The Happy Saint: The Call to Holiness is a Call to Happiness

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Abstract

Research has shown the benefits of religion and spirituality to an individual’s well-being. And yet, over the last several decades, the Catholic Church has seen a decline in affiliated members, especially amongst adolescents. Furthermore, this same population of adolescents has experienced exponential increases in anxiety, depression, and suicide rates, which begs the question: how must the Church respond? This paper examines this decline in religious affiliation and decrease in adolescent well-being, looking specifically towards character strengths and virtue for remedies. Finally, using the new science of positive psychology, this paper will propose that holiness is found through living the virtuous life, which ultimately leads to a life of fulfillment.

Keywords: virtue, character, Catholicism, positive psychology, ethics, virtue ethics, morality, happiness, eudaimonia, adolescence, religion, spirituality, well-being, character strengths
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Do not be afraid to be holy! Have the courage and humility to present yourselves to the world determined to be holy, since full, true freedom is born from holiness.


Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy. Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave. Whereas if you simply copy someone else, you will deprive this earth, and heaven too, of something that no one else can offer.

—Pope Francis, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Christus Vivit of His Holiness Francis to the young people and to the entire world*, 2019

**Introduction**

For Catholics, the universal call to holiness is intricately tied to the call of sainthood. Saints, or individuals who lived out virtuous lives, are uplifted as moral paragons and aspirational goals in the Church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019c). And while adolescents learn about sainthood in youth ministry, or age-specific religious ministry that aims to help adolescents grow in faith, spirituality, and community, and Catholic religion classes, it can seem lofty, unrelatable and unattainable. But what if the saintly path was synonymous with the path to happiness? And it simply came down to awareness and practice?

Like all human beings, adolescents desire happiness and fulfillment. Within the scientific community, two trains of thought exist around the notion of happiness: hedonism and eudaimonia. Hedonism is more aptly referred to as pleasure (Weijers, 2019), and denotes how one should live in a world that is motivated by pain or pleasure. When human beings live out the hedonic life, they are living a life of pleasure. While pleasure heightens emotions at the moment,
hedonic happiness can seem short lived (Brickman & Campbell, 1971). Unlike hedonism, eudaimonia refers to the fulfilling life, a life of optimal functioning. Aristotle used this Greek phrase, *eudaimonia*, to describe the highest human good and delineate between momentary pleasure and lasting fulfillment (Melchert, 2002). But just what constitutes this optimal functioning? Ryan and Deci (2000) describe it as such: human beings are learning, curious, self-motivated, committed, and apply their talents. And, the recently founded field of positive psychology intends to study what leads to this human flourishing. The following paper aims to lay out that the best antidote to adolescent depression and anxiety may not be medication but is found in living the virtuous life. Practicing and cultivating virtue will help to increase positive relationships to God, self, and others, thereby increasing spiritual, psychological, and emotional well-being. Catholic teenagers are called to a life of holiness, a life towards sainthood—which, science will show, ultimately equates to living a fulfilling life.

**Catholic Conception of God**

Before taking the reader on a journey into the connections between Catholicism, virtue, and positive psychology, it is helpful to explain the Catholic Church’s belief about God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), the central source of Catholic doctrine and beliefs, God is revealed through Fatherhood (i.e., God the Father), Jesus Christ (i.e., the Father’s son) and the Holy Spirit (i.e., God’s invisible spirit); thus when any of these terms or variations of these terms are used (i.e., Father, Jesus, Son, Christ, Holy Spirit, or Spirit), it is synonymous with the Catholic concept of *the one true God* (CCC, 1993, para. 234, 253). Of particular note, Catholics believe that God is physically and spiritually revealed through the personhood of Jesus Christ, and thus, is considered both human and divine (CCC, 1993, para. 449; Acts 2:34-36, John 1:1 New American Bible Revised Edition [NABRE]). This is clearly
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seen when Catholics recite the Nicene Creed, or the statement of belief, and states, “For us men and for our salvation he [Jesus] came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit, he [Jesus] became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man” (CCC, 1993, para. 456). This shows that Jesus was both divine and human. For the following discussion, it will be helpful for readers to keep this central belief in mind.

Additionally, one more aspect to note is that God embodies all strengths and virtues. As Jesus states in Matthew 5:48 (NABRE), “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Thus, God is all good, which means that he incarnates all virtue. This is followed by the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC; 1993), professing that, for example, the theological virtues have their origin, motive, and object as God (para. 1840). This will be discussed in greater detail later, but helpful for the reader to keep front of mind.

Religion and Spirituality Increase Well-Being

To begin, an overview of the connections between religion, spirituality and psychology is in order. Over the past 60 or so years, researchers have dug deep on the connections between religion, spirituality and well-being. Findings suggest the link here is strong, that the greater the religious faith, the higher the subjective well-being (Ellison & Smith, 1991). Specific to adolescents, religion and religious communities have been studied as both protective factors, which help shield adolescents from risky behaviors, and promotive factors which help to increase positive development, like prosocial behavior (King & Benson, 2006). Attending church services has been related to increases in positive health-related behaviors such as use of the seat belts and physical activity (Jessor, Turbin, & Costa, 1998). Regarding life satisfaction, in their study on what makes people happy, Myers and Diener (1995) found striking connections between faith and happiness. Across North American and Europe, religious people report higher levels of life
satisfaction than non-religious people. These individuals also have lower levels of delinquency and mental illness (Myers & Diener, 1995). A Gallup survey found that individuals who were “highly spiritual” were twice as likely to report being “very happy” compared to individuals low in spiritual commitment (Gallup, 1985). These early empirical findings in life satisfaction and well-being are essential for any organization that desires for adolescents to live happy lives. As science shows, relationship to God and the larger religious community seems to matter for overall well-being.

And here is where the paradox lies: religion and spirituality are shown to increase well-being, and yet adolescents are moving away from organized religious communities, especially Catholic communities, at rates higher than ever, all in a time where mental anguish is at an all-time high. The following sections will dive deeper into this boggling paradox, begging the question, how must the Church respond?

**The Problem: Adolescent Population Declines in Religious Communities**

And yet, considering these positive well-being benefits to religion and spirituality, in this modern era, churches, including the Catholic Church, seem to be facing a crisis: a crisis of declining youth involvement. In a 2015 report from the Pew Research Center, the number of individuals that affiliate with Christianity, and more specifically, Catholicism, is declining. While the number that affiliates with no church, referred to as the *nones*, has been growing rapidly. Almost 56 million adults in America now identify as “nones,” second only to evangelical Christians (Pew Research Center, 2015). One of the number one factors the Pew Research Center (2015) proposes for this change in church communities is due to generational replacement, or each generation becoming more unaffiliated than the last. The research study shows that the millennial generation (born 1981-1996), report “unaffiliated” at higher rates than
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their Baby Boomer parents, and this number has gone up most over the past seven years with the older generation Millennials (now in their 20s and 30s). For example, in 2007, 25% of older millennials identified as unaffiliated and now that number has increased to 34% (Pew Research Center, 2015).

That said, in an interview with the Pew Research Center, David Campbell, University of Notre Dame political science professor, shared he thinks otherwise (Masci, 2015). He cites that unlike Europe, which is experiencing slow generational replacement, in the United States, the rise in secularism is proving to be more dramatic. In fact, across the board, the population of religious nones is growing with Baby Boomer, Generation Xers (b. 1965-1980) and Millennials (Pew Research Center, 2015). In 2008, this group of adult unaffiliates topped 8% and 20 years later, this number is now reaching 25% (Pew Research Center, 2015).

And, most relevant to Catholic youth ministry, over a third of the younger millennials (18-25 years) have identified as “nones” (Pew Research Center, 2015). These millennials are seeking out different pathways than the generations before. The Pew Research Center found this trend follows into adulthood, with almost one of every five U.S. adults that were raised in a religious faith now identifying as unaffiliated. This means that even though individuals are growing up in faith-based communities, they are not staying connected later as they age. The Pew Research Center’s (2015) study shows that of all religions, Catholicism has suffered the greatest net losses. Of the 31.7% in the study that stated they were raised Catholic, 12.9% have since left, with only 2% converting to Catholicism. Thus, Catholics are leaving the faith with too few individuals replacing these lost members. David Campbell attributes some of this decline to the off-putting mixture of religion and politics alongside the weakening of Catholic subculture, which is not seen in groups like Evangelical Protestants (Masci, 2015). Is it any surprise, then,
that Smith and Denton (2009) found that Catholic youth were consistently scoring lower on beliefs, practices, and experiences than their Protestant peers? In their vast survey of adolescents in America, only a very small minority of Catholic teenagers interviewed were spiritually and religiously devout and engaged (Smith & Denton, 2009). What is underlying this disengagement?

In the book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Smith and Denton (2009) chronicle their interviews with three Catholic adolescents, showcasing the trend of disinterested and disengaged young people. They interviewed Heather, a typical teenager, who reported that she had been raised a Catholic, attended classes each week, and goes to church on Sundays (Smith & Denton, 2009). Despite this, however, Heather lacks spiritual and religious motivation. When asked if she thinks of herself as religious or spiritual, Heather replied, “I go through the actions but I think the faith is kind of missing. I think I believe it, but a lot of people are like, ‘God talked to me,’ and I don’t think I really ever felt any connection like that or anything” (Smith & Denton, 2009, p.196).

While Heather reported having a more positive outlook on God, in response to when negative events befall her, she does state that “this wouldn’t have happened if God was like, paying attention or whatever” (Smith & Denton, 2009, p. 196-197). Regarding her attendance on Sundays, Heather cites that she often feels bored and restless. She reports that the sermons and messages from church do not resonate (Smith & Denton, 2009). The others that these researchers interviewed had similar stories and no one had positive relationships with adults in the church community (Smith & Denton, 2009). One of the interviewees, John, reported never becoming involved at youth ministry at his church. While going to Mass every few weeks, John stated that “I’d never go to [youth ministry], no matter how religious I might be. It’s all just people trying to
feel secure about their religious beliefs” and later stating that his experience in religious education classes “sucked” (Smith & Denton, 2009, p. 201). When asked about how they believe they will be when they are older (age 25-30) regarding religion and spirituality? All three responded they felt like they would be more spiritually and religiously active when they grow up (Smith & Denton, 2009). And yet, from the earlier dive into the Pew Research Center (2015) study results, this resurgence of spirituality as an adult may not seem so certain after all. At first glance, it seems like young people lack relational connection to their faith. Individuals like Heather note a desire for connection with God, and yet, feeling spiritually detached. Additionally, John notes that the lack of connections with youth ministry programs and adults in the Church. Smith and Denton (2009) are uncovering one key to this puzzle: relational connections.

According to Smith and Denton (2009), an additional reason may be parental religious and spiritual actions and beliefs. Catholic adult attendance has also been on the decline over the past half of the 20th century. And, as Smith and Denton (2009) found, parental religiosity is statistically significant when linked with their children’s religiosity. Thus, the more indifferent the parents, the more indifferent the youth. Relationships with caring adults matter and young people like Heather and John do not have these connections.

One further frustrating reason Smith and Denton (2009) offer as to the lower rates of religiosity and spirituality between Catholics and their more active Protestant peers is due to a lack of infrastructure support for youth ministry programs on a whole. According to the survey, between 81% and 86% of Protestants belong to church communities with youth ministry programs, as opposed to only 67% of Catholic youth (Smith & Denton, 2009). And, about half the Catholic youth surveyed belong to a parish that supports a full-time youth minister, unlike
their Protestant peers. Alongside this, Smith and Denton (2009) note that Catholic parents are much more likely to state that their church has been less supportive of them in childrearing, and that youth ministry programs are not a priority in their communities. And with school expenses and finances at a premium, only 15% of Catholic youth in America attend Catholic Schools, many of them hailing from affluence (Smith & Denton, 2009). According to McCarty and Vitek (2018), 76% of former Catholics (i.e., no longer affiliated) surveyed indicated that they participated in no formal Catholic education growing up. Thus, youth ministry and after school programs are essential to reaching the larger youth population, especially those from underserved urban and rural communities. Unfortunately, Catholic religious education is much less Catholic and increasingly watered down from decades ago, which prompts the necessity of reform (Pittman, 2017).

Finally, young people are not finding resonance with Catholic teachings, especially when it comes to morals and virtues. In hopes of digging further into this idea of non-religiously affiliated, following this 2015 study, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University and Saint Mary’s Press Catholic Research Group put forth a research report entitled, “Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics in Disaffiliation in Young Catholics” (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). This report was aimed at trying to understand the when, the why, and the what of this young people diaspora. In the report, 74% of the unaffiliated stated they made the intentional choice to leave early, at an average age of 13 years old. The majority of the individuals surveyed made the intentional decision to leave before reaching adulthood (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). As to why this happens, the study conducted 204 interviews with young people who left the Catholic Church. And while the researchers note that no one silver bullet can be identified, some reasons that were cited: adolescents still believe in Jesus, but think that the
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Catholic Church is muddling in its teachings; a moral life is easier to live outside of the Catholic Church’s dogma, which they see as nonsensical, feelings of freedom without the burden of a religion they feel was *forced* on them; and, struggling with understanding suffering in the world alongside the belief in a loving God (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). For example, one person stated, “[Catholicism] was forced on me as a young child. It was not something that I ever wanted to do. It was just something that we were forced to go to” (McCarty & Vitek, 2018, p. 16). The researchers note that many individuals do not see the connection between Catholicism and ethics or morality (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). From this, young people seem to feel as if the teachings are non-relevant, especially when it comes to living out the virtuous life. As one individual mentioned about their religious education classes (CCD):

I was already distancing myself from the teachings of the Church when I was probably in middle school. There were passages that would come up in CCD, for example, rich people are bad and men should not lie with a man as with a woman. I was always questioning and I would always bring things up. It didn’t quite make much sense to me and I never felt like I was receiving satisfactory answers from my CCD teachers. (McCarty & Vitek, 2018, p. 23)

And, the researchers note, many of the individuals interviewed through this study reported feelings of freedom and relief at finally leaving the Catholic Church—a process, that McCarty and Vitek (2018) note, happens over many years. The researchers state in their executive summary, “they believe they are happier, freer, and more moral without the baggage and burden of a religious practice they feel as been forced on them” (McCarty & Vitek, 2018, p. 12).

McCarty and Vitek send out a cautionary call: some individuals interviewed make up the *almost dones*, or those who are not completely disaffiliated but are not as tied to traditions and Catholic
teachings. These almost dones are just steps, the researchers exclaim, from being dones (McCarty & Vitek, 2018, p. 33).

Yet, some may wonder if it matters. What real impact will youth ministry and Catholic education program improvement have on the lives of adolescents? Well, research is showing that religious affiliation is connected to positive outcomes for teens and young adults (e.g., Wright, Frost, & Wisecarver, 1993; Pearce, Little, & Perez, 2003; Cotton, Zebracki, Rosenthal, Tsevat, & Drotar (2006); Laird, Marks, and Marrero, 2011). One example of this research comes in the form of connecting college student experience with religious affiliation. Utilizing the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen, Mooney (2010) looked at the relationship between religion, academic achievement, and college satisfaction. With over 3,000 students at 28 elite colleges and universities, the results were astounding. Two measures of religiosity—attending service at least once a week and on a scale of 1 to 10 observing religious tradition—showed increases in time studying, decreases in time partying, and ultimately were correlated with higher grades and greater college satisfaction (Mooney, 2010). Thus, if individuals are unaffiliated well before college, this could impact academic grades, risk-taking behaviors, and satisfaction at school.

Not only with success at school, but affiliation with a religious community matters for overall health and well-being for adolescents (e.g., Wright et al., 2003; Smith, 2003). Regarding church attendance and participation, the Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behaviors survey from RespecTeen, a program sponsored by the Lutheran Brotherhood, polls adolescents on various domains, including internal and external promotive factors, such as family support and motivation, risk behaviors, stress, and prosocial interactions (Benson, 1990; Donahue & Benson, 1995). In this survey, three questions focus on religiosity: average weekly hours spent attending religious services and programs; regularity of participation, and the importance of religion to
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daily life. With over 250,000 surveys taken, researchers found that religious attendance and belief of importance correlated with prosocial behaviors (Donahue & Benson, 1995). Caring for the poor and needy and volunteerism is important for overall health and well-being (Post, 2005). For instance, volunteerism has been linked to decreasing depression and anxiety and tied with increases of well-being and happiness (Musick & Wilson, 2003; Schwartz, Meisenholder, Ma, & Reed, 2003; Pressman, Kraft, & Kross, 2015). In fact, the Commission on Children at Risk (2003) found that helping behaviors helps to decrease depression rates specifically in adolescence. Not surprisingly, volunteerism and altruistic behavior also link to happiness and well-being into adulthood (Dulin & Hill, 2003; Kim & Morgü, 2017; Liang, Krause, & Bennett, 2001; Lum & Lightfoot, 2005; Midlarsky & Kahana, 1994). Thus, if the habits are cultivated early on, young people who continue to serve and care for others can experience well-being effects into adulthood. Religious attendance and practice were also two of the strongest factors related to lower rates of suicidal ideation and attempts, positing that church attendance and engagement are protective factors against depression (Donahue & Benson, 1995). Additionally, religion was connected to lower risk-taking behaviors, such as drinking and illicit substance use, important for the health and well-being of adolescents (Donahue & Benson, 1995). And these factors, can be explained by not only family values, but also participation in positive religious communities at large (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Smith, 2003). So, it appears that participation in a religious community of faith matters in terms of well-being. Thus, a decline in Catholic youth affiliation and participation in religious communities could have disastrous effects on the well-being of youth and on through adulthood. Therefore, to promote human thriving amongst Catholic adolescents, the emphasis of this paper is to use both theory and science to address the two identified underlying issues: (1) an over-dependence on duty ethics and (2) a lack of
issue one: heavy reliance on duty ethics

normative ethics, or the practical understanding of right and wrong behavior, helps individuals understand how to live (fieser, 2019). in this realm of ethics, fieser notes, individuals adopt a system of beliefs that guides moral behavior. underneath the umbrella concept of normative ethics, three ethics theories, or strategies, exist: virtue, duty, and consequentialist ethics. to begin, virtue theories are about developing good character (fieser, 2019). virtue ethics posits that through this development of foundational virtues, one understands how to make moral decisions and live one’s life towards the good (fieser, 2019). alternatively, fieser suggests duty theories attribute right and wrong behaviors to obligations individuals have as human beings. these encompass duties to self, god, and others. duty theories include the rules and laws set out to denote right from wrong behaviors and actions, regardless of consequences (fieser, 2019). for example, it is wrong to steal even if it provides some sort of financial benefit to the thief. a few famous individuals were proponents of different forms of duty ethics. john locke, for example, proposed that nature mandates all people should not harm another’s right to life, health, liberty, or possessions (fieser, 2019). regarding rights theories, each person’s right relates to the duty of another human being (i.e., one’s right to health means the duty of another to not harm another person). thus, one can see, that the united states declaration of independence falls under rights theories of duty ethics (fieser, 2019).

kant proposed another famous model of duty ethics with the categorical imperative, which essentially boiled all moral acts to one single principle (fieser, 2019). according to fieser, kant believed one of the four versions of the categorical imperative is to treat all people as an end, not as a means to an end. thus, individuals could base all moral decisions on this one
imperative, and if it passes the test, it thus must be a morally good action (Fieser, 2019). For example, helping a neighbor with their garage sale for their own sake would pass Kant’s moral test, but taking a lamp from the sale because it would look good in one’s house would be treating the neighbor as a means to an end, and thus would not pass this universal law. And finally, consequentialist theories state that moral action is judged only based on consequence caused by the action (Fieser, 2019). Underneath consequentialism, an action is deemed moral if the outcome is more positive than negative. Thus, stealing from a bank would be morally correct if the end, essentially, justified the means. Consequentialist ethics is based, then, on purely observable external behavior and results (Fieser, 2019).

While duty and virtues ethics can be seen in the Catholic Church, consequentialist ethics is based on external acts alone, which does not coincide with Catholic moral teaching. According to Pinckaers (1995), St. Thomas Aquinas, a foundational Christian ethicist, was a steadfast proponent of the interior movements of the will as essential to the exterior actions. For Aquinas, every external action was grounded in the interior of the will, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit (Pinckaers, 1995). And these were not two separate concepts but joined together in the one act (Pinckaers, 1995). Aquinas, thus, believed that the most central aspect of Christian morality is the regulation of interior acts of the will (Pinckaers, 1995). Therefore, delineating from consequentialist theories, in Christian morality, the end never justifies the means.

And both duty and virtue ethics are seen in Catholic morality. Teachings around the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17 NABRE), for example, is one form of duty ethics. Alternatively, the Sermon on the Mount and the Jesus’ instruction on the Beatitudes (e.g., “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;” Matthew 5:3 NABRE) centers around the cultivation of virtues like humility, love, and justice. In light of this, Pinckaers
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(1995) argues that a balance is needed in the Catholic Church—one must have the guidance of rules and duties, and yet, also cultivate at the core, virtues like charity and justice. That said, Pinckaers (1995) fears that the pendulum has swung too far into duty and obligation ethics and is forgetting the central importance of virtues towards the good life. He likens this to making obligatory acts of charity every year or ensuring that, as Christians, individuals pray enough just enough times (Pinckaers, 1995). He states that there:

are dangers inherent in a concept of morality that focuses excessively on obligation. We could miss what lies beyond and above obligation, could overlook the life-giving principles of the Gospel such as the power of love to animate all of a Christian’s actions, or the [Jesus’] advice to ‘pray always’. (Pinckaers, 1995, p. 16)

And these foundational virtues of love and justice are essential in building flourishing Catholic communities, ones that draw adolescents to participate. Thriving communities cannot function by rules and laws alone, they must be built on virtues. As Jean Vanier (1989), Catholic philosopher, theologian, and founder of the L’Arche communities for the intellectually disabled states:

Too many communities form - or deform - their members to make them all alike, as if this were a good quality, based on self-denial. These communities are founded on laws or rules. But it is the opposite which is important; each person must grow in their gift to build the community and make it more beautiful and more radiant, a clearer sign of the Kingdom. Nor must we look just at the obvious gift, which is maybe linked to a natural talent. There are hidden and latent gifts, much deeper ones, which are linked to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to love. They too must flower. (p. 51)
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From the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5-7 NABRE), considered the New Law, Jesus would probably agree (Pinckaers, 1995). These Beatitudes are the foundation of Jesus Christ’s teaching on how his followers must act and is the central principle to St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas’ moral teachings (Pinckaers, 1995). Aquinas proposed that each beatitude highlights that all exterior actions find their cause in interior movements. For example, when Jesus states, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied (Matthew 5:6 NABRE), according to Aquinas the interior movement is one towards justice and fairness, and when one leads with these virtues, they will find peace (exterior consequence). For Aquinas, his ethics rested foundationally on virtues, and secondarily on precepts or law (Pinckaers, 1995). He believed that virtues regulate the interior actions, which then are molded by rules and guidelines, which were more concerned with exterior actions (Pinckaers, 1995). And, as virtues increase, according to Aquinas, the need for rules and law decreases (Pinckaers, 1995). This New Law is considered the law of freedom because as individuals hone their virtuous dispositions, the less law is needed, increasing the individual’s freedom (Pinckaers, 1995). That said, Aquinas does think laws are important, especially in the beginning stages of virtue development as they act as guardrails (Pinckaers, 1995). And while Pinckaers does acknowledge that living life by the law can lead to a good life, as many great saints were able to live this way, he questions if this is the central core to Christian ethics, or if the field is overlooking other important facets, such as virtues. This is echoed in the longings of youth, stating a discrepancy between the teachings at Church and the teachings of Jesus (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). In fact, half of the respondents surveyed mentioned that the Catholic Church’s “rules and judgement approach” was important to their final decision to leave (McCarty & Vitek, 2018, p. 43). Young people who feel as if attendance and engagement are forced may be uncovering this heavier reliance on duty and
obligation ethics, one that is cautioned by Pinckaers (1995) and Vanier (1989). A re-balancing may be in order.

