

DUC IN ALTUM!

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The Essence and Education
of Magnanimity



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There are two sorts of flying birds that symbolize two sorts of souls: the chicken and the eagle. The flight of the chicken is low, make noises, kicks up dust, and causes chaos in the chicken coop. It is a symbol of the souls that simply crawl, with horizontal ideas and short-sighted careers. They might produce a lot of noise and provide something to talk about, but they are almost immediately forgotten. When the dirt and the feathers that their rampage raised up fall to the ground, no one remembers the chicken's flight; it was inconsequential and passed unnoticed in the history of the chicken coop. The souls that set down goals that don't go beyond the shadows of their noses will pass without leaving any mark; they live off conquests that are as perishable as those of our chicken.

The eagle's flight is challenging, lordly, fleet, and unattainable. The eagle's sight can be fixed on the sun, and to contemplate the fullness of the scenery from the mountain peaks to the clouds. The eagle plays with the winds, glides, throws itself into a dive, and turns to raise itself up swiftly. From its heights, it sees the seas as if they were puddles, and the lakes and rivers uncover their secrets for it as their waters become transparent. It is a bird that hunts and that fights. It is the symbol of the soul that feels cramped in by the earth, and relieved in heaven; it is the symbol of the soul that needs distant and difficult goals, that can confront roughness and obstacles not only without discouragement, but rather with excitement and joy. It is the soul that can aspire to heroism and to sanctity. When such a soul passes by, it leaves an

imprint and a furrow; of such a soul it could be said what Psalm 84 recounts:

*Blessed the man who finds refuge in you,
in their hearts are pilgrim roads.
As they pass through the bitter valley,
they find spring water to drink.
The early rain covers it with blessings.
They will go from strength to strength
and see the God of gods on Zion.*

To educate souls of the second sort is an urgent, necessary, and difficult challenge. The virtue that formally constitutes such souls is called magnanimity.

1.

“Courageous souls”: nature of magnanimity¹

As its name indicates, magnanimity refers to greatness of soul, *anima magna*. Therefore, Aristotle said that magnanimity is the characteristic of the souls that aspire to what is best, to the highest things.² Its object is “what is great,” and, more properly, “what is greatest,” the “best”: the things that, although great, are not “the greatest,” are only the secondary matter of this virtue.

Saint Thomas defined it as *extensio animi ad magna*, stretching forth of the soul to great things.³ Pieper translates this expression as “the striving of the mind towards great things.” It is, therefore, a true desire for greatness. Nonetheless, it is essentially different from that desire for greatness which is pride, since pride is a de-

¹ Cf. Alfredo Sáenz, *La magnanimidad*, Rev. Mikael 19 (1979); Pieper, J., *Las virtudes fundamentales*, Ed. Rialp, Madrid 1980; Felice Adalberto Bednarski, *L'educazione dell'affettività alla luce della psicologia di S.Tommaso d'Aquino*, Ed. Massimo, Milano 1986; Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 129ss.

² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, III, 5.

³ Saint Thomas Aquinas, ST II-II, q. 129, a. 1.

sire for an apparent greatness: greatness based on the recognition of others, in applause, in fame, or in power. On the other hand, magnanimity is a desire for true greatness, that is, for the greatness of a virtue; it is an aspiration to the greatness proper to virtuous works. For this reason, it is called “the flower of virtue,” and for this reason too only the virtuous man can be magnanimous, as Saint Thomas says.⁴ Beauty is something proper to every virtue, because every virtue has its own specific beauty; but to this, magnanimity adds a beauty that comes from the greatness of the work performed: “further adornment results from the very greatness of a virtuous deed through magnanimity, which makes all virtues greater.”⁵ Even further, Saint Thomas affirms that to act with magnanimity isn’t a characteristic of all the virtuous, but rather proper only to those who are very virtuous, the ones who practice virtue to an eminent degree.⁶ This is why he says that Jesus Christ, since He was the most virtuous of all, was also the most magnanimous.⁷

It is said that the magnanimous person seeks greatness. To understand this in the right way, it must be understood that he principally seeks interior greatness, that is, the glory that is intrinsic to virtue. What Saint Bernard said, that love is its own reward, can also be applied to every virtue: the greatness and the reward of every virtue is the exercise of the virtue itself. Magnanimous people believe that they have been sufficiently repaid by the sim-

⁴ *In II Sent.*, d. 42, 2, 4.

⁵ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 4 ad 3.

⁶ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 3 ad 2.

