



Virtue Corner

Excellence and the Imperishable Crown

We dedicate the next three Lumen Circles to reflect upon the virtue of excellence, an important prerequisite for leadership. For the ancient Greeks, *arete* (Greek: ἀρετή) referred to “excellence” of any type, but especially that regarding the fulfillment of purpose, the act of living up to one's full potential.

As described in the Lumen Member Handbook, “*the closer people come to God, the more they strive for excellence in all areas of their lives. There is a reason for such an effort because they can contribute to the eternal Kingdom, and they have a chance to show God their gratitude and love. Wherever He goes, they will be disposed to follow.*” By baptism, our dignity as Christians is elevated as adopted children of God, brothers to Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 20:17; Heb 2:11). That is no “small potatoes.”

By 1980, the Soviet Union had won the gold medal in five of the six previous Winter Olympic Games, and they were the favorites to win once more in Lake Placid, NY. The team consisted primarily of professional players with significant experience in international play. By contrast, the United States’ team, led by head coach Herb Brooks, was comprised of amateur players. Only four of their athletes had minimal minor-league experience, and the United States was the youngest team, both in the tournament and in U.S. national team history. Herb Brooks gave a rally speech to his players before that Miracle on Ice match, which compelled them to play with excellence never seen on a USA Olympic hockey team. “*Great moments are born from great opportunities. Tonight we are the greatest hockey team in the world. You were born to be hockey players, every one of you. You were meant to be here tonight. This is your time. Their time is done and over. This is your time! Go out there and take it!*”

A Christian perspective of excellence means setting our sites higher than even Olympic gold; we pursue an “imperishable crown” (cf. 1 Cor 9:24-27; Jas 1:12; 2 Tim 4:8; 1 Pet 1:4, 5:4). We were born to be a saint.

One saint’s reputation has endured for almost two thousand years; his name is St. Ireneus (AD 130 – AD 202). He was a Greek bishop noted for guiding and expanding Christian communities in what is now the south of France and, more widely, for the development of Christian theology by combating heresy and defining orthodoxy. He famously said, “*God’s glory is man fully alive.*” The first step to living fully alive is receiving baptism, when we are born again unto eternal life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 1265) states that baptism purifies from all sins and “*makes the neophyte ‘a new creature,’ an adopted son of God. He has become a*

'partaker of the divine nature,' member of Christ and co-heir with him, and a temple of the Holy Spirit.'

Carpe diem! Let us seize the day! This means searching for excellence in the relationships of everyday life: with God, and as a son, husband, father, and leader. To live with excellence requires INTENTIONALITY. Do you see that giving your best effort in these areas truly is moving you towards the ultimate excellence, to be a saint? How can you strive for the excellence that glorifies God in these five key relationships?

Scripture

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you... If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

John 14:12-14; 23-26

"Brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence [arête], if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do; and the God of peace will be with you."

Philippians 4:8-9

Questions for Discussion

1. Context: The first passage above took place during the Last Supper, just before Jesus was arrested. He is not talking frantically about his upcoming suffering, instead, he is focusing on the fact that he will be with them and us until the end of time. The passage from St. Paul's letter to early Christians at Philippi, an important Greek city, addresses the radical newness and excellence of life in Christ Jesus. His presence is not make-believe; he is in each Christian through baptism.
2. Am I motivated more by success in the eyes of the world, or by the excellence of holiness? Why?
3. UCLA basketball coaching great John Wooden once said, "If I were ever prosecuted for my religion, I truly hope there would be enough evidence to convict me." Could a third party evaluating my time allocation see that I am striving for excellence in what really matters?
4. Jesus knows the reality his disciples will experience once they receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit. They will accomplish more extraordinary things than Jesus, as he told them. We will be fully alive, reach excellence, in the measure we believe in Jesus and love him. What are some challenges to faith these days? Does it seem harder to believe in Jesus than in the past? Why or why not?

5. Jesus never did anything halfway. He loved and sought to please his Father, so there was no place for fear or mediocrity. What holds me back from giving my best effort as a child of God, son, husband, father, or leader? What are some fears that cause me to second guess Christ's power in me?

Inspiring Quotes

"I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

Philippians 4:13

"Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me. Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger, Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger."

