Virtue and “The Art of Living” by Dr. Edward P. Sri

I’ll never forget the instructor’s last words: "And if you happen to fall out of your kayak, don’t try to stand up in the river."

A number of years ago, my wife and I went kayaking on the Arkansas River in the Colorado Rockies. We had never been kayaking before, so we went with a group led by a guide who gave us lessons—lessons that included the warning about not standing up in the river. "The river is not that deep," he said. "But it is very powerful. If you fall into it, don’t stand up because the river will knock you right down. Just hold on to your life jacket and wade to the side."

We began our adventure on smooth, peaceful waters, with me in the front of the kayak and my wife in back. Things were off to a great start as we enjoyed the clear blue skies, the beautiful scenery around us, and the snowcapped mountains above. But we knew the rapids eventually would come, and that would be our first test as new kayakers.

Suddenly, we heard them: the roar of the rapids. Our adrenaline started pumping and we got ready. Into the rapids we went. kayak tilted to the left and the waves poured in. We jumped back to the right and were soaked again. We jerked left again and then straightened up just in time to push through successfully. We made it to the other side of the rapids and returned to safe, smooth waters. We passed the first test!

I turned around to smile at my wife and celebrate: “We did it!” But Beth had a look of horror on her face. She was frantically pointing forward and yelling, "Keep it straight! it straight!" She noticed that as I had turned around to celebrate—prematurely—the kayak turned with me. In a matter of seconds, we had done a complete 180 and now were floating backwards down the Arkansas River!

Going Against the Current
I eventually got us straight again, but it was too late. There was a large tree log that had fallen halfway across the river. While the rest of our group followed our guide around the log, we were headed straight for it. Our kayak brushed up against the log and was immediately sucked under by the river. We were left desperately hanging on to the log with our bodies being pulled under. Soon enough, we too were sucked underwater, swept away by the current.

Downstream I drifted submerged, choking in the water and having my rear end hit what seemed like every rock in the river. I didn’t like that feeling, so guess what I tried to do. Yes, I tried to stand up. And immediately, boom! The river knocked me back down. In a panic, I tried a second time to stand up, and instantly, I was pulled under the water and swept away. After a failed third attempt to stand up, I finally remembered the instructor’s words, "Don’t try to stand up in the river." I held on to my life jacket, rose to the surface, and eventually made it safely to the side of the river. My wife survived, too. I found her alive about a half-mile downstream—and we haven’t been kayaking since!
It’s hard to stand up against a powerful river. And similarly, it’s hard to stand up against the current of our culture. There is not a lot of support from our secular, relativistic world for living a good Catholic life. In the media, in the workplace, and sometimes even in our own families, we do not get a lot of encouragement for going deeper in our Catholic faith, for building a strong marriage and raising godly children for the Lord. Quite the opposite. Many forces are constantly working against us, distracting us from what is most important in life and trying to knock us down in our pursuit to follow Christ.

**Virtue: Skills for Life**

If we want to swim against the tide of our culture, there is one thing we need that is absolutely critical. If we want deep trust and intimacy in our marriages, if we want to build a strong family life for our children, if we want to have true Christian friendship with others—in sum, if we desire to live our Catholic faith deeply and not be swayed by the way the world tries to get us to live—there is one thing we need that is virtually indispensable. And that’s virtue.

No matter how much I may sincerely desire to live out my Catholic faith and grow in my relationship with Christ, no matter how much I may sincerely desire to be a good husband to my wife, a good father to my children, and a good friend to the people in my life, without virtue, I will fail to live these relationships well. I will be swept away by the current of the culture and my own selfish desires unless I am proactively swimming upstream to cultivate virtue in my life.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines virtue as "an habitual and firm disposition to do the good" (no. 1803). Think of virtue as a skill that enables one to do the right thing easily and to love God and neighbor as if it were second nature. Just as various trades and crafts require certain skills, so the art of living requires virtue. The virtues are the crucial life skills we need to live our relationships with God and neighbor with excellence.