⁷ ST III, q. 15, a. 8, obj. 2.

ple fact that they have done something magnanimous. Only as a secondary end, and then according to the circumstances, does the magnanimous person aspire to the exterior glory of the virtue, that is, to the honor that the virtue deserves.⁸ Regarding that exterior glory, the magnanimous person should, and indeed does if he is virtuous, desire human glory; however, he also knows that the exterior tribute redounds to the honor of the virtue itself; thus, in a secondary and subordinated way, the person can sometimes aspire to a certain exterior recognition. This is what Saint Paul says: *Your kindness should be known to all* (Phil. 4:5). Christ Himself says: *Your light must shine before others* (Mt 5:16).

Saint Thomas says that the magnanimous person seeks honor for three possible ends. First, it is for his own good, in the sense that the honor that is given him because of his virtue affirms him in his desire for greatness, and it encourages him on to reach perfection. Second, it is for his neighbor’s good, because he knows that that in which he excels is a gift from God who has given it to him for the benefit of his neighbor, exciting the neighbor to virtue with his outstanding example of virtue. Finally, it is for God, because he who is virtuous directs all honor to the true cause of virtue, which is God Himself: *What do you possess that you have not received? But if you have received it, why are you boasting as if you did not receive it?* (1 Cor 4:7).

To properly understand this virtue, it must be seen in connection with three other virtues: fortitude, hope, and humility.

⁸ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 4.

First and foremost, it is linked with **fortitude**.⁹ Fortitude is the virtue proper to the irascible appetite, that is, of the desire to overcome. It implies a connection with strength, with confronting adversity, and with material and spiritual fights. Magnanimity keeps fortitude from enclosing itself in little things, in fragmentary fights in life, and makes it properly the virtue of great conquests; it turns fortitude into a desire for an entire and spiritual conquest. It encompasses what Saint Paul affirms in the letter to the Ephesians: *For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens* (Eph 6:12).

Secondly, it relates to **hope**, both the passion and the virtue. The passion of hope is the movement of the sensible appetite that seeks a future, arduous good that is possible to obtain. The difficulty that the desired good entails makes it more attractive; it makes the soul expand or extend itself in a movement to obtain that good.¹⁰ Magnanimity makes the man who possesses it a subject especially given to hope, to drive, and to spiritual entrepreneurship; it makes him a person who sees the overcoming of what is difficult as his way of life. Clearly this is the characteristic psychology of the great conquistadors, like Hernán Cortés, Pizarro, Hernandarias, King Saint Louis, Saint Fernando, and even pagan figures like Alexander the Great, Hanibal, or Julius Ceasar; it is also that of untiring missionaries like Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Francisco Solano, Friar Motolinia, Ruíz de Montoya, and all the

⁹ Cf. ST II-II, q. 129, a. 5.

¹⁰ Cf. ST I-II, q. 25, a. 1.

great missionaries. Magnanimity is more closely linked with the theological virtue of hope. In this case, the limits of the two virtues blur, since, as Saint Bonaventure said, “the substance of the act of hope itself consists in extending oneself with magnanimity towards eternal goods.”¹¹ Pieper says that, together with humility, magnanimity is one of the pillars of theological hope, and that the sinful loss of hope has two possible causes: either a lack of magnanimity, or a lack of humility. Hence, magnanimity is the spiritual attitude that characterizes the person centered on God. This is why Saint Teresa would tell her nuns: “It is most important that we should not cramp our good desires. . . . His Majesty desires and loves courageous souls.”¹²

Lastly, although it seems inexplicably paradoxical for worldly people, magnanimity is a virtue that is profoundly rooted in the **humble** man. This is because the magnanimous man seeks out and tends to what is great, but he knows that the desire to aspire to great things is a gift from God, and, moreover, he cannot achieve those goals with only human strengths. *Indeed, I have toiled harder than all of them*, writes Saint Paul, *not I, however, but the grace of God [that is] with me* (1 Cor 15:10). The one who is truly magnanimous seeks what is the best fully aware that God has placed that desire in his heart, and so it is a duty rather than a right (a duty towards God), and if he trusts that his undertakings will be successful, it is only by leaning on grace and divine mercy. Saint Thomas explains the connections between the two by writing:

¹¹ Saint Bonaventure, *In III Sent.*, d. 26, 3, 1.

¹² Saint Teresa, *Life*, 13, 2.