**Issue Two: Lack of Relational Connection**

Positive relationships and high-quality connections with others are essential to positive youth development and increasing subjective well-being (Park, 2004). And, it is not just the presence of a relationship that matters. According to Barrera (1986), social support can be seen in three ways: 1) the size of the teenager’s social support, 2) the support the teenager believes they are receiving (enacted) and 3) the perception for future social support. Using these distinctions, Taylor et al. (2004) theorized that actual support may not be as important as perceived support, as sometimes the actual support is unaligned. This makes sense, as Armsden and Greenberg (1987) also found that the perceived quality of parent and peer interaction dictated psychological well-being. When young people see their connections as strong, positive, and secure, they are more likely to have greater mental health than adolescents who do not see their relationships as stable. These researchers found that adolescents who defined themselves as securely attached in their relationships saw greater satisfaction with self, greater outreach to social support, and less psychological stress (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987).

Thus, the size of the friend network on Facebook is not necessarily indicative of positive relationships. Perceptions and beliefs about one’s connections are what really matters. Helping young people to form healthy, supportive relationships and improve their perceptions of those relationships is key. Taking this research into account, Chu, Saucier, and Hafner (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of social support, perceived support, and well-being to more deeply understand the connection between adolescent relationships and well-being. Again, they found
across studies that social support correlated with self-concept and positively perceived support aligned with greater well-being for young people.

When taking the importance of relationships into account, there is no surprise, that a lack of relational connection to the Church would accompany a decline in religious affiliation. Furthermore, this lack of relational connection is also inversely mirrored by the rise in depression and anxiety in adolescents. Popularized in media articles and news stories, over the past few decades, America has seen a rise in depression and anxiety disorder rates, especially amongst teenagers and young adults. In fact, according to Twenge, Cooper, Duffy, and Binau (2019), drawing from data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health, major depressive episodes rose 52% from 2005 to 2017 in young people ages 12-17 and was even higher at 63% increase in young adults, aged 18-25. Also present was a rise in suicidal ideation, with a 71% increase for those aged 18-25 but significantly drops for individuals after age 26 (Twenge et al., 2019). Like depression and suicide, rates of anxiety diagnosis have also been increasing over the past 10 years. According to the 2018 Children’s Mental Health Report from the Child Mind Institute, practitioners found a 17% increase in diagnoses of anxiety related disorders in children and young adults.

But is this rise in anxiety and depression actually occurring, or is it just due to other factors like better testing, more awareness, and greater social desirability? Twenge et al. (2010) set out to answer these questions through a meta-analysis of psychiatric symptoms from diverse data sets, ranging from 1938 to 2007. In their analysis, using a time-lag approach which controls for confounding factors like age, they concluded that the current generation of adolescents is, in fact, a standard deviation higher in reports of mental health disorders like depression, paranoia, and psychopathic deviation than their older generational counterparts (Twenge et al., 2010).
Additionally, the researchers controlled for social desirability bias (i.e., the tendency to answer questions that would be favorably viewed by others), and they still found significant increases over the almost seventy years of data (Twenge et al., 2010). And with this in mind, the 2018 *Children’s Mental Health Report* also noted that less than 1% of youth seek support in the first year of diagnosis, making it challenging to treat. That said, the report also notes that less than 1% of youth seek support in the first year of diagnosis, making it challenging to treat. Anxiety disorders have been linked to depression, failure at school, and alcohol and drug abuse (Child Mind Institute, 2018). Without answers, young people may turn towards these more destructive pathways (e.g., drugs, etc.) to alleviate this burden.

This staggering increase affecting the Millennial (those born after 1980) and *iGen* (those born after 1995) generations has been correlated with many different causes. One of these, the researchers note, is social media (Twenge et al., 2019). Developmentally, teenagers are more concerned with peer approval and influence than older individuals (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007), and social media may be exaggerating these notions (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, & Prinstein, 2018). And, as the social media *crisis* may hint at, positive relationships are not only essential for all individuals but especially for adolescents. As seen from individuals like Heather and John, adolescents lack connections to their faith communities and relationships with caring adults. One pathway towards increased well-being may lie within helping young people through deeper enacted and perceived relationship to self, others, and God.

**The Solution: The Call to Holiness, The Call to Happiness**

Considering this reality, how must the Catholic Church respond? This is not a new issue. Coinciding with other Christian ethicists and philosophers like St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, in 1988, St. John Paul II, then head of the Catholic Church, put forth an
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apostolic exhortation entitled, “Christifideles Laici” where he called everyone in the Church, including youth (not just clergy), to holiness. The pope encouraged all peoples of the world in their vocations and pathways towards the divine in this “universal call to holiness” (Pope John Paul II, 1988, section 16). Contrary to misconceptions, holiness is not reserved only for the elite. Anyone, and everyone, can live their calling to become holy, virtuous saints. Often sainthood can feel daunting. It feels that saints like St. Teresa of Calcutta, more commonly known as Mother Teresa, are (quite literally sometimes) positioned on pedestals in the Church. This distant notion of sainthood can feel out of reach for teenagers. And yet, St. John Paul II tapped into this idea, calling all Catholics to find fulfillment by living out the holy, saintly life (Pope John Paul II, 1988).

As stated earlier, for Catholics, this spiritual destination takes on the pursuit of sainthood. Saints are considered moral pillars in the Catholic Church. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB, 2019c), saints are individuals in heaven (recognized or not) who have achieved perfect union with God for living virtuous lives. Deceased individuals who are formally considered for sainthood go through a rigorous process of canonization, or declaration of sainthood (USCCB, 2019c). Through this process, the Church looks at two elements on route to declaring saints: martyrdom and living a virtuous life (USCCB, 2019c). During the canonization process, the Vatican will dive into how this individual lived out heroic virtue during their lifetime (USCCB, 2019c).

One key thing to note here: the destination, and even more importantly, the perception of the destination, is essential. Regarding the psychology of religion and spirituality, Pargament (1999) and Pargament and Mahoney (2017) note that each search for the sacred contains two elements: the journey and the destination. The journey, or pathway, is construed by relationships,
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experiences, beliefs, and practices that lead individuals towards their most valued goal (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). And this most valued goal, when thinking about the spiritual journey, is the *sacred* (Pargament & Mahoney, 2017). Theologian, Paul Tillich (1957/2001) proposes that spiritual strivings are considered ultimate concerns (versus personal or current concerns), which means these goals have the highest value, focus one’s life, and call for total submission in hopes of ultimate fulfillment. And while Pargament and Mahoney (2017) note that the sacred can take on many different forms, for Catholics, this spiritual striving can look like sainthood and virtuous connection with God. These destinations, Pargament and Mahoney (2002) argue are pivotal, as they can be both positive and negative for individuals, impacting their well-being.

Unfortunately, for example, Pargament and Mahoney (2017) note that individuals can take on unhealthy sacred destinations through *small god* or perceptions, which are limiting conceptions of God or substituting God for other objects, relationships, etc. Having a small god perception involves having a very limited concept of God, typically a god who has a defined role like being a strict policeman or gentle grandfather, but not a god who encompasses and surpasses all human potential and strengths (Pargament, 2011; Phillips, 1952). Pargament (2011) notes that it is during adolescence when individuals are most susceptible to these small god images, as this stage of life typically marks the end of formal religious education for teens and can be a challenging time to navigate spiritual relationships solo. This small god perception can lead to anger and distress, as these boxed-in versions of God cannot support the broad range of human potential and challenges (Pargament, 2011).

Often in the wake of a limiting image of God, individuals will and search for other substitutes to fill the spiritual gap thus creating a false god (Pargament, 2011). For example,
alcoholism, self-absorption, or food can divert an individual’s attention when God seems far-away, distant, or punishing (Pargament, 2011). As Pargament (2011) notes, individuals can become destructive towards themselves when these false gods become the focus. He underlines the potential pitfalls when attributing the sacred to objects and relationships because they may evolve from a healthy manifestation of God but may eventually evolve to seeing them as God. This borders idolatry, or the worship of physical or non-physical objects as god, and can set up individuals for distress, especially when these objects or people turn out to have limitations (Pargament, 2011). Thus, it is important for teens to have a healthy spiritual relationship with God, and youth ministry programs are perfectly positioned to help adolescents connect with a healthy image of the divine.

When one does have a healthy image and connection with God, achieving sainthood as a destination in itself can still become a stumbling block for a few (Exline & Rose, 2013). When one cultivates virtue and attempts to live the saintly life, inevitably one will fall short and must deal with sin and weakness (Exline & Rose, 2013). And, when moral failings occur, some individuals may take to self-flagellation or rumination which can lead to what researchers term low spiritual self-efficacy, or the belief that they cannot improve (Exline & Rose, 2013). Thus, individuals must have healthy perceptions of their goals, especially that of sainthood. The pathway towards sainthood is not easy and will include moments of suffering, and yet is attainable.

Regarding the connection between personal well-being and sainthood, St. John Paul II seems to be on to something. According to Pargament, Wong, and Exline (2016), researchers in spirituality, religion and psychology, the word holy has its roots in the Old English word halig, meaning wholeness, happiness, and health. From this, it seems that the etymologist might
connect the call to sainthood as a call to happiness, but is it true? Will becoming more saintly mean also becoming happier for Catholic adolescents? Adolescents want to know. They have heard time and time again, living as a saint is fulfilling…but…is it? A turn to modern science may help to illuminate this very question: is the saintly life, a happy life?

**Adolescents and The Call to Holiness**

Recently, the Catholic Church has been challenged to a greater emphasis on youth. In a recent papal letter entitled “Christus Vivit,” the Holy Father Pope Francis (2019) speaks directly to adolescents and individuals who counsel and work with teenagers. In his letter, he starts with God’s love and recognition of adolescents’ importance and dignity with examples from the Bible and young saints. For example, Pope Francis mentions the Old Testament figure, Joseph, who has a young boy, found favor with God amongst all of his older brothers and was given a royal throne (Francis, 2019, para. 6). Later, Pope Francis dedicates an entire section to uplifting young saints and moral pillars (Francis, 2019, para. 49-63). He depicts the virtues of St. Francis of Assisi, practicing humility before God, and St. Joan of Arc, who courageously fought for her faith (Francis, 2019, para. 52-53). Through these and other adolescent saints, Pope Francis gives rise to the greatness of God’s special love for teenagers with a call of holiness for young people everywhere. He emphasizes these examples to show adolescents the vast array of pathways towards holiness (Francis, 2019). He encourages them towards holiness by stating:

You can become what God your Creator knows you are, if only you realize that you are called to something greater. Ask the help of the Holy Spirit and confidently aim for the great goal of holiness. In this way, you will not be a photocopy. You will be fully yourself. (Francis, 2019, para. 107)
These examples relate to a positive psychology focus on mattering, which Prilleltensky (2016) defines as having two aspects: individuals feel valued and that they add value. In his statement to young people, Pope Francis (2019) is showing through Biblical exemplars that the youth matter to God, and each young person is called to serve the world authentically. Thus, God sees the value of young people and recognizes that they add unique value. In fact, Pope Francis (2019) notes that young people mattered especially to Jesus, quoting him, “the greatest among you must become like the youngest” (Luke 22:26, New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, para. 14). He challenges the Catholic Church to recognize the unique mission of every young person, stating, “young people are not meant to become discouraged; they are meant to dream great things, to seek vast horizons, to aim higher, to take on the world, to accept challenges and to offer the best of themselves to the building of something better” (Francis, 2019, para. 15). Therefore, Pope Francis uplifts the notion of adolescence and encourages all to do the same. And to teenagers, the Pope directs these words: “if you have lost your inner vitality, your dreams, your enthusiasm, your optimism and your generosity, Jesus stands before you…and urges you…‘Young man, I say to you, arise!’” (Luke 7:14 New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, Francis, 2019, para. 20).

In his challenge towards the youth, Pope Francis (2019) encourages them to follow the example of Jesus, who was a young person just like themselves. He states, “this [involves] growing in relationship to the Father [God], in awareness of being a part of a family and people, and in openness to being filled with the Holy Spirit, and led to carry out the mission that God gives them, their personal vocation” (Francis, 2019, para. 30). In this, the Pope encourages teens and adolescents to grow in relationship to God, self, and others, while recognizing the gifts of the Spirit, or their strengths. For he states to the youth:
Jesus does not teach you, young people, from afar or from without, but from within your very youth, a youth he shares with you. It is very important for you to contemplate the young Jesus as presented in the Gospels, for he was truly one of you, and shares many of the features of your young hearts. (Francis, 2019, para. 31)

Pope Francis goes on to name several virtues exemplified in the young Jesus: forgiveness, compassion, courage, and love. Thus, adolescents are called to recognize their own attributes and strengths that are reflected in Jesus and live out their call to holiness.

Not only adolescents, but Pope Francis (2019) encourages all Catholics to also “reflect Jesus Christ” (para. 41). He challenges the Church to recognize the plight of young people, who do not feel like the Catholic Church is significant in their lives, by becoming more like Jesus (Francis, 2019). Instead of denying the critiques of adolescents, Pope Francis empathizes with the many reasons why teens today are leaving the Church: financial and sexual scandals, unresponsive clergy, unprepared homilies, and passive participation (Francis, 2019). And, Pope Francis illuminates that while adolescents may not be enthralled with the Church, teens are engaged and attentive to Jesus Christ. The Jesus he encourages all Catholics to become is like Jesus, the young person. Pope Francis (2019, para. 13) mentions that St. Paul, a great early teacher in the Christian church, challenges Christians to put on this young self, which is defined as wearing the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, and forgiveness. This coincides with his call later for deeper renewal in the Catholic Church (Francis, 2019, para. 35-38). He states, that in order for the Catholic Church to become young, she must return to the core, and “dare to be different, to point to ideals other than those of this world, testifying to the beauty of generosity, service, purity, perseverance, forgiveness…pursuit of justice…love for the poor.”
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(Francis, 2019, para. 35-36). And, following this, he encourages everyone to practice the virtues of humility and love, truly living out the teachings of Jesus (Francis, 2019). Powerfully, Pope Francis is calling all Catholics to become more youth-like and practice basic virtues.

From this urging, Church leaders, youth ministers (i.e., individuals who direct and run adolescent faith formation programming at a Catholic church), and Catholic educators may need to shift course. As seen earlier, young people feel disconnected and disengaged religiously and spiritually. Teens like Heather and John are not finding youth ministry or Catholic education transformative. According to Amanda George, coordinator of Catholic youth and young adult ministries in San Francisco, the “way youth ministry has been done isn’t working,” adding that in light of the current diaspora from the faith, young people are looking for different avenues to spirituality—the structured youth ministry environment does not seem to be supporting this (Smith, 2018, para. 22). In fact, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2019d), marked three challenges facing youth ministry today that must be addressed: the culture which may be harming rather than helping adolescent well-being, deficiency of development from family, school, and church communities, and programs that lack depth and relevance. Ironically, as this paper will discuss, one way to improve Catholic youth ministry programs and positive relationships may be to return to the basics: harkening back thousands of years ago to the early Greeks and ancient Church Fathers, only with a modern twist.

Virtue, Holiness, and Happiness

Aristotle’s World: Virtue and Eudaimonia

Over 2000 years ago, beginning with the Greeks, the notion of happiness, well-being, and the good life was thoroughly examined. Ethics, or the study of how human beings are to live, was at the epicenter of Greek philosophical life (Fieser, 2019). Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle
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wrestled with questions like, “What is the purpose of human life?” and “How must human beings fulfill that purpose?” For Aristotle, human beings do things for the sake of another, and happiness ultimately was the end of all human aims (Melchert, 2002). But, the modern popularized notion of happiness is not how Aristotle defined this end goal. To him, the good life was not a life lived for mere pleasure alone, but for eudaimonia, or more closely related to well-being or flourishing (Melchert, 2002). Happiness is more than merely a feeling; it is a way of being. This is a sharp distinction from hedonics, or the search for happiness derived from pleasure. And happiness goes beyond amusement and fame, in which, Aristotle points out, many people believe happiness to lie (Melchert, 2002). No, Aristotle posits a different outlook towards happiness, or eudaimonia. For this ancient Greek philosopher, true happiness is obtained in the ultimate fulfillment of a purpose. For example, Aristotle notes that flute players will be happy when they are playing excellently. Or take an inanimate object, like coffee maker. If it is a good coffee maker, then it will make cup of excellent tasting brew (Melchert, 2002). And thus, everything to reach the good must perfect its original function. Melchert (2002) summarizes that Aristotle believed that what makes human beings human is the soul. And to attain the good life, individuals must seek excellence in the soul, which Aristotle calls virtue, making true happiness possible. It is not enough to just function at the status quo. For Aristotle, true happiness is derived when human beings are pursuing their unique function: excellence of the soul.

This leads Aristotle to point out that the happy life is an active life. He states, “happiness is an activity of soul in accord with excellence” (Melchert, 2002, p. 191). Happiness is not something given to an individual; one must intentionally seek out excellence and take action to obtain it. For example, winning the lottery may bring material wealth, but it does not guarantee the good life. Likewise, one is not simply given bravery or love, one must make the active choice
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to build these virtues as habits. Aristotle believed that virtues were not emotions or capacity, but rather dispositions towards the good (Melchert, 2002). Thus, through the habit of courage, one may be more disposed towards bravery in a situation. And through the habit of kindness, one may be disposed towards acting generously. To Aristotle, virtue was based on action and choice, not mere happenstance or feeling (Melchert, 2002). One is not brave, because one feels brave but because one acted bravely.

Thus, while human beings have a capacity for good, virtue is not given, it is learned and practiced (Melchert, 2002). By performing virtues, one can build towards more virtues. For as Aristotle states, “We acquire the know-how by actually doing. For example, people become builders by actually building, and the same applies to lyre players. In the same way, we become just by doing just acts” (Aristotle, N.E., 2.1, as cited in Melchert, 2002). And the more one builds towards virtues, the more they become habitual. Melchert (2002) denotes this as the virtuous circle. This is the ideal, to create habits of virtue so much so that it becomes automatic. Ultimately, this automaticity makes virtuous actions easier. As the late 20th century philosopher, William James (1892/1984) teaches, habit is the nature of an object’s plasticity towards an outward force and gives examples such as a paper once folded is easier to fold, or an old used lock is easier to unlock. And, as James (1892/1984) notes, habits allow for ease, less fatigue, and greater accuracy. Such is true with virtue--the more one practices kindness intentionally, the easier it becomes to be kind. And finally, James (1892/1984) also argues that habits allow for the freedom of attention: as habits become more automated, less conscious attention must be used. So, not only does the habit of virtue become easier over time, but it also frees up cognitive resources for greater concentration elsewhere. Aristotle and James have exciting news for
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 teens—if happiness is found through virtue, and virtue can be learned and practiced, this means that the road to happiness is lined with intention and action, rather than happenstance and luck.

Speaking directly to this, James (1892/1984) agrees with Aristotle, emphasizing the importance of learning habits of virtue early in life. He states, “If the period between twenty and thirty is a critical one in the formation of intellectual and professional habits, the period below twenty is more important still for the fixing of personal habits” (James, 1892/1984, p. 133). He later challenges systems of education to focus on helping individuals to learn and put into habit as many good, moral actions as possible, lest individuals get stuck in bad, or poor habit loops (James, 1882/1984). Thus, the case for virtue, youth and education can be made. Youth ministers and Catholic educators take note: the earlier young people work to develop the habits of virtue, the more likely they are to perfect these actions throughout their lifetime.

Finally, while developing virtues like bravery and love are important, one must be cognizant of balance. For Aristotle, too much or too little of a strength proves foolhardy (Melchert, 2002). For example, too much bravery and the individual practices reckless decision making, but too little bravery and cowardice rears its ugly head. Being able to develop and build strengths in balance is essential (Rashid & Seligman, 2018). And for this, Aristotle claimed, one needed practical wisdom (Melchert, 2002). For Aristotle, the strength of wisdom outshone all other strengths. According to Aristotle, this superior virtue allows individuals to know which strength to draw on in specific situations, and how much of the virtue to use in any situation (Melchert, 2002). For Aristotle, one must rationalize the mean between two extremes, and act accordingly. Without reason, one may not know how much of the strength to use. Schwartz and Sharpe (2006) remind individuals that Aristotelian philosophy posits that strengths are interdependent, and one cannot lean too heavily on some and lack development with others. This
imbalance does not lead to eudaimonia (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). For example, when faced with situations with no clear answers, such as answering a friend’s question, “Does this dress make me look bad?,” one must reason whether to lean into honesty or kindness. According to Schwartz and Sharpe (2006), both routes will impact personal well-being and the well-being of others. And thus, Aristotelian practical wisdom becomes the ultimate virtue for living a balanced, virtuous life.

**Aristotle and Catholicism: Call to Eudaimonia and Virtue Ethics**

Many similarities exist between the Aristotelian notion of virtue-based eudaimonia and Catholic teaching on living a joyful and happy life. Like the Greeks, Catholic Christian tradition teaches that a life of virtue is the pathway towards the good life. And, also, developing virtue is an active choice. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), virtues are described as “habitual and firm dispositions to do the good” (1993, para. 1803). Thus, a virtuous person not only desires to act for the good but also gives the best of her or himself habitually. And, as St. Gregory of Nyssa declared, “the goal of a virtuous life is to become [more] like God” who is all good (CCC, 1993, para. 1803). Thus, not only are virtues an essential part of living the good life for self and others, but they also help individuals to fulfill the universal call to holiness: becoming more like God.

One influential thirteenth-century Catholic theologian and philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas, was heavily influenced by Aristotelian concepts and ideas. Like Aristotle, Aquinas also placed virtue at a central place in his philosophy (Porter, 2012). Aquinas defined virtue like his predecessor, St. Augustine, in that virtue is a good state of the mind, one that aids individuals in living a righteous life, but only comes from God (Porter, 2012). That said, he caveats that this is only inclusive of the virtues that are given directly from God, and as for the human virtues,
Aquinas defined these as stable dispositions of the will, intellect or passions that encourage individuals to act in one way rather than another (Porter, 2012). These dispositions help individuals build towards the good life, for like Aristotle, Aquinas, too, believed that human beings seek the good in moral perfection (Porter, 2012). Combining Aristotle’s teachings of eudaimonia with Christian theology, Aquinas proposed that a human being’s telos, or one’s aim in life, is for perfection, or the fullest possible development of human capacities and dispositions (Porter, 2012). And for Aquinas, virtue is perfection of the soul (Porter, 2012).

And, like Aristotle, Aquinas proposed that happiness is the end goal of human existence (Davies, 2012). Like Aristotle, Aquinas defined happiness beyond mere pleasure or momentary delight. Aligned to eudaimonia, Aquinas believed happiness to mean the totality of a well-lived life, but unlike his Greek counterpart, broke this up into two distinct terms: felicitas and beatitudo (Davies, 2012). Felicitas is a Latin phrase that means happiness enjoyed before death, while beatitudo means happiness that comes from the union with God after life on earth (Davies, 2012). Felicitas can be understood as earthly happiness, to which Aquinas believed to be good but imperfect (Davies, 2012). Beatitudo, on the other hand, was found beyond death, when individuals found perfect union with the Creator (Davies, 2012). That said, to live a happy life, according to Aquinas, was to live the virtuous life (Davies, 2012). This decidedly connects with his Greek counterpart, believing that the perfection of the soul ultimately leads to a well-lived life. And, further, he connects virtuous action with both types of happiness. For felicitas, Aquinas proposes that human beings live out their natural virtues, or the cardinal virtues, due to human-oriented and intentional action (Porter, 2012). As for beatitudo happiness, Aquinas taught that this was only possible through God’s intercession with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (Porter, 2012). These will be discussed more in depth later, however, something to note is
that one difference from Aristotle is that Aquinas believed happiness was due to both human and divine action and interaction. Thus, relationship with God is essential to living a happy life.

