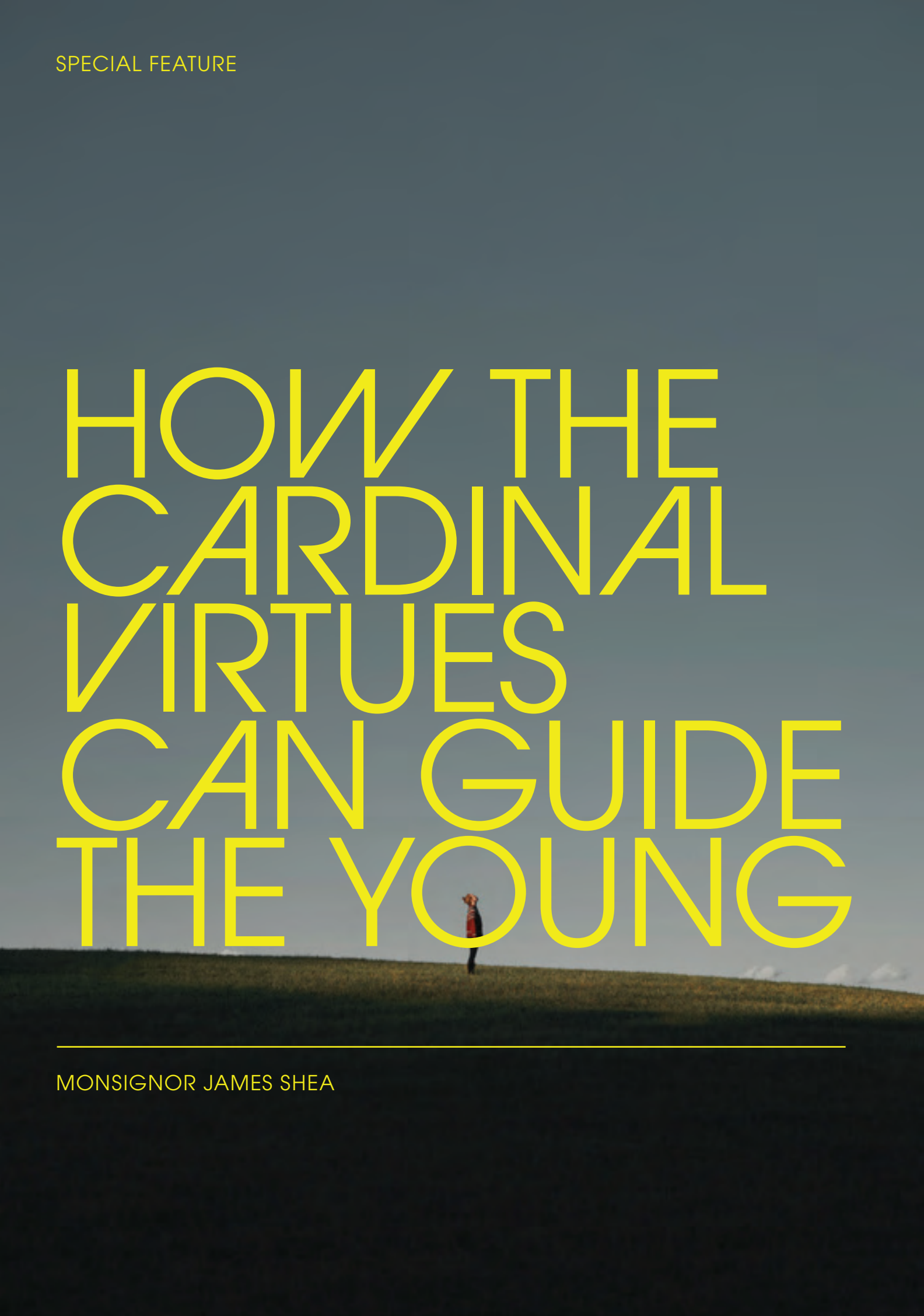


SPECIAL FEATURE

HOW THE CARDINAL VIRTUES CAN GUIDE THE YOUNG

A person in clerical attire, including a red cassock and a white zucchetto, stands on a grassy hill. The person is positioned in the lower center of the frame, looking towards the right. The background is a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is peaceful and contemplative.