“There is in man something great which he possesses through the gift of God; and something defective which accrues to him through the weakness of nature. Accordingly, magnanimity makes a man deem himself worthy of great things in consideration of the gifts he holds from God. . . . On the other hand, humility makes a man think little of himself in consideration of his own deficiency, and magnanimity makes him despise others in so far as they fall away from God’s gifts: since he does not think so much of others as to do anything wrong for their sake. Yet humility makes us honor others and esteem them better than ourselves, in so far as we see some of God’s gifts in them. . . . It is therefore evident that magnanimity and humility are not contrary to one another, although they seem to tend in contrary directions, because they proceed according to different considerations.”¹³

From here arises the beautiful description that Pieper gives of the magnanimous man [Pieper uses the term *high-minded*]: “High-minded is the man who feels the potentiality of greatness and prepares for it. The high-minded or magnanimous man is, in a certain sense, ‘selective.’ He will not be accessible to every approach, but will keep himself for the greatness to which he feels akin.¹⁴ Above all, high-mindedness is demanding as to honor: “The high-minded man strives toward that which deserves the highest honor.”¹⁵ In the *Summa Theologiae* we read: “If a man should despise honor to the extent that he would not take care to do

¹³ ST II-II, q. 129, q. 3 ad 4.

¹⁴ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 3 ad 5.

¹⁵ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 2.

what is deserving of honor, this would be blameworthy.¹⁶ On the other hand, the high-minded man is not crushed by dishonor; he disregards it as something beneath him.¹⁷ The high-minded man despises everything small-minded. He would never prize another man so highly as to do anything improper for his sake.¹⁸ The words of the Psalmist (Ps 14:4), *The evil-doer is nothing in his sight*, refer to the high-minded *contempt of men* of the just, says St. Thomas. Fearless frankness is the hallmark of high-mindedness; nothing is further from it than to suppress truth from fear.¹⁹ Flattery and dissimulation are equally removed from the high-minded.²⁰ The high-minded man does not complain; for his heart is impervious to external evil.²¹ High-mindedness implies an unshakable firmness of hope, a challenging assurance,²² and the perfect peace of a fearless heart. The high-minded man bows neither to confusion of the soul, nor to any man, nor to fate but to God alone.²³²⁴

Magnanimity thus imposes a lifestyle marked by greatness. As a virtue, it has acts that are proper to it, but Saint Thomas also considers it a “general virtue” in the sense that it acts upon all the other virtues and makes them unmistakable: they become heroic and noble. It also serves as an antidote to things that falsely appear as virtues; indeed, all moral virtues have two opposed vices:

¹⁶ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 1 ad 3.

¹⁷ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 2 ad 3.

¹⁸ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 3 ad 4.

¹⁹ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 4 ad 2.

²⁰ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 3 ad 5.

²¹ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 4 ad 2.

²² ST II-II, q. 129, a. 6.

²³ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 7 sed contra.

²⁴ Pieper, op. cit., pp. 189-190.

one by excess, and one by defect. One of them (which varies depending on the virtue) has an apparent likeness with the virtue that it is opposed to; for example, recklessness appears like courage, insensitivity to temperance, rigorism to justice, false humility to humility, shrewdness to prudence. Since magnanimity brings each virtue to the full extent of its potential, it impedes any sort of falsification, and it is characteristic of the saints because magnanimity is what makes their virtues into heroic virtues. For this reason, it is magnanimity that makes a Christian who lives a mortified life into someone who is obsessed with the cross, like Saint Paul or Saint Peter Claver. It changes a poor person into a spouse of Lady Poverty, like Saint Francis of Assisi. In place of a simple student, it gives us a wise man like Saint Thomas. Instead of a soul with a lukewarm zeal for God, it gives the Church a Roque González, a Francis Xavier, an Isaac Jogues. In place of a Christian who trusts in Providence, magnanimity gives us a Don Ori-
one, who is totally abandoned in the arms of Providence.

2.

The principal acts of magnanimity

We've said that magnanimity is the "flower of all the virtues," inasmuch as it acts upon all of them, crowning them with heroic acts. Nonetheless, it has two acts that are proper to it: one is negative, and the other positive.