Another similarity to Aristotle, Aquinas believed that human reason ruled the day. For Aquinas, human beings act intentionally, with reason, for things that are good, attractive, and desirable (Davies, 2012). And, while he recognizes that humans may act unintentionally sometimes (e.g., accidental movements, etc.), Aquinas underscores that human action always intentionally moves one towards happiness (Davies, 2012). Remember that Aristotle believed that for a thing to function well, it must fulfill its purpose (Melchert, 2002). To this, Aquinas agrees: all things seek their own perfection and fulfillment of their species-defining power, to which he defined human perfection to lie in rationality, or reason (Davies, 2012). Thus, when humans are exercising their rational capacity, they have greater ability to move towards their ultimate fulfillment and purpose.

Considering the field of ethics, both Aristotle and Aquinas fall under the larger umbrella of normative ethics, or the practical understanding of right and wrong behavior. This science of ethics helps individuals to understand how to live (Fieser, 2019). Within normative ethics, several ethical theories exist on how to live out human life. For example, virtue ethics claims that through the development of character strengths such as love, kindness, open-mindedness and justice, human beings will understand how to access the good life (Fieser, 2019). The foundation of virtue ethics is a belief in human potential and human development. Ethicists that align theories living towards virtue propose that by focusing on developing and growing the good, one will ultimately have the skills to choose the right ways to live (Fieser, 2019). This is opposed to duty, or obligation ethics, which marks the need for laws to illuminate for individuals right from wrong (Fieser, 2019). Duty ethics equates to obligations to God, self, and society, guiding
individuals on how to live out the good life through statues. Thus, under duty ethics, selecting the right path is guided by law and moral checklists.

According to the issues above, young people are leaving the Catholic Church today feeling that practices are forced, the Church is too often focused on obligation and non-relevant to their lives and the life of Jesus. Teenagers are choosing to unaffiliate and leave, seeking happiness elsewhere (McCarty & Vitek, 2018). This is the reason Pope Francis (2019) challenges the Church to become more like Jesus, especially in its practice of virtue. It is not hard to see why young people feel less compelled in their call to holiness today, especially if it rings of obligation. However, what youth may not understand is that the call to holiness is a call to the virtuous life, which, as one will see, leads towards happiness. Perhaps an ethical re-focus is in order.

The Modern Twist: What Science Has to Say about Eudaimonia and Virtue

Like their Greek and Catholic counterparts, Peterson and Seligman (2004), in their groundbreaking handbook and classification of virtues, posit that virtues are the “bedrock of the human condition,” and through these strengths, humans can access the good life that these philosophers and saints have long spoken of (p. 4). Through a modern, scientific lens, their study and research on virtue empirically answers the original questions of philosophers like Aristotle, such as “What is the good of a person?” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 10). Curious about the claim of virtue and eudaimonia, these researchers sought to quantify and study the virtues through validated measures, scientifically probing the claim that virtues lead to happiness and fulfillment. However, prior to testing and measuring, how did these researchers identify virtuous characteristics? They scoured various cultural, religious, and philosophical traditions to theoretically isolate the virtues that were ubiquitous across the world (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, &
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Seligman, 2005). In their exploration, they looked at Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Athenian philosophy, and Islam, to find the most universal and commonly represented virtues. They found that six virtues were present across these various religious and cultural traditions: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). And, regarding Christian and Catholic virtue, Dahlsgaard, Peterson, and Seligman (2005) state much of the research came from the *Summa Theologiae*, St. Thomas Aquinas’ writings about morality and virtue. Thus, the scientific study of virtues and strengths has a direct link to ancient Catholic teaching.

This research led to the creation of a common language around overarching virtues and sub-virtues, more commonly called *character strengths* in this literature, helping to guide scientific research around what constitutes the good life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As Park and Peterson (2009a) note, the virtues are the important concepts that philosophers and theologians discussed, and the character strengths are the psychological mechanisms that help to build towards virtue. Or, as Niemiec (2013) refers to the strengths as *psychological ingredients*. This common language research project was operationalized through funding from the Manuel D. and Rhoda Mayerson Foundation 2000, creating the VIA Classification of Character Strengths and the VIA Inventory of Strengths (formally known as Values in Action; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Niemiec, 2013; VIA Institute, 2019a, 2019b). Additionally, a survey for adolescents was also established, called the VIA Inventory for Strengths (or VIA-Youth; Park & Peterson, 2006a). As Niemiec (2019) denotes, the ancient word *via* is the Latin term for *the way*, and this is apropos; the VIA Survey acts as a connector between research and practice. While this research will be discussed more in depth later, essentially, this push for a universal measurement of character strengths and global virtues allows individuals to use empirical data to
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finally answer questions like: was Aristotle and Aquinas right to propose that virtues are the pathway towards happiness? What does science say about who leads happy lives? The good news is that this contemporary empirical research is agreeing with the Ancients.

Connecting Virtue to Science: Positive Psychology

History of Positive Psychology

To better comprehend the connection between virtue and science, an understanding of positive psychology is helpful. In 1998, Martin E. P. Seligman took the stage to announce his inaugural presidential speech for the APA, or the American Psychological Association. During these speeches, presidents focus on their upcoming agenda and what will mark the legacy of their time as president. Seligman (1999) dedicated his speech to a new (or as one might see, old) focus in psychology. Seligman spoke about the advances in the field over the past 70 years, and the current strong focus on the disease-based model. Instead of a model focus on “repairing damage” he poised the domain of psychology to shift gears, including a focus on “nurturing…human strengths” (Seligman, 1999, p. 561). Thus, for too long psychology had focused on the negative and what’s wrong with people but failed to appreciate, research, and study the positive, or what’s right with life and people to prevent mental illness and promote individual and societal flourishing. Seligman (1999) announced that his plan as president was to find support and funding for this new field of positive psychology, that would help to empirically and scientifically understand how to promote human growth and potential, especially helping adolescents develop these traits. At this time, several researchers across the country were engaging in strengths-based work but with little collective force. This speech sparked the movement to pave the way for a new encompassing field of positive psychology.
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In the millennial introductory article to the *Journal of American Psychologist*, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) illuminated the steep, but imperative charge to create a field of positive psychology: to scientifically study what makes the good life, in hopes of turning around institutions headed towards materialistic and ethical disaster. Urging the field of psychology to begin to document through empirical research this important mission, they highlighted three key essential areas: positive subjective experience, positive traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). By focusing more research on how to create thriving communities and individuals, the field of positive psychology was formed to balance the approach to mental health. Never meant to replace traditional psychology, “the aim of positive psychology is to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). In this call to psychologists, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) proposed a return to empirically studying strengths and virtue, and aligning to the theories of human will, choice, and ability to improve. This millennial issue set the stage for the new, burgeoning field of positive psychology. In it, the three focus areas of subjective experience, traits, and institutions were proposed, with researchers focusing their expertise on happiness, subjective well-being, optimism, strengths, and self-determination within these areas (Diener, 2000; Myers, 2000; Peterson, 2000).

While the scientific study of positive emotions, traits and institutions are relatively new, as readers saw earlier, these concepts are older than old (Myers & Diener, 1995). Ancient Greek philosophers and early Christian ethicists, like Augustine and Aquinas, were obsessed with the notion of the good life and how to attain it. The value of positive psychology is its use of scientific study to test these philosophical theories and illuminate practical pathways towards
eudaimonia. For example, Myers and Diener (1995) looked at this very notion through the subjective well-being scores of women and men, black and white, young and old. Subjective well-being is described as having more positive affect (i.e., emotions), less negative affect, and a sense of life satisfaction (Myers & Diener, 1995). Looking at Subjective Well-Being measurements (Diener, 1994; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985), these two researchers desired to focus on the underpinnings of life satisfaction. For example, they found that age has no noticeable effects on happiness, but gender does (Myers & Diener, 1995). Women were two times as likely to experience mental anguish (i.e., anxiety and depression) than men, while men were five times as likely to experience alcoholism (Myers & Diener, 1995). Regarding money and wealth, Myers and Diener (1995) found that having more money was no guarantee of a happier life. Having the basic necessities (e.g., food, shelter, water) were correlated with higher levels of subjective well-being across the world, but to a point. Passing a certain threshold, more money did not equate to greater levels of subjective well-being (Myers & Diener, 1995). What Myers and Diener did find that was correlated to happiness were measures of self-esteem, personal control, optimism, and extraversion. And, they found that relationships with others matter to increasing subjective well-being, specifically marriage relationships. The more positive the marriage relationship, for example, the greater the level of positive affect and life satisfaction (Myers & Diener, 1995). Likewise, individuals who found flow, or optimal engagement, more often in life, also reported higher levels of life satisfaction (Myers & Diener, 1995).

**PERMA Model on Well-Being**

Following his presidential address, a decade or so later, Seligman (2011) connected positive psychology research in an overarching theory of well-being which includes the following five elements: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and purpose,
and Accomplishment and are collectively referenced as the PERMA model. According to Seligman (2011), all five components are essential in accessing the Aristotelian good life. The argument for including positive in a well-being model began with Barbara Fredrickson’s (2001) Broaden and Build Theory. According to her theory, positive emotions like joy, gratitude, serenity and awe, broaden our scope, helping individuals to form connections to others and stay open to new possibilities (Fredrickson, 2001). In comparison, she has found that negative emotions like anger, despair, and frustration, tend to narrow our focus, disconnecting one from others and opportunities (Fredrickson, 2001). Seligman (2011) draws much on this research in his PERMA model, citing positive emotions as one pathway towards happiness.

Another aspect of the PERMA model is engagement, or flow (Seligman, 2011). This state of “optimal engagement” denotes the experience that one has with deliberately ordered attention, or consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Individuals can self-direct consciousness, and thus have control of their happiness just by changing what they agree to attend to. And as Csikszentmihalyi suggests, individuals who can deliberately order this conscious attention towards a goal often find themselves in deep engagement: an intense, effortless concentration, moving the individual into a feeling of time stopping still and fulfillment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Often, individuals find these moments deeply gratifying and pursue activities that produce flow-like states for their own sake.

Along with engagement, Seligman (2011) highlights the importance of positive relationships in his PERMA model of well-being. Highly associated with positive well-being and life satisfaction, relationships are critical for living the eudaimonic life. Much research, some discussed in detail later, has been conducted on the relationship between connections to others and well-being. The need to connect positively with others is paramount to an individual’s well-
being and happiness. The “M” in PERMA stands for meaning and purpose. Seligman (2011) argues that human beings need meaning, or connection to something beyond themselves, in order to live fulfilling lives. Much of this research began with Victor Frankl’s, *A Man’s Search for Meaning*, his 1963 foundational work on the importance of meaning and purpose to human happiness. In this work, Frankl (1963) exposes the reality of hope and purpose in the midst of challenging and adverse conditions. Through the lens of his experience during the Holocaust, Frankl (1963) so aptly states that man must know the *why* for his existence in order to bear any *how*. Seligman (2011) captures this fourth critical element in his PERMA model, helping others to understand the necessity of moving beyond the self and exercising hope in challenging circumstances. Finally, Seligman (2011) captures the last element of PERMA: accomplishment. According to Seligman, achievement and success for the sheer joy of winning can also bring about happiness and greater well-being.

And, underlying these elements of positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and achievement, is the concept of virtue. As Peterson and Seligman (2004) state, these strengths are the *bedrock* or foundation to thriving. In his book connecting positive psychology and Christianity, *The Gospel of Happiness*, Christopher Kaczor (2015) links PERMA to the Catholic virtues of faith, hope, and love using various research studies. For example, focusing on the virtue of faith, he connects it to positive emotions through studies on religious awe-inspiring moments (Kaczor, 2015). Additionally, Kaczor (2015) connects the Catholic virtue of faith to engagement through actions such as worship, fellowship and prayer, leading individuals to experience *flow-like* states. He also mentions that the virtue of faith underlies positive relationships, especially relationship with God and the Christian love of neighbor (Kaczor, 2015). Concerning meaning, Kaczor (2015) connects faith to the long-term legacy Christians
hope to leave, not just in the short term, but for eternal life with God. Thus, seeing meaning in all actions, allows Christians to put their work into a larger perspective (Kaczor, 2015). And finally, he unites faith and achievements by positing that Christians can find new avenues for accomplishing, like building virtues and works of charity (Kaczor, 2015). And, not only is PERMA connected philosophically to the virtues, but science is also showing this trend as well. For example, in one recent study, Wagner, Gander, Proyer, and Ruch (2018) examined the intersection between character strengths use and PERMA, finding positive connections with all aspects well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment. This next section will dive into one specific PERMA element, positive relationships, more deeply.

**Relationships: An Essential Element**

As one may notice, PERMA includes the essential element of positive relationships. The human need for social connection and friendship has been thoroughly studied by ancient philosophers and modern scientists alike. Positive psychologist, Christopher Peterson (2006), said that positive psychology could be encapsulated in these simple words: “other people matter” (p. 249). Thus, one overarching conclusion is that relationships are essential for well-being. For example, regarding physical health, relationships are essential. As Berkman and Syme (1979) found in a 9-year large longitudinal study on the residents of Alameda, California, individuals who lacked social connections were more likely to die in the follow up than individuals who had greater community connections. In addition, Diener and Seligman (2002) wanted to know what characteristics consistently occurred in *very happy people*. They found that across the board, in the 222 individuals studied, strong social relationships were key to greater subjective well-being (Diener & Seligman, 2002). And, they found that individuals with lower subjective well-being
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had worse than average social relationships (Diener & Seligman, 2002). For teens, this is no
different. Youth spend an inordinate amount of time around their peers, and increasingly, more
and more, online. The need for strong social relationships is important for adolescents, which
leads to the further discussion around the rise in social media use.

Kraut and colleagues (1998) asked the question if the rise in connections via the Internet
would affect social relationships. In a longitudinal study of 169 individuals within the first two
years of receiving connection to the web, these researchers found that more internet use led to
less connections with family members, decrease in social circles, and increases in loneliness and
depression (Kraut et al., 1998). Following this, Kim, LaRose, and Peng (2009) found that
loneliness is both a cause and effect of compulsive internet use. In their study, they found that
individuals who scored higher in loneliness showed to have more associations with compulsive
internet use, hypothesized to compensate for lack of face-to-face social interactions. This
increased use of the internet, in turn, replaced opportunities to form real relationships with others
(Kim et al., 2009). Following this logic, individuals who lack the strength development of
building friendships may turn to the internet to connect with others, potentially leading to greater
social isolation.

That said, not all internet use is leading to depression and isolation. Social media research
has also shown positive correlates to well-being and self-esteem amongst adolescents. For
example, Shaw and Gant (2002) found that through a sample of undergraduates, loneliness and
depression decreased, while feelings of social support and self-esteem increased after anonymous
web-based chat sessions with a partner. This could be attributed to, the researchers note, the fact
that anonymity can form more personal connections in which individuals disclose more about
themselves, that in-person interactions cannot (Shaw & Gant, 2002). Based on these
contradictory studies, it looks as if the internet might not be the causal issue. If not social media and the internet, what may be at the root of depression, loneliness, and anxiety?

This returns the focus to the foundations of virtues, character strengths and relationships. The internet and social media sites are technical tools, and changing or rearranging these tools does not inevitably hit at the route of the issue. Character strength and virtue development (i.e., building love, kindness, social intelligence, and self-regulation) can help teens to use the tools of the internet to build good relationships. The internet is not necessarily the perpetrator. Could developing stronger character strengths and virtues like self-control and kindness open teens to developing better relationships both online and in-person? All this to say, clearly, relationships matter, online or otherwise, and the quality of these relationships can impact adolescent health and well-being. Yet, as noted before, while relationships to self and others are essential, Aquinas posited that happiness also comes from the ultimate relational connection to the divine. So, what does science have to say about that?

The Missing Piece: Spirituality

One aspect that PERMA lacks is the inclusion of spiritual well-being and health. Essential to faith-based communities, religion and spirituality have been increasingly studied in the scientific communities (Miller & Thoresen, 2003), due to their influence across all subsets of society. Miller and Thoresen (2003), in *American Psychologist*, note the Gallup and Lindsey (1999) surveys as one indicator that religion and spirituality are important to most people. In several surveys, Gallup and Lindsay (1999) found that about 95% of the population believes in God or another higher power, a rate that, over the past 50 years, has yet to drop below 90%. Noting this importance, on a broader scale, both spirituality and religion have more and more been of interest to the field of psychology, gathering empirical evidence of their importance for
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thriving in various contexts (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). For example, regarding general well-being, in their research on happy people, Myers and Diener (1995) conclude that religion and spirituality tend to have strong positive correlations with subjective well-being. As they note a Gallup Research Poll (1984), very happy people are also very spiritual people (as cited in Myers & Diener, 1995). Additionally, in the physical health domain, researchers like Brady, Peterman, Fitchett, Mo, and Cella (1999) found that within oncology Quality of Life (QOL) measurements, the essential realm of spirituality was missing. These researchers found over a large (n=1670) sample, that spirituality questions were associated at the same degree as physical well-being within the scale, that this association was unique, and that spirituality was significantly related to enjoyment of life for cancer patients (Brady et al., 1999). Not only is spirituality carving a unique space in physical health environments, like oncology wards, but it is also finding traction within mental health environments. Pargament (2011) and Pargament, Lomax, McGee, and Fang (2014) call psychologists and psychotherapists towards a model of spirituality integrated psychotherapy, noting that spirituality is an essential dimension for clients that has not traditionally found intentional focus in therapy sessions. In addition to health and health care environments, spirituality is also being studied more in the workplace as an essential piece to thriving environments and organizations (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010; Kolodinsky, Giacalone, & Jurkiewicz, 2008). All this to say, spirituality seems to hold strong connection to flourishing.

Yet, as individuals can see with the above construct of PERMA, often well-being models can leave out the spiritual dimension. Ellison (1983) argues that traditional models of well-being deny the human necessity of transcendence. He emphatically argues that the human spirit dimension is separate from the mind and body and is the force that pushes individuals to seek out meaning (Ellison, 1983). And, specifically, meaning directed towards a unique aim. Pargament
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(1999) distinguishes spirituality as the “search for the sacred” (p. 12), which one can see, moves beyond the concept of meaning in models like PERMA, in that it encapsulates meaning and purpose directed towards a specific aim: the sacred dimension. Following this logic, Ellison and Smith (1991) argue that a well-being model without spirituality is a well-being model without \textit{wholeness}. In speaking of the biblical word, \textit{shalom}, which translates to well-being, they state, “shalom…may be viewed as the integral experience of a person who is functioning as God intended, in consonant relationship with Him, with others, and within one’s self (Ellison & Smith, 1991, p. 36). Spirituality, thus, is 1) necessary for well-being and 2) integrated relationships to God, self, and others. This call for inclusion of spirituality is echoed in Pargament, Wong, and Exline’s (2016) concept of eudaimonia as wholeness. These researchers also argue that well-being and fulfillment must include human brokenness and spirituality, as these dimensions are so integral to human flourishing.

Furthermore, an integrated approach to spirituality and well-being is found in Paloutzian and Ellison’s (1982) creation of the Spiritual Well-being Scale (SWB), which empirically measures one’s relationship to God, self, and others. Coinciding with the above, the SWB measures two components: Religious Well-Being, which measures one’s relationship to God, and Existential Well-Being, which measures one’s sense of purpose and satisfaction with life (Ellison, 1983; Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). Thus, integrated in this scale is not only the importance of meaning and purpose, but the essential piece around relational connection to the divine. Using this scale, researchers have found that spiritual well-being is positively correlated with self-esteem, outlook on relationships, and social competence amongst undergraduate students (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982). Regarding adolescents, using the SWB scale, lower rates of depression were significantly association with higher rates of Existential Well-Being and
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Religious Well-Being, and higher beliefs in God (Cotton, Hoopes, & Larkin, 2004). Like Ellison, Fisher (2011) argues that spirituality is the most important domain of health and well-being, as all humans are spiritual beings. His four-domain model of spirituality encompasses all other aspects of well-being and health in the form of relationships, including the essential relationship to God (Fisher, 2010, 2011). Thus, for a whole construct on well-being, spirituality must be included. Meaning and purpose are important, and yet are missing the spiritual dimension and relationship to God. And, as one is starting to see, spirituality can be seen through the lens of relationships. To more fully conceptualize this connection, it will be helpful to first understand more of the background on religion, spirituality and psychology.

Psychology, Religion and Spirituality

The Psychological Perspective

While both spirituality and religiosity have been linked to well-being, research has primarily focused on the latter. According to Kenneth Pargament (1999), clinical psychologist in the field of religion and spirituality, the study of the psychology of religion had for many years, focused on religion and religiousness rather than spirituality. And while he notes that many definitions of religion abound in the field, he posits that religion is a wide-ranging concept, covering multiple dimensions of the field. Included in these meanings is everything ranging from religion as an institution to religion on the individual scale; religion as concrete and religion as abstract; religion as good as well as bad (Pargament, 1999). At the turn of the century, however, Pargament (1999) illuminates that in recent times, religion is being used to depict the institutional, ritual, and organized, while the term spirituality is now being used to focus on the individual, personal and affective (Pargament, 1999). He goes on to propose that spirituality is most used to express the search for meaning, connectedness, unity and transcendence. This
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differs from how religion is used today, as often the personal and elevated is at odds with institutions and constructs. One idea as to why this might be occurring Pargament (1999) notes, is that spirituality may be making up for something that religion seems to be lacking (i.e., putting the personal and spirit back into the institutions). That said, in his early surveys, Pargament (1999) found that many individuals saw no difference in the two terms, with most identifying as “religious and spiritual.” Additionally, he found that almost all individuals identified with being spiritual (Pargament, 1999). More recent surveys have shown that individuals identifying as both religious and spiritual have decreased, while individuals identifying as spiritual but non-religious has increased (Pargament & Mahoney, 2017). Thus, it is imperative that interventions in a religious, cultural context uplift both concepts.

Pargament (1997) defines religion as such: the search for significance in relation to the sacred. This means that when individuals identify as being religious or practice religion, at the very heart, these individuals searching for their significance amongst the sacred. This central meaning system guides individuals to making sense of their worlds. For example, religious beliefs can help individuals cope with stress by reappraising thoughts according to this meaning system (Pargament, 1997; Pargament et al., 2000; Park, 2005). As noted before, differing slightly, Pargament (1999) defines spirituality as the “search for the Sacred” (p. 12). One can see, therefore, that spirituality is not separate, but a part of religion, and in fact, its very heart. His push for the field is to recognize that spirituality is this central core of religion, and, therefore, must be attended to (Pargament, 1999). Regarding Catholicism and Roman Catholic youth, both religion and spirituality must connect. Nurturing religion without the heart of spirituality can mean that rules and structures are devoid of personal connection. And likewise, stimulating the search for the sacred without a clear destination can end with lack of direction. This balance is
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key to any intervention put forth.

**Spiritual Health and Well-Being as Relational Health and Well-being**

And yet, is relationship to the divine the only presupposition to spiritual health and well-being? Just how does one’s search for the sacred occur? What are the components to this journey? One could argue that the journey towards the sacred is lined with relationships, relationships that adolescents seem to be lacking. And while over the past decades various definitions of spiritual well-being have arisen, this paper focuses on defining spirituality through its connections to relationships. An early definition connecting spirituality and relationships in the well-being literature comes from the National Interfaith Coalition on Aging (1975) which celebrated spiritual health as “the affirmation of life in a relationship to God, self, community and environment that celebrates and nurtures wholeness” (as cited in Ellison, 1983, p. 331). These three integral relationships: God, self, and others, appear in various forms in other definitions across the field. Ellison (1983) proposes that spiritual well-being is an interaction between vertical and horizontal dimensions. He theorizes that spiritual well-being is both one’s relational connection to God (vertical) and connection to life satisfaction and purpose (horizontal), which may or may not be religious (Ellison, 1983). Burkhardt (1989) posits harmonious interconnectedness (i.e., balanced relationships to self, others, and God) as an essential part of spiritual well-being, especially when defining it for the nursing field. Zinnbauer et al. (2015) found through survey that “relationship to God” was one of the most often given responses when defining spirituality. Likewise, Dyson, Cobb, and Foreman (1997) in a literature review of the term spirituality, identified self, other, and God and the relationships between them as most integral to definitions across the field.
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With these definitions and theory in mind, Gomez and Fisher (2003) and Fisher (2011), set about to validate a scale for spiritual health and well-being, defining it as a dynamic state in which people live in balance with the following relationships: personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental. The four domains are captured in Table 1.

