



WALKING
Toward Virtue

A Journey with Dante

Christopher M. Bellitto



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In a world where virtuous people seem less and less valued, we need to talk about virtues more than ever. Christopher Bellitto provides an excellent path to do that by walking with Dante, whose classic writings on the virtuous and unvirtuous still accurately describe human nature. Together, Bellitto and Dante take us on a tour of heaven, hell, and purgatory. Just as Dante did, we will learn how virtues build us and our communities up, while vice turns us inward and tears our communities down. Invitations to meditate and record our own experiences add to the impact of this book. Bellitto and Dante invite us to realize, in an often unvirtuous world, that living a fulfilling life means choosing virtue.

—James Martin, SJ, author, *Learning to Pray*

Just as Dante had his Virgil and his Beatrice, readers of this thoughtful and thought-provoking book have their Bellitto as a sure-footed guide to *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Christopher Bellitto's gift for communicating to a wide readership in perceptive, pithy, plain-speaking prose is once again on display here. The journaling questions at the end of each chapter not only aid personal reflection but also would suit parish-based discussion groups. For those unafraid to have their illusions and certainties challenged, Bellitto and Dante together offer the perfect "off-ramp"—humility.

—Salvador Ryan, editor,
Reforming the Church: Global Perspectives

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On the Cover:

The Empyrean, 1885 (digitally coloured engraving)

Gustave Dore (1832-83) / French

From Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, Dante and Beatrice gaze upon the highest Heaven, The Empyrean.

(Paradiso: XXXI, 1-3): (Paradis: chant 31)

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*To librarians, archivists, and curators:
they keep the light of knowledge burning,
even in dark times.*

*The world indeed is, as your words convey,
Utterly empty now of every virtue,
And heavy and overlaid with malice.*

DANTE'S LAMENT, PURGATORIO, CANTO 16, LINES 58–60

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About *Spiritual Journaling*

What Is Spiritual Journaling?

At its heart, spiritual journaling is the practice of writing to deepen your relationship with God. It's not merely about putting words on a page, but engaging your mind, heart, and soul in response to God's presence and revelation in your life. Through reflection, prayerful writing, and honesty, you create space for God to speak and for you to listen, remember, and respond.

For centuries, spiritual seekers—from biblical figures to modern-day saints—have written down their prayers, struggles, questions, insights, and hopes. This practice helps us integrate what we hear, learn, and experience into our faith journey.

Think of your journal as a sacred space on paper—one that no one else needs to see but God and you. It is a place where you can be real, vulnerable, and authentic. As you write, your pen becomes a tool of prayer, and your journal becomes a record of grace. Spiritual journaling allows you to reflect on your personal experience as you begin to articulate what faith means for you. The intention is not academic mastery, but transformation. By writing regularly, you allow the Holy Spirit to work deeply and personally in you.

Who Is This Book For?

Whether you are brand-new to the faith or longing to grow in your spiritual life, this book, with its thought-provoking journal prompts, welcomes you as you are. You don't need to be a skilled writer or a theologian. All you need is to be open to letting God meet you on these pages.

Theological Foundations for Journaling

Faith Seeking Understanding (St. Anselm)

The Catholic faith is not just received—it is lived in. Saint Anselm described theology as “faith seeking understanding.” Journaling is one way to seek understanding—not only intellectually but also emotionally and spiritually.

The Example of the Saints

Many saints practiced spiritual journaling. Consider:

- Saint Augustine, whose *Confessions* remains one of the most profound journals of the soul ever written.
- Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, who wrote her *Story of a Soul* as a spiritual memoir filled with simple honesty and deep insight.
- Saint Alphonsus Liguori, who taught that spiritual exercises—including writing—help root us in God’s will and love.

Writing is a way of praying, thinking, and listening all at once.

How to Use This *Sacred Pathways* Book

Think of this book as a companion on *your* sacred pathway. You are free to write as much or as little as you like. What matters is that you return to it regularly.