1) Scorn of the world and of everything little

The negative act of magnanimity is found regarding what the virtue scorns. Magnanimity means to aspire to great things; consequently, it implies scorn of the little aspirations that wear out the soul in tasks that lack importance or magnitude. In pagan antiquity the one who was magnanimous was characterized as a man who was above all the vicissitudes of the world, above its agitations and its ups and downs; he did not lose heart in the face of adversity nor did he aspire to purely human rewards. The mag-

nanimous man despises the world's recognition, because he is aware, first and foremost, of the disproportion between the virtue that he practices and the reward that the world offers. The virtue cannot be rewarded as it deserves. On the other hand, the world is incapable of recognizing the virtue itself, and so generally it persecutes rather than reward it. Saint Thomas writes that the magnanimous man "is not uplifted by great honors, because he does not deem them above him; rather he despises them, and much more such as are ordinary or little. In like manner he is not cast down by dishonor, but despises it, since he recognizes that he does not deserve it."²⁵ Don Quixote reproaches Sancho Panza: "Thou art a bad Christian, Sancho, for once an injury has been done thee thou never forgettest it: but know that it is the part of noble and generous hearts not to attach importance to trifles."²⁶

From here it follows that the magnanimous man is characterized by his capacity for sacrifice and renunciation of the things of the world rather than abandon virtue, by his forgetting of insults, by the ease with which he forgives, and for doing good to those who have done him wrong. Socrates was one of those great examples of paganism, who scorned even his own life rather than commit an injustice. Saint Basil says, "The helmsman is recognized in the storm, the athlete in the stadium, the general in the battle, and the magnanimous in misfortune."²⁷ The Biblical example *par excellence* in the Old Testament is Job who, amid his adver-

²⁵ ST II-II, q. 129, a. 2 ad 3; cf. a. 3 ad 3 and ad 5.

²⁶ *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, I, ch. 21.

²⁷ Saint Basil the Great, *Hom. Tempore famis et siccitatis*, PG 31,317.

sities, proclaims: *The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord!* (Jb 1:21); in the New Testament, it is Jesus Christ who is the example in His serenity during His Passion and in His imperturbability in the face of insults: *Jesus did not answer him* (Jn 19:9).

2) Magnanimity as a drive and conquest

Magnanimity is an eminently active virtue. It is a desire, a drive, a stretching out towards what is great. Therefore, its subject is the irascible appetite, which is the appetite for conquest, overcoming, and the fight. In the Middle Ages, magnanimity was a synonym for courage, and it was the virtue proper to the soldier, the crusader, and the knight; we see something akin to this in the Hellenic, Germanic, and Roman cultures. This is what Aristotle refers to which he considers it as a “passion” for what is great. It is the virtue that always looks ahead, that extends its horizons, as the Spanish hero says:

*Of necessity I battle
and once set in the saddle
Castile goes expanding
in front of my horse . . .
Get out of my lands, Cid,
Bad knight that you are
And do not return to my lands
For a year to the hour*

It pleases me, said the good Cid,

It pleases me, he said, so much

Since this is the first thing

That you have ordered in your kingdom

You exile me for one year,

I exile myself for four.²⁸

In *Quixote*, Cervantes has some sayings that express beautifully what we want to say. For example, his hero says, “Great deeds are reserved for great men.”²⁹ When he describes the virtues of the knight, he says, with certain humor: “Knight-errantry . . . is a science that comprehends in itself all or most of the sciences of the world, for he who professes it must be a jurist, and must know the rules of justice, distributive and equitable, so as to give to each on what belongs to him and is due to him. He must be a theologian, so as to be able to give a clear and distinctive reason for the Christian faith he professes, wherever it may be asked of him. He must be a physician. . . . He must know mathematics. . . . and, putting it aside that he must be adorned with all the virtues, cardinal and theological, to come down to minor particulars, he must, I say, be able to swim. . . . He must know how to shoe a horse, and repair his saddle and bridle; and, to return to higher matters, he

²⁸ “Por necesidad batallo / y una vez puesto en mi silla / ¡Se va ensanchando Castilla / Delante de mi caballo! . . . Vete de mis tierras, Cid, mal caballero probado / y no vuelvas a mis tierras / dende esta hora en un año. / Pláceme, dijo el buen Cid, / pláceme, dijo, de grado / por ser la primera cosa / que mandas en tu reinado; / por un año me destierras, / yo me destierro por cuatro.”

²⁹ *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, II, cap. 23.

must be faithful to God and to his lady; he must be pure in thought, decorous in words, generous in works, valiant in deeds, patient in suffering, compassionate towards the needy, and, lastly, an upholder of the truth though its defense should cost him his life.”³⁰ Also, through the mouth of the Knight of the Green Gaban, Miguel de Cervantes says: “I, Sir Knight of the Rueful Countenance . . . sometimes dine with my neighbors and friends, and often invite them; my entertainments are neat and well serve without stint of anything. I have no taste for tattle, nor do I allow tattling in my presence. I pry not into my neighbors’ lives, nor have I lynx-eyes for what others do. I hear Mass every day; I share my substance with the poor, making no display of good works, lest I let hypocrisy and vainglory, those enemies that subtly take possession of the most watchful heart, find an entrance into mine. I strive to make peace between those whom I know to be at variance; I am the devoted servant of Our Lady, and my trust is ever in the infinite mercy of God our Lord.”³¹

This aspect of magnanimity is shown in the fact that those who possess this virtue not only aspire to great things but also effectively bring them to completion; that is, they finish what they start, in spite of the difficulties they encounter.³² Speaking of the resolution that her sisters should have in the path of prayer, Saint Teresa writes: “Take my advice and do not tarry on the way, but strive like strong men until you die in the attempt, for you are

³⁰ *Ibid.*, II, ch. 18.

