

Discovering virtues, the basis of Faith

European Family Congress

Instituto delle Studi Superiori sulla Donna

I applaud the gathering here of so much hope and the evidences of those new green shoots of a promising springtime of faith. The work being done here in the Instituto per le Studi Superiori sulla Donna shows that a new day is dawning, after the desolation of the last 40 years of religious de-construction and of its corollary, the incredible spread of promiscuity.

Today I have been asked to talk about discovering virtues. Virtue was a word which for the second half of the last century was considered practically an indecent word: judgmental, bigoted and thoroughly un-PC! During most of history, virtue was taught, admired and generally sought after. Then, as we all know, relativism became dominant in our culture, pragmatism was espoused, and the most unpardonable solecism was to seem to be “imposing” an opinion or way of life. And so we find a world in deep trouble.

Twenty-five years of work in this field has convinced me that virtue is still the heart’s longing. In spite of the sinking into immorality, corruption and even lawlessness that we see about us, every human being knows virtue when he or she sees it, and desires to possess it.

How to teach virtue once more is the big challenge. Former generations had the benefit of parents and grandparents who held virtue high. They had the benefit of a huge literature, both written and oral, which told of virtue, how to acquire it and examples of every kind. And, more importantly, perhaps, former generations had the advantage of living realism, at every moment. Physical effort had to be made to gain each desire: for water one had to go to the well; to have food one had to plant and cultivate; one had to walk to get to where one was going...or dominate some beast.

All this is now gone and children and young people are born into a world where it is difficult to separate fact from fantasy. So much is easy; so much is to be bought. Distances seem not to exist. Commitment is avoidable; virtue is distorted and anti-values appear admirable.

And so in many parts of the world, particularly the urban world, many distortions occur and young people are led, willy-nilly, to a life without the benefits of virtue, and suffer the terrible consequences. Promiscuity, with its results of disease, heartbreak and breakdown of every sort; and the nightmare of boys joining gangs of young criminals are problems we see everyday. These are considered social problems, but in fact they are but the result of a society that no longer teaches virtue.

Before going into the main matter of my talk today, which is how to teach virtues comprehensibly, I would like to treat you to a 3 minute demonstration to make the point that all young people desire to be virtuous; I think we could call it an innate gift. Even when hardened in crime and deprived of all advantages, this seems to be true.

I am going to show you young, hardened criminals: murderers, robbers and traffickers. These are gangs of delinquents such as infest urban ghettos everywhere.

This is an amazing adventure, and it all started as a misfortune.

Four years ago, one of the security guards of our factory in the country west of Caracas, Venezuela, was taken, beaten up and robbed of his gun, radio, and so on. Alberto our son, who is managing this company, was incensed, of course. He sent the supervisor out to find these delinquents, which he shortly did. The police had found them and was offering to “eliminate” these known troublemakers. Alberto said “Well, no, let me talk to them.” He then offered them a choice: stay with the police, or work 3 months for free to repay the damage. Of course these 2 young men chose the latter, knowing well the inclinations of the police in our country.

Alberto then set them to putting out fires (this was February, dry season) and planting trees, high up on our hills. After 3 or 4 days, these boys said they had to talk to him...some friends wanted to work up there too. In all they were 24. It turned out that Alberto had happened upon the leader of a large gang, and they wanted to be together.

At this point Alberto realized he had to organize this situation. He gave it a uniform: black tee shirts, and a name: the Alcatraz Project. Everyone

understood the name when Alberto explained the reason: “the worst prison is your own heads and your parameters. *This* is what you must escape from.”

He also organized their days: hard work on the hills from 7 till 1. Then lunch, and an hour of counseling and values education. Then from 3 until 6: Rugby training. As the Holy Father has recently pointed out, sports are a wonderful way to teach virtues, and Rugby is perhaps the most effective sport to this end.

At the end of the 3 months, there was a graduation ceremony and each one was given work. This was a challenge of course, especially in a land of wide unemployment. So Alberto resurrected an old idea. He is a civil engineer and his thesis had been alternative construction: building with adobe. So the work he proposed to these young men was to enlarge an old house we had in the town and transform it into a school for building. The goal was, of course, to prepare these graduates to change the worst hovels of the slums into decent homes.