You’ll find:

- Journaling prompts throughout this book.
- Scripture references and prayers to inspire reflection.
- Space to write freely, doodle, paste, or draw if you’d like.

Establish a rhythm:

- Read the prompt.
- Reflect quietly.
- Write from the heart. Don’t worry about grammar or form.
- Revisit your writing later for further insight.

Five Tips for Journaling Spiritually

1. Begin with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts.
2. Be honest. This is your space. You can wrestle with questions, express doubts, and record joys.
3. Use Scripture. Let a Bible verse spark your thoughts. Many of the reflections and prompts include Scripture references.
4. Be consistent. A few lines in response to each prompt build a powerful record of your faith.
5. Review often. Flip back through previous pages. Notice how your understanding and relationship with God is growing.

Journaling as Transformation

Writing is not simply remembering—it is forming. It integrates:

- The mind (understanding and concepts).
- The heart (prayer and feeling).
- The will (commitment and action).

Through journaling, faith becomes more than ideas—it becomes a lived experience.

Your journal will become:

- A mirror for self-discovery.
- A repository of insights and prayers.
- A map of your spiritual journey.

In moments of dryness or doubt, you can look back and remember how God has led you thus far.

A Word from the Tradition

“The one who desires to be saved must continually examine the state of his soul, and journaling is a most useful exercise for such reflection.” —St. Alphonsus Liguori

The Church invites us to not just learn the faith but to live and embody it. Writing brings this invitation to life. It enables you to pause amid the rush of new information and hear what God is saying personally to you.

Your Journey Starts Here

Let this journaling be a space of:

- Stillness in a noisy world.
- Clarity in a confusing time.
- Faith in the midst of questions.
- Each page is a step in your walk with God.

Welcome to the journey. Welcome home.

Rev. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR
Liguori Publications

Why Virtue Matters

It can be hard to talk about virtues and vices because they've been tangled in decades of culture wars and politics. We hear it all the time: my values are good; yours are bad. But that doesn't make much sense. Surely, we can agree that good judgment and discretion help us make positive decisions for ourselves and others. Who would argue that grounding yourself in courage and fortitude is a bad thing? Yet, here we are, a time in which being a moderate is now a radical position because arguments on most issues seem dominated by the loudest voices on the far right or far left. We can't agree on what's justice for all, let alone think that displaying some humility is a virtue and not a vice. I've even heard people trash-talking empathy and charity as weakness, vice, or wrong-headedness. Here's where that leaves us: we can either be grumpy or try to make things better.

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) is someone who tried to teach us how to make things better. He is the poet from Florence who had a vision of hell, purgatory, and heaven that he described colorfully in his *Divine Comedy*. He wrote this masterpiece after a series of bitter personal and career setbacks in his late thirties—middle age in the Middle Ages. This book draws insights from Dante's walk through the three tiers, titled *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. As we go, we will note his fundamental lesson: to learn a virtue, you often need to understand its corresponding vice—even purge it out in the aptly named purgatory, if that's what it takes.

Before taking a deep dive into Dante, we should talk a bit about how classical Greeks and Romans considered virtue and vice, if only briefly, because they had an influence on Dante. We'll also consider the Christian tradition, specifically what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) presents as a framework. We'll encounter these influences in particular places where they helped inform Dante's ideas on virtue and vice.

This book is not intended to be an exhaustive (and therefore exhausting) study encompassing every tradition through every historical space and time. Instead, we take as our guide the principle that less is more by examining specific lessons that help us understand how people of the past looked at virtue and vice. What can they teach us about why virtues still matter in our world today? How can we go about recovering them?