³¹ *Ibid.*, II, ch. 16.

³² ST II-II, q. 128, a. 1.

here for nothing else than to strive. If you always pursue this determination to die rather than fail to reach the end of the road, the Lord may bring you through this life with a certain degree of thirst, but in the life which never ends He will give you great abundance to drink.”³³

The founder of the Consolata Missionaries, Blessed Giuseppe Allamano, in a magnificent text that I cannot leave uncopied, divided religious people who seek perfection into three groups: “The first group is that of those who make for themselves a great idea of perfection, who know the need for it, and have great desire for it, but that’s also where they stop, and they do not put into practice the means that lead to holiness. It’s one thing to know, however, and another to put into practice; it’s one thing to know the need for perfection and another to try to achieve it. One thing is the desire, and the other the fact. It’s true that Saint Teresa exhorts us to have great desires, but here she means efficacious desires, those accompanied by works. Hell is full of ephemeral desires and resolutions to convert later. . . . In certain communities, there are always some certain individuals who are always at the same level of virtue or, rather, lack of virtue, from the moment they enter religious life until the end of their lives. They had desires for perfection when they entered, when they entered in the novitiate, when they professed vows . . . and they remain the same as before, with the same defects of pride, laziness, lack of mortification. Certainly, they are not an example to the community, who

³³ Saint Teresa of Jesus, *Way of Perfection*, 20, 2.

simply puts up with them, and who doesn't weep when they leave or when they die. They pass their days without taking advantage of the innumerable graces that accompany them, and in the end, they find themselves with empty hands and a terrible rendering of accounts that must be made. They are like the dried fig tree that the Gospel speaks of, or like the land that didn't produce fruits after the dewfall and the rains. Happy the community that knows how to opportunely get rid of such ones! Such ones, who know how to exploit all the protections of religious life, live more time than others in detriment to discipline and religious peace. This is, regrettably, the story of one monastery. . . . May God grant that this never happen in our Institute! The second group is made up of those who aren't content with mere desires; they do something, and take steps along the path to perfection, but that's it. They try to become perfect, but in their way, trying to strike a deal with the Lord. They are not generous in their response to the divine callings, they won't sacrifice certain inclinations, they are not indifferent to their tasks, they don't strip themselves of the inclination towards their family members; they are bound to small comforts, and lack the courage to test the effects of poverty. Jesus doesn't accept these half-hearted measures; He doesn't want these reservations, and He withdraws from them. Hence, such souls do not enjoy true peace in this life, and they gather a lot of material for purgatory. Unfortunately, in communities there are usually this sort of people. The third group is made up of those who spare no means to become saints; they allow for no delay, and they fight without rest. Of them Saint Ignatius says: 'With great and gener-

ous souls in the service of God, they set all their minds and efforts.’ They sacrifice everything, especially their good will. This is how they become saints! This isn’t so difficult; again, I say, it’s enough to take the first step with courage. Referring to these three groups, Saint Robert Bellarmine says that the first are the sick who don’t want to take their medicine; the second accept only sweet and flavorful medicines, and the third reject nothing, no matter how bitter it is, provided it cures them. My thoughts are directed to your future, and I ask: will you be part of the third group? Or will some of you come to be part of the second, or the first group? It’s a question of having a firm and resolute will.”³⁴

Magnanimity, as a resolute desire to seek holiness, is essential to the Church, which must fulfill the mandate of the greatest conquest: *Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature* (Mk 16:15)

Pemán has expressed it perfectly by placing the following magnificent dialogue in the mouths of Francis Xavier and Ignatius:

“XAVIER:

You ask me, then, to separate myself from all?

You ask me, perhaps, to give up my fortune and my rank?

You ask too much of me.

³⁴ Lorenzo Sales, *La vida espiritual. Conversaciones del P. José Allamano con sus misioneros*, Madrid 1977, pp. 149-150. It’s clear that the background of this description is taken from the meditation on the “Three Classes of Men” from the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola.