Table 1

*Four Domains of Spiritual Well-Being*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Domain</th>
<th>Intrapersonal: the individual relationship to self, regarding meaning, purpose and values. Self-awareness, with effect on self-esteem and identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communal Domain</td>
<td>Interpersonal: strength of relationships between others and self. Relates to morality, culture. These relationships are expressed through faith, justice, hope and love of humanity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental Domain</td>
<td>One’s relationship with environment/nature. Includes care for nature, physical, biological. Can illicit wonder, awe and connectedness to environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcendental Domain</td>
<td>One’s relationship with someone or something beyond the person level, transcendent order (i.e., higher being, spirit, God) Connected to the Mystery of the universe, faith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Each of the four aspects of spiritual well-being are interrelated (Fisher, 2010, 2011). Therefore, a positive increase in one, increases in the others. For example, self-awareness in the personal domain will build up connection with others, which will then enhance knowledge of self, impacting the relationship with God (Fisher, 2011). And, while people are scored in each domain, Fisher (2011) posits that individuals may lean towards one or another domain more heavily than the others. This definition of spiritual health and well-being led to a validated scale, the Spiritual Health in Four Domains Index (SH4DI), created to identify each of these aspects of spiritual health separately with an overall score (Fisher, Francis, & Johnson, 2000). This scale allows individuals to understand their spiritual health more completely as relationship to self, others, nature, and God.
Concurring with this notion of spirituality as relationships, Mahoney (2010) specifically highlights a relational spirituality framework for family and spousal relationships. In her work, she designates three important stages to this framework: 1) formation of family relationships, 2) maintenance of the family relationships, and 3) transformation of family relationships. Additionally, Mahoney (2010) posits that this framework highlights three specific mechanisms to integrate spirituality into family and spousal relationships. These three include family members relying on divine relationships, family relationships being imbued with spiritual qualities, and family members relying on spiritual communities (Mahoney, 2010). Ultimately, this relational spirituality model is based on Pargament and Mahoney’s (2017) overall model of spirituality: 1) discovering the sacred, 2) maintaining one’s relationship to the sacred, and 3) transforming one’s relationship to the sacred after struggle or challenge. According to Mahoney (2010), religion, and more importantly, spirituality, help to shape the creation of family (e.g., selecting a spouse, procreating, etc.) and spiritual and religious practices help to maintain spousal relationships over time. Finally, Mahoney (2010) suggests that spirituality can also help to transform distressed marital and familial relationships over time, thus imbedding the spiritual framework into relationships. Again, if spirituality can be seen through the lens of relationships, and stronger relationships lead to greater well-being, then one could assume that deepening spirituality will leads towards greater well-being. From this, it seems as if the call to holiness connects more and more to deepening relational connections to God, self, and others. This may come as surprising news to teenagers, that the pathway towards sainthood is lined with strong, positive relationships. It is to this concept the paper turns to next: connections between virtue, relationships, and well-being.
Positive Relationships and Virtue

Ultimately, like Peterson and Seligman (2004) note, virtue underlies human well-being and thus, is foundational to relational connections. And, if spirituality can be defined at its core as relationships, virtue underlies this also. Going back to ancient Greek philosophy, Aristotle believed that friendship was the key foundational value to all social structures in society (e.g., partnerships, communities, families, etc.; Fowers, 1998). According to Aristotle, friendship is defined by two aspects: 1) having shared ideals and pursuit of the good and 2) wanting for another individual what is good not for one’s own benefit, but for the benefit of the other (Cooper, 1980). Thus, the Aristotelian friend is one who recognizes, pursues and encourages the virtuous life with others. And, while Aristotle recognized that mutual affection is important, he puts virtues above all else in good relationships (Fowers, 1998). Aristotle defined three types of friendships: those that have common benefits, those that have shared pleasure, and those that recognize the excellence and virtue in another (Pawelski & Pawelski, 2018). For Aristotle, all three can lead towards the good, but the third type of friendship is the pinnacle. It can include both benefits and pleasure, but it moves individuals into a deeper connection through virtues and character (Fowers, 1998; Pawelski & Pawelski, 2018). Thus, when teens learn how to recognize, celebrate and encourage virtues in their peers and use their virtues to better others, the relationships will move into this third category, helping individuals to flourish and thrive.

Like Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas proposed that love is the first movement of the will, and the origins of all other movements (Pinckaers, 1995). According to Pinckaers (1995), Aquinas equated friendship with charity, to love an object for its own sake, not the sake of self. So, whether that friendship was directed at God, self, or others, to practice friendship was to practice selfless love. Aquinas firmly believed that without charity, or love, no other virtue was
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truly alive (Pinckaers, 1995). Thus, virtuous relationships according to Aristotle and Aquinas, are foundational to human well-being, flourishing, and excellence. And, as we saw earlier, Fisher’s (2011) model of spiritual well-being revolves around relational connections. He cites that relationship to self, others, nature, and God are essential to holistic well-being, coinciding with these masters of virtue-based ethics.

The field of positive psychology theory is also finding the same trends: virtuous relationships matter. Most of the current research around character strengths interventions and relationships revolves around marriage and long term committed unions (Goddard, Marshall, Olsen, & Dennis, 2012; Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Bareli, 2016). That said, much can be learned from virtue theory within marriage and applied elsewhere. Right now, in the current landscape of marriage therapy and counseling, communication skills are best practice (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley, & Clemens, 1993; Halford, Markman, Kling, & Stanley, 2003). According to Fowers (1998, 2001), however, the good marriage cannot be reduced to mere communication skill improvement. Empirically, for example, Burleson and Denton (1997) found that the communication skill level between distressed and non-distressed married couples, as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) did not significantly differ, thus pointing to more complex mediation models. They did find, however, that negative communication patterns trended in distressed couples, and the researchers point out that this could be due more to “ill will than ill skill” (Burleson & Denton, 1997, p. 897). And yet, traditionally, couples are often counseled to improve their listening and responding skills—teaching the magic bullet to end relationship misery (Fowers 1998, 2001). This approach leans towards the underpinnings of obligation and duty ethics. When relationships are reduced to check lists and formulas, however, deeper meaning alludes actions. Fowers (1998, 2001)
suggests that therapists, counselors and coaches that heavily rely on teaching better communication skills as the antidote to divorce need to rethink the foundations of virtue. Fowers (1998, 2001) puts forth a marital virtue framework that ties marital success and longanimity to foundational virtues like self-restraint, courage, generosity, justice, and judgement. The long-sought after communication skills of non-defensive and active listening, editing, and self-disclosure take a considerable amount of character strengths to attain. Thus, focusing on the technical fixes will not build towards successful unions; instead, couples should focus on building marital virtues as foundational to a good relationship (Fowers, 1998, 2001). This concept of good relationships built on virtue can be extended to any relationship: with friend, teacher, or sibling, making this research relevant to adolescents and young adults. Again, as seen earlier, the internet and communication skills are often the first to funnel blame. This, however, may be fundamentally missing the mark. Foundationally, when individuals have love, generosity, bravery, and hope, these lead to more intimate, committed, uplifting relationships (Fowers 1998, 2001).

Virtue, however, can be intimidating and nebulous. Just what does it mean to develop virtues like love and wisdom? And, does practicing virtue really matter to building stronger relationships? The task can seem daunting, especially to teenagers. Over the last 25 years, positive psychology has sought to break down, illuminate, and study the building blocks of virtue: character strengths. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), the theoretical concepts of virtues are operationalized by the character strengths, to which this next section will illuminate.

Values in Action: Science of Character Strengths and Virtues

After much cross-cultural and cross-sectional research, the resulting VIA Classification
of Character Strengths and the VIA Youth Classification of Character Strengths assumes a virtue ethics perspective on morality (VIA Institute, 2019a). Instead of relying on a moral view based on obligations, the measures focus on developing a well-lived life through the route of clearly defined character strengths and virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). As stated earlier, through the research across various traditions and cultures, six umbrella virtues were identified: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These six virtues consistently present themselves in historical, cultural and religious contexts, which the researchers note imparts some weight to their importance (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). And, according to Peterson and Seligman (2004), character strengths are the mechanisms, or pathways that lead to virtue development, aligning 24 character strengths to the umbrella virtues above. In other words, these positive strengths are the vehicles towards building the once nebulous virtues. It would be wrong to say that love causes the virtue of humanity, but instead, love when exercised is an avenue towards this greater virtue. See Appendix A for a complete list of character strengths and virtues (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a).

Ultimately, this common vocabulary and assessments are essential developments towards improving the practice of virtue. For hundreds of years, character has been woven into the fabric of scouting, youth development programs, education, and church services with much abstractness. And while many would agree that building character is a noble cause, often these efforts lack similar language and assessment to understand effectiveness. It can seem overwhelming to attain good character or virtue with little direction and guidance. With common language and validated measures, however, it is possible to build and develop character with greater concreteness. And, it allows for the scientific study of character, virtue, and happiness.
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Just as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5th Ed.* (*DSM-V*; APA, 2013) assesses and categorizes mental illness in the medical disease model, the classification of character strengths gives light to worthy and honorable human traits that promote thriving mental health (Seligman & Peterson, 2004). Using the structure and learnings of the *DSM-V*, these researchers created a common language for practitioners and clients to use to build towards greater mental health (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rashid & Seligman, 2018). The resulting validated measurement tool, the Values In Action-Inventory of Strengths—or VIA-IS, is a survey which measures the 24 unique character strengths corresponding to one of the six overarching virtues (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). This has additionally been converted to the VIA-IS Youth survey, with user friendly terms for young people (Park & Peterson, 2006b; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Now known simply as the VIA Classification of Character Strengths or the VIA Survey, individuals can find materials and measurement tools free of charge from the VIA Institute on Character (2019a, 2019b). And thus, for teens and those who minister to youth, the concept of virtue becomes clearer through the aligned, measured character strengths.

To be clear, however, one important distinction that Peterson and Seligman (2004) make is that character strengths and virtues are not synonymous with talents and abilities. Talents like impressive piano playing or adept athletic skills are more static and unchangeable than character strengths and virtues. Additionally, character strengths, unlike talent, fall in the moral domain, ultimately affecting ethical outcomes (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). And finally, Peterson and Seligman (2004) in their original discourse surmise that character strengths must be developed through effort and willpower, and unlike talents, cannot be wasted. This is good news for adolescents. In the ever increasingly achievement driven world, youth who lack traditionally
prized talents and abilities, like superstar athletics or whiz-kid intelligence, may feel as if they do not have agency in improving their strengths, and this can have disastrous impacts. Dweck (2008) posits the theory that individuals who believe their traits to be fixed, operate under the guise that no matter how hard they practice, they will never get any better or worse. These individuals have internalized the belief that ability, talent, and intelligence is fixed. Opposed to a fixed mindset, Dweck (2008) proposes some individuals operate under a growth mindset, or belief that ability can be altered and changed through work and effort. For these individuals, ability can be improved and altered. When setting goals, Dweck and Leggett (1988), recognized when children approach goals like performance metrics, asking themselves, “Are my abilities enough for this goal?,” fear of failure, increased helplessness, and lower self-esteem occur in pursuit. These adolescents began to attribute failure to a personality flaw and felt increased negative affect, like anxiety. For example, instead of having failures, these individuals potentially saw themselves as failures. Dweck and Leggett (1988) conclude that when mastery-oriented children, on the other hand, set learning goals, they are more likely to increase effort, asking the question: “What will help to build my mastery and abilities?” These individuals are more likely to persist, showing optimism in the face of difficulties. For example, in observing fixed and growth mindsets in youth, Yeager and Dweck (2012) found that adolescents who believed and were taught that social attributes could be changed, showed less aggression and stress when bullied by peers and increased academic performance. Believing that traits can be improved and changed impacts well-being. Thus, it is important for youth ministers and Catholic educators to echo that adolescents can improve their character strengths through practice and effort.

In addition to the difference between character and talent, Peterson and Seligman (2004)
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denote that strengths, when exercised, uplift others. This means that when one displays a strength like bravery or self-regulation, this causes admiration amongst onlookers, inspiring greater good from others. The researchers posit that there is a contagion effect such that the more one is surrounded by individuals who are kind, gracious, and loving, the more likely one is to grow also in these character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Haidt (2000) describes this as the feeling of *elevation* which is the opposite of disgust: the warm feelings individuals get when witnessing morally excellent behavior. Often, these feelings lead individuals to want to be better themselves (Haidt, 2000). In fact, Algoe and Haidt (2009) found that when individuals watched morally excellent virtues in action, this elevation brought about more kindness and caring towards others.

Related, the researchers similarly note that strengths are found in cultural paragons (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Not only are individuals inspired by strengths displayed in their present relationships, but they are also inspired by historical figures as well as real life and fictional models of virtue. Again, as noted before, this is easily seen in the Catholic Church tradition of honoring saints. Responding to the call to holiness, saints are men and women who lived virtuous lives, thus acting as aspirational figures for the everyday faithful. And, as seen through moral elevation, adolescents can feel positively affected with both *everyday saints* and the official canonized saints that fill the pages of religious textbooks.

Finally, Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Peterson (2006) speak towards the plurality of character strengths, meaning that just because one strength is not exhibited in an individual, does not mean other strengths are not present. For example, an individual might not practice the strength of honesty regularly but have deeply developed strengths of kindness and generosity. And, character strengths are often dependent on context and expressed in varying degrees
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(Fowers, 2008; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2006). Young people, for example, may lean into bravery when standing up for a classmate being bullied but show less bravery in other situations which do not call for it. These characteristics of strengths are crucial for youth and those who minister to young people. Often it can feel that society values certain strengths, highlighting them as penultimate. This can tend to outcast youth who do not exhibit those strengths. And yet, the VIA Survey is a dimensional and relative tool—meaning it is not all or nothing (Niemiec, 2018).

Teens have all 24 of the character strengths, but as the VIA survey results show, some strengths are stronger than others. While the tool measures each strength on a continuum, the final result is a list of all 24 character strengths in rank order from a person’s top strength to the lowest strength and what matters is the ranking rather than the absolute value (Niemiec, 2013). See Appendix N for the author’s example of a dimensional strengths report.

Character Strengths: Being and Doing

Ryan Niemiec (2014, 2018), Education Director of the VIA Institute on Character, describes character strengths as both being and doing. He notes that the 24-character strengths in the classification are a part of our identities and authenticity, or just being ourselves (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). This coincides with Pope Francis’ call to youth: to be more of who they fully are on route to holiness. Thus, it is important for youth to identify these unique strengths along the pathway towards virtue. But character strengths are also more than just who one is, they also denote what one does (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). Character strengths are about expressing action in the world and creating better environments. As the original title of the classification, Values in Action, shows—character strengths are who individuals are and what individuals do.

Regarding being, research on the VIA character strengths survey (VIA Institute on Character, 2019b) shows that character strengths are somewhat stable. Niemiec (2009) found that
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with repeated VIA survey takers, less than 1% have no overlap in signature strengths and 76%
have three to five top strengths in common from the first time to the second time taking the
survey. This shows that individuals have core, authentic strengths that align with their unique
selves and that the VIA measurements are reliable over time.

And, once adolescents know their top strengths, they can lean in and practice those
strengths towards greater well-being, or the doing. In fact, research around signature strengths
(i.e., one’s top five character strengths) showcases that individuals who use their top, or
signature, strengths in novel ways increase happiness and decrease depression (Gander, Proyer,
asked individuals to complete the VIA Character Strengths survey and to use their five signature
strengths in a new way each day for a week. Seligman et al. (2005) found that even though
individuals in the treatment group had the intervention over one week, the effects lasted up to six
months. They attribute this to the participant’s continued practice of the strengths even after
intervention. Thus, when individuals practice their signature strengths through doing, they are
being their most authentic selves which results in increased happiness.

Keeping this connection between practicing strengths and well-being in mind, in analysis
of character strengths in relation to life satisfaction in college students, Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy
and Welsh (2009), observed that all 24 VIA character strengths positively correlated with life
satisfaction. Additionally, 22 of the 24 strengths significantly related to college satisfaction (only
Creativity and Social Intelligence did not correlate with this outcome measure), and 16 character
strengths significantly related to higher GPAs (Lounsbury et al., 2009). For example, these
researchers found that the strengths of self-regulation, persistence, judgement, love of learning,
and prudence to be correlated highest with GPA. Taking this into consideration, they proposed
that students who were exercising self-regulation, for example, were able to complete assignments and study, while controlling focus and attention. Additionally, Lounsbury et al. (2009) suggested that students practicing love of learning would be more likely to speak up in class, ask questions, and seek out additional knowledge. Thus, practicing character strengths (i.e., doing) leads to positive well-being outcomes for college students.

And yet, as Aristotle and Aquinas argue, virtue takes practice. While character strengths are not only a part of who we are, they also can be developed and improved. This is counter to some beliefs that strengths are fixed and immutable traits. For example, one research study that showed the movability of character strengths occurred after the tragic attacks on the World Trade Center. Peterson and Seligman (2003) found that one way that character strengths might shift or change is due to life events, traumatic experiences, or simply age. After the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, Peterson and Seligman (2003) discovered that gratitude, kindness, leadership, love, spirituality, and teamwork all increased over a 2-month period in the U.S. sample of survey takers, and not in the European sample. This study shows that through circumstances, character strengths can increase and change.

This is analogous to the research on changing one’s own personality traits. Additionally, Borghans, Duckworth, Heckman, and Ter Weel (2008) found that personality traits are not as stable as originally thought. Changes in environment, role shifts, and intentional practice can potentially shift once static personality traits (Borghans et al., 2008). Building on this, in the research domain, studies have shown that deliberate, intentional interventions can help to further develop individual personality traits. For example, in a randomized study over 16 weeks, Hudson and Fraley (2015) found that individuals who set initial goals around changing one of the Big Five personality traits (i.e., extroversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness and
openness), reported experiencing changes in that trait. During the study, individuals who were coached to create specific if—then implementation intentions around changing personality traits (as opposed to vague goals), showed to have the greatest gains in changing their traits. These researchers also found that trait behaviors mediated this change (Hudson & Fraley, 2015). Thus, if individuals wanted to increase in extraversion, they might shift their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors to reflect this, leading to greater change. For example, this individual might start attending more group events and thinking of themselves as bubbly and friendly. This study shows that intentional interventions might have the ability to shift traits which were presumably fixed. What does this mean for character strengths? If personality traits and character strengths operate similarly, one can hypothesize that specific character strengths can grow in an individual through attention and intentional action as well.

For Catholic adolescents, this is great news. Character strengths are not only a part of the authentic self but can also be practiced and developed over time, leading to deepening virtues. Instead of feeling far off, non-relevant, and hopeless, sainthood may just come down to a much simpler equation: self-awareness plus practice.

**VIA Character Strengths and Catholicism: Virtues, Strengths, and Tradition**

Turning back now to the religious and spiritual context, as readers will see, the VIA Survey can be applied in these settings to help deepen and broaden understanding and development of character and virtues, especially as it includes empirical measurement. As noted earlier, many religious and cultural traditions were studied to construct this classification. Many of the virtues from Peterson and Seligman’s original classification are synonymous with the named Catholic virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance, charity, faith, and hope (CCC, 1993, para. 1805-1829). According to the Catholic Church, there are two types of virtues:
human and theological (CCC, 1993, para. 1804-1829). Like Peterson and Seligman’s classification, the Catholic Church identifies the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance as pivotal, with all other natural virtues within these foundational virtues (para. 1805). Additionally, the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity “inform and give life to all the moral virtues” (CCC, 1993, para. 1813). Thus, in Catholicism, these seven virtues are essential, with all other sub-virtues (or character strengths as positive psychology would refer to them) as pathways towards the good. As seen before and coinciding with Aristotle’s notions of virtue, human virtues are practiced and obtained by individuals through good, moral actions. These virtues are “firm attitudes, stable dispositions, and habitual perfections of intellect and will” that ultimately help to shape individuals’ actions and behaviors, such that when mastered, joy is present (CCC, 1993, para. 1804). Again, rather than a lofty, out of reach goal, sainthood comes down to practiced actions overtime.

Cardinal Virtues: Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance

Diving into the virtues a bit more, according to the Catholic Church, the cardinal virtues are natural which means that human beings may grow in these virtues without divine intervention, meaning without the help of God (CCC, 1993, para. 1804). And, these virtues “make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life” (CCC, 1993, para. 1804). As one can see, many similarities between the cardinal virtues and positive psychology virtues exist (see Table 2). For example, like the virtue of wisdom within the VIA Character Strengths Classification (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a), the Catholic Church’s virtue of prudence is the virtue of good reason and judgement, allowing individuals to choose the good in all circumstances and act accordingly (CCC, 1993, para. 1806). Building on the tradition of Aristotle and practical wisdom, St. Thomas Aquinas dubs prudence as utilizing rationality to act
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(CCC, 1993, para. 1806). Prudence, like practical wisdom, is needed in order to decide the right
course of action and what strengths to deploy in any situation. Justice is the virtue that helps
individuals give their fair due to God and neighbor (CCC, 1993, para. 1807). The virtue of
justice denotes one’s relationship with God and others—respecting the dignity of all and
practicing harmony and equity. This, of course, aligns nicely with the virtue of justice in the VIA
classification. The cardinal virtue of fortitude helps individuals practice resilience in the face of
obstacles on their journey towards the good (CCC, 1993, para. 1808). Fortitude is not unlike the
virtue of courage captured in the VIA. And finally, temperance is the virtue that enables
individuals to moderate the intake of pleasures (e.g., self-control) and regulate materialism
(CCC, 1993, para. 1809). Temperance is needed in the balance between poverty and excess,
helping one to control one’s impulses and restrain from overindulgence. Temperance directly
aligns to the virtue of temperance in the VIA classification. These four virtues, again, are the
human virtues. Human virtues are learned through education, practice, and intentional action,
leading to unification with divine love (CCC, 1993, para. 1804/1810/1839). Echoing Aristotle
and positive psychology, sainthood is a practiced discipline, rather than a bestowed gift. For
young Catholics, this makes the lofty call to holiness a little less daunting. And finally, because
the Catholic Church teaches that man is wounded by sin, it is not easy to maintain the moral
balance (CCC, 1993). Through divine grace and perseverance, however, individuals can build
towards greater virtue and character. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993) states, “the
virtuous man is happy to practice [virtues]” (para. 1810). Thus, morally good action in the form
of the human virtues inherently emits joy. The practice of sainthood is indeed a happy one.

Differing from the Greeks, in the Catholic tradition, however, the most important virtues
are gifts from God that help individuals to draw closer to him, and thus attain the eternal fruits of
joy, peace, and goodness. Unlike the human virtues, the theological virtues are gifts, or graces given by God for man to participate in a relationship with the divine (CCC, 1993, para. 1812). The human virtues are embedded in the theological virtues, as they are the foundation and life for all moral activity. These three virtues are faith, hope, and charity/love (CCC, 1993, para. 1813). As the foundation of Christian morality, the theological virtues have as their ultimate end goal a deeper relationship to God. According to the Catholic Church (CCC, 1993), through these virtues, one can experience connection and communion with the divine (para. 1812). And while these gifts cannot be acquired, as only God bestows them, they can be increased through action (Wawrykow, 2012). Through acts of love, for example, one becomes more centered in charity, and thus will become more charitable towards self and neighbor (Wawrykow, 2012). These virtues act as connectors to strengthening relationship to the divine, one of the essential relationships in Fisher’s (2010/2011) model of spirituality. Therefore, adolescents like Heather and John, who feel little relational connection with God, may benefit from the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

The first theological virtue, faith, denotes belief in God and all that God has commanded (CCC, 1993, para. 1814). Faith fuels commitment to God and desire for this connection. But, as St. James notes, “So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17 NABRE) and so faith needs the virtues of hope and love to give it life. The Catholic Church (1993) teaches that faith alone cannot unite one to God or the larger community (para. 1815). Thus, teenagers must exercise the other virtues, as well. The theological virtue of faith connects with the positive psychology virtue of transcendence (see Table 2).