A Glance Back

It might be a quick and logical assumption to say that, historically, religious societies have virtues, and secular societies don't. Not necessarily. First, we'd have to ask what makes a society religious. Do we mean only the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam? Is that to say that Hindus and Buddhists, who are polytheists, or ancient Egyptians, who believed in many gods like the Greeks and Romans did, couldn't be virtuous? Of course not. We can find many people in our communities and workplaces who profess belief in one or many gods (or none at all) and who are terrific people. Others of the same faiths are scoundrels despite how much they might wave a flag or wear a cross. This dichotomy is the essential hypocrisy that has caused so many people across the world to turn away from organized religion and call themselves "spiritual but not religious" or "nones"—believers in no faith at all or maybe with some faith but no institutional allegiance. Still, there are large numbers of solid and caring citizens who give of their time and money in their communities but have no religious affiliation or possibly no faith. But virtue and vice—now, that's something we might all be able to agree is common ground among people of goodwill.

Let me give you an example about misleading preconceptions and expectations. I confess that when I started to research the history of humility as the lost virtue over a decade ago, I started with a presumption that turned out to be dead wrong. I thought the Greco-Roman world would have been hostile to humility until Christianity came along and, building on Jewish roots, turned pagan notions on their heads. While that is partly true, I also found that there were some Greeks who praised humility even as the Roman Empire mostly equated humility with humiliation. So, going into the journey, we must be open to where the research and historical material lead us and not pick and choose those pieces of evidence that support our foregone conclusions. We need to try to avoid this kind of confirmation bias.

Take Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who, like his fellow ancient Greeks, used the word that is typically translated as "excellences" for what we mean as "virtue." He did not, as we so often do, pit a virtue at one end of the scale against a vice on the other. Instead, Aristotle saw every ethical virtue as an example of moderation between two extremes. Here's one example: courage is the virtue between the vices of acting recklessly on one side and being cowardly on the other. Courage, in this sense, is the center position between the extremes of recklessness and cowardice.

Let's explore another example: pride, which can be a good thing or a bad thing, depending on how you use the word. Aristotle used the word for "pride" for what we call humility. We can find many bad examples of pride, such as thinking too much of yourself, which we call arrogance, and the Greek term *hubris*, which is a major theme of their legends and plays. Aristotle saw pride (what we know as humility) as a proper, even sane, sense of balanced

self-appreciation for what we do well. He also saw pride as a way to acknowledge that we don't know it all. We need help. For Aristotle, this virtue sat between thinking too little of yourself (humiliation or self-deprecation) and thinking too much of yourself (hubris). Think of the Greek myth of Icarus flying with his man-made wings too close to the sun despite his father's warning. What happened was predictable: the sun's heat melted the wax holding the feathers together, and Icarus fell to his death. This was an ancient Greek mythological metaphor for the need to have moderation and an understanding of where we fit in the universe.

Along with stories and legends, there are many historical examples in which a virtue went too far. We think of the path to dictatorship by many people who were too ambitious: they got greedy, even lustful, for power. They turned a virtue like ambition—wanting something better and working toward it—into the vice of wanting everything and disregarding everybody else. Consider Julius Caesar and Napoleon centuries ago, although the twentieth century is full of such awful men: Hitler, Idi Amin, Stalin, Pinochet, Ceaușescu, Ferdinand Marcos. The list is too depressing to continue, and it unfortunately continues to grow in our own twenty-first century, too.

Another preconception we find is the thinking that virtues and vices are separated when, in fact, they are typically tied together, which is something Dante emphasizes in *Purgatorio*. The issue is often one of degree. Persistence and fortitude are virtues, but when you hold on to a lost cause for too long, you can become stubborn, which is a vice. Accentuating the positive is a good idea, but if you are blind to potholes or thinking with too much cheer or optimism, you can become unrealistic, even foolish. You can say, "I won't consider anything that is negative or could stop me from my goal. I'm going to act like obstacles are not there." Those words sound inspiring when you're chasing an Olympic gold medal or a bachelor's degree, but saying them doesn't make obstacles go away.