IGNATIUS:

And I offer you much more.

*You, the deluded seeker after fame, glory, honor,
do you make little of it when I offer you
a greater fame, a finer glory?*

*Oh, do not seek for fame and honor
in shields and blazonry,
in crowns and coronets.*

*These are not what your ambition really craves;
it is not to these that I summon you.*

*You think, when applause is loud around you,
that you have reached your highest destiny.*

*Do you not see, do you not know,
that your destiny is divine,
and that you are resting
before half your journey's done?'³⁵*

³⁵ Text taken from: José María Pemán, *A Saint in a hurry: El Divino Impaciente – The Story of Saint Francis Xavier* (London: Sands and Co., 1935), 34-5.

3.

Sins against Magnanimity

Just like all the moral virtues, there are sins that oppose magnanimity both by defect and by excess. As a defect of magnanimity, we can point out the surrender of greatness of soul, pusillanimity. On the side of excess, we have the disordered search for honor, which is manifested in three vices: vainglory, presumption, and ambition.

1) Vainglory

As its name indicates, vainglory is the search for inane, perishable glory. The adjective “vain” means “empty” and is the same as saying false. Glory or recognition from men can be called vain for different reasons: first and foremost, when it concerns a non-existent good or a good that doesn’t warrant such praise (this is, in the strict sense of the word, false glory, since it has no real motive or object); praise is also vain when it comes from those who aren’t able to properly judge regarding what is an authentic good

or from those who judge according to inadequate criteria. Sometimes virtuous people are honored, but not because of what is worthy of honor in them: the martyrs are exalted because they didn't give up their beliefs, but not because they are witnesses of God. The great doctors of the Christianity are honored not because they contemplated the truth, but because they have given themselves an "unforgettable name" among the wise men of the world. The true good that merits glory is the interior good, virtue, and this cannot be properly valued. This is why, in a certain sense, **all human glory is vain**; as Sacred Scripture says: *Vanity of vanities, says Qobeleth, vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!* (Ecc 1:2); *I have seen all things that are done under the sun, and behold, all is vanity and a chase after wind* (Ecc 1:14). Human honors are always risky.

Lastly, the glory that prefers human tribute to the praise of God is vain, as Saint John says of some of the leaders of Israel: *For they preferred human praise to the glory of God* (Jn 12:43).

Vainglory is a gross parody of magnanimity, because the vain man doesn't really desire great things, but rather **small things** and **small honors** that he exalts as if they were valuable. The magnanimous man, on the contrary, despises those things that mean the world to the vain man.³⁶

Furthermore, vainglory or vanity is a capital vice, meaning, it gives rise to other sins. Saint Gregory the Great says that disobe-

³⁶ Cf. ST II-II, q. 132, a. 2 ad 1.

dience, boastfulness, hypocrisy, contention, obstinacy, discord, and eccentricity [love of novelties] are all born from vainglory.³⁷

2) Presumption

The word presumption derives from presume which means “to take too much.” It has various meanings. As an **intellectual act**, presumption means to think arrogantly of one’s own excellence,³⁸ or also rash judgments regarding the deeds of others or of things that are hidden. As **an act of the will** it can mean the way of acting with willful recklessness. In the **proper sense** of the word it is the vice that implies a “certain immoderation in hope,” or “a disordered hope,” which arises from excessive hope and security in one’s own strengths.

Presumption indicates two vices that have a certain connection between them: human presumption and theological presumption. Human presumption is the vice that is properly opposed to magnanimity. It means to seek goods, undertakings, and honors that are disproportionate for the person, and this because of an excessive confidence in their own strengths and a false assessment of their own qualities and excellence, with an egoistic attachment to them. On the other hand, theological presumption is “a reckless and immoderate trust in obtaining eternal happiness by means that are not ordered by God.” The presumptuous person does not deny the substance of hope in God, nor do they cease to rely on

³⁷ ST II-II, q. 132, a. 5.

³⁸ ST II-II, q. 162, a. 2 ad 4.

the divine power, nor do they oppose it by quantitative excess, but rather they in fact deform hope and turn it into a vice. Although it appears to exalt God's power and help, in truth it lowers them because it falsifies their scope. Although they are different, the two sins are connected and, in a certain sense, the first leads to the second, which is one of the sins against the Holy Spirit.