St. Patrick's Breastplate Prayer

"You are rewarded not according to your work or your time, but according to the measure of your love... Do not be satisfied with little things because God wants great things... If you are what you say you are, you will set the world ablaze."

St. Catherine of Siena

Case Study

Excellence in the use of one's talents.¹

Eric Liddell, born in China of Scottish missionary parents, was engaged in running races in Scotland. His devout sister Jennie disapproved of his plans to pursue competitive running, which she considered a hindrance to their missionary calling. Still, Liddell saw running as a way of glorifying God before returning to China to work as a missionary.

When Liddell accidentally missed a church prayer meeting because of his running, his sister Jennie upbraided him and accused him of no longer caring about God. Eric told her that though he intends to return eventually to the China mission, he feels divinely inspired when running and that not to run would be to dishonor God, saying, "I believe that God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."

After years of training, Eric was accepted to represent Great Britain in the 1924 Olympics in Paris. While boarding the boat to France for the Olympics, Liddell discovered the heats for his 100-meter race would be on a Sunday. He refused to run the race, despite strong pressure from the Prince of Wales and the British Olympic Committee, because his Christian convictions prevented him from running on the Lord's Day.

¹ From the movie *Chariots of Fire* (1981). Case study text adapted from Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots_of_Fire.

A solution was found thanks to Liddell's teammate Lindsay, who, having already won a silver medal in another event, offered to give his place in the 400-meter race on the following Thursday to Liddell who gratefully accepted. Liddell's religious convictions in the face of national athletic pride made headlines around the world.

Liddell delivered a sermon at the Paris Church of Scotland on that Sunday and quoted from Isaiah 40, "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk, and not faint."

Before Liddell's race, the American coach remarked dismissively to his runners that Liddell had little chance of doing well in his now, far longer, 400-meter race. But one of the American runners, Jackson Scholz, handed Liddell a note of support, quoting 1 Samuel 2:30 "He that honors Me I will honor." Liddell defeated the American favorites and won the gold medal.

Questions for Discussion

1. How was Liddell's excellence in running – his particular gift – tied to his holiness in running the race for an imperishable crown?
2. What impact did Eric Liddell's stand of character and principle have upon others?
3. Excellence requires one to acknowledge the gifts received and put them into practice. To neglect gifts is rooted in a lack of love for God and for self. How could such negligence be a lack of love for self?
4. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in n. 2094 outlines various ways in which we can sin against the excellence of God's love by neglecting his gifts. Which of these are applicable to my situation?
 - *indifference* neglects or refuses to reflect on divine charity; it fails to consider its prevenient goodness and denies its power.
 - *ingratitude* fails or refuses to acknowledge divine charity and to return him love for love.
 - *lukewarmness* is hesitation or negligence in responding to divine love; it can imply refusal to give oneself over to the prompting of charity.
 - *acedia*² or spiritual sloth goes so far as to refuse the joy that comes from God and to be repelled by divine goodness.
 - *hatred of God* comes from pride. It is contrary to love of God, whose goodness it denies, and whom it presumes to curse as the one who forbids sins and inflicts punishments.

² The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in n. 2733 further explains acedia: "Another temptation, to which presumption opens the gate, is acedia. The spiritual writers understand by this a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart. 'The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.' The greater the height, the harder the fall. Painful as discouragement is, it is the reverse of presumption. The humble are not surprised by their distress; it leads them to trust more, to hold fast in constancy."

Lumen Core Values Self-Assessment (10 minutes)

Core Values Assessment. Spend 10 minutes in silence assessing positive and negative examples of how you pursue excellence in your relationship with God and others. The below quadrant can help in jotting down some of your assessment as well as a tool for the whole Lumen Circle and how you can let it be a leaven in your life.

What struck me in this circle and how I might apply it to my THINKING. What CRITICAL ISSUES am I facing? What are the biggest CHALLENGES with these issues I face and what OPPORTINITIES does it present?

Prayer:

Family:

Business:

Lumen Action:

What ACTION STEPS can I take now or long term? Develop a concrete resolution for how you can improve in your efforts to improve your relationships with others during the next month. Your resolution should be a specific action or activity that is easily measured.