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The Faculty Initiative

seeks to promote the integration

of Christian faith and academic disciplines

by bringing theologians into conversation with scholars

across the spectrum of faculties

in research universities

worldwide.

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Preview Response

VIRTUES / SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Professor Herdt provides a wonderfully lucid overview of the virtues and virtue ethics and I look forward to the fuller account in due course. The topic seems more relevant than ever in our so-called “post-truth age”.

In reading the Brief, two questions came to mind that the fuller treatment will no doubt clarify. The first relates to the meaning and content of the category of “*Christian* virtues”. By this phrase, are we talking about a discrete assortment of virtues (including the “theological virtues” of faith, hope and love) that are “formed within the context of the life of the Church and support a life of faithful discipleship”? Or are we talking about a Christian perspective on all the virtues or, perhaps, a distinctive way of extending or deepening virtuous conduct, such as in love of enemy? And if it is true that “the virtues are a gift of divine grace” and require some “infusion” of moral power through the sacraments, what bearing does this have on the cultivation of moral virtues in a secular or pluralist arena?

The second question relates to whether and how we can speak of virtuous *institutions* as well as virtuous individuals. Dr Herdt proposes that virtue ethics can help us think about how groups and institutions, such as the university, can help form the character of the people who constitute them and who, in turn, help form the institution. This suggests a kind of virtuous feedback loop: virtuous agents help shape virtuous institutions which in turn help shape virtuous character. Experience suggests this sometimes *can* be the case (such as in healthy families), but the shameful record of the institutional church with respect to sexual abuse, for example, gives serious pause for thought about how straightforward or common this phenomenon is.

And when it comes to, say, the institutions of the criminal justice system, the issue becomes even more challenging. Institutional forces are at work there that seem to defeat the best intentions of those virtuous actors working within the system and, at worst, to stir up the basest instincts of wider society. We may speak euphemistically of “correcting” offenders and “rehabilitating” their moral character, but evidence shows the opposite often takes place. Certainly, a virtue-framework can help us identify the moral problems of institutional performance; I am keen to know more about how it can offer a practical way of helping transform institutional character.

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