation of the Above:

M. Offrng – A Daily Morning Offering. A very good thing to do each day—you can learn more about these by googling one, or using ones in the Laudate smartphone app.

D. Mass – Attending Daily Mass is highly encouraged if your state of life allows you to.

Lectio – Lectio Divina—a way of praying with Scripture each day

Rosary – Praying a daily rosary (I encourage using the customary mysteries most of the time)

DM Chplt – Praying the Divine Mercy Chaplet

Sp. Rdng – Spiritual reading. Nice to do this for at least 5 minutes a day, or otherwise if your director says so.

TheoRdng – Theological reading. This is more like theological study—e.g. reading Church documents, the Catechism, the Summa of St. Thomas Aquinas, etc. Nice to do at least 5 minutes of this a day.

LOTH – The Liturgy of the Hours. If someone does this, it is especially fitting that they do Morning Prayer (Lauds) or Evening Prayer (Vespers), rather than the other less central hours (which are certainly still very good to pray, however).

5/5 – At the end of the day, looking back and seeing:

- 5 things to be grateful to God for
- 5 ways you felt God speaking to you, and looking at how you responded
 - Did you respond well? Praise God for it and ask the grace to continue, etc. Strive to do so.
 - Did you not respond well? Ask for God's forgiveness and the grace to do better next time. Plan out how you can do better next time so that if similar circumstances come up you'll be ready to act differently.

Examen C – Examination of Conscience. It is good to do this frequently, noting where we may have sinned (mortally, venially, materially (non-deliberate venial sin)) and telling God we are sorry. It can be helpful to make an act of contrition and a firm purpose of amendment, and it is often useful to write down the sin so that when you go to confession you can confess it, rather than forgetting it, and get both actual graces and additional counsel from the priest through the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

APPENDIX 3

Recommended Resources

All resources are hyperlinked for those viewing this document digitally!



For Catholics who want to grow in their faith

- Relevant Radio
- Catholic Link
- Ascension Presents
- Word on Fire
- EWTN
- Dynamic Catholic
- Formed
- Heroic Men (high-quality faith formation programs available free for anyone)
- Lighthouse Catholic Media
- Spiritual Direction
- St. Paul Center
- Faith & Reason
- New Advent
- The Real Presence
- Ignatius Press
- Church Pop
- Matt Fradd
- Evango
- Me and My House
- Catholic Mom's Group
- Real Life Catholic
- Jimmy Akin
- Simply Catholic
- Peter Kreeft
- The Wild Goose
- Chasity Project
- Katie Warner
- Leah Darrow
- UCatholic
- RealTrue.org
- Project YM
- Douglas Beaumont

For those with questions or wondering about Catholicism

- Catholic Answers (great place to look up your questions about the faith)
- Strange Notions
- Catholics Come Home
- Patrick Madrid
- Trent Horn
- CH Network
- Catholic Convert

Official Church Websites

- The Vatican
- Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
- Hamilton Diocese
- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Good Catholic News Sites

- aleteia.org
- ncregister.com
- catholicnewsagency.com
- cruxnow.com
- catholicculture.org/news
- epicpew.com

Scripture Study

- Scott Hahn
- St. Paul Center
- Verbum

Catholic Apps

- Laudate
- Amen App
- Hallow

YouTube Channels

- Catholic Answers
- Ascension Presents
- Ascension Press
- Fr. Mark Goring
- Spirit Juice Studios
- Word On Fire
- EWTN
- Life Teen
- Busted Halo
- Steubenville Conferences
- Franciscan University of Steubenville
- Ignatius Press

Catholic Podcasts

- Bible in a Year Podcast – Fr. Michael Schmitz
- Catechism in a Year Podcast – Fr. Michael Schmitz
- Rosary in a Year Podcast – Fr. Mark-Mary Ames, CFR
- Relevant Radio – In Conversation with God
- 10 Minutes with Jesus
- All Things Catholic – Dr. Edward Sri
- Ascension Presents Podcasts
- The Cordial Catholic Podcast

Catholic Stores

- Sunrise Marian
- CatholicShop.ca

Useful Videos

All of us have “wounds”—things in our life, either that we have done or experienced, or that others did to us, which left negative impacts on us, whether in our mind, heart, soul, psychology, etc. These wounds can sap our energy and make it harder for us to have the fullness of life that Jesus Christ came to give us. To learn more about these and how to be healed of them, watch: **How Do You Heal Wounds? (Part 1/2) Healing Emotional & Spiritual Wounds ~ Fr Ripperger.**

In order to have a good foundation, it is often helpful to learn from the greatest theologians in the Church. The most recommended theologian of the Church is Saint Thomas Aquinas. Hence, it is very good to learn more about him. A helpful video is: **Saint Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor of the Church (7 March) ~ Fr. Ripperger.**

It is very good to understand more about a Catholic view on spiritual warfare. A useful video is: **Spiritual Protection | How to Protect Yourself & Your Family from Diabolic Influence ~ Fr. Ripperger.**

If someone commits a mortal sin and thereby falls out of a state of grace, they should immediately go to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. That said, sometimes, if one simply cannot get to the Sacrament of Reconciliation right away when they should, knowing about perfect contrition can be very useful. A helpful source for learning about perfect contrition is: **How to Assist Someone to Make an Act of Perfect Contrition.**

The two books mentioned in the video are:

- **Contribution: The Golden Key of Paradise**
(<https://www.ecatholic2000.com/cts/untitled-110.shtml>)
- **Perfect Contribution**
(<https://www.ecatholic2000.com/cts/untitled-343.shtml>)