There can be a limit to the power of positive thinking if it is not grounded in reality. The cliché about the merits of an ounce of prevention is true. A sobering example: you might not like that cancer runs in your family, but ignorance is not bliss. A physical exam and mammogram every year can keep you from whistling past the graveyard and ending up there prematurely.

Another example of knocking down misconceptions about virtues and vices comes from the Romans. We cannot deny that the Roman Empire improved many aspects of the regions they took over: trade, roads, what we call a social safety net, law and order, and aqueducts and the water supply that improved hygiene, sanitation, health, and irrigation for higher farming yields and, therefore, a more nutritious diet. At the same time, Roman imperialism was based on fear, brutality, slavery, and the constant threat that the empire's authorities could crush a provincial uprising in a moment. Romans thought humility was for wimps. What they val-

ued was the vice of humiliation, to the point where they had a ritual to show a defeated army and the region it failed to protect that they were now under Roman authority. They'd set up three spears like a doorway: two on each side and one across the top. The conquered area's army and leaders had to stoop to walk under the contraption, demonstrating that now they were literally and figuratively under the yoke of Roman authority.

But we can't just say the Romans were entirely full of vice and empty of virtue, despite the caricatures of the empire falling due to raucous parties and hedonism. The yoke's example of raw domination was countered by the Roman philosophy of Stoicism, which ran against the notion that Rome was and ever would be on top of the power structure. One practitioner was a philosopher named Seneca (ca. 1 BCE–65 CE), who, in Letter 47 of his *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, reminded his readers that not much stood between the fate of master and slave.

"They are slaves," people declare. Nay, rather they are men. "Slaves!" No, comrades. "Slaves!" No, they are unpretentious friends.... They are not enemies when we acquire them; we make them enemies.... Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters.... "But I have no master," you say. You are still young. Perhaps you will have one.

Another complicated Roman example comes from Marcus Aurelius, who was emperor from 161–180 CE. Now, you don't become emperor by being a choirboy (or the emperor who is murdered at the start of the first *Gladiator* movie), but he is equally well known for his Stoic philosophy in line with Seneca's. Marcus Aurelius left a kind of handbook full of aphorisms and proverbs called *Meditations*, which reads like a how-to for following a virtuous, self-reflective life that is conscious of the needs of others. He tells us that his grandfather Verus taught him self-control and personal discipline while his mother, Domitia Lucilla, showed him how to live his life with generosity and simplicity. Marcus Aurelius praised his father, Marcus Annius Verus, as "a man who was concerned with what ought to be done, and not with doing whatever would enhance his reputation." The son also benefited from his father's example of moderation: "He was able to abstain from those things which most people are too weak to resist and to enjoy in moderation those which most people enjoy to excess."

Marcus Aurelius' litany of virtues and avoidance of vices continues. The virtuous person must find the sweet spot (reminiscent of Aristotle's sense of balance) between procrastination and rushing into action without deliberation. As he rose through the ranks, he learned the virtue of hard work as well as how to avoid vices like gossip and slander. He saw that it was best to speak and write plainly, not to show off or talk about things when he was uninformed or inexperienced. Better to listen carefully, to respond with logic and reason, to be open to the other side of an issue, and to temper resolution with flexibility in changing cir-

cumstances. Dignity should defeat ostentation. One should have someone's back instead of plotting how to defeat an enemy or being quick to find fault with someone else's actions or opinions. One should keep an open mind. Though he was emperor, he feared turning into a tyrant through envy and hypocrisy. He must be a monarch, not a dictator, and protect free speech, rights, and law.