The theological virtue of hope describes the gift of future desire for the fulfillment of eternal happiness in the kingdom of heaven (CCC, 1993, para. 1817/1818). Hope teaches
Catholic youth to not solely rely on their own strength, but on the strength of God as they face the trials and tribulations of this world. The gift of hope affords Catholics joy even amidst challenges and protects against feelings of abandonment and discouragement (CCC, 1993, para. 1818). Hope also strongly connects with the virtue of transcendence in the VIA classification (see Table 2).

And finally, the third theological virtue, the virtue of love or charity, is the gift of love for God, for self, and for neighbor (CCC, 1993, para. 1822). As Jesus teaches his followers, the two greatest commandments: love God above all else, and love neighbor as oneself (Matthew 22: 36-40 NABRE). Additionally, he states, “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35 NABRE). Thus, these new commandments mark love as most important above all else for Catholics. This call is one towards loving self and others like the love one receives from God: unrelenting, unending, unbreakable. The virtue of charity marks the freedom of a true relationship to God, one not of slavery and fear, but one of love (CCC, 1993, para. 1828). Thus, charity, according to the Catholic Church (1993) is the greatest of the three theological virtues, as the both the source and goal of all virtuous activity (para. 1827). This differs from Aristotle, who promotes wisdom and reason above all else. For Catholics, the virtue of love guides all other virtues and strengths. St. Paul, famously states, “so faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13 NABRE). As it relates to the love of others, the virtue of charity and love corresponds to the humanity virtue in the VIA classification (Table 2).

Based on this, one can see the strong similarities and foundational roots between the religious Catholic virtues and the secular virtues of Peterson and Seligman’s classification of
vices and strengths. Table 2 shows the cross-section analysis between the two systems, linking the secular virtues to the cardinal and theological matches. That said, one key difference between the two is in order of virtues. While Peterson and Seligman (2004) note that religions and cultures often pro-offer a pinnacle virtue (i.e., practical wisdom and Greek philosophers, love and Catholicism/Christianity), positive psychology does not place importance on any one particular strength over another. This is one key difference between Catholic teaching and the secular virtues.

Table 2

*Connections between the VIA Character Strengths & Virtues and the Cardinal & Theological Virtues*

|---|---|
| Wisdom  
Cognitive strengths that necessitate the attainment and use of knowledge | Prudence  
Practical reason that helps individuals to discern right courses of action and to make the right decisions |
| Courage  
Strengths that involve the exercise of a person’s will to accomplish tasks and goals in the face of internal or external challenge | Fortitude  
Standing firm and steadfast in difficulty and challenge; conquering fear and death in pursuit of the good |
| Humanity  
Interpersonal character strengths that involve caring for and befriending others | Charity/Love  
Love for God, self, and neighbor drawing the individual into communion with the divine |
| Justice  
One’s civic strengths that foundationally contribute to healthy community life | Justice  
Acting with fairness in relationship to God and others; giving others and God their fair due; upholding dignity, harmony, and equity for all humans |
| Temperance  
Character strengths that help keep one from excess and opulence | Temperance  
Moderating intake of pleasures and vices; self-control over one’s impulses |
| Transcendence  
Character strengths that connect the self to something larger and provide meaning in life | Faith/Hope  
Belief in God and all that God commands; desire and belief in happiness that lies in the kingdom of heaven |

Connections to the Gifts and Fruits of the Holy Spirit

In addition to the connection with Catholic cardinal and theological virtues, the character strengths in Peterson and Seligman’s (2004) classification have strong ties to the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit in Catholic teaching. As one might recall, the character strengths according to Peterson and Seligman (2004) do not cause virtue, but instead act as foundations to the good life. Likewise, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1993), the moral life of Catholics is stimulated by the gifts of the Spirit (para. 1830). This concept reflects the overarching structure and purpose of character strengths as vehicles towards virtues and the good life (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). One key concept to note, is that gifts are given by God (in the form of the Holy Spirit) through the sacrament of Baptism (CCC, 1993, para. 1831). The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord (CCC, 1993, para. 1831; Isaiah 11:1-4 NABRE). The gifts are found in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Isaiah 11:1-4 (NABRE), it reads:

> But a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse,
> and from his roots a bud shall blossom.
> The spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him:
> a spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
> A spirit of counsel and of strength,
> a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD,
> and his delight shall be the fear of the LORD. (Isaiah 11:1-2 NABRE)

According to the Catholic Church, these gifts perfect the human and theological virtues, acting as pathways towards the good life (CCC, 1993, para. 1831). Thus, for Catholics, these gifts are divinely given to help individuals on their pathway towards living the virtuous life as the practice
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of the moral and good life is sustained through them. See Table 3 for gifts of the Holy Spirit and definitions, aligning them to the Catholic virtues. Like the VIA Character Strengths Classification (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a), the gifts fall under the virtues as fuel towards the eudaimonic life.

In contrast, the fruits of the Holy Spirit (charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity) are human actions that perfect the virtues and bring about glimpses of eternal joy (CCC, 1993, para. 1832). Thus, according to the Catholic Church, these fruits are present when individuals are utilizing the gifts of the Spirit listed above, moving towards virtue. Because these are human directed through choice and will, these are more closely aligned to the character strengths in the VIA Character Strengths Classification, as these are actions individuals and groups take in the world, building towards the good life.

As individuals can see, the connections between positive psychology character strengths and the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit begin to become apparent (see Table 3). Character strengths such as kindness, humility, self-regulation, hope and love show up as kindness, modesty, self-control, faithfulness, and charity in the Catechism. One clear difference is the inclusion of additional character strengths in the positive psychology classification system. Strengths such as gratitude, humor, leadership, and teamwork do not seem to have a direct correlation with the Catholic Church’s teaching on the gifts and fruits. However, strengths like gratitude may find its counterpart in generosity, while strengths like humor may be a combination of joy and gentleness/playfulness. See Table 3 for cross connections between the VIA Character Strengths Classification and the Fruits of the Holy Spirit (CCC, 1993, 1831-1832).
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With these connections to the VIA Character Strengths classification (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a) and Catholic teachings made clearer, youth still might be wondering, but why does this matter? How, for example, will developing signature strengths lead towards a life of fulfillment? The next section will answer these questions, specifically utilizing Fisher’s (2010, 2011) model of spirituality as relationships.

Table 3

Connections between the Fruits of the Holy Spirit and Character Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>12 Fruits of the Holy Spirit (CCC, 1993, para. 1832)</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Connection to Character Strengths in the VIA Character Strengths Classification (Peterson &amp; Seligman, 2004; Niemiec, 2018; VIA Institute on Character, 2019a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love/Charity</td>
<td>Affection, good will, benevolence towards others</td>
<td>Love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Delight that is deeper than mere happiness (which is fleeting); more serene</td>
<td>Zest; Gratitude; Humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>Peace within self and with others; harmony</td>
<td>Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience</td>
<td>Patient endurance; longsuffering; steadfastness</td>
<td>Hope; Perseverance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>Acting for the good of people regardless what they do in return</td>
<td>Kindness; Forgiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodness</td>
<td>Moral excellence and virtue, the state and quality of being “good”</td>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence; Bravery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faithfulness</td>
<td>Trustworthy; faithful</td>
<td>Honesty; Fairness; Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleness</td>
<td>Meekness, even-tempered</td>
<td>Prudence, Self-Regulation; Humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Control</td>
<td>Ability to control one’s thoughts and actions</td>
<td>Prudence; Self-Regulation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 12 Fruits of the Holy Spirit
(CCC, 1993, para. 1832)  |  Meaning  |  Connection to Character Strengths in the VIA Character Strengths Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Niemiec, 2018; VIA Institute on Character, 2019a)
---|---|---
Generosity  | Sharing gifts and possessions with others  | Forgiveness/Gratitude/Fairness/Kindness
Modesty  | Purity of heart and mind  | Humility
Chastity  | The giving of oneself to God; faithfulness  | Prudence; Fairness


### Character Strengths, Relationships, and Spirituality

**The Personal Domain**

As seen in “love your neighbor as yourself [emphasis added],” individual well-being matters in terms of relational well-being (Matthew 22:39 NABRE). Jesus’ statement reads as such: you cannot love your neighbor if you do not also love self. And, St. Thomas Aquinas furthers this notion by distinguishing between two different types of self-love: natural love of self and egoism (Pinckaers, 1995). According to Aquinas, natural love of self, not egoism, leads one to true fulfillment. Natural love of self is defined as a “spontaneous love of self, which is good like all God’s works” and is the foundation of friendship and charity (Pinckaers, 1995, p. 42). Egoism, on the other hand, is self-love turned inward, putting self above all (Pinckaers, 1995). It is natural love of self which ultimately leads to loving God and others, thereby increasing fulfillment.

Coinciding with these ancient teachings, in recent years, research has specifically looked...
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at these notions of self-love: self-compassion and self-esteem. As for natural love of self, early on, Berger (1952) showed that acceptance of self is positively related to acceptance of others through studies on college students and prisoners who took self-acceptance and other acceptance surveys. More recently, psychologists have started to identify self-compassion as important towards acceptance of self and others. Neff (2003) defines self-compassion as: self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness. Self-kindness refers to the ability to be kind, non-judgmental, and forgiving towards oneself. Individuals who practice self-compassion have a great deal of understanding for the self (Neff, 2003). Common humanity indicates that the individual understands and recognizes that others also make mistakes, deal with issues and problems, and can feel inadequate too (Neff, 2003). Thus, individuals who practice self-compassion exercise both understanding for self and others, giving grace where grace is due. And, finally, individuals who practice self-compassion are mindful (Neff, 2003). Mindfulness refers to the ability to balance approach to life through present-minded orientation, halting rumination about past events. Kabat-Zinn (1994/2009) defines mindfulness as intentionally being aware of the present, non-judgmentally. This concept of self-compassion seems to correlate with the natural love of self that St. Thomas Aquinas posited was most important in living the life of freedom and fulfillment.

Aquinas was onto something, as self-compassion, research shows, is leading towards increased well-being. For example, Yarnell and Neff (2013) found that individuals who practice higher self-compassion also reported greater abilities to compromise, higher authenticity, lower emotional turmoil, and greater relational well-being. Additionally, Shapira and Mongrain (2010) found that self-compassion exercises helped to reduce depressive symptoms over three months and increase happiness over six months in individuals prone to high self-criticism. Thus, when
individuals are practicing non-judgmental thinking towards self and others, well-being is shown to increase. Finally, in a meta-analysis of 79 studies of self-compassion and well-being, totaling a sample size of 16,416, Zessin, Dickhäuser, and Garbade (2015), found that self-compassion and well-being to be overall correlated ($r = .47$). They did find that self-compassion more strongly associated with cognitive and psychological well-being ($r = .47; r = .62$) than positive affect ($r = .39$; Zessin et al., 2015).

As for character strengths, the connections between virtue and self-compassion are increasing. For example, the link between character strengths and non-judgmental awareness of the present moment (i.e., mindfulness) has begun to be studied more and more. Niemiec (2012, 2014) created the Mindfulness Based Strengths Practice (MBSP), a program directed at increasing mindful use of character strengths. This program helps individuals to practice the best of both fields, mindfulness and character strengths, increasing awareness and attention on one’s positive qualities. Niemiec (2012, 2014) connects the strengths of self-regulation, curiosity, and judgement to essential elements of strong mindfulness practice. For example, the famous beginner’s mind, or *raisin* exercise, asks individuals to practice meditating and focusing on seeing the dried fruit like it was the first time. This activity, researchers note, implicitly practices the strength of curiosity (Niemiec, Rashid, & Spinella, 2012). Thus, individuals are challenged to use signature strengths within their mindfulness practice, ultimately increasing their abilities to stay on track (i.e., perseverance) and control attention (i.e., self-regulation). This integration would, theoretically, help an individual to build up one of the key aspects of self-compassion: mindfulness.

On the other hand, research on self-esteem, once thought to be the key towards happiness, is now showing mixed results. Self-esteem, according to the *International*
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*Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences,* is defined as both global and domain-specific (e.g., academics, work, appearance) evaluations of the self (Jordan, Zeigler-Hill, & Cameron, 2015). Unlike self-compassion, however, global self-esteem is more self-directed and based on others’ judgements of personal worth in domains that matter in life (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Researchers have found that low self-esteem in adolescents can predict other risk factors like criminal activity and poor health in adulthood (Trzesniewski et al., 2006). And other research shows that low self-esteem is linked to anti-social behavior and aggression, two factors that impact positive relationship building (Donnellan et al., 2005). Sowislo and Orth (2013) found in a meta-analysis of research studies looking at the relationship between self-esteem, anxiety and depression, that while self-esteem and both anxiety and depression were related, it was only with depression where low-self-esteem had some predictive power as it relates to mental illness.

While low self-esteem seems to diminish well-being, it is unclear if self-esteem has the power to raise well-being. Recently, self-esteem has come under attack in the scientific community. According to Neff and Vonk (2009), recent research reviews have surfaced that self-esteem is connected with little benefits other than persistence, risk taking, and willingness to innovate. Whereas once all the rage, time and effort to build higher self-esteem is showing to have major costs. Neff and Vonk underscore that the pursuit of high self-esteem can bring about negative consequences, such as dismissing reliable negative feedback, protecting ego at all costs, and participating in downward social comparisons. The latter can be especially harmful if it leads to prejudice against others (Neff & Vonk, 2009). Ego protection can lead individuals to close off opinions and ideas from others, fearing that self-worth will go away if others do not validate their thoughts and opinions (Neff & Vonk, 2009). And because self-esteem is based on other’s
judgements of the self, it can fluctuate from day to day, and this instability can lead to depression (Kernis, Paradise, Whitaker, Wheatman, & Goldman, 2000). That said, healthy self-esteem does exist. Deci and Ryan (1995) define healthy self-esteem is one where an individual autonomously evaluates themselves without approval from others. And Kernis (2003) has proposed *optimal self-esteem*, where similarly, it is based on evaluations that are not contingent on others.

Regarding character strengths use and impacts on self-esteem, research does look positive. Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, and Hurling (2011), in a study around whether strengths use matters, found that individuals who not only identified, but used their strengths had higher levels of self-esteem and lower stress than the control group. Through this longitudinal study, this group of researchers validated the Strengths Use Scale to capture strengths exercise (Wood et al., 2011). This scale measures the extent that individuals practice and use the strength, rather than simply possess it (Wood et al., 2011). In one recent research study, Freire, Lima, Teixeira, Araújo, and Machado (2018) desired to look at the connection between character strengths and self-esteem, self-concept, psychological well-being, and life satisfaction. The group intervention, named “Challenge To Be+,” was studied with a group of 99 adolescents. The researchers decided to utilize the group intervention platform as peer relationships are essential in building self-esteem, as peer approval and belonging can not only help young people to understand others, but themselves (Drumm, 2006). The intervention included a unit on developing character strengths by identifying one’s strengths and applying one’s strengths. Using the Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenburg, 1965) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985), Freire et al. (2018) revealed that the character strengths intervention showed significant increases in self-esteem and life satisfaction in the post-test. And, on the program evaluation, adolescents named “learning and knowing about self” as the most valuable aspect of “Challenge
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To Be+” (Freire et al., 2018). These are just two examples of studies designed to increase positive image of self through the lens of identifying and applying character strengths.

In addition to self-esteem, belief in one’s own abilities is also important for flourishing (Maddux, 2002). Self-efficacy is defined as the belief in one’s abilities to perform and influence control over events in one’s life, involving the interaction between an individual’s behaviors, beliefs, and environment (Bandura, 1977, 1991, 2010). Or, simply, when one believes they can perform the behavior to lead to an outcome (Maddux, 2002). Regarding flourishing, individuals who exhibit high self-efficacy take on challenges and persevere through difficulties, believing they can impact the results (Bandura, 2010; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). It is the I CAN attitude. They set challenging goals and heighten their effort in the face of failure, recognizing that failure is a mere setback (Bandura, 1991; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). On the other hand, individuals low in self-efficacy have little belief they can affect change, and shy away from difficult tasks and challenges (Bandura, 2010; Schunk & Pajares, 2002). They have low aspirations towards the goals they want to pursue, ultimately kindling the belief that they will meet defeat. And, as expected, high self-efficacy is linked to increased well-being and flourishing. For example, adolescents’ subjective well-being scores have been shown to predict academic self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s competence to perform in school (Danielson et al., 2009; Gillman & Heubner, 2006; Suldo et al., 2011). Thus, one can see that the higher the positive affect and well-being the more likely that teen is to have increased self-efficacy towards school.

And, empirical research linking the VIA Character Strengths and self-efficacy is promising. For example, researchers have found that academic self-efficacy and belief tend to decline during the transition to middle school, as students are faced with larger peer groups,
different grading structures, and fluctuating teacher efficacy (Schunk & Pajares, 2002; Harter et al., 1992; Midgley, Feldlaufer, & Eccles, 1989). And yet, through research on the middle school transition and adjustment, Shoshani and Slone (2013) found that character strengths significantly predicted positive school adjustment outcomes, thereby potentially mitigating some of the effects of self-efficacy loss. The outcome measures in this study included middle school GPAs for each student as well as behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and social adjustment scores for each pre-teen (Shoshani & Slone, 2013; National Center for School Engagement Survey, 2006; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2001).

In this study of 417 seventh and eighth graders (age 12-13 years old) using the VIA Youth Survey, Shoshani and Slone (2013) found that high intellectually related character strengths (e.g., curiosity, love of learning, etc.) in students were significantly correlated with higher levels of cognitive adjustment during a transition \( (r = .21, p < .01) \) and higher GPAs \( (r = .32, p < .01) \) in the transition (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). Interpersonal strengths (e.g., kindness, love, etc.) were significantly correlated with cognitive \( (r = .17, p < .01) \) and social \( (r = .31, p < .01) \) adjustment outcomes. Which may come as no surprise, given pre-teens that exhibit love and kindness are more likely to form friendships during a transition (Shoshani & Slone, 2013).

Temperance character strengths (e.g., self-regulation, prudence, etc.) significantly correlated with all outcome variables: cognitive adjustment \( (r = .42, p < .01) \), social adjustment \( (r = .12, p < .05) \), behavioral adjustment \( (r = .48, p < .01) \), emotional adjustment \( (r = .43, p < .01) \), and GPA \( (r = .41, p < .01) \). This, the researchers note, is key to transition success as adolescents are figuring out how to regulate thoughts, emotions, and actions towards their goals (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). And finally, transcendent strengths (e.g., spirituality, hope, etc.) significantly correlated with emotional adjustment \( (r = 0.18, p < .01) \) in the transition (Shoshani & Slone,
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2013). This is interesting considering the call to holiness is a call to happiness, as transcendent strengths were the only strengths to have significant correlations to both affect and life satisfaction (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). In fact, transcendent strengths is significantly correlated with increased positive affect ($r = .12, p < .05$), decreased negative affect ($r = .10, p < .05$), and increased life satisfaction ($r = .17, p < .01$) in the transition (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). From this, it looks like adolescents who have strengths in spirituality, hope, and humor may be happier. Thus, in a transitionary period of time, one that teens will encounter during middle school and high school, character strengths may be a way to build up adjustment skills like self-efficacy.

The Communal Domain

And, as expected, research is also indeed showing that character strengths can help to build better and stronger relational connections with others, which is one area that Catholic youth seem to be lacking. While many of the empirical studies looked at the correlation between character strengths, depression, and life satisfaction, few looked at predictive factors. Gillham et al. (2011) set out with the question, do certain character strengths not only correlate, but predict rates of depression and life satisfaction for adolescents over time? In the study, they found that when individuals showed higher levels of other-directed character strengths (i.e., kindness, love, etc.) this predicted lower levels of depression in the future. Additionally, the study showed that strengths of transcendence (i.e., hope, spirituality, gratitude) predicted higher life satisfaction (Gillham et al., 2011). The conclusions these researchers drew from this study was that interventions helping to develop virtues that improve connections towards others and connection to meaning larger than self, can help to lower depression and increase life satisfaction. For Catholic youth ministers, this translates to developing strengths to deepen relationships to others and God, two aspects of Fisher’s (2010, 2011) Four Domains Model of Spiritual Health and
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Well-Being. The next section will take a deeper look at more theories and empirical research from the vault of positive psychology around character strengths and deepening interpersonal relationships.

Character strengths and virtues are essential to flourishing in romantic relationships (Fowers, 1998; Pawelski & Pawelski, 2018). In one empirical study, researchers found through a one-week daily dairy intervention, that partners who more readily recognized and celebrated the strengths of their significant others experienced greater relationship satisfaction, commitment, intimacy, and support for goals (Kashdan et al., 2017). Additionally, they found the opposite was true: when partners noted their significant other’ strengths through a deficit lens (e.g., “Your sense of humor is annoying” or “Your kindness makes you weak”), this trend was negatively related. Thus, recognizing and celebrating another’s strengths can affect the intimacy and support in a relationship. This brings new meaning to seeing God in others (Vanier, 1995), as teens are often told. Celebrating strengths and virtues in others can impact the success and support for both parties in relationships.

Aligning to the bedrock quality of character strengths in relationships, Veldorale-Borgan, Bradford, and Vail (2010), found in their study of 422 married couples, marital virtues were foundational to success. These researchers used the 8-item Danger Signs Scale to study the negative communication patterns (e.g., escalation, invalidation, and withdrawal) within the couples (Kline et al., 2004). It is noted, however, that Veldorale-Borgan, Bradford, and Vail (2010) did only look at the absence of negative communication patterns as a sign of marital well-being, rather than positive communication factors. When measuring marital virtues, the researchers used the generosity and other-centeredness subscales of the Marital Virtues Profile (MVP); Hawkins, Fawcett, Carroll, & Gilliland, 2006). And, relationship well-being was
measured by the Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS), noting the couples’ cohesion (e.g., couple connection in shared goals, interests, etc.), consensus, and satisfaction (Busby, Christensen, Crane, & Larson, 1995; Spanier, 1976). In the study, one mediated relationship was between marital virtues (e.g., generosity, other centeredness), communication, and relationship satisfaction. Aligning with Fowers (1998, 2001), Veldorale-Borgan et al. (2010) empirically found that communication acted as a mediator between marital virtues and relationship satisfaction (see Figure 1). Thus, individuals who had increased marital virtues (i.e., generosity, kindness, etc.) had lower levels of negative communication, which connected to higher levels of marital satisfaction. Additionally, the researchers found that marital virtues, themselves, had a small, significant effect on relationship cohesion, coherence, and satisfaction, which means that some additional variable might have been mediating this relationship (Veldorale-Borgan et al., 2010). Virtues seems to be a foundational key to relationship success. It was the presence of virtues that fueled the couples’ abilities to avoid negative communication, which in turn, helped better their relationships. Interestingly, they found that an individual’s personal well-being was connected to relationship success (Veldorale-Borgan et al., 2010). For example, the researchers cite that this mediation could suggest that the higher the well-being of the individuals, the lower the level of negative communication. And the lower the level of negative communication leads to a higher level of relationship satisfaction (Veldorale-Borgan et al., 2010). They found this mediation with marital virtues as well. Individuals with higher levels of personal well-being had greater quantities of other-centered strengths, which improved marital relationships. These mediated relationships are interesting in that they show the importance of individual well-being alongside interpersonal relationships. Cycling back to love your neighbor as yourself, it looks like individual well-being is essential in improving relational connections with others. Thus, as
stated before, a focus on relationship to self is also needed for healthy flourishing.