MONSIGNOR JAMES SHEA

*"If any one loves
righteousness, her
labors are virtues;
for she teaches
self-control and
prudence, justice
and courage;
nothing in life is
more profitable for
men than these."*

WISDOM 8:7

Anyone who spends much time living with or working with young people knows that certain perennial questions facing humanity have now taken on an anguished importance for our youth as they attempt to sort out their lives. Who am I? Where can I find my identity? What does it mean to be a good person? Where is meaning to be found? All peoples in all times and places have sought answers to these questions and have incarnated their answers in long-standing customs and habits of thought and behavior that have provided a clear road map for the great majority. We now live in a time of the dissolution of cultural norms and patterns, such that every individual person is left to attempt to find his own personal way in the perplexing and often dangerous adventure of human existence. The reasons for our cultural dissolution are complex, involving both sociological realities stemming from the "liquid" life of a highly technologized society, and certain philosophical and metaphysical currents that have isolated the individual and have consciously stripped away many of the road signs that once offered help to pilgrim souls. The result has been that our youth (to say nothing of ourselves) are left shivering and naked with little help to guide them.

The noble tradition of the four cardinal virtues can be a huge help in bringing order and harmony to this human and spiritual chaos. Given that we are dealing with a wide topic whose practical applications are almost endless, in this article I want to point to just a few key aspects of the cardinal virtues that I have found to be of particular help in serving our youth and young adults.

*We have been
created by God
with a specific
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our creation,*

*and we who are creatures
do not have the capacity
to arrive at our identity
by ourselves.*

01.

The Reality of Human Nature

We know that there are many differences between our modern views of humanity and those of virtually all the societies that came before us. Maybe the most significant difference is this: Cultures of the past have always held that our human world was part of something that went beyond us and that provided an order to the world—God, the gods, the Tao, Brahmin, the Great Mother—and much of what it meant to be a good human was to learn the ways of that transcendent order and to live in harmony with it. Exactly what that cosmic harmony consisted in has differed greatly, but there has always been a profound sense that we possess a human nature, a proper shape, what Aristotle called a telos or end goal, and that the social order aided humans in arriving at that goal. Because humans were obviously both uniquely individual and also embedded in tight-knit social worlds, there were both personal and social skills, strengths, and excellences that would be taught to the young: how to handle a sword and how to honor a father; how to work a farm and how to worship the deity.

We have changed all that. Strong currents are now running that insist that there is no such thing as a normative human nature, and that any attempt to suggest one is to impose an oppressive limitation on the individual personality. Instead, it is for each person to determine to be whatever he or she wishes to be, even if he wishes to be she. This can sound like a highly liberating way to go at life, but the truth runs in the opposite

direction. We have been created by God with a specific purpose behind our creation, and we who are creatures do not have the capacity to arrive at our identity by ourselves. The idea that we are to create our identities from within ourselves is, for many of our youth, a burden far too heavy to carry, and is surely one of the main contributing causes to the epidemic of anxiety and depression so many young people suffer. They will find their true liberation only when they discover that their life has a meaning and purpose that transcends them, one that they do not need to manufacture on their own. They no longer need to “get a life,” to devise or attempt a personal project that would provide them with significance; they can rather embark on a voyage of discovery because they are beloved creations of the mind of God. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger liked to call this the “divine project.” In asking the question: ‘What am I? What must I do to be a human being?’ he noted that “Man is not merely some entity devoid of an essential nature; rather, God has a project planned for him, and he has freely entrusted man with the task of fulfilling this project, and doing so with creativity.”¹

So here is one great benefit that we can gain from the practice of the cardinal virtues. Pursuing them reminds us that we are made with a specific purpose, and that our lives are meant to take on a certain shape. This frees us from the terrible curse of having to invent ourselves.



He has called us to a much higher destiny, one so high that it would be hugely presumptuous to take upon ourselves.



02

New Creation in Christ

But there is much more. The overall scheme of the virtues, the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, and the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, courage, and temperance, do more than point us toward various good qualities and habitual excellences that make our lives better. They fill out within us a very particular shape: the shape of God himself.

Our faith teaches us that God's purpose with us, his Divine project regarding humans, is not simply to form us into high-functioning human specimens who have lots of good qualities. He has called us to a much higher destiny, one so high that it would be hugely presumptuous to take upon ourselves. He has destined us to share his own inner life; he intends that our humanity be absorbed into his divinity even while remaining human; he wants us to be united to Christ, the New Adam, and to become "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). Many of the greatest teachers of Christian faith, from Saint Augustine and Saint Athanasius to Saint Thomas Aquinas, have put the matter in stark terms: "God became man so that men might become God." Theologians call this process by various names such as deification, divinization, and theosis. St. Paul wrote about it this way: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor 5:17); "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19–20). We receive that new life with the gift of the Holy Spirit in baptism and it is sustained in us by the Eucharist. The theological virtues are infused within us at baptism by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The cardinal virtues, given to us as potentialities of our created nature, are transformed by the Holy Spirit into expressions of his own life. If we were to ask: what does the life of the Holy Spirit look like? What does it mean to be holy? A good answer would be: Holiness looks like a person living the theological and cardinal virtues. They are not just good human qualities; they are the very life of God within us.