**Flying High**

When teaching about virtue, I like to talk about airplanes. Since my childhood, I’ve been fascinated by flying. I loved going to the airport and seeing planes take off and come in for landing. And when onboard, I always wanted to sit by the window, so that I could gaze at the sky above and look down at the clouds and ground far below. To this day, while most frequent flyers prefer the aisle seat, I still choose the window because of how enthralled I am about being in flight.

Now, here’s a question for you: After hearing of my passion about flying, would that ever make you want to get into an airplane with me in the cockpit? No way! I may value flying and have strong feelings about airplanes, but if I do not have the skills to fly a plane, you don’t want to fly with me as your pilot.

Similarly, my father was a surgeon, and I grew up often following him to the hospital and looking at books and pictures about anatomy and surgical procedures. I have fond memories of my dad as a surgeon and continue to place surgeons in high esteem. However, would you want to get on the operating table with me as your surgeon just because I value surgery so much? Hardly. Since I never went to medical school and do not possess the skills of performing operations, you don’t want me serving as your surgeon.

This is all common sense. No one would ever get into an airplane with someone who doesn’t have the skills of flying. And no one would ever hop on the operating table with someone who didn’t possess the skills of surgery. Yet in our age, many people jump into business partnerships, dating relationships, and even marriages without ever asking the fundamental question of virtue: Does this person have the virtue—the skills—necessary to live this relationship well? Does this person have patience, generosity, prudence, self-control, humility, discipline, etc.? These are just some of the many virtues we need to love others and live out our commitments to them.

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Value or Virtue?

When I speak at marriage and family conferences, I often ask spouses two questions. First: "How many of you value your spouse and want to treat him or her well?" Everyone raises their hands. Second: "How many of you do things that hurt your spouse?" Everyone raises their hands again.

It’s easy to say I value my spouse, my children, my friends, and my God. And I may sincerely desire to love them all. But it takes much effort, practice, and grace to acquire the virtues I need to actually be a good husband, father, friend, and Christian. The virtues are like powers within us that help us to love others. Indeed, the virtues give us the freedom to love, and without the virtues, we are simply not capable of loving others the way God intends.

This is an important point to make. When I was younger and heard people at church talk about the virtues, I had an individualistic view of the virtuous life. I had a mistaken impression that virtues were something good merely for my own soul: for my moral development or my spiritual life. Humility, piety, kindness, prudence, temperance—these and other virtues seemed to be simply good qualities every Catholic was supposed to have in order to be a good Christian. The virtues were like badges that made you a good "boy scout" for God. However, virtue should be understood relationally. The virtues are not important merely for one’s own life; they are the habitual dispositions—the skills—we need to love God and the people God has placed in our lives. If I lack virtue in certain areas, that doesn’t just harm me; it affects the people closest to me. They will suffer the consequences of my lack of virtue.

For example, if I lack in the virtue of generosity, I will do selfish things that hurt my spouse. If I lack prudence and spend too many hours preoccupied with work and not enough time with my children, my kids will feel the effects of the imprudent way I choose to spend my time. If I often get overwhelmed with life and become easily irritated, stressed, or angered, the people in my life will suffer the consequences of my lack of patience and perseverance.

This is the most tragic thing about my deficiency in virtue: To the extent that I lack in virtue, to that extent I am not free to love. No matter how much I may desire to be a good son of God, a good husband to my wife, and a good father to my children, without virtue, I will not consistently give the best of myself to the Lord, I will not honor and serve my wife effectively, and I will not raise my children as well as I should. My lack of virtue will affect other people’s lives.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) once said that in our progressively secular, de-Christianized world, we have lost "the art of living." Indeed, in an age of moral confusion, when the heritage of the virtues and character formation has not been passed on, we no longer know how to live life well. This new series of articles will explore the Catholic tradition of the virtues in a practical way to help us begin to recover "the art of living."

Edward P. Sri is a professor of theology and Scripture at the Augustine Institute in Denver, Colorado. He is the author of or contributor to several Emmaus Road books, including his latest book, Queen Mother, which is based on his doctoral dissertation. This article was published in Lay Witness Magazine and reproduced with permission of Catholics United for the Faith. All rights reserved.