In addition to romantic and one-on-one relationships, character strengths have been studied empirically amongst adolescents and community building. In seminal research on positive education, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009) studied the impact of positive psychology curriculum within language arts classrooms. One of the objectives of the curriculum was to help individuals identify their signature strengths and develop them (Seligman et al., 2009). Results showed higher engagement and achievement, but most important for adolescent relationships, higher social skills (i.e., empathy for others, cooperation, self-control). Thus, helping individuals understand their own strengths and practice them amongst their peers helps to improve social relations.

![Image of diagram](image.png)

*Figure 1. Communication acts as the mediator between marital virtue and relationship satisfaction. Adapted from “Marital Virtues and Their Relationship to Individual Functioning, Communication, and Relationship Adjustment,” by A. Veldorale-Brogan, K. Bradford, & A. Vail, 2010, Journal of Positive Psychology, 5(4), 281-293.*

Likewise, Quinlan, Swain, Cameron, and Vella-Brodrick (2015) researched a character strength intervention in the context of a classroom, specifically looking at strengths use and student interconnectedness, affinity, engagement and well-being. In the intervention, students (ages 9-
12) practiced strengths awareness and spotting strengths in others, while also partook in strengths goal setting (Quinlan et al., 2014). Naming the program, Awesome Us, the intervention group showed positive increases in group cohesion, decreases in friction over the year, and increases in school engagement (Quinlan et al., 2014). Additionally, the intervention group went beyond merely identifying strengths, but actually putting them into practice, and at the follow up, showed higher levels of strengths use than the control group (Quinlan et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of character strengths as not only being, but also doing. This research study shows that character strengths can truly be a team sport, heightening the impact for all individuals and improving relationships.

And, like Aristotle suggested, adolescents look for character strengths in their good friends. Wagner (2019) found that children deemed character strengths like honesty, love, kindness and social intelligence as the most important when considering their good friends. And Weber and Ruth (2012) found that in adolescent peer relationships individuals prized moral qualities in their ideal mates. In their study, young people highlighted honesty, humor, and love as the most cherished character strengths (Weber & Ruch, 2012). Thus, as with adults, adolescents are attuned to character strengths and virtues in both their friends and significant others. Virtue seems to rule the day!

**The Transcendental Domain**

Like Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas was a proponent of human connection and friendship, specifically with the divine. Aquinas defined charity, or the virtue of love, as friendship with God (Pincknaers, 1995). And later, he described the work of the Holy Spirit in the world as the gift of friendship (Pincknaers, 1995). If research around relational connections with others and self is crucial to well-being, does friendship with God also follow this logic? Currently, empirical
research connecting the character strengths to positive relationships with the divine and spirituality is almost non-existent in the literature. That said, this section will propose theoretical ways in which current research around spirituality, relationships, and positive notions of God can be impacted through a focus on strengths and virtues.

**Positive Relationship to God: Why it Matters**

How individuals see their relationship with God and the larger religious community can drastically impact well-being and health. According to Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998), how an individual practices religious coping, or religious world outlook, is a stronger predictor of flourishing than other measures of religiosity (i.e., prayer, frequency of attending Mass, etc.). In fact, research on positive religious coping has shown relationships with lower depression rates (Koenig et al., 1992). Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) name five important elements to the benefits of religion: meaning, control, comfort and spirituality, intimacy and spirituality, and transformation. When individuals engage in religious practices, activities, and beliefs, they can experience greater meaning and purpose, intimacy with others and God, and feel more in control. As Pargament et al. (2000) found with the RCOPE scale of religious coping, the ways in which individuals perceived their relationship with their community and with God mattered for psychological health. The RCOPE scale is a measure that includes different types of religious coping for stressful events that align to the five main benefits of religion: meaning, control, comfort, intimacy, and transformation (See Appendix B). Some examples of positive religious coping are forgiveness, active surrender, spiritual connection, and beneficial religious reappraisal (Pargament et al., 2000). Some examples of negative religious coping are religious or spiritual discontent, demonic reappraisal, and a punishing God outlook (Pargament et al., 2000). Using the RCOPE measure, Pargament et al. (2000) found that positive avenues of
relational outlook will be discussed.

According to Pargament et al. (2000), religion and spirituality can provide positive meaning and purpose, thereby increasing flourishing. And yet, individuals can make both positive and negative religious meaning, and this positioning can impact well-being in both positive and negative ways. The RCOPE scale includes several positive and negative religious coping methods to find meaning (Pargament et al., 2000). Positive religious reappraisal of negative events included outlooks like, “Saw my situation as a part of God’s plan” and “Tried to see how God might be trying to strengthen me in this situation.” Both denote a sense of trust in God, essential for any relationship. Negative avenues of religious coping included the subconstructs of Punishing God Reappraisal, Demonic Reappraisal, and Reappraisal of God’s Powers (Pargament et al., 2000). Individuals who made sense of their stressful events through one of these lenses may have “wondered what [they] did for God to punish [them]” or “questioned the power of God” on the RCOPE scale (Pargament et al., 2000). Again, within these negative outlooks, individuals seem to distrust God, believing the divine to be punitive and powerless. As seen before, how one sees self and see others impacts those relationships. This is also true with relationship to the divine. These statements on the RCOPE can be indicative of the relationship the individual has with their God.

And, this relationship matters in terms of adjustment and flourishing. In a study of undergraduates using the RCOPE, Pargament et al. (2000) found that poorer health (e.g., physical and mental) occurred for individuals with higher use of Punishing God Reappraisal and
Reappraisal of God’s Powers. Additionally, they found when individuals use Reappraisal of God’s Powers, this correlated to greater anguish at the time of the past event (Pargament et al., 2000). And, the researchers noted, that individuals with higher levels of suffering during the current experience was related to the use of Punishing God Reappraisal and Reappraisal of God’s Powers (Pargament et al., 2000). On the other side, growth in adversity and positive religious outcomes were connected to all positive religious coping methods, such as Positive Religious Reappraisal (Pargament et al., 2000). This research aligns to empirical studies like Park’s (2005), researching religious coping and well-being with 169 college students who experienced death, showing that those with a stronger religious meaning system showed greater long-term adjustment to the event. Thus, how individuals make sense of events through their relationship with God, especially stressful ones, can impact their own personal well-being.

Positive religious outlooks and practices can also help individuals feel more control in their lives. In the RCOPE scale, individuals who practice Collaborative Religious Coping and Active Religious Surrender, are utilizing positive coping methods for challenging experiences or situations (Pargament et al., 2000). Some examples of this might be to see God as a partner who is working alongside the individual. Or, when individuals actively surrender to God, stating things like, “did what I could then put the rest in God’s hands” (Pargament et al., 2000). Searching for control, individuals who utilize negative religious coping may employ Passive Religious Deferral, or submissively waiting for God to take over the event, or use Pleading for Direct Intercession, or begging for a miracle to happen (Pargament et al., 2000). Again, trust is an essential element here in these statements. Seeing God as a partner and trusting is indicative of a positive relationship with the divine, leading to feelings of greater control over challenges and obstacles in life.
Additionally, personal relationship to God is another factor in improved well-being. Religion can help individuals find comfort and closeness to their relationship with the divine, thereby impacting their sense of flourishing. Pollner (1989) suggests that individuals approach relationships with imagined deities in similar ways to social relationships with others. And, these relationships of guidance and support have shown to significantly relate to improved psychological well-being (Pollner, 1989). And yet, individuals now understand how one perceives their relationship with God can both positively and negatively impact their well-being. For example, in the RCOPE scale, individuals who use seeking spiritual support as a method of religious coping tend to look for comfort, support, and direction from God (Pargament et al., 2000). They also may use church activities or rituals to draw focus away from negative life events and stressors, choosing instead to focus on their relationship with God and the community. Individuals who use negative religious coping mechanisms, on the other hand, may experience Spiritual Discontent, and instead of finding solace in their relationship with God, find anger and abandonment (Pargament et al., 2000). Spiritual discontent was related to college students’ poorer mental and bodily health (Pargament et al., 2000). One can see that the more positively one sees their relationship with God, the more likely they are to flourish and thrive.

Churches and religious communities also provide space for social interaction between individuals with like-minded beliefs and values, thereby increasing well-being. The sociologist Durkheim (1915) theorized that religion benefits others through shared social intimacy. Empirical research shows that individuals’ interactions in a religious community may prove to be more significant than religiosity to increasing subjective well-being (Witter, Stock, Okun, & Haring, 1985). Likewise, according to Haidt (2012), collective worship enables individuals to make the hive switch and transcend the self to form part of a larger purpose temporarily. This
group transcendence can happen through ritual worship and immersive experiences leading to collective joy (Haidt, 2012). Thus, through nurturing of friendships and relationships, and providing structure and environments for collective worship, churches like the Catholic Church can help to improve the well-being of its members. This aligns with the RCOPE scale and positive and negative religious coping in search of intimacy with others and with God (Pargament et al., 2000). Two positive coping mechanisms here would be Seeking Support from Clergy or Members, or looking to others in the community for comfort, and Religious Helping, or working to give spiritual support to others. Individuals who use Seeking Support from Clergy or Members may have taken actions like asking others to pray for them or asking their clergy to recall them in prayer (Pargament et al., 2000). If using Religious Helping, individuals may have offered prayers to others in the community or given spiritual support. That said, where positive religious coping exists towards greater intimacy with others and with God, negative approaches can also materialize. Individuals who experience Interpersonal Religious Discontent, may feel rejected or ignored by their church, disagree with priests, or feel tension with what they perceive the church wanting them to believe (Pargament et al., 2000). This outlook can lead to a lack of closeness with the church community and with God. As seen with Heather and John, outlook on relational connections within faith communities is important, and improving these perceptions is one key to building towards greater adolescent well-being.

Finally, religion and spirituality can bolster life transformation, thereby impacting well-being. While definitions of spirituality abound in psychological science, according to Pargament (1999) spirituality simply means the “search for the Sacred” (p. 12). The term search denotes that spirituality is a lifelong process, not merely an end goal. It is dynamic and evolving, rather than static and unyielding. Pargament and Mahoney (2017) posit that this search has three
important components: discovering, nurturing, and transforming the sacred. Discovery names the process of becoming aware or understanding the sacred, maintaining or nurturing indicates an individual’s desire to hold on to the sacred once it is found, and finally, transformation involves adapting or re-orienting one’s understanding of the sacred throughout life (Pargament, 2011; Pargament & Mahoney, 2017). Thus, spirituality can lend towards a positive change process, helping individuals towards positive transformation.

**Sanctification: Attributing the Sacred to Character Strengths**

One way to help deepen one’s outlook and positive relationship to God, self, and others might be through the sanctification of character strengths. According to Pargament and Mahoney (2017) sacredness does not rest merely on notions of God. Sacred qualities can abound in various arenas, including marriage, parenting, sex, and social justice. These researchers note that virtues, when attributed with sacred qualities, can be relevant to the study of spirituality (Pargament & Mahoney, 2017). Attributing divine character and significance to any aspect of life, be it relationships, physical objects, or strengths, is defined as *sanctification* (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). As noted by the researchers, the term sanctification is used across various religions, but their definition is not necessarily theological (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Instead, Pargament and Mahoney (2005) focus on sanctification via human perception of what is holy and measuring sanctification through social science rather than theology. For the Catholic Church, sanctification refers only to human beings, made in divine image, who are called to become holy and ultimately be united with God (CCC, 1993, para. 2000). With that said, sacred objects (e.g., Sacred Scripture, relics, holy cards), places (e.g., St. Peter’s Cathedral, Lourdes), and experiences (e.g., the Sacred Mass) are all ways that assist with an individual’s growth in holiness (Carlin, 2017). Thus, for Catholics, sanctification refers to the person becoming holy,
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while sacred objects, places, and experiences are ways that God visibly assists individuals in this sanctification process. And sacred objects, places, and people are important as this is a visible way for ordinary people to experience the extraordinary, invisible God (Carlin, 2017). Similarly, in the social sciences according to Pargament and Mahoney (2005), when individuals sanctify objects or relationships, they a) perceive the experience, object, etc. to be a direct manifestation of God, and/or b) attach holy characteristic to the experience, relationship or object.

And, according to Pargament and Mahoney (2005), sanctification of concrete and abstract objects effects individuals in multiple ways. For one, the researchers note, people who find the sacred in aspects of life tend to spend more time and effort with these things (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). When perceiving objects or relationships as holy, individuals place more emphasis on them in their lives, and choose to expend more effort around them. For example, Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, and Schwartz (1997) discovered that when individuals saw work as a “calling” rather than simply a career or job, they were more likely to spend additional energy and time at work. Alternatively, people who perceived their work to be a job were motivated by materials rewards only (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Those who saw their work as a career were driven by more than money, but by advancement and title (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). And finally, individuals who saw their work as a calling (and as the researchers note, this is connected to having religious significance) desired work that had social value outside of self-gain (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). In their research of 196 respondents across various fields (e.g., nurses, administrators, educators, etc.), they found that individuals who perceived their work to be a calling (rather than a job or career), rated their work significantly higher priority and had less absences than their counterparts who viewed work as jobs or careers (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Thus, when individuals see their work as having a religious calling, for example, they are
more likely to spend greater time and effort. Additionally, researchers found this trend with sanctification of the environment and donating to environmental causes (Tarkeshwar, Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2001). These researchers looked at whether individuals sanctified the environment, seeing nature as holy and as an extension of God, or held a more theologically conservative viewpoint that human beings were more important than nature, and God created humans to dominate the environment (Tarkeshwar et al., 2001). Individuals who perceived nature to be sacred and holy were more likely to donate resources to environmental causes than individuals who did not hold this sanctification belief (Tarkeshwar et al., 2001).

Additionally, these researchers suggest that individuals go above and beyond to guard and take care of these sacred objects and ideas, which often elicit spiritual emotions of attraction (e.g., love and gratitude) and fear (i.e., awe and humility) (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). For example, in the study of individuals’ perceptions on nature and the environment which may elicit the positive emotion of awe, Tarkeshwar et al., (2001) found that the individuals who held the belief that the environment was sacred, were more likely to take action to protect it. Additionally, in terms of producing emotions of love, gratitude, and awe, in a study of undergraduates, sanctification, and dreams, Phillips and Pargament (2002) found that students who saw their dreams as sacred reported more positive affect (along with greater spiritual growth and stress-related growth) towards the life stressor associated with that dream.

Sanctified objects or relationships also act as personal resources that individuals can access throughout life, increasing well-being and utilizing during challenging circumstances (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Pargament and Mahoney (2005) posit that often identity and relationships are intertwined with sacred objects, and thus these provide a sense of stability and cohesion for individuals, especially in times of stress. For example, when studying the spiritual
goals and *strivings* of individuals, Emmons, Cheung, and Tehrani (1998) found that spiritual strivings (i.e., aims around increasing knowledge of God, developing a relationship with the divine, living out spiritual values in daily life, or transcendence outside of oneself) led to greater subjective well-being, purpose in life, and marital/life satisfaction. Additionally, Emmons et al. (1998) noticed that sanctified goals required more effort, were deemed more important, and captured more intrinsic purpose than non-spiritual destinations. These spiritual goals were more correlated to well-being measures than other strivings (e.g., strivings for intimacy, power, or achievement), showcasing the impact of sanctification (Emmons et al., 1998). And finally, when individuals had spiritual strivings, they experienced less interpersonal conflict and greater purpose than non-spiritual goals.

Not only does sanctification filter into concepts like work and the environment, but spiritually framing the body can also impact well-being and health. Mahoney, Carels, et al. (2005) similarly discovered that when undergraduates perceived their bodies in spiritual terms (e.g., “My body is holy or blessed”) or as a manifestation of God (e.g., “My body is a temple of God”), they displayed healthier behaviors towards their bodies, increased exercise, greater approval with one’s body, and lower consumption of alcohol and illicit drugs. Thus, when individuals saw their bodies through the lens of the divine, they were more likely to protect and positively develop this aspect. Likewise, when researching the sanctification of goals and strivings within a community, Mahoney, Pargament, et al. (2005) found that the majority of 150 adults in a community samples attributed their top ten goals and wants in life to theistic sanctification (God) or nontheistic sanctification (having sacred or transcendent qualities). And, in this sample, the greater the sanctification of these strivings (e.g., religious or spiritual goals, relationships, philanthropic endeavors, etc.), the greater the significance, dedication, endurance
and social support (Mahoney, Pargament, et al., 2005). These researchers also found that greater sanctification led to greater sense of meaning/purpose and joy. Again, when individuals see aspects of their lives through *God-lenses*, they are shown to spend more time with these aspects and derive greater life satisfaction along the way.

Pargament and Mahoney (2005) do note, however, that the loss or violation of the sacred can have disastrous effects. Research has shown that when one perceives a sanctified relationship or value to have been desecrated or lost, greater negative affect, anxiety, and physical health symptoms ensue (Maygar, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2000; Pargament, Maygar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). For example, Pargament et al. (2005) discovered in a community sample, individuals who perceived impactful negative life-events as sacred loss (e.g., “This event involved losing a gift from God”) or violations (e.g., “A part of my life that God made sacred was attacked”), experienced higher levels of emotional anguish. Interesting to note for this paper, in the community sample, almost 40% of the population attributed their negative life event to sacred loss or violation, with a large number of these individuals (36.7%) citing personal values as the area of life most effects (Pargament et al., 2005). Overall, these researchers found that when viewed as a loss, this predicted greater depression and more intrusive thoughts about the event (Pargament et al., 2005). Interestingly, sacred loss also predicted greater post-traumatic growth and spiritual growth (Pargament et al., 2005). However, as for desecration, or sacred violation, this correlated with greater anger and lower post-traumatic growth (Pargament et al., 2005).

And in terms of this particular discussion, not surprising, sanctification can have important impacts on relational well-being. One empirically studied arena is sanctification and relationships (Mahoney et al., 1999; Ellison et al., 2011; DeMaris et al., 2010). Mahoney et al.
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(1999) studied the sanctification of marriage with 97 married couples, hoping to understand if viewing marital unions as having spiritual meaning or embodiment impacted the relationship positively or negatively. Again, the researchers defined sanctification in two ways: 1) individuals view their relationship to have sacred qualities, and 2) individuals see marriage as a manifestation of God (Mahoney et al., 1999). The former denotes that individuals attribute spiritual qualities to their marriages, using terms like “holy,” “blessed,” or “heavenly” (Mahoney et al., 1999). The latter outlook on marriage, Mahoney et al. (1999) define as couples who believe God is an active part of the marriage and may see, for example, their marriage as reflections of God’s relationship with his people. Using the Perceived Sacred Qualities of Marriage Scale and the Manifestation of God Scale, these couples were asked to illuminate their spiritual perceptions of their marriages (Mahoney et al., 1999). Items like, “God is present in my marriage” and “My marriage is influenced by God’s actions in our lives” tested how couples saw or did not see God manifest in their marital relationships. And what these researchers found was not surprising; couples who reported higher sanctification of marriage in both sacred characteristics and manifestation of God showed various positive relationships benefits: higher global marital satisfaction, greater personal benefits, less quarrels, more teamwork, and less reliance on hostile or standoff strategies when in conflict (Mahoney et al., 1999). And what these researchers found was this sanctification outlook was more important than previous measures of spirituality and marriage including religious homogeny or couples who were of the same faith (Jewish, Christian, etc.).

Currently, little research exists between character strengths and spiritual relationship to God. That said, as seen earlier, for Catholics, the gifts of the Spirit are divinely given, while the fruits are manifestations of those strengths in action. With the strong connections between the
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VIA Character Strengths and these gifts and fruits, it seems like these strengths naturally lend themselves towards sanctification in the psychological sense. For Catholic youth, perceptions that their signature VIA Character Strengths are sacred, holy, and emit the presence of God, would in theory lead to greater commitment, effort, meaning/purpose, and joy. Additionally, as seen with the sanctification of marriage, it is also theorized that this sanctification of strengths would lead to more positive relationships with the divine. Like the couples from the Mahoney et al. (1999) study show, greater partnership, collaboration, and less anger exist when the marriage is sanctified. This ties back to Pargament et al. (2000) and the RCOPE scale: individuals who saw God as a partner and less abandonment and anger were more likely to flourish. Adolescents who see their strengths as gifts and connections to the divine should see their relationship with God as a caring partnership rather than God as a punitive despot. That said, not only can youth see their strengths as holy gifts but can see them as manifestations of the divine, which based on research exemplified above, would help to increase well-being and build relationships.

Manifestation of the divine within strengths would mean youth would see the strength of love, for example, as not only holy, but as a direct reflection of God’s own strength of love.

Additionally, when adolescents sanctify their own strengths, this in turn would lead to the belief that all strengths are holy, further improving their outlook and relationships with others. Catholic social teaching, a core element to the Catholic faith, encourages Catholics to deeply connect with the poor and uphold the dignity and respect for all human life (USCCB, 2019a). For according to the Catechism, Catholics must find Christ in even the outcasts and social pariahs, as it states, “To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren” (CCC, 1993, para. 1397). Thus, adolescents and adults alike are challenged to find the image of God in others, and it seems that through the VIA Character
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Strengths this can be practically applied. When teenagers strength spot in others, and they believe that strengths are manifestations of the divine, they practically see God in others (Vanier, 2015). And, finally, Pargament and Mahoney (2005) state that sanctification of objects or abstract concepts puts importance and weight behind these things. When adolescents see their strengths as gifts from God and being of God, rather than just strengths, they would more likely place importance on these strengths. Seeing these strengths as important and positive aspects of self should therefore improve their own self compassion and self-worth. Thus, based on this theory, sanctifying strengths would lead to improving relationship to God, self, and others.

Putting it into Action: Identifying Signature Strengths
How do youth ministers (individuals in the Catholics Church who encourage adolescents to live as disciples of Jesus and grow spiritually in the faith) put this into practical action? In the Catholic Church, strengths and virtues are often taught, reinforced, and integrated into K-12 education, Sunday school, youth ministry, and sermons. To become a saint, and live a virtuous life, is the end goal. But, adolescents are often left with the question of how? It is common to hear, “You have gifts from God,” but…what gifts? Not unlike adults, teens usually point to individual talents or skills instead of character strengths. For example, responses like math, reading, or soccer are more likely to be mentioned over notes of kindness, gratitude, and love. Individuals can be notoriously good at identifying weaknesses and fail to appreciate and affirm their strengths. Niemiec (2014, 2018) refers to these issues as strengths blindness, and this can mean general unawareness or meaning around strengths. While having special talent as a soccer player is important, this talent is not necessarily building towards the virtuous life. If adolescents are not able to identify their strengths and affirm them, the pathway towards sainthood can become foggy without clear direction.
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In this way, positive psychology and the measurement of unique character strengths can support teenagers in their own pathways towards virtue. Strengths awareness and identification is important, and research is showing why. Peterson and Seligman (2004) originally proposed that signature strengths are those assets that an individual identifies with, revels in and practices often. Signature strengths is not just an abstract notion, it is a validated concept, with several empirical studies showing that individuals identify with, on average, five strengths that are “most like me” (Mayerson, 2013; McGrath, 2017). McGrath (2017) devised the Signature Strengths Survey (SSS) to understand the concept of top strengths more deeply. In response, individuals most often selected strengths because they were “a part” of who they are. Seligman (2002) proposed that signature strengths inspire authenticity, creativity, ownership, joy, and excitement during use, desire to use the strength, and energy (rather than fatigue) while using the strength.