But at this point they brought Alberto a problem. If they were to return to the town unarmed, they would immediately be decimated by the rival gang...the Cemetery Gang! So, Alberto ventured into the cemetery slum...in jacket and tie, and wooed the Cemetery gang to join the project. Amazingly, it took a couple of hours, but his arguments were accepted. These men were older and more numerous, 35 of them. Alberto was careful to keep them separated from the first gang until he felt they could train together for a rugby cup, which was to be played against the best schools and universities in the country. It only took 5 months or so.

By this time the project was famous and he was inundated with requests by gangs and individuals who wanted to enter the project. The gang grapevine was telling how great it is to be able to walk “in the light;” to be seen in the street by day; to be invited to parties; not to fear being eliminated. Oddly, working for minimum salary, instead of big bucks, they were for the first time saving and buying little comforts for their families.... usually their mom.

The fifth gang is now in training. 150 young men have successfully entered. The demand is infinite. Alberto is now trying to find the formula for replication.

In our little town of 40.000, murders are down 95% and robberies 82%. A “Mother’s Network” has now put all the Alcatraz mothers (mothers are generally the original problem, and there are no fathers of Alcatrazes) to studying, values education or doing some honest trade. The drug headquarters in the Cemetery slum has been transformed into a day care center, run by them under official supervision.

The story isn’t over, though. There are more gangs waiting in line and the matter of replication to be resolved. But many, many people now realize that “God doesn’t create any junk” and all can be saved.

I will show you a short BBC clip which shows these Alcatrazes in action:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-30707808>

I would like to quote one of the Alcatraz for you in English. More than what it says about Alberto, it says a lot about the basic “light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world” and which must be turned on, or brought out, by the love of someone who cares.

He said when asked his opinion: “Alberto? I think Alberto is like God; he knows us, knows what we have done, but loves us all the same, and gives us another chance.”

What we have experienced and seen during this amazing journey with these young men, deprived of everything, is the deep desire to learn virtue. The deprivation is so deep that rebuilding is slow and will perhaps never be complete. But the recognition of what is right, what is God-like is there. And so is the longing to be “in the light” as they call it.

Rugby teaches them the need for rules, and the basics of selfless cooperation to obtain a goal. Rugby also teaches them self-control; when they have been tackled and trampled and when the adrenaline is flowing, they must control their urges and remember the rules. Rugby teaches them humility.

The Alcatraz boys are extreme examples, of course. But most youth are in need. Seeing the breakdown, not only of society, but also of faith, that is putting our civilization at risk, the Church is launching a huge effort to evangelize. I believe, however, that a firm basis of what we could call the

“logic of life” must be laid down in the minds and consciousness of human beings before the mysteries of the faith can be comprehended. A sense of the realities of cause and effect must prepare young people for commitment to what the faith will require of them. Young people must *learn* to see beyond themselves and their desires, in order to be capable of self-gift.

If we are to correct the problems of loss of faith, family breakdown, of the incredibly low birthrate that threatens our very existence, and the problems of violence and abandonment, we must teach once more the fundamental virtues. In our time, however, we cannot necessarily count upon parents. Parents today are children of the sixties and were themselves deprived of these concepts.

In our work in Pro-life since the early 1980’s, we quickly learned that the problem of abortion, of “unwanted pregnancies” was a problem of incomprehension of committed love and of the gift of sexuality. So-called “Sex education” was compounding the problem and this needed to be neutralized. We realized we needed to start from the beginning to recuperate and re-teach the Christian understanding of love and self-gift. For this, a renewed understanding of virtues, human sexuality and marriage had to be structured and made comprehensible for today’s youth

The first step was to define what ‘sex education’ should be: “All that must be learned, from birth, to enable an individual to live happily and for ever as a couple.” This definition is easily agreed to. But what does it take to be happily married for 50 years? Of course it takes loyalty, generosity, justice, patience, perseverance, commitment, understanding, responsibility; to know how to listen, to express, to negotiate....It takes many virtues and as many skills.

