

Virtue of the Month: Honesty
Reflection for students
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I went to a very strict college – Virginia Military Institute - with a very strict Honor Code... The Honor Code states: A cadet does not lie, cheat, steal nor tolerate those who do. In some ways it was great! You could literally put a \$100 bill on the ground and come back the next day to find it there waiting for you. In fact, one time I did lose a \$20 bill and when I retraced my steps back to it, there it was, right where I had dropped it. And there were no locks on anything at VMI, so people could go into each other's rooms or private spaces at any point knowing that their belongings were safe. VMI Cadets are very proud of the fact that their word is their honor. That part was great!

But, there was also a heavy price to pay for that level of trust. Cadets who were found guilty of even the tiniest Honor Code violation were given a trial and then removed from the school, never to return again. ... for example, I witnessed some of my friends leave in the middle of the night and in 21 years, I have not heard from them. One little mistake cost them their entire cadetship. It was harsh... And even though it was a very trusting environment, I'm not sure that I agree with the philosophy to the degree that VMI executed their honor code.

But, that was VMI. And VMI is not a Catholic School, and a Catholic grade school such as St. Edward Epiphany has a responsibility to help shape your conscience, not scare you in to being honest because if you tell a lie you will get kicked out of school. My point is that I've thought a lot about the virtue of honesty throughout the course of my life. And, I agree with what Scripture, the Catechism, and Virtues in Practice program has to offer.

And so, I'd like to ask you to think of Honesty like this, which is similar to what you will be learning about in the Virtues in Practice lesson this week... Honesty is the foundation for friendships and healthy relationships... Again, honesty is the foundation for friendships and healthy relationships. Honesty, which means being trustworthy and true, is what is necessary when you want to make friends and keep them. It extends from the little friendships that first graders have on the playground all the way up to the promise that a man and a woman make to love each other forever in the Sacrament of Holy Matrimony. In many ways, it's like learning to do anything, such as basketball or cooking, or riding a bike... if you don't practice being honest at an early age, then it gets harder as you get older. But, if you do practice honesty now, then it will get easier as you get older.

When it comes to seeing honesty as a way to build healthy friendships and relationships... Think of it this way... would you trust someone if you saw them lying to their teacher, parents, or to your friends? I hope not. And why? Because if a person lies to someone, then they are also going to eventually lie to you. And so, you should be careful when you see someone lying, because if you don't help them see that what they are doing is wrong, then they may eventually lie to you. And those lies will damage your friendship. But, what if you or I could tell a lie and we know no one will get hurt by it? For example, what if I said I scored 12 points in my 8th grade basketball game, but in fact, I only scored 4 points. Well, my friends might come to rely on my ability for the game winning shot, but if my ability is not there, then I will let down the team, and potentially embarrassed myself. Better to have just been honest in the first place.

What I'm describing is more related to integrity, specifically, "who are you when no one is looking?" Or, do you tell the truth even if you know you won't get caught.

Now, let's talk about honesty a little bit deeper. Question, is it possible to be too honest?... Yes! Of course it is. If you say to someone, "Hey, I don't like your shoes". And they say, "That's not cool, what's wrong with my shoes". And you say, "well, I'm just being honest..." Then, the original comment we made, although it may be true...we don't like the shoes, is not virtuous. In fact, there is a word for this type of uncharitable honesty...it's called *detraction*. Middle school students will learn more about detraction in class. Along with two other types of bearing false witness known as "calumny" and "rash judgment". Therefore, we need to watch ourselves. There is an old adage that says, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Another one says, "if it's both true and painful, say it gently." And one that you will learn about this week is to ask three questions: 1) Is it true? 2) Is it kind? 3) Is it helpful? But, let me offer one more standard that I hold myself to... I try my best not to comment on a part of someone that they cannot easily change about themselves. Meaning, I try not to say things about people who are too tall, too short, too skinny, too old, or too young. They don't need those types of "honest" comments and, in fact, honesty that lacks charity is not a true understanding of what honesty is. So, be careful with your words and how "honest" you are being.

But, I get it, the 8th commandment says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor." Meaning, "you shall not lie". And sometimes those who lie deserve harsh penalties because their lies or actions can really hurt people. In fact, most criminal and/or civil law suits go to trial because the truth has to be figured out first before justice can be administered.

In looking back, I suppose the part that was hardest for me at VMI with a strict honor code was that I never had the chance to speak to my friends and give them the opportunity to ask for forgiveness and to be made whole by working through their mistake. The idea that they were dismissed for cheating on a test meant that all the other great parts of who they were and what made them wonderful friends was now over shadowed by a poor choice... a choice that could have sought forgiveness. We as Catholics owe it to each other to be honest because that's what God wants for us in order to be happy. As opposed to being worried that if we tell a lie that we will be punished for it. I think of a saying that Mark Twain once said,... "if you always tell the truth, you don't have to remember anything." Which makes sense... when we tell a lie, we have to remember all these stories and who we said to whom. Our hearts grow anxious and restless when we lie because we try hard not to get caught. So, be honest... because it's what God wants for each of us, and it will bring you peace, and it's what your parents, teachers, and friends deserve. And don't get me wrong, I'm very "pro-honor code". I think every school should have one. But I'm also "pro-giving students an opportunity to correct their mistake".

You all did a great job last month of looking for your classmates who demonstrate the virtue of Gratitude. And because of your honesty in searching for grateful students, the teachers were able to do a good job helping select the students who appear to represent this part of what it means to live virtuously. And so, this month, you will be looking for students who are honest... but not just honest, but also those who have the wisdom to make the best decision on how to be honest which includes when to speak up and when to stay quiet. Say a quiet prayer to ask God for wisdom before you nominate your classmate. And then after you do nominate that person, say a quiet prayer of gratitude that that friend is in your life.