Knowledge of these strengths is the first step towards intentionally using these assets, which research is showing leads to higher levels of well-being. For example, in a study on flourishing correlates in New Zealand workers, Hone, Jarden, Duncan and Schofield (2015) found that individuals who had greater strengths awareness were on average 2 to 9 times more likely to be flourishing than individuals who were low in strengths awareness. This refers back to Niemiec’s (2018) definition of character strengths as strengths of being. Not only strengths awareness increases flourishing, but also strengths practice (or, the doing aspect of strengths). In that same study, Hone et al., (2015) observed that individuals who intentionally practiced their strengths were 3 to 18 greater odds of flourishing than individuals who did not practice their strengths. This connects with Govindji and Linley (2007), who found that awareness and use of one’s strengths is what truly matters. In a study of over 200 undergraduates, Govindji and Linley (2007) discovered that both understanding and use of one’s strengths is correlated to greater
levels of overall well-being and vitality. They found that knowing one’s strengths is important, but even more so when it leads to the exercise of strengths. Thus, instead of providing abstract lessons on virtue and sainthood, Catholic educators can help students with the first step of strengths identification, and the second step of strengths development.

Giving students a scientifically validated tool to help them discover their unique strengths can encourage youth in their own pathways and help them further develop their signature strengths, and ultimately, deepen their spirituality. When individuals take the free, online VIA Classification of Character Strengths Survey and the VIA Youth Inventory of Strengths from the VIA Character Institute, the results showcase all the individual’s strengths in rank order (VIA Institute, 2019b). Each person taking the survey will, therefore, have a unique combination of top or signature strengths. And while all 24 character strengths are important, according to Niemiec (2018), it is best to simplify at first, and focus in on the signature strengths. In this way, adolescents will not be left in the dark about their own God-given gifts and strengths, instead they will have a much better understanding of their most authentic selves and have a clear pathway to start developing their strengths. And for sainthood, this is important: to return to and live out the most authentic self God created. As Pope Francis (2019) so emphatically states:

Imitating the Saints does not mean copying their lifestyle and their way of living holiness…you have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy, whatever others may say or think. Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy. Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave. Whereas if you simply copy someone else, you will deprive this earth, and heaven too, of something that no one
Therefore, character strengths can help adolescents to discover their unique gifts which align to their most genuine selves, bringing to the world strengths it so desperately needs. The next section takes a deeper look at the second step, using one’s signature strengths and its effects on Fisher’s (2010, 2011) model of spiritual well-being.

**Putting it into Action: Developing Signature Strengths**

As seen above, identification and awareness of strengths is key towards setting intentional development plans, and yet, awareness is not enough—one must put virtue into action, as Aristotle suggests. Since Peterson and Seligman (2004) first introduced the concept of signature strengths, various research studies have looked at the connection between signature strengths practice and well-being. Specifically, this section dives into how developing character strengths can benefit the relational areas of Spiritual Well-Being to self, others, and God. For more specific interventions and applications, Appendix C gives youth ministers a roadmap for a simple four lesson unit plan to integrate character strengths interventions in the curriculum. Each lesson targets one’s relationship with God, self, and others. And, appendices D-K give the youth minister various tools to apply these interventions with adolescents.

**Deepening Relationship to Self through Character Strengths**

So why does putting one’s signature strengths into practice improve well-being, especially with self? Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, and Biswas-Diener (2010) observed that when individuals use their signature strengths, they help to advance towards one’s goals and satisfy the important determinants of self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). These researchers found that use of strengths helps individuals in healthy goal attainment, which therefore increases well-being (Linley et al., 2010). And, according to
Niemiec (2018), it is no surprise that signature strengths use would lead to higher levels of self-determination. Signature strengths are a core part of who individuals really are, and when this authenticity is expressed, it helps to build connections with others and move towards goals. Thus, when individuals identify and use their signature strengths, they are acting in accordance with their most true self.

Developing and identifying character strengths can also help increase self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) proposed that self-efficacy is built through four avenues: 1) performance, or what we try to do well and whether or not we are successful; 2) vicarious learning, or what we see others do, 3) verbal persuasion, what others tell us we are good at, and 4) imaginal, or what we imagine ourselves doing or not doing. When adolescents, therefore, take the VIA-Youth Character Strengths survey, they are learning about what they can do from others (VIA Institute, 2019b). By simply taking the survey, young people receive a report that validates the top strengths that they do possess. This itself can be seen as a form of verbal persuasion, building self-efficacy. Additionally, when they use and develop their strengths and learn to perform through practice, they will build up the confidence through the performance avenue. And finally, by witnessing their peers take on challenges with their strengths, and learning from adults in the ministry atmosphere, they can build up self-efficacy through vicarious learning.

Helping youth to develop character strengths in efforts to build self-efficacy is crucial, especially for chronically underperforming youth. As Park and Peterson (2009b) note, with individuals who are always picked last for the dodgeball team, telling them they have good character is not enough. No longer does character have to be a one-size-fits-all approach, using vague language. Utilizing an empirical measurement that looks at character strengths within the individual will help teens to understand their unique strengths and gifts (Park & Peterson,
One suggested intervention to increase self-efficacy through performance would be to utilize Niemiec’s (2014, 2018) Aware-Explore-Apply model. In this model, individuals practice identification, connection, and use of their strengths. One common mistake that novices in strengths development make, however, is to identify and then jump into use (Niemiec, 2018). After taking the VIA Character Strengths Survey, teens may want to be too quick to act and move towards immediately wanting to use their strengths. Through the Aware-Explore-Apply model, Niemiec (2018) suggests the important in-between step of exploration. During this phase, he suggests that individuals connect strengths to their past successes, relationships, and happiest times. This step helps individuals dive deep into how their character strengths have shaped the person they are today, bringing added importance to their authentic strengths (Niemiec, 2018). In this way, young people are recognizing their past successes in line with their strengths, building their self-efficacy through prior mastery.

In the Apply element of Niemiec’s (2018) model, youth can select different ways in which they can practice their signature strengths. This phase revolves around action planning, with goals and objectives (Niemiec, 2018). For example, at the beginning of the year, youth ministers and Catholic educators can encourage young people to set goals around their signature strengths and identify one new way they can exercise the strengths each day which can help to improve anxiety and depression and build towards greater virtue. If a young person, for example, has the top strength of curiosity, they may try a new food that week or take a different path home (Niemiec, 2014). As mentioned, Seligman et al. (2005) found that when individuals identified their signature strengths using the VIA Character Strengths survey (VIA Institute on Character, 2019b) and tried using them in novel ways during the week, happiness increased while
depression decreased over six months. And, Madden, Green and Grant (2011) found that when youth engaged in developing their signature strengths along with goal setting, this increased engagement and hope. Thus, youth ministers and Catholic educators can lead students towards goal setting with their character strengths through the Aware-Explore-Apply model. See Appendix E for an intervention to lead adolescents through the Aware-Explore-Apply process with their character strengths (Niemiec, 2018).

One additional vehicle to build self-efficacy is vicarious learning, or seeing others utilize strengths. An avenue to this might be to have youth identify saints and moral paragons in the Church who exemplify their same signature strengths. For example, teens may choose to focus on the appreciation of beauty and excellence of St. Francis of Assisi, or the kindness of St. Teresa of Calcutta. In fact, during Confirmation, many teens find a saint to take on as their guide (Life Teen, 2019). Often this means teens will choose a saint they admire, adopting their name in the Confirmation process. This practice can be bolstered using the VIA Character Strengths Survey for Youth (VIA Institute, 2019b). Encouraging teens to discover their signature strengths and select a saint based on these strengths can help to increase their self-efficacy towards living out their call to holiness.

**Deepening Relationship to Others through Character Strengths**

Like benefiting relationship to self, teens can also develop and uplift character strengths in their relationships to others. As Niemiec (2018) points out, character strengths are social. In other words, this means that individuals use and exemplify their own strengths and the strengths of others in one-on-one and communal settings (Niemiec, 2018). Niemiec calls this *strengths spotting* and he notes that this can often be even easier than recognizing self-strengths. He proposes a simple formula for spotting strengths in others: Label, Explain, and Appreciate
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(Niemiec, 2018). When one labels, they simply name the strength they notice in others. Niemiec (2018) notes that just naming the strength is powerful as it elevates its importance and empowers awareness. Researchers propose labeling strengths, such as courage, have positive benefits in further bolstering this strength (Hannah, Sweeney, & Lester, 2007). And, on the other hand, negative labeling can have the reverse affects. As Rashid et al. (2013) note that often teachers, peers, and mentors can fall into the trap of negatively labeling deficits, which the researchers note, can impact how adolescents see themselves (i.e., anxious, depressed, lazy, etc.). In fact, Rashid and Ostermann (2009) propose the idea that as humans have evolved, the brain has gained skill at recognizing the gaps, remembering the grudges, and criticizing the faults rather than remembering gratitude and other strengths. Thus, positive labeling is essential as the first step of strengths spotting.

The second step Niemiec (2018) illuminates as important in strengths spotting with others is explaining. He encourages individuals to further explain the actions behind the label. Simply saying “You have the strength of leadership” can leave individuals with more questions than answers. The label needs to have the aligned behavioral evidence for it to stick (Niemiec, 2018). Therefore, teenagers are encouraged to follow up the label with the active evidence.

And finally, the third step to strengths spotting is to appreciate. This is another step that is essential and, yet, can sometimes be overlooked. When adolescents appreciate, they are expressing value for a person and their strengths (Niemiec, 2018). And, research has shown the benefits to appreciating others. For one, it can increase relationship success. For example, Gordon, Impett, Kogan, Oveis, and Keltner (2012) discovered that individuals who appreciated their significant others reported being more responsive to their partner’s needs, more committed, and more likely to stay in the relationship. Additionally, in this same study, partners who felt
appreciated, were more likely to appreciate in return! Thus, appreciating others can build towards greater appreciation overall. And, as noted earlier, Kashdan et al. (2017) found that character strengths appreciation in marriage relationships was associated with higher relationship commitment and satisfaction.

And, readers know this to be true. As one remembers Fredrickson’s (2001) broaden and build theory, positive emotions aid in creating and maintaining resources and strengthening relationships. Regarding expressing thankfulness, for example, Algoe, Haidt, and Gable (2008) observed that gratitude predicted the benefactor’s (or the receiver’s) positive responses to the relationship a month later. This meant that the feelings of gratitude and gratefulness helped to bond or connect relationships in positive ways. Thus, when teenagers express gratitude for a peer’s strengths, this can help to forge more intimate connections. Moreover, Algoe and Haidt (2009) found in their study of elevation, gratitude, and admiration, individuals who experienced these other-praising strengths were more likely to note positive relationship building motivations than individuals who experienced positive emotions like joy. Not only closer bonds, but these other-praising emotions impacted self-improvement aspirations. What these researchers found was that when individuals practiced elevation, or witnessing the virtuous acts of others, these individuals felt desire to improve themselves (Algoe & Haidt, 2009). And when in response to an act of kindness towards the self the individuals expressed gratitude, to which Algoe and Haidt (2009) found these inspired individuals to become closer or desire closeness with the benefactor. Instead of narrowing in on selfish needs and wants, all three other-praising emotions: admiration, elevation, and gratitude opened the individuals to others. Thus, when adolescents notice the strengths of others, and express gratitude for their gifts, it will improve relationship connections and spark self-improvement.
And, taking this one step further, when individuals strengths spot, connecting these unique gifts to God, it is theorized that this will help to deepen spirituality as well. Through these strengths spotting interventions, for example, teens can practice the call to see *God in others* (Vanier, 2008) and recognize the dignity and value of members in the community. As the *Catholic Catechism* (CCC, 1993), the central source of all Catholic Church teachings on faith and morals, denotes, “the divine image is present in every man” and men are given both reason and free will: cognitive abilities to understand the Creator’s will and the freedom to choose what is true and good (para. 1702-1704). And many canonized saints, like St. Teresa of Calcutta, practiced the Catholic social teaching of seeing God in everyone, no matter the social stature (Pentin, 2016). Noting the research around sanctification, if teens believe that strengths are manifestations of God, the pathways to finding the divine image in others becomes much easier. While research on character strengths spotting through the spiritual lens is currently lacking, one could imagine that this may be a future avenue for investigation. To assist with this process, interventions are suggested in Appendix G from Niemiec’s (2018) *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners*. Each relates to building positive relationships through the VIA and VIA-Youth Character Classification and Survey (VIA Institute, 2019b). Note, these interventions have been modified with ideas on how Catholic youth ministers might roll them out to teens, utilizing various examples and exemplars.

**Deepening Relationship to God through Character Strengths**

Based on the research on sanctification and vicarious learning, one practical way of connecting the divine and character strengths to help teens deepen their relationship with God is through finding connections to Scripture. According to Judeo-Christian beliefs, human beings were made in the image of God. For example, in the Book of Sirach, it reads:
The Lord created human beings from the earth, and makes them return to earth again. A limited number of days he gave them, but granted them authority over everything on earth. He endowed them with strength like his own, and made them in his image (Sirach 17: 1-3 NABRE).

In this passage, one reads that God made human beings in his likeness and gave them his strength. Adolescents who connect their top strengths to strengths that Jesus and God exemplify would most likely see their strengths as manifestations of God. As such, seeing strengths as manifestations of God means that teens will sanctify their strengths according to Pargament and Mahoney’s (2005) construct of sanctification. Furthermore, this means that teens who sanctify their own strengths, just like with people who sanctify objects or relationships, will place more emphasis on the significance of their strengths and have more positive affect when deploying them in the world (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). This aligns to Pope Francis’ (2019) call for youth to become more like the young Jesus, exemplifying his character strengths of humility, love, and bravery.

And a reasonable conclusion to draw from this? When one practices their signature strengths, and thus becoming more of their authentic self, they are, in turn, becoming more like God. For example, when teens practice their strength of creativity, they are becoming like the Creator. In this way, the universal call to holiness seems more personal, unique, and within reach. No longer does sainthood seem far away--through the VIA Character Strengths survey, youth are given clear direction on their strengths, helping them to move towards the virtuous life. As St. Gregory of Nyssa exclaimed, “the goal of a virtuous life is to become like God” (CCC, 1993, para. 1803). Teenagers can realize this through the practical development of their unique character strengths. Using the intervention examples in God’s Character: Connections between
the VIA Character Strengths and Holy Scripture (Appendix I) and My Strengths are Jesus’
Strengths (Appendix J), youth ministers can prompt teens to reflect on their own signature
strengths and how they align to Jesus and God (to see how this exercise fits into the overall
roadmap, see Appendix C for the lesson plan and objectives).

Sainthood: An Anecdote to Youth Depression and Anxiety?

Back to the original question: is the call to holiness a call to happiness? Could the
antidote to teen depression and anxiety be found in living the saintly life? To be sure, clinical
depression and diagnosed anxiety disorders that truly need medication could benefit from both
medical and positive psychology. That said, much of the issues with teens today around lack of
optimism, hope, and resilience could be alleviated with development of character strengths and
virtues. According to Peterson (2006), psychological disorders can be perceived as an
ABSENCE of a strength, the OPPOSITE of a strength, or the EXCESS of a strength (AOE).
Niemiec (2014, 2018) further defines these as underuse, overuse, and optimal use of strengths.
Underuse is when individuals fail to bring forth a strength in a situation that ends up having a
negative impact on self (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). Similarly, overuse of a strength can be when
individuals use too-much of a strength, to where it becomes something negative to self and
others (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). And finally, optimal use of a strength is the healthy balance
between excess and deficiency (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). This aligns with the Aristotelian teaching
of the golden mean, or the presence of strengths is healthy, and the lack or overabundance of
strengths denotes unhealthy mental states. According to Aristotle, balance is important, and why
practical wisdom in knowing how and when to use strengths is key (Melchert, 2002; Schwartz
and Sharpe, 2006).

When thinking about strength overuse and underuse, it is helpful to keep the following in
mind. Niemiec (2014) states that any, and all of the 24 VIA character strengths can be *overused* and *underused*. Additionally, each of the 24 strengths is on its own dimension, with the optimal use denoting the right use for the context or situation (Niemiec, 2014). And, when strengths fall into this overuse or underuse category, they are no longer strengths. For example, in Figure 2, humility is the optimal use; however, overuse of can look like self-deprecation, and therefore is no longer a *strength*. On the other hand, not enough humility looks like arrogance which is not a character strength (Niemiec, 2014). For more examples over, under, and optimal use of character strengths, see Appendix L.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrogance</th>
<th>Humility</th>
<th>Self-Deprecation</th>
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*Figure 2. Example adapted from Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing, by R. M. Niemiec, 2014, Boston, MA: Hogrefe Publishing.*

Niemiec (2014) also mentions that it is most likely that individuals will overdo their signature strengths and underuse their lowest strengths, which makes sense. Ensuring that adolescents are approaching all of their strengths in a balanced way is key—too much, or too little, can lead to negative outcomes (Niemiec, 2014). And finally, overuse and underuse can be managed or corrected when individuals bring out other character strengths to counteract it, or reframe or rework the overused/underused strength in some way (Niemiec, 2014).

As the VIA Classification of Character Strengths (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a) was meant to counteract the *DSM-V*, this idea of mental illness attributed to strengths and lack thereof, is groundbreaking (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). While Peterson (2006) does note that clinical disorders like bipolar or schizophrenia may have more biological roots, other
psychopathologies (i.e., depression, anxiety, attention disorders, etc.) may however, fall into the
AOE model (Peterson, 2006). The DSM-V was not meant to originally be a treatment manual for
practitioners, it set out to be a tool for researchers (Seligman, 2015). And, as Seligman (2015)
states, only became such a panacea manual because of the rise in reimbursement for treatments
through insurance. The DSM-V was supposed to help researchers with common language, but
because of the pressure to treat mental illness arose, the DSM-V stepped in to fill the gap, even if
the treatments were untested and unaligned (Seligman, 2015). Treatments are often not specific
(i.e., antidepressant medication to treat depression, anxiety, etc.) and are effective only 65% of
the time next to placebo controls (Seligman, 2011). It begs the question, are treatments aimed at
the right mechanism?

Mental health through the lens of strengths may be the better answer. Capitalizing on the
original theory from Peterson (2006) and taking a nod from Aristotle’s philosophy, Niemiec
(2014, 2019) created an empirically tested and validated model around overuse, underuse, and
optimal use of character strengths. This optimal use is also known as the golden mean of
strengths, an idea proposed by Aristotle (Melchert, 2002; Niemiec, 2014, 2019). See Appendix L
for Niemiec’s (2014) updated Table on Overuse-Underuse-Optimal Use.

And, empirical research is showing that when individuals exemplify optimal use, rather
than overuse or underuse of the strength, positive rather than outcomes ensue (Freidlin, Littman-
Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017; Tehranchi, Doost, Amiri, & Power, 2018). For example, Freidlin et al.
(2017) discovered in a study of 238 adults, that overuse of strengths was significantly related to
negative outcomes like depression \((r = .34, p < .001)\). And, underuse also was significantly
related to depression, \(r = .49, p < .001\). Conversely, optimal use of strengths was negatively
related to depression \((r = -.50, p < .01)\) (Freidlin et al., 2017). Likewise, Friedlin et al. (2017)
observed that optimal strengths use significantly positively related with flourishing \((r = .61, p < .001)\) and life satisfaction \((r = .49, p < .001)\), as measured by The Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985). Digging into one specific form of mental illness, social anxiety, these researchers found similar trends with specific character strengths. For example, Friedlin et al. (2017) found that underuse and overuse of social intelligence was associated with social anxiety disorder. And, likewise, underuse of zest and self-regulation, along with overuse of humility, were also associated with social anxiety (Friedlin et al., 2017). From this empirical study, one can see that Aristotle’s notion of the golden mean seems to be important, especially when it comes to avoiding depression and amplifying flourishing.

And, there is rising evidence that strengths can be bolstered and built, especially when individuals are at risk for underuse (Niemiec, 2014, 2019). For example, cowardice can be helped through systematic desensitization and development of the character strength of bravery (Seligman, 2014). Thus, mental health may have more to do with character strengths and virtues than was originally proposed by the field of psychology.

Building on this claim, and further refining the original work of Peterson, Tayyab Rashid and Martin Seligman (2018) propose a modified AOE model for many diagnoses in the DSM-V (see Appendix M for abridged table). In their model, they posit that common mental illnesses like depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder are due to an underuse or overuse of character strengths. For example, depression can be due to a lack of the character strengths of hope, optimism, or zest (Rashid & Seligman, 2018). In regard to anxiety disorders, this might be linked to a lack of grit or patience. Likewise, these disorders can be attributed to excess of strengths (Rashid & Seligman, 2018). Depression can result from an
excess of humility (e.g., too much focus on other’s needs), an excess of kindness (e.g., helping others at the expense of self-care), or an excess of perspective (hyper focusing and narrow views on reality). Aligned to this notion of depression and anxiety tied with strengths use, empirical research shows that lacking positive factors can be connected to greater risk of a disorder. For example, Wood and Joseph (2010) found over a ten-year longitudinal study in a large sample size of over 5,000 individuals, those lacking psychological well-being (PWB) factors (e.g., self-acceptance, autonomy, positive relationships, and positive growth) were at seven times greater risk for developing depression.

In light of this, the implications on strength and virtue development are interesting to note. Youth ministry programs that hyper focus on the negative (e.g., too much attention on sin, brokenness, etc.) may need increased consideration of virtue and character strengths. In addition, questions like, “How much humility is TOO much humility?” or “When can kindness go wrong?” are important to discuss with teens. According to Aristotle, Peterson, Niemiec, Seligman, and Rashid, there is a limit to how much humility one should exercise, ensuring the right balance of self-acceptance and praise of others is present. Too much self-deprecation can potentially lead to depressive-like symptoms. It is important for Catholic educators teaching the virtues to understand the links between character strengths, virtues, and mental health and illness. Messaging to teens should underscore that developing strengths is important, but too much or too little is a road that could lead to negative results.

In an emerging field, positive psychotherapy (PPT), practitioners help individuals identify, explore, and practice strength development (Rashid & Seligman, 2018). This type of therapy is built on the understanding that mental illness can signify a lack or excess of strength. In order to re-balance, or right a person, the first step is identifying what is truly right. Through
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this process, individuals learn essential skills to maneuver present levels of anxiety and
depression, and skills that ultimately lead to resilience, the shiny armor that helps individuals
withstand future setbacks, trauma, and challenges in life. Thus, it seems with balanced strengths
development, young people can find reprieve from depression and anxiety, drawing strong
connections between the holy life and the happy life.

Future Directions

As noted before, gaps exist in the research connecting character strengths to spirituality,
especially through the lens of relationships. While some research exists around character
strengths and relationships to self and others, little has been done to connect these with a
relationship to God. Thus, one avenue might be to utilize current measurements like the RCOPE
or the Perceived Sacred Qualities of Marriage Scale and the Manifestation of God Scale,
modifying it to connect with strengths of character. How do young people perceive their
strengths? Do they see them as gifts from God? Manifestations of God? And how does this effect
their well-being? These questions could help researchers more deeply understand the ways in
which young people perceive their strengths in relation to their connection with the divine.