Two more of Marcus Aurelius' virtues are worth emphasizing. First, patience. Marcus Aurelius, in *Meditations*, credits his friend Sextus with teaching him to "tolerate ignorant persons, and those who form opinions without consideration" (i.e., about things they don't understand). (One wonders how Sextus and Marcus Aurelius would do in our age of social media.) Second, gratitude. In *Meditations*, Book I, he thanks his teachers by name, recounts what they taught him, and gives us the following ideas:

- Gratitude is not a weakness, though too often we fail to acknowledge that we owe our progress and success to somebody else.
- Saying thank you is a wonderfully fulfilling way of understanding how we grow.
- We ought to pay gratitude forward by being as generous and open-hearted to others as our teachers were to us. In this positive domino effect, more virtues flow to counter the vices of being mean-spirited and unwilling to share.
- It's true that no one can take anything from a closed fist, but no one can place anything in your palm that way, either.

Christian Traditions

While this book certainly doesn't take the stance that Judaism and Islam, along with other faiths, don't offer wisdom when it comes to virtue, our focus is on the Christian tradition. But first, a few words about words. Some words seem a bit archaic or stuffy. Do we really use "temperance" or "fortitude" in everyday conversation anymore? When was the last time you said "prudence"? In this book, we will frequently opt for more common words in current times: for example, "moderation" for temperance and "courage" for fortitude. We'll say "good judgment" in place of prudence. You get the idea.

Also, we should note that virtues overlap each other, so putting them in a box for the purpose of identification doesn't separate their dependence on each other. Virtues grow in conversation with other virtues. They are all players on the same team.

The place to start is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which talks about virtues in sections 1803–1845, within the part devoted to living a life of vocation following Christ's example. This section on virtues is nestled in Chapter 1, titled "The Dignity of the Human Person," which emphasizes that a life lived in virtue means being in dialogue with and service

to others. The purpose of the virtues is to help us live out the Golden Rule: do unto others what you'd have them do unto you. We might add the reverse, too: don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you. The message is the same.

Living virtuously is a state of mind, a disposition, and a foundational way of engaging the world. Virtues are tendencies and good habits. Don't forget that, at the same time, vices are these things, too: tendencies, dispositions, bad habits. Living virtuously makes us better people, and being better people means helping others. Our goal should be to learn to live virtuous lives like it's a good habit. Practice makes us as perfect as we can be, given that we're human.

Christian tradition puts forward four virtues known as the *cardinal virtues*. This term has nothing to do with the men dressed in red who vote for the pope in a conclave. The word "cardinal" comes from the Latin word *cardo*, meaning "hinge." These four virtues are the hinges around which all the other virtues pivot. They are central and essential, serving as the inner core from which the others come. Using the original terms, they are prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Saint Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century called them the "principal" virtues because he said they are the key to the others. Let's break them down.

As we said, we'll substitute the phrase "good judgment" for "prudence." This virtue refers to making good decisions and applying them as guiding principles to particular situations and actions. It's related to perspective and proportion, which should be taken into account when making decisions. First, think; then, act. To make the point, the *Catechism* quotes Proverbs 14:15: "Shrewd [people] watch their steps." So important is this virtue that the *Catechism* labels it *auriga virtutum*: "the charioteer of the virtues." (It paints a great picture in your mind, doesn't it?)

The second cardinal virtue is justice, which respects the rights and needs of others. You can see here how virtues are already overlapping and interacting. In our divided times, justice can help us create a harmonious and civil society by leading us to consider the common good—justice for *all*, not just *some*. Walking with a sense of justice will drive our decision-making with a desire for fairness and equity. Seeking justice is a reminder that it's about "we," not "me." Certainly, Pope Leo XIV's selection of his name means that social justice is squarely within his agenda as pope. Leo XIII, pope from 1878 to 1903, wrote an encyclical titled *Rerum Novarum* (Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor) that put the Church squarely behind workers, unions, and the cast-offs of raging capitalism that created poverty and dangerous working conditions. For both Leos, fairness is central.

The third cardinal virtue is fortitude, for which we're substituting "courage." It means having guts and what an earlier generation might have called "steadfastness." When opposition comes, you plug away. An illustration of this virtue is Psalm 27, which is King David's hymn about trusting, confidently and patiently, in God.