We made a lengthy list, and ordered them, according to Piaget, Isaacs, Likona and others, by order of age, from 6-18. We divided all this into 12 levels, grades 1-12, and then 35 lessons per level.

Then we wrote a story; a story of a boy, Charlie and his cousin Alice. In this story, the characters encounter the universal situations. One tool that we found very useful of course was the subject of sports. For the 8-year olds the basic virtues are first presented through the parable of sports. The virtues learned in properly understood sports can then be applied to many other

areas of their lives. The “golden rule” of doing unto others as one would have them do to one is basic of course.

Then, perseverance, fair play, self sacrifice, playing the ‘position’ assigned to one and many forms of patience, humility and companionship can be lived vicariously through the characters of our story. As the continuous story unfolds, these virtues and skills are applied to their family life, school life and community life. Progressively the students learn, through a story they find fascinating, how to deal with the desire to belong, with all that entails.

At 9 years old the characters in this story begin to understand the importance of sharing in all its forms: property, time, talents, understanding and solidarity. Then, for the 10-year olds we progress to the understanding of the huge diversity of talents and tastes, strengths and weaknesses of human beings and how to determine one’s own. This is a big area and recalls the lessons learned about sports. Within this is also the need to retain one’s identity and at the same time put one’s gifts at the service of others; the famous “Social Capital” described as indispensable for social progress. This requires learning how to cooperate, and collaborate which in turn means to be and to expect responsibility, honesty and dependability.

Another important area is friendship and the discernment to choose well the groups one will belong to, what and who are real friends and who will be only acquaintances. Peer pressure and how to recognize it, how to resist it and how to influence, it is another area.

Then, for the teenagers we must begin to apply this full range of virtues and understanding of one’s own personality to the changing emotions of adolescence. At this age, the person begins to see things independently and to test his or her knowledge against new realities. It is an extremely important period in our lives and this testing must be understood, encouraged and accompanied.

Logical reasoning must be demonstrated and demanded by the teacher and text. Good reasoning should give new relevance to the virtues the young people learned as children but want to see the truth of at the new stage of cerebral growth they have entered.

For the teenage years our story becomes a series of little novels containing those things which fascinate them, but which need definition, explaining, and reflection. Those are: friendship, attraction, thoughts of love, and plans for the future. The role of parents is also made clear and skills are given for dealing fairly with them.

This new pedagogy owes much to a very varied list of wonderful researchers in the field. We have taken from Viktor Frankl, Piaget and Likona, Kohlberg and Isaacs, among many others. We have learned from Becker and Kliksberg, who have the latest about social development.

Courses for teachers have been devised, as our approach is rather different. Each lesson is based on what Likona calls the method of “Heart, Head and Hand.” Each lesson has objectives for Understanding, for Accepting with the emotions and for Action.

We want to be sure our method is effective and have had Evaluation Instruments made. These are answered on-line by the students. The Templeton Foundation is helping an international evaluation of 13.000 students over a 4-year period in 3 countries: Mexico, Peru and Venezuela. We are confident, in view of first results that our method will prove effective.

This curriculum is spreading throughout Latin America and an American edition will be ready in the spring, God willing. An adaptation for Africa is now going to print, too. This one required some small changes, and of course, new illustrations! An English edition (British) is now under way and other countries are looking to see how to fit this course into curricula that have become totally centered on the purely material and the politically correct.

It is our hope and our prayer that virtue can once again be recognized as the basis of all human behaviour and that we may have contributed in some way to the return of sanity. The young people you saw in that clip are examples of the big cultural problem that is spreading all over the world. As we look for ways to form Europe’s future, we must realize that if virtues are not taught effectively, as they were in the past in a very different cultural environment, there will be no future, there will be fewer and fewer marriages, fewer and fewer children and more and more young people

crushed by the forces of materialism and relativism and, finally, the disappearance of committed love.

May God bless you all and give strength to your work.

Thank you!