

Introduction by Editors

Michael Hahn, Ph.D.¹ and Christopher Bobier, Ph.D.²

For centuries, Christians have questioned to what extent Christian theology and practice ought to be shaped by Greek philosophy, ever since Tertullian famously asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" For Tertullian, Christianity possessed the fullness of truth. What could secular wisdom add to the truth of the Gospel? While various iterations of Tertullian's question have arisen throughout Christianity, the majority of Christian thinkers—reaching a highpoint with Aquinas—persuasively argued that Greek philosophy, while never to be confused with the truth of the Gospel, is valuable to clarify, articulate, and advance the Christian message.

Ancient in its origin, Aristotelian virtue ethics has experienced somewhat of a resurgence in recent years. It begins with the end in sight, what Aristotle called *eudaimonia* and we may translate as "human flourishing"—the goal of human life. While there are several and varied accounts of human flourishing including hedonic and preferentist versions, the *eudaimonic* account of flourishing is not primarily about achieving goods that lead to happiness, such as health, wealth, and friends but rather living and acting well. In brief, Aristotelian flourishing entails the possession and exercise of virtue and virtue, according to Aristotle, is a stable disposition of character, avoiding extremes or excess, and learned through habituation or practice. Critical to the Aristotelian understanding of virtue ethics is *phronesis* or practical moral wisdom,³ the intellectual the intellectual meta-virtue that involves the good sense to know what is right in any given situation. The cultivation of *phronesis* is a life-long endeavor.

Although a great deal of literature exists about the positive interventions of character and virtue education in primary and secondary education, there has been scant attention on the context of higher education until more recently. The current strategic plan of Saint Mary's University of Minnesota has endorsed a renewed focus on character and virtue education grounded in the school's Lasallian Catholic identity. Saint Mary's has adopted an Aristotelian virtue ethics approach to guide these efforts, for as its Position Statement explains, "far from a set of mandates or situation-specific rules, this approach focuses on the internal formation of the person that finds its fullest expression manifested in externally good actions." Indeed, this approach seems best aligned not only with the Catholic character of Saint Mary's but also with its commitment to critical thinking and university-level pedagogy. Character and virtue education in the context of higher education should be distinct from initiatives at the primary and secondary levels. Indeed, university students and adult learners bring greater experience to this work, which is ultimately required for the cultivation of *phronesis*.

Most university mission statements make the claim that they advance the well-being of their graduates as well as serve the common good. Saint Mary's is no exception to this tendency, for its

mission statement reads: “Enriched by the Lasallian Catholic heritage, Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota awakens, nurtures, and empowers learners to ethical lives of service and leadership.” The ubiquitous mention of personal and common well-being in university statements begs the question: how ought universities educate students to lead ethical lives, become ethical leaders, and contribute to the common good?

This special issue of *AXIS*⁴ seeks to advance our understanding of the role, rationale, and purpose of character and virtue education in faith-based universities, including and especially Lasallian Catholic schools. The essays in this volume address a range of questions and topics from a variety of vantage points and disciplinary expertise. Some of the essays are more reflective and focus on a classroom experience of teaching virtue while others are more argumentative or theoretical. All of them, however, aim to highlight the importance of character and virtue in Lasallian Catholic education.

We may heuristically divide the essays into two broad categories: those that are theoretical and those that are practical. Of course, character education and virtue formation are simultaneously lived out and yet subject to scholarly investigation. We begin with Professor James Arthur who has graciously included a precis of his most recent book *A Christian Education in the Virtues: Character Formation and Human Flourishing* (Routledge 2021). Professor Arthur argues that Catholic higher education must focus on character, for it is an education concerned with the kind of person one becomes and not only about the job one seeks. In a similar vein, the next article “Countering Teleopathy in Catholic Universities: Toward a Theologically Modified Character and Virtue Education Framework” by Dr. Matthew Gerlach makes the case that Catholic universities should adopt a modified Aristotelian framework of virtue formation in order to rediscover their core mission as distinctly *Catholic* universities. The Very Reverend James Burns, IVD, Ph.D., president of Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota, is joined by two co-authors to explain how intentional virtue formation initiatives at the college level offer a promising solution to the ideological partisanship currently rampant in the United States and Europe. Using the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, Dr. David Kwon argues in his paper that, for justice to form in students, it is necessary that everyone at the university manifest justice, from support staff to senior administration.

On the more practical side, there are essays addressing a wide range of questions. We begin with three colleagues in the school of business and technology. Dr. Antar Salim offers a concrete example of a professional development program to dismantle racism and promote human flourishing. And then Dr. Christine Beech considers the role of civic virtue and moral formation in American business schools. Dr. Matt Nowakowski, a long-time business faculty member at Saint Mary’s and now vice provost for faculties and academic affairs, suggests how those serving in administration and leadership roles can exercise virtue.

The renewed focus on character and virtue education at Saint Mary’s has benefited from the collaboration with several other colleges and universities. We are happy to include “Fostering Virtue Formation in Aspiring School Leaders: One Institution’s Journey” by Dr. Maureen Spelman, visiting professor in the educational leadership program at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, as one example of such collaboration. Sister Mary Elizabeth Ann McCullough, RSM, Ed.D. brings us back to the classrooms of Saint Mary’s as she describes her experience of

teaching an introductory course on virtue ethics. We conclude this special issue with an article by Dr. Nicola Imbrascio who reminds us that “we measure what we value, even if its value exceeds what we can measure.”

Readers of these essays gain valuable insight into how character and virtue education can be implemented at every level of a higher education institution, from classroom pedagogy to senior administration, from a systematic overview of how a character initiative has been implemented to an explanation of how to assess such an initiative.

Character and virtue are pillars of Lasallian education. In addition to his contributions to pedagogical theory and practice, John Baptist de La Salle believed in the necessity of cultivating virtuous dispositions within his teachers by his own personal example and instruction. De La Salle understood the value of character and virtue: when educators nourish habits of goodness and excellence in themselves, they can better recognize and encourage them in their students. In *The Twelve Virtues of a Good Teacher*, Brother Agathon, fifth Superior General of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, wrote a commentary on the virtues De La Salle believed to be most essential for educators. These virtues continue to be foundational to the charism and ethos of Saint Mary’s and Lasallian schools worldwide.

Endnotes

1. Michael Hahn, Ph.D., is the assistant dean of the school of education at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota where he also serves as an assistant professor and the program director of character and virtue education.

2. Christopher Bobier, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the department of theology and philosophy as well as the associate director of the Hendrickson Institute for Ethical Leadership at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota.

3. This is sometimes translated as the exercise of prudence.

4. While the normal editorial style in the AXIS Journal is to have endnotes according to the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS), note that an exception has been made to allow some of the articles in this special issue to follow the APA style.