**The Art of Manly Virtue**

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It is a foregone conclusion in some corners of Western society that men and virtue are mutually exclusive things. Especially in our own American popular culture, men are more often presented as hapless perpetual adolescents or dimwitted loons who stumble their way through life haphazardly and without virtue. From television and film characters to homosexual politicians, we are force-fed a steady diet of men whom no one wants to respect.

We have exchanged our manly heroes for a vacant spot…there are precious few authentic men presented to us as role models in the modern culture. The trick is not to attempt to use modern culture as our touchstone.

One of the glories of our Catholic Faith, however, is that we’re not set adrift in modern culture. To extend the nautical metaphor just a bit further, as Christians we have Christ as the “keel” and the Church as our “rudder.” We have the benefit of looking back over 2,000 years of culture: at the contributions of the Saints and our beliefs to the building up of first the West, then later the entire world. When we ground ourselves in authentic culture, and not some sort of commercialized anti-culture, we can see that manly virtues really do have a place in our society… and that bumbling adolescent oaf presented in modern culture ought to be rejected out of hand.

What is “manly virtue” any way? Well, I suppose every man has his own idea about what that is. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines virtue as the “habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (#1833). According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, the very meaning of the word “virtue” comes from the Latin “virtus” which means manliness or courage. Both words eventually find their root in the Latin word, “vir” which means “man.” Our language links virtue with manhood.

Both the *Catechism* and *Catholic Encyclopedia* list the Theological (faith, hope, love) and Human (prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance) virtues…but no “manly virtue.” So I suppose we’re going to come up with our own list. With your permission, here’s my offering of manly virtue: work, honesty, respect, self-sacrifice, courage, honor, and piety.

Like all things in the lives of Christians, our model for manly virtue is Christ. Modern culture would have us believe that Jesus Christ was some sort of soft-spoken social activist, but nothing is farther from the truth. Our Lord was indeed a man’s man, exhibiting in perfection the manly virtues.

Jesus Christ worked hard all of His life and lived simply. He honored His Mother, He was compassionate to the poor and less fortunate, and He was courageous. On more than one occasion He stepped physically between unjust men and persecuted women. He obeyed the Law, but didn’t shrink from challenging authorities who had become so enamored with the Law itself they forgot its purpose.

And when the time came, from an infinite store of courage and love, He opened His arms on the Cross to offer Himself up in order to save our lives. Our Lord is the original action hero.

Looking around the cesspool that passes for modern “culture”, it seems to me that we men need to re-orient ourselves again and show the way to virtue. We should reject both the crusty Hollywood “anti-hero” and the emasculated feminist “metrosexual” — neither of whom is a recognizable authentic man — and look to the example of masculinity embodied by Our Lord.

It is manly to give of yourself completely, be that in marriage or the priesthood, and those men need to be affirmed in their vocations. We need to be the “iron that sharpens iron” for the men around us, and help them reject the selfishness that the purveyors of our modern culture seem hell-bent on trying to sell us.

Women are not toys, work is not “for chumps”, and self-indulgence is a useless pursuit for a man.

It’s appropriate and praiseworthy for a man to scowl at the magazine his fellows are buying, and it’s certainly appropriate to invite your fellow men to Holy Mass. It’s manly to be clean and polite. It’s manly to respect women and the Church. It’s manly to pray… and it’s very manly to lead others in prayer.

Being a “real man” doesn’t mean abandoning manly pursuits; being a real man *does* mean recognizing what is authentic and what is not. You see, real men still seek conquest and battle, they just seek it in the service of Our Lord and not in service to themselves. The Centurion was a real man, so was St Isaac Jogues, so was John Paul II, and so is Benedict XVI.

So men, here’s your action plan — you’re of course free to choose some or all, but if you choose “none” you’re not only cheating yourself but those around you that you love. Get rid of anything that objectifies persons in your life — guard your eyes and your ears. Make friends with other authentic men — after all iron sharpens iron — and do something together that betters your families, communities, or churches. If your parish doesn’t have a men’s group, start one. Make friends with your priest, and include him occasionally in manly things — priests are men and they like to hunt, fish, go to ball games, drink beer and eat hamburgers just like you do. Give him a chance to talk about something besides parish business for a change: “How ’bout them Cowboys?”

It wasn’t long ago that the assault on masculinity in the West began — the Enemy is at the Gates — it’s time for real men to take their places in the line and turn back the tide.