*The practice
of the virtues is
the mode by
which we grow
habitually into
the new person
after the pattern
of Christ.*

03

Cardinal Virtues are Moral Virtues

We know that we have been created in God's image, and our likeness to God is in our possession of an intellect and a will. But we have more than just minds and wills. We humans are in a sense at the midpoint of the created order. We share with inorganic matter our makeup of atoms and molecules. We share with plants the principle of growth, and with animals many physical operations, our senses, even our emotions. We share with angels our minds and our wills. We are a kind of micro-cosmos: a small but complete world. This means that we are a kind of hybrid, that we have both a physical and a spiritual aspect to us. We are enfleshed souls, or ensouled bodies. How are we to maintain our inner harmony among our various faculties? It was supposed to go this way: our minds, given to understand truth, would embrace the truth of God himself. Our wills, oriented to all things good, would move toward God's infinite goodness. Our emotional and sensual capacities, sometimes called "the passions" in the Scriptures, would support and intensify what our minds and wills were embracing. All our various faculties would work in harmony. When our race turned away from God in the Fall, our minds and our wills were wounded. Our intellects, having rebelled against the reality of God, could no longer see the truth with clarity, and our wills followed our minds down false paths of apparent goodness. Our passions became unruly and tended to dominate and overpower our higher faculties. Hence the war that rages in every human heart.

When we turn back to our Creator and receive his life, we are once again united to our true source. Our minds become enlightened and our wills are made supple for doing good. We are then in

a position once again to gain the mastery of our emotions and our sensual desires such that they no longer dominate us, and instead serve us in acting for what is good and loving. This change of our inner being doesn't happen in a day, or a year. The practice of the virtues is the mode by which we grow habitually into the new person after the pattern of Christ. The intellectual virtues tend to the perfection of our minds in gaining truth. The moral virtues bring our wills back to their true form in acting for what is good.

A look into the world of the young will make clear that there is an immense amount of information streaming toward them and appealing to their minds and their passions. But it is almost always received passively. That constant stream overstimulates the imagination and emotions, but leaves the will enervated. One becomes a spectator rather than an actor in the drama of life. The cardinal virtues take on a special importance here. Because they are moral virtues, they address themselves to the will, to what is good to do. They develop habits of behavior, according to the mind of God. The virtue of prudence brings us the ability to perceive and act for what is good amid all the various complexities of life. The virtue of justice trains us to give to each what is properly their due. To act prudently and justly, in alignment with the truth and goodness of God and penetrated by his love, is to complete our humanity. The twin virtues of courage and temperance come into play to order our emotions and our senses toward all that is prudent and just. Courage allows us to do what is right in the face of serious difficulties; to conquer our fears, to calm our anger, to temper our sadness. Temperance trains us in the proper place of pleasure, and it keeps us from pursuing immediate sensual enjoyment when this would put justice or prudence at risk. All these virtues call us from passivity into action. They get us out of our beds, off our couches, away from our screens, into doing what is wise and just. That is a much-needed medicine for our time.



We have our part to play in growing in virtue, but it is God who is building his own life within us and who is drawing us into that life.



04.

The Pitfall of Self-Improvement

Before ending I want to say a quick last word about a pitfall that I regularly encounter. It often happens that someone will grow dissatisfied with the way their life is going and will decide to get themselves into better order by pursuing the virtues. So far so good. The danger comes when the pursuit of virtue is not clearly carried out in the context of growing into the life of the Holy Spirit. We have our part to play in growing in virtue, but it is God who is building his own life within us and who is drawing us into that life. When this inner conviction of God's action gets lost, the pursuit of virtue tends either to discouragement or to pride; often to some of both. If virtue is something I accomplish on my own, when I am successful I will attribute it to my own strength and will grow proud of myself; when I am unsuccessful I will get discouraged and will think that there's no possibility for me to change. Both results are the consequence of self-absorption. It is when I offer myself entirely to God and recognize that God "is at work in [me], enabling [me] both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil 2:13), that I become free to do my best, which is never truly very good, and allow God to do his best, which is exceedingly good and will bring me to my eternal home.

To conclude

The cardinal virtues provide us with an excellent understanding of our human nature, and lay out a clear roadmap, of special importance for the young, for growing in holiness, and for cooperating with the Holy Spirit as he fills out his own life within us.

Monsignor James Shea is a priest of the Diocese of Bismarck. Deeply committed to the education and formation of young people, he serves as president of the University of Mary.

Notes

¹Joseph Ratzinger, *The Divine Project* (Ignatius, 2022).