What is proper to the presumptuous person is to seek true and great goods, but all the while believing himself able to accomplish them through his own efforts; these goods infinitely surpass him. It is a falsified magnanimity. Between the magnanimous person and the presumptuous, an abyss springs up, the abyss that goes from error to truth. Both believe themselves worthy of great things; however, the magnanimous person thinks himself worthy of those things but because of grace, whereas the presumptuous person believes himself naturally worth of what in fact surpasses him.³⁹

3) Ambition

What characterizes ambition is the disordered desire for honor, and many times it also entails recourse to illicit means to obtain it. The difference between the ambitious man and the presumptuous is that this second one desires great things, supporting himself on his own efforts which are inadequate for such things. The ambitious man, on the other hand, doesn't seek great deeds, but rather the honor that follows from great things. He wants to

³⁹ Cf. *In Eth.*, IV, n. 737.

taste the fruits of greatness without experiencing the fatigues that it demands. Therefore, he is happy when someone considers him as an important person and honors him, and, on the contrary, he grows indignant and angry if someone lacks respect towards him. Thus, the ambitious man is only interested in honor, in whatever manner that might come, no matter the cost it might have. This vice thus gives rise to numerous sins, such as the lack of scruples, fraud, hypocrisy, flattery, and betrayal. The ambitious man is often what we would call a “social climber.”

4) Pusillanimity

By defect, magnanimity is opposed to pusillanimity. The word comes from *pusilla anima*, small soul. What is thus indicated is spiritual timidity or meanness. This pusillanimity can be something infirm or something culpable. It is something sickly, meaning, without guilt on the subject’s part, if it arises from a poor family or school education. It is not uncommon that parents or teachers “clip the wings” of those who are under their charge, either because of the inability to educate or out of envy. This, in turn, gives rise to “learned helplessness”: souls that need constant shelter, like chicks under the hen’s wings.

On the other hand, sometimes the vice is culpable. This is the case of those who close themselves off to greatness when they could obtain it. This phenomenon might have an **intellectual** cause: the sinful ignorance of one’s own abilities or of one’s true vocation. It is sinful when it comes from laziness in measuring

one's strengths; it is the sin committed by the one who voluntarily renounces the "effort" to do something great.⁴⁰ Sometimes this ignorance is a consequence of voluptuous vices such as lust or gluttony. The animalization into which these sins submerge man deforms the image that he himself has of his dignity and vocation. Therefore, Saint Thomas says that the impure soul is condemned to littleness and pusillanimity.⁴¹ This could also have an **affective** cause, such as fear of failure in great undertaking, cowardice in the face of danger, of a lack of determination to give up certain natural attachments.

In these voluntary cases pusillanimity is a true sin. It is the sin committed by the servants in the parable of the talents (cf. Mt 25:14; Lk 19:12), symbol of all those who let the gifts that they have received from God wither. The Gospel says that God chose us *to bear fruit* (Jn 15:16). To bear fruit is an evangelical imperative, a duty and not an act of generosity. Therefore, Saint Thomas says: "Now just as presumption makes a man exceed what is proportionate to his power, by striving to do more than he can, so pusillanimity makes a man fall short of what is proportionate to his power, by refusing to tend to that which is commensurate thereto."⁴²

It is a sin because it condemns to mediocrity the soul called to great things. The sin becomes even more serious when it affects consecrated souls and priests: "that if they who demur to do good

⁴⁰ ST II-II, q. 133, a. 2 ad 1.

⁴¹ ST II-II, q. 20, a. 4.

⁴² ST II-II, q. 133, a. 1.

to their neighbor in preaching be judged strictly, without doubt their guilt is proportionate to the good they might have done had they been less retiring,” as Saint Thomas says, citing Saint Gregory.⁴³

⁴³ ST II-II, q. 133, a. 1 ad 1.

4.

The education of magnanimity

Just like all the virtues, magnanimity can and should be taught, using the ordinary means for developing the virtues and the passions. We can highlight the following elements for the education and self-education of magnanimity.

1st The first of the means is to produce **esteem for the virtue itself**. Magnanimity should be presented in all its splendor. In the measure that it is loved, a person will put into practice the means to obtain it. Educators (parents, teachers, formators, and spiritual directors) must make the virtue known, along with the need for it, its intrinsic beauty, and the contrary vices that characterize the person who does not possess it.

