

PART THREE, SECTION ONE, CHAPTER ONE, ARTICLE 7, PARAGRAPH 1803

FAITH: Catholicism | TEXT: Catechism of the Catholic Church | VOLUME: 1997 Volume | AUTHOR: John Paul II

OVERVIEW

Paragraph 1803 of the Catechism serves as the foundational definition for the Catholic treatment of the virtues. It opens by citing St. Paul's exhortation in Philippians 4:8 to focus on what is true, honorable, and just. It then proceeds to define a virtue using classical Aristotelian and Thomistic language: it is not merely a singular good act, but a 'habitual and firm disposition.' The text emphasizes the agency of the human person, stating that virtue allows one to 'give the best of himself.' It describes the virtuous person as one who engages all sensory and spiritual powers to pursue and choose the good in concrete actions. This definition sets the stage for the Catholic understanding of sanctification as an intrinsic transformation of the character through habituation and grace, contrasting with a purely forensic view of righteousness.

KEY FIGURES

St. Paul (Author of cited scripture), Aristotle (Philosophical source of the 'habitual disposition' definition), Thomas Aquinas (Theological synthesizer of virtue ethics)

DOCTRINES ANALYZED

1. VIRTUE ETHICS

Assertion: Virtue is a stable, habitual disposition of the character that enables a person to give the best of themselves and pursue the good.

"A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself."

Evangelical Comparison: The Catholic definition relies heavily on Aristotelian ethics, viewing virtue as a 'habit' (habitus) that shapes the soul's powers. This implies that the human person, through repeated action, builds a character that is intrinsically righteous. Evangelical theology, while valuing character, emphasizes that human 'best' is insufficient (Isaiah 64:6) and that true virtue is the result of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer (Galatians 5:22-23), often distinguishing sharply between the believer's standing (imputed righteousness) and their state (progressive sanctification). The Catholic view blurs this distinction, suggesting the person's own 'best' is a contributing factor to their moral standing.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Divergence Status: Partial

Theological Gap: The fundamental gap lies in the anthropology and soteriology implied. The CCC suggests that a human being, properly disposed, can 'give the best of himself' and that this constitutes virtue. This aligns with a view of salvation where intrinsic righteousness is required. Evangelicalism holds to Total Depravity, meaning that even the regenerate man's 'best' is insufficient for merit before God. For the Evangelical, virtue is not a 'habit' we build to present to God, but a 'fruit' God grows in us as we rest in Christ. The Catholic view places a burden of performance (habit formation) on the believer that the Evangelical view places on Christ (imputation) and the Spirit (sanctification).

Shared Values:

High moral standards; Desire for truth, honor, and justice; Importance of character formation; Reliance on Philippians 4:8

Friction Points:

- [Major] Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) – The emphasis on the person 'giving the best of himself' and 'choosing' through 'habitual' power risks obscuring the absolute necessity of grace for **any** good work.
- [Major] Anthropology (Total Depravity) – Suggests human sensory and spiritual powers can be effectively marshaled to 'pursue the good' consistently, minimizing the corruption of the will.

Semantic Warnings:

"Virtue"

In Text: A habitual and firm disposition to do the good; a human capacity developed over time.

Evangelical: Often translated as 'excellence' (arete); in Evangelical thought, usually associated with the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5).

Example: *A Catholic seeks to 'acquire' virtue through practice; an Evangelical seeks to 'walk in' the Spirit to bear fruit.*

"The Good"

In Text: A moral object to be pursued by sensory and spiritual powers.

Evangelical: The will of God; often viewed as unattainable by human effort alone (Romans 3:12).

Example: *The text says the person 'pursues the good'; Romans 3 says 'no one seeks for God' (the ultimate Good) without prior grace.*

SOTERIOLOGY

Salvation Defined: Implicitly, salvation involves the transformation of the person into one who is virtuous (ontological change).

How Attained: Through the pursuit of the good and the formation of habits (cooperating with grace).

Basis of Assurance: The firmness of one's own disposition (subjective and internal).

Comparison to Sola Fide: This text describes a righteousness that is inherent and practiced, contrasting with the Evangelical doctrine of righteousness that is alien and imputed (Philippians 3:9).

MANDATES & REQUIREMENTS

Explicit Commands:

1. Think about things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and gracious.

Implicit Obligations:

1. Develop firm habits of doing good.
2. Engage all sensory and spiritual powers to pursue the good.
3. Consistently choose the good in concrete actions.

EVANGELISM TOOLKIT

Discovery Questions:

1. The text says virtue is a 'habitual and firm disposition.' Do you feel your disposition to do good is always firm, or does it waver?
2. When the text says a person gives 'the best of himself,' do you believe that 'best' is enough to satisfy God's standard of perfection?
3. How do you handle the times when you try to 'pursue the good' with all your powers but still fail?

Redemptive Analogies:

1. The desire for a 'firm disposition' – We all long to be stable and consistent in goodness, but we are unstable like water. Jesus is the only one with a truly firm disposition toward the Father's will. [Hebrews 13:8 (Jesus is the same yesterday, today, forever); Romans 7:18-25 (Paul's lack of firmness vs. Christ's deliverance).]

Spiritual Weight:

1. Performance/Perfectionism [Moderate] – The believer is burdened with the task of maintaining a 'firm disposition' and ensuring they are always giving 'the best of himself.' This creates anxiety over every slip or failure of will.
2. Introspection/Uncertainty [Severe] – By defining virtue as an internal habit, the believer must constantly look inward to analyze the quality of their disposition rather than looking outward to the finished work of

Christ.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Knowledge Source: Synthesis of Biblical Revelation and Moral Philosophy (Reason).

Verification Method: Self-examination of one's habits and the consistency of one's actions.

Evangelical Contrast: Evangelicalism relies on the internal testimony of the Spirit and alignment with Scripture, rather than the philosophical categorization of habits.

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Dating: 1997 (Latin Typical Edition)

Authorship: Promulgated by John Paul II; drafted by a commission.

Textual Issues: No significant textual variants; this is a modern dogmatic text.