Thumbnails are hyperlinked for those viewing this document digitally! 



https://youtu.be/JWsaW_VyYQ8?si=Wf3Xpzm9HSVakiZf



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-2_BM9-aUh8



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96PwgL6ZOBU>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncNNME98vyA&rco=1>

APPENDIX 4

Virtues

Source: sensustraditionis.org/Virtues.pdf

MORAL VIRTUES

INTEGRAL PARTS OF PRUDENCE (KNOWING THE MEANS TO ATTAIN THE END)

1. Memory (Memoria): the virtue by which one remembers the right things pertaining to the action and its circumstances
2. Understanding (Intellectus): the ability to grasp practical principles and the nature of various situations
3. Docility (Docilitas): ability to be lead and take counsel from others
4. Shrewdness (Solertia): quickness in arriving at the means to the end
5. Reason (Ratio): ability to reason about practical matters; the ability to apply universal practical principles to particular situations
6. Foresight (Providentia): ability to see future outcomes of actions based upon past experience
7. Circumspection (Circumspectio): virtue by which one keeps track of one's circumstances
8. Caution (Cautio): application of knowledge of the past to action in order to avoid impediments and evils

POTENTIAL PARTS OF PRUDENCE

1. Good Counsel (Eubulia): the habit of taking good counsel
2. Synesis: the ability to know what to do when the common law applies
3. Gnome: the ability to know what to do when the common law does not apply

JUSTICE (RENDER ANOTHER HIS DUE)

1. Commutative: justice between individuals
2. Legal: justice of the individual to the common good
3. Distributive: justice of those in charge of the common good to the individual
4. Restitution: the habit by which one pays back what one owes
5. Religion: the virtue by which we render to God what is due to Him
6. Devotion: the habit by which one has a prompt will to do those things pertaining to the service of God
7. Adjuration: the swearing or taking of an oath, such as in a court of law
8. Piety: the virtue by which one renders to one's parents due honor and reverence
9. Patriotism: the subvirtue to Piety in which one renders to one's country the honor due to it
10. Observances: making acts of religion
11. Dulia: giving due honor to one's superiors
12. Obedience: promptness of will to do the will of one's superior
13. Diligence: fulfilling one's duty according to one's state in life
14. Gratitude or Thankfulness: appreciation (normally expressed) to a benefactor for some gift given
15. Just vindication: the habit by which one puts an end to the harm caused by others
16. Truthfulness (in English: honesty): the habit of telling the truth
17. Friendship or affability: the virtue by which one is able to be befriended
18. Liberality: the use of one's surplus means to aid the poor
19. Epieikeia: the virtue by which one knows the mind of the legislator

Appendix 4 | Virtues

FORTITUDE (THE WILLINGNESS TO ENGAGE THE ARDUOUS)

1. Magnanimity: the virtue by which one seeks excellence in all things but especially great things
2. Magnificence: the virtue by which one uses his wealth to do great things
3. Patience: the ability to suffer evils well or the equanimity in the face of evils
4. Perseverance: the virtue by which one persists in the arduous good until the end is achieved
5. Longanimity: longness of soul; the ability to await the good
6. Mortification: the willingness to suffer

TEMPERANCE (THE VIRTUE WHICH MODERATES THE PLEASURES OF TOUCH)

1. Shame: fear of being perceived as lowly
2. Honestia: the habit of always seeking to do what is virtuous in each situation (may also be called integrity)
3. Abstinence: refraining from the eating of certain kinds of food
4. Fasting: refraining from eating food in general
5. Sobriety: the virtue by which one has moderated use of alcohol
6. Continence: the virtue in the will by which one remains steadfast despite the tumult of the appetites
7. Chastity: the virtue which moderates the pleasures of touch in relation to those matters pertaining to the 6th Commandment
8. Virginity: the habit of mind or soul which always refrains from taking delight, even interiorly, from pleasures associated with the 6th Commandment
9. Continence: a virtue of the will by which one remains steadfast despite the tumult of the appetites (usually in relation to matters pertaining to the 6th Commandment)
10. Clemency or meekness: moderation of the delight of vindication (of anger)
11. Modesty proper: the virtue in which one's externals do not draw others into sins against the 6th and 9th Commandments
12. Humility: willingness to live in accordance with the truth; restraint of the irascible appetite from striving for excellence beyond one's state; not judging oneself greater than he is
13. Eutrapelia: the virtue of right recreation
14. Sportsmanship: the virtue in which one regulates the pleasures specifically in relation to play or games
15. Decorum: the virtue in which one's externals suits person and circumstances
16. Silence: the virtue by which one does not speak unless necessary; also the virtue in which one seeks to have interior quiet of the appetites
17. Studiosity: the virtue in which one pursues knowledge according to one's state in life
18. Simplicity: the virtue in which one moderates one externals as to quantity (having neither more than is necessary nor less)

THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

FAITH (THE VIRTUE BY WHICH ONE GIVES ASSENT TO THE DEPOSIT OF FAITH)

HOPE (THE VIRTUE BY WHICH ONE AWAITS BEATITUDE AND HAS CONFIDENCE IN GOD'S AID)

CHARITY (THE VIRTUE BY WHICH ONE LOVES GOD AND ONE'S NEIGHBOR FOR THE SAKE OF GOD)

Intellectual Virtues

1. Understanding: the habit of mind (virtue) by which one grasps the natures of things
2. Knowledge (scientia): the virtue by which one is able to judge created things as they are
3. Wisdom: the virtue by which one grasps those things that pertain to God as known through the natural light of reason