2nd The second way to form this virtue are the **virtuous examples** of those who have practiced this virtue to an eminent degree. Commenting upon the method of moral philosophy in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas points out the importance of teaching ethical principles by means of examples, since the moral realm is

the land of the contingent and particular, and hence it needs not only abstract principles but also models that incarnate them. With respect to our topic, an educator must know how to present examples taken from different educational sources: the Bible (beginning with the example of Jesus Christ Himself and of our Lady), hagiography (the model of the holy missionaries and those who stood out by their great undertakings in the name of charity and their works of mercy, and those who had an extraordinary vision of the world and of the Church), and of world history (the conquistadors, explorers, great soldiers, and other magnificent figures). Examples of the contrary are also useful: those of men and women who, because of their pusillanimity or cowardice, withered without having done anything that was worthwhile in the eyes of both God and men. These negative models make the importance of the real virtue stand out even more, since, as Martín Fierro says:

*“Shadows are always useful
to make the light stand out.”*

3rd Thirdly, the ground in which magnanimity is to grow must be **prepared**, and this by acquiring the virtues that have an immediate connection with it, or those virtues on which it depends. Even if magnanimity crowns all the other virtues, it nonetheless has a special connection with some of them. In this sense, we should point out **fortitude**, of which it is a subordinate virtue and with which it has a special analogy; **humility**, which, as we said earlier, accompanies and compliments it, preventing it from de-

generating into the vices that oppose it by excess; and finally, all the virtues that are in some way connected to the arduous good and to the irascible appetite, the object of magnanimity: with hope, zeal, the spirit of sacrifice or oblation, heroic charity, etc.

4th Fourthly, the **interior sources** for the psychology of magnanimity must be moved. Magnanimity is defined as a “stretching forth of the soul towards the greatest goods”: in that definition, two essential elements are indicated. The first is the **subjective disposition**: stretching forth or extension of the irascible appetite. From this point of view, the individual’s capacity to overcome must be strengthened and maximized, so that the subject proposes for himself goals that are at once distant but achievable, and then calling on him, or having him call on himself, to continue until the goals are met. For this reason, he will have to fight against the contrary desires: reluctance, laziness, inconstancy, and leaving works half begun. This requires educating or forming a vigorous soul. For this, it is of fundamental importance to give incentives for initiatives undertaken. Even when the works of a young person or child won’t achieve the perfection of those undertaken by people who are older or more experienced, never cut down their enthusiasm; this would be to cut the wings that are just beginning to grow. On the contrary, the true educator, the one who forms magnanimous souls, must support all good initiatives (not the ones that are mere whims, nor those that are destined for obvious failure), and, in the measure that it is possible, the educator should collaborate on those works. Those who want

to study, or to develop their talents, whether artistic or scientific, to delve more deeply into a topic, to write and publish books, to create sources of work, to edit Catholic journals, to attempt new apostolates, etc., must be encouraged. It is also necessary to encourage, congratulate, and push them to set ideals for themselves, even though personal experience sometimes remind us of many analogous works that were begun and later abandoned by us. Those who are under the illusion of some great goal should never be made fun of or scorned; the one who does so is like, in the words of the poet, “those fruitless men who have the habit of casting the spittle of their skepticism on the virgin rose of any enthusiasm.”⁴⁴

The second element that the definition of magnanimity points out is its **object**, since it tells us that it is a stretching forth of the soul to “great things, to what is magnificent.” From this point of view, the desire for what is truly great must be encouraged, and this by exalting those great things, and, on the contrary, lesser goods must be downplayed, teaching them to think nothing of what is partial and petty and encouraging them not to be content with little, but rather always tending to “what is best.”

In short, since magnanimity is the flower of the virtues, it must be encouraged by making it crown the virtues that the subject already possesses; those virtues should be made to give the most, exercising them in a superlative and heroic way.

⁴⁴ Leopoldo Marechal, *Adán Buenosayres*, Sudamericana, Buenos Aires 1986, p. 132.

5.

Conclusion

For all the reasons that have been mentioned, we should conclude that magnanimity is the “normal measure” of holiness. If someone really wants to be virtuous, they must be magnanimous. Since we have undertaken a work that, by its very essence, is something supernatural, to engage in it half-heartedly is crazy. For this reason, we can summarize all that has been said with some lines from the poet⁴⁵:

For everyone who lives without craziness

Is less sane than he thinks himself to be

And since the promised princess

Is far better than the slave of sure goods

⁴⁵ Leonardo Castellani, “Quijotismo” in: *El libro de las oraciones*, Diction, Buenos Aires, p. 151.

DUC IN ALTUM!

*For the wound of love is never healed
But by making it deeper and wider
With the renunciation of the reward
And taking the figure as present*

*Just like Don Ignatius and Saint Quixote
Leaving the old bird-in-hand
I chose one hundred birds in flight*

*And the strict one can see me
Trampling the guano underfoot
Which is my way of looking to heaven.*