To close, the call to holiness is the call to happiness. As Aristotle and Aquinas theorized,
science is showing that living a fulfilled life comes from living a life practicing virtue. In an age
of increased depression and anxiety, this is good news for teens and young adults. Living the
saintly life really comes down to self-awareness and habits of virtue. And through the VIA
Character Strengths Classification (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a), it is easier than ever to
ascertain one’s unique gifts and strengths, creating a clear pathway towards sainthood.
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Appendix A

VIA Character Strengths Classification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Wisdom and knowledge</strong></th>
<th><strong>Curiosity</strong></th>
<th><strong>Judgement</strong></th>
<th><strong>Love of Learning</strong></th>
<th><strong>Perspective</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive strengths that necessitate the attainment and use of knowledge</td>
<td>Interest, novelty-seeking, exploration, openness to experience</td>
<td>Critical thinking, thinking through all sides, not jumping to conclusions</td>
<td>Mastering new skills and topics, systematically adding to knowledge</td>
<td>Wisdom, providing wise counsel, taking the big picture view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Creativity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Curiosity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Judgement</strong></td>
<td><strong>Love of Learning</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perspective</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original, adaptive, ingenuity, seeing and doing things in different ways</td>
<td>Interest, novelty-seeking, exploration, openness to experience</td>
<td>Critical thinking, thinking through all sides, not jumping to conclusions</td>
<td>Mastering new skills and topics, systematically adding to knowledge</td>
<td>Wisdom, providing wise counsel, taking the big picture view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Courage</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perseverance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Honesty</strong></td>
<td><strong>Zest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Humanity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish tasks and goals in the face of internal or external challenge</td>
<td>Persistence, industry, finishing what one starts, overcoming obstacles</td>
<td>Authenticity, being true to oneself, sincerity without pretense, integrity</td>
<td>Vitality, enthusiasm for life, vigor, energy, not doing things half-heartedly</td>
<td><strong>Humanity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bravery</strong></td>
<td><strong>Perseverance</strong></td>
<td><strong>Honesty</strong></td>
<td><strong>Zest</strong></td>
<td><strong>Humanity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valor, not shrinking from threat or challenge, facing fears, speaking up for what is right</td>
<td>Persistence, industry, finishing what one starts, overcoming obstacles</td>
<td>Authenticity, being true to oneself, sincerity without pretense, integrity</td>
<td>Vitality, enthusiasm for life, vigor, energy, not doing things half-heartedly</td>
<td><strong>Humanity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Humanity</strong></td>
<td><strong>Kindness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social Intelligence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Justice</strong></td>
<td>One's civic strengths that foundationally contribute to healthy community life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal character strengths that involve caring for and befriending others</td>
<td>Generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others</td>
<td>Aware of the motives and feelings of oneself and others, knows what makes others tick</td>
<td></td>
<td>One's civic strengths that foundationally contribute to healthy community life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Love</strong></td>
<td><strong>Kindness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social Intelligence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Justice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teamwork</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both loving and being loved, valuing close relations with others, genuine warmth</td>
<td>Generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruism, doing for others</td>
<td>Aware of the motives and feelings of oneself and others, knows what makes others tick</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, contributing to a group effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Justice</strong></td>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td><strong>Teamwork</strong></td>
<td><strong>Social responsibility</strong>, loyalty, contributing to a group effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One's civic strengths that foundationally contribute to healthy community life</td>
<td>Adhering to principles of justice, not allowing feelings to bias decisions about others</td>
<td>Organizing group activities to get things done, positively influencing others</td>
<td></td>
<td>Citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, contributing to a group effort</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Temperance</th>
<th>Humility</th>
<th>Prudence</th>
<th>Self-Regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forgiveness</strong></td>
<td>Mercy, accepting others’ shortcomings, giving people a second chance, letting go of hurt</td>
<td>Modesty, letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves</td>
<td>Careful about one’s choices, cautious, not taking undue risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcendence</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</strong></td>
<td><strong>Gratitude</strong> Thankful for the good, expressing thanks, feeling blessed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix B

RCOPE Subscales and Items and Definitions of Religious Coping Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Methods of Coping to Find Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Benevolent Religious Reappraisal</strong>—redefining the stressor through religious as benevolent and potentially beneficial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Saw my situation as part of God’s plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Tried to find a lesson from God in the event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tried to see how God might be trying to strength me in this situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Through that the event might bring me closer to God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tried to see how the situation could be beneficial spiritually.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Punishing God Reappraisal—redefining the stressor as a punishment from God for the individual’s sins |
| 1. Wondered what I did for God to punish me. |
| 2. Decided that God was punishing me for my sins. |
| 3. Felt punished by God for my lack of devotion. |
| 4. Wondered if God allowed this event to happen to me because of my sin. |
| 5. Wondered whether God was punishing me because of my lack of faith. |

| Demonic Reappraisal—redefining the stressor as an act of the Devil. |
| 1. Believed the devil was responsible for my situation. |
| 2. Felt the situation was the work of the devil. |
| 3. Felt the devil was trying to turn me away from God. |
| 4. Decided the devil made this happen. |
| 5. Wondered if the devil had anything to do with this situation. |

| Reappraisal of God’s Powers—redefining God’s power to influence the stressful situation. |
| 1. Questioned the power of God. |
| 2. Thought that some things are beyond God’s control. |
| 3. Realized that God cannot answer all of my prayers. |
| 4. Realized that there were some things that even God could not change. |
| 5. Felt that even God has limits. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaborative Religious Coping</strong>—seeking control through a partnership with God in problem solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Tried to put my plans into action together with God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Worked together with God as partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Tried to make sense of the situation with God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Felt that God was working right along with me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Worked together with God to relieve my worries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Active Religious Surrender—an active giving up of control to God in coping. |
| 1. Did my best and then turned the situation over to God. |
| 2. Did what I could and put the rest in God’s hands. |
| 3. Took control over what I could, and gave the rest up to God. |
| 4. Tried to do the best I could and let God do the rest. |
| 5. Turned the situation over to God after doing all that I could. |
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### Passive Religious Deferral—passive waiting for God to control the situation
1. Didn’t do much, just expected God to solve my problems for me.
2. Didn’t try much of anything; simply expected God to take control.
3. Didn’t try to cope; only expected God to take my worries away.
4. Knew that I couldn’t handle the situation, so I just expected God to take control.
5. Didn’t try to do much; just assumed God would handle it.

### Pleading for Direct Intercession—seeking control indirectly by pleading to God for a miracle or divine intercession
1. Plead with God to make things turn out okay.
2. Prayed for a miracle.
3. Bargained with God to make things better.
4. Made a deal with God so that he would make things better.
5. Plead with God to make everything work out.

### Self-Directing Religious Coping—seeking control directly through individual initiative rather than help from God
1. Tried to deal with my feelings without God’s help.
2. Tried to make sense of the situation without relying on God.
3. Made decisions about what to do without God’s help.
4. Depended on my own strength without support from God.
5. Tried to deal with the situation on my own without God’s help.

### Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Comfort and Closeness to God

#### Seeking Spiritual Support—searching for comfort and reassurance through God’s love and care
1. Sought God’s love and care.
2. Trusted that God would be by my side.
3. Looked to God for strength, support, and guidance.
4. Trusted that God was with me.
5. Sought comfort from God.

#### Religious Focus—engaging in religious activities to shift focus from the stressor
1. Prayed to get my mind off of my problems.
2. Thought about spiritual matters to stop thinking about my problems.
3. Focused on religion to stop worrying about my problems.
4. Went to church to stop thinking about this situation.
5. Tried to get my mind off my problems by focusing on God.

#### Religious Purification—searching for spiritual cleansing through religious actions
1. Confessed my sins.
2. Asked forgiveness for my sins.
3. Tried to be less sinful.
4. Searched for forgiveness from God.
5. Asked for God to help me to be less sinful.

#### Spiritual Connection—experiencing a sense of connectedness with forces that transcend the individual
1. Looked for a stronger connection with God.
2. Sought a stronger spiritual connection with other people.
3. Thought about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force.
4. Tried to build a strong relationship with a higher power.
5. Tried to experience a strong feeling of spirituality.

**Spiritual Discontent**—expressing confusion and dissatisfaction with God’s relationship to the individual in the stressful situation
1. Wondered whether God had abandoned me.
2. Voiced anger that God didn’t answer my prayers.
3. Questioned God’s love for me.
4. Wondered if God really cares.
5. Felt angry that God was not there for me.

**Marking Religious Boundaries**—clearly demarcating acceptable from unacceptable religious behavior and remaining within religious boundaries
1. Avoided people who weren’t of my faith.
2. Stuck to the teachings and practices of my religion.
3. Ignored advice that was inconsistent with my faith.
4. Tried to stick with others of my own faith.
5. Stayed away from false religious teachings.

**Religious Methods of Coping to Gain Intimacy with Others and Closeness to God**

**Seeking Support from Clergy or Members**—searching for comfort and reassurance through the love and care of congregation members and clergy
1. Looked for spiritual support from clergy.
2. Asked others to pray for me.
3. Looked for love and concern from the members of my church.
4. Sought support from members of my congregation.
5. Asked clergy to remember me in their prayers.

**Religious Helping**—attempting to provide spiritual support and comfort to others
1. Prayed for the well-being of others.
2. Offered spiritual support to family or friends.
3. Tried to give spiritual strength to others.
4. Tried to comfort others through prayer.
5. Tried to provide others with spiritual comfort.

**Interpersonal Religious Discontent**—expression confusion and dissatisfaction with the relationship of clergy or members to the individual in the stressful situation
1. Disagreed with what the church wanted me to do or believe.
2. Felt dissatisfaction with the clergy.
3. Wondered whether my church had abandoned me.
4. Felt my church seemed to be rejecting or ignoring me.
5. Wondered whether my clergy was really there for me.

**Religious Methods of Coping to Achieve a Life Transformation**

**Seeking Religious Direction**—looking to religion for assistance in finding new direction for living when the old one may no longer be viable
1. Asked God to help me find a new purpose in life.
2. Prayed to find a new reason to live.
3. Prayed to discover my purpose in living.
### Religious Conversion—looking to religion for a radical change in life

1. Tried to find a completely new life through religion.
2. Looked for a total spiritual reawakening.
3. Prayed for a complete transformation of my life.
4. Tried to change my whole way of life and follow a new path—God’s path.
5. Hoped for a spiritual rebirth.

### Religious Forgiving—looking to religion for help in shifting from anger, hurt, and fear associated with an offense to peace.

1. Sought help from God in letting go of my anger.
2. Asked God to help me overcome my bitterness.
3. Sought God’s help in trying to forgive others.
4. Asked God to help me be more forgiving.
5. Sought spiritual help to give up my resentments.

## Appendix C

### Character Strengths in Youth Ministry Unit Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Connect My Calling to Virtue  | Adolescents will be able to…<br>  

  >> Read Pope Francis’ *Christus Vivit* and understand their call to holiness and sainthood  

  >> Understand St. Thomas Aquinas’ teaching on virtue and the “good life,” recognizing the Catholic Churches teaching on virtue and happiness  

  >> Connect virtue to happiness through the scientific lens, by looking at current research  

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Pope Francis’ *Christus Vivit*<sup>1</sup> and Discussion Questions (see Appendix C)                                                          | Peterson & Seligman (2004)  

  *Oxford Handbook on Aquinas*

| Strengths Awareness in Self | Adolescents will be able to…<br>  

  >> Recognize their own strengths and identify their signature strengths  

  >> Connect past events and strengths use to the VIA Survey results  

  >> Analyze the life of a saint who exemplified their same top strength  

  >> Appreciate and celebrate their strengths  

  >> Create 5 unique ways to use their signature strengths over the next week  

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | VIA Youth Survey<sup>2</sup>  

  *Aware-Explore-Apply (see Appendix D)*  

  *Saint Matching - find your match! (see Appendix E)*  

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 2010)  

  *Five Signature Strengths (Seligman et al., 2005)*  

  *Aware-Explore-Apply (Niemiec, 2014, 2018)*

| My Strengths are God’s Strengths | Adolescents will be able to…<br>  

  >> Connect their signature strengths to Jesus’  

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | VIA Youth Survey results  

|                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Sanctification (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005)

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.viacharacter.org/Survey/Account/Register#youth](https://www.viacharacter.org/Survey/Account/Register#youth)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>My “Jesus Strengths” Activity (see Appendix J)</th>
<th>Strengths Spotting: Seeing God in Others and Other Relationship Building Interventions (see Appendix G)</th>
<th>Everyday Saint Shout Outs (see Appendix H)</th>
<th>Niemiec (2014, 2018)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Seeing God in Others</strong></td>
<td>Adolescents will be able to…</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Rust, T., Diessner, R., &amp; Reade, L. (2009) found that individuals who worked on one high strength and one low strength in a new way had benefits for well-being compared to a placebo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Connect the strengths of others to Jesus’ signature strengths through Holy Scripture and to saints</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dahlsgaard, Peterson, &amp; Seligman (2005): 6 virtues across various cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Recognize moments in the past when individuals exemplified their signature strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oettingen, Pak, and Shettner (2001) found that when individuals use mental contrasting, or thinking positively about their future and comparing that to their current reality, it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Celebrate others for their unique strengths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>My Saint Pathway: Pathways to Virtue</strong></td>
<td>Adolescents will be able to:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Identify a virtue that they specifically want to develop during the semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Recognize their own strengths leading to this virtue, and highlight areas of grow</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Make connections between the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit and Cardinal + Theological Virtues and the VIA Character Strengths and virtues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;&gt;Create a plan to practice these strengths in new ways during the fall semester</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
was more motivating for achieving goals and plans.


CSI 17, Niemiec (2018)
Appendix D

Christus Vivit: Discussion Questions

1. What was one impactful statement Pope Francis made in *Christus Vivit* for you? Why?
2. How does Jesus challenge the Church and others to see “youth”?
3. What do you think Pope Francis meant when he stated that the youth must become more like Jesus?
4. What strengths did you notice that Pope Francis highlighted in Jesus? Do you exemplify any of these strengths in your own life? How?
5. How do you see yourself in Mary or any of the young saints Pope Francis mentions? What inspires you about their way of life?
6. What are the “three truths” Pope Francis speak about?
7. After reflecting on your own dream and mission, what do you think your pathway might entail?
8. What does it mean to you to have a “friendship with Jesus”?
9. Pope Francis says: *But I would also remind you that you won’t become holy and find fulfilment by copying others. Imitating the Saints does not mean copying their lifestyle and their way of living holiness: “There are some testimonies that may prove helpful and inspiring, but that we are not meant to copy, for that could even lead us astray from the one specific path that the Lord has in mind for us.” You have to discover who you are and develop your own way of being holy, whatever others may say or think. Becoming a saint means becoming more fully yourself, becoming what the Lord wished to dream and create, and not a photocopy. Your life ought to be a prophetic stimulus to others and leave a mark on this world, the unique mark that only you can leave. Whereas if you simply copy someone else, you will deprive this earth, and heaven too, of something that no one else can offer.*
10. What does this mean to you? What does this mean about the call to “sainthood”?
After looking at your strengths, what is your gut reaction? What surprises you most? Do your highest strengths exemplify the “real you”? In the descriptions, what sounds most like you?

When you consider your successes, what strengths were you using? How did each of your signature strengths (TOP 5) come into play?

How do you express your signature strengths at school? In relationships?

When you think about a time when you were anxious or stressed, what strengths did you rely on to pull you through?
How might you use your signature strengths in new ways over the next week? With self, with others, or with God?

What is one goal you have for the next month to improve relationship with self, with others, or with God? What specific strengths can you draw on to move you towards this goal?

Use your signature strengths to find your “saint match”! With the short guide of popular Catholic saints below, use your phone or computer to research these saints, finding saints who exemplify your signature strengths.

Saints to research:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>St. Francis of Assisi</th>
<th>St. Mary</th>
<th>St. Michael the Archangel</th>
<th>St. Cecilia</th>
<th>St. Faustina</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Joan of Arc</td>
<td>St. Francis Xavier</td>
<td>St. Christopher</td>
<td>St. Valentine</td>
<td>St. Joseph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Peter</td>
<td>St. Elizabeth Ann Seton</td>
<td>St. Patrick</td>
<td>St. Rose of Lima</td>
<td>St. Teresa of Avila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Paul</td>
<td>St. Catherine of Siena</td>
<td>St. Therese of the Little Flower</td>
<td>St. Padre Pio</td>
<td>St. Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Thomas Aquinas</td>
<td>St. Anthony of Padua</td>
<td>St. Jude</td>
<td>St. Bernadette</td>
<td>St. Sebastian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Claire</td>
<td>St. Augustine</td>
<td>St. Ignatius of Loyola</td>
<td>St. Maria Goretti</td>
<td>St. Philomena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Teresa of Calcutta</td>
<td>St. Benedict</td>
<td>St. Rita</td>
<td>St. Kateri Tekakwitha</td>
<td>St. Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Maximiliano Kolbe</td>
<td>St. Dymphna</td>
<td>St. Pope John Paul 2</td>
<td>St. Luke</td>
<td>St. Dominic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Choose your own!

### My Signature Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My Signature Strengths</th>
<th>Saint I Chose who has My Strength</th>
<th>How they exemplified this strength (be specific!)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: appreciation of beauty and excellence</td>
<td>St. Francis of Assisi</td>
<td>St. Francis’ love for nature and for animals exemplifies the signature strength of appreciation of beauty and excellence. He had a huge heart for caring for living things, and the environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strength 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix G

**Character Strengths Interventions for Improving Relationship to Others**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Aligned Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Seeing God in Others” Character Strength Appreciation and Strengths Spotting</td>
<td>To offer insights to peers; to boost the positivity in a relationship</td>
<td>1. Identify three of your friend/peer’s top character strengths 2. For each strength, write down a specific instance when they used the strength. How did you see the strength expressed? When were they acting “saintly”? 3. What saints also exemplified these strengths? 4. What examples do you have of Jesus exemplifying your friend’s strengths? 5. Appreciate and Celebrate your partner! Tell them what inspires you about their strength use, and how it is valued by you. This can be done in one-on-one interactions and in small groups.</td>
<td>Kashdan, et al. (2017)  Seligman (2002)  Relationships (Bao &amp; Lyubomirsky, 2013; Sheldon &amp; Lyubomirsky, 2012)  CSI 41, Niemiec (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicing Charity: Writing Love Letters/Gratitude Letters</td>
<td>Improve mood; mood repair; boost positive relationships; develop the strengths of love, gratitude, kindness (virtue of charity)</td>
<td>1. Ask teens to select one individual they care about deeply (could be a family member, relative, best friend, significant other) 2. Teens should reflect on the love they have for that individual. 3. Write a brief love letter to this person, expressing your deep admiration and love</td>
<td>Lavy, et al. (2014)  In this research, Lavy et al., (2014) found that individuals who wrote love letters had increased positive affect and decreased positive affect the following day. Thus, asking teens to write a letter to a loved one may help to improve positive mood.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| “Do Onto Others”: Directing Our Strengths Outward | Direct a character strength outward towards others to strengthen and build the relationship; finding a new way to use a strength | 1. Ask teens to choose one of their signature strengths  
2. Reflect: how can you direct this strength towards one of your friends? What is one new way you can use this strength to better the other person?  
3. Plan: make a plan to exercise this strength in the next week towards this individual  
4. Reflect: how did this make you feel? What was this person’s reaction?  
5. Repeat: use a new strength, with the same or different individual. | Fowers (1998): Developing character strengths within relationships will help to deepen the relationship more than working on communication skills.  
Veldorale-Brogan et al. (2010)  
CSI 43, Niemiec (2018) |
| | towards this individual. Specifically highlight thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and examples from this past week.  
Challenge: another suggestion on how to utilize this intervention would be to have teens write a love letter to someone they are in conflict with. This would allow individuals to also develop the strength of forgiveness. | CSI 42, Niemiec (2018) |
| Some examples (Niemiec, 2018, CSI 43):  
*Utilizing curiosity to ask your best friend new questions about themselves, or showing* | | |
| **Give Thanks:** Subtract then Add | **kindness in a new way towards another.** | **Seligman, et al. (2005)**
gratitude letters and gratitude visits give significant boosts to happiness.  
**CSI 46, Niemiec (2018)** |
|---|---|---|
| Deepen gratitude and appreciation strengths; Develop the strength of perspective about a meaningful relationship | 1. Ask teens to name an important relationship in their lives (could be with a loved one, best friend, etc.)  
2. Play some quiet music and have teens meditate for 4 minutes. Say: “Imagine your life without this person. Picture this clearly. What are you picturing? What is the impact? How do you feel? How would your life be different?”  
3. Write a letter to this person telling them how grateful you are to have them in your life. What does this person mean to you? Why and how are they important?  
4. Highlight: highlight their strengths and examples in the letter.  
5. Read: take this letter and read it out loud to the individual (if you can)  
6. Reflect: what character strengths in you did this help develop? How did this help deepen your relationship with this individual? Did you notice what effect it had on the other person? What was it? |
Faith Connection

“For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and of your love for all the saints, “do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers” (Ephesians 1: 15-16, New American Bible Revised Edition)

As Paul states in his letter to the Ephesians, he gives thanks for this individual’s strengths of faith (spirituality/belief) and love, ensuring to give specific examples of why he is grateful. Use this example when teaching teens about the character strength of gratitude and how we might express it through strengths spotting.

Appendix H

Everyday Saint Shout Outs Activity

As research shows, strengths spotting with others can be a powerful way for individuals to build motivation and connections (Niemiec, 2014, 2018). One way to do this is to create an “Everyday Saint Shout Outs” activity with the youth group, ideally a board or wall in the youth room that can stay up all semester.

Match saints to character strengths they exemplify. For example, “St Francis—Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence” or “St. Joan of Arc---Bravery.” Then, create space in the youth room to have a shout out board, where teens can shout out their peers for specific actions using the “saint character strength cards.” This can be a powerful way of connecting character strengths to sainthood, and utilizing the strengths spotting research to publicly build connections in the group.

Saints and the VIA Character Strengths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Strength</th>
<th>Saint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</td>
<td>St. Francis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>St. Joan of Arc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>St. Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>St. Luke/St. Catherine of Bologna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>St. Francis de Sales/St. Ignatius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>St. Elizabeth Ann Seton/St. John Bosco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>St. Vincent de Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>St. Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>St. Benedict/St. Maximiliano Kobe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persistence</td>
<td>St. Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>St. Teresa of Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>St. Thomas Aquinas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>St. Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>St. Catherine of Siena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>St. Faustina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>St. Theresa of the Little Flower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>St. John Paul II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>St. Teresa of Avila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>St. Nicholas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>St. Thomas More</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>St. Ambrose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>St. Junipero Serra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>St. Sebastian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
<td>St. Maria Goretti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I

God’s Character Strengths:
Connections between the VIA Character Strengths Classification and Scripture
New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)

Creativity:
Nehemiah 9:6 (NABRE)
“You are the Lord, you alone;
You made the heavens,
    the highest heavens and all their host,
The earth and all that is upon it,
    the seas and all that is in them.
To all of them you give life,
    the heavenly hosts bow down before you.

Psalm 143:5 (NABRE)
I remember the days of old; I ponder all your deeds; the works of your hands I recall.

Curiosity:
Matthew 7:7-11 (NABRE)
“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and the one who seeks, finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. Which one of you would hand his son a stone when he asks for a loaf of bread, or a snake when he asks for a fish? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him.”

Jeremiah 29:12-14 (NABRE)
When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. Yes, when you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me—oracle of the Lord—and I will change your lot; I will gather you together from all the nations and all the places to which I have banished you—oracle of the Lord—and bring you back to the place from which I have exiled you.

Deuteronomy 4:29 (NABRE)
Yet when you seek the Lord, your God, from there, you shall indeed find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul.

Judgment:
Hebrews 4:12 (NABRE)
Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart.
Love of Learning:
Proverbs 2 (NABRE)
The Blessings of Wisdom
My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commands,
Turning your ear to wisdom, inclining your heart to understanding;
Yes, if you call for intelligence, and to understanding raise your voice;
If you seek her like silver, and like hidden treasures search her out,
Then will you understand the fear of the Lord; the knowledge of God you will find;
For the Lord gives wisdom, from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He has success in store for the upright, is the shield of those who walk honestly,
Guarding the paths of justice, protecting the way of his faithful ones,
Then you will understand what is right and just, what is fair, every good path;
For wisdom will enter your heart, knowledge will be at home in your soul,
Discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you;
Saving you from the way of the wicked, from those whose speech is perverse.
From those who have left the straight paths to walk in the ways of darkness,
Who delight in doing evil and celebrate perversity;
Whose ways are crooked, whose paths are devious;
Saving you from a stranger, from a foreign woman with her smooth words,
One who forsakes the companion of her youth and forgets the covenant of her God;
For her path sinks down to death, and her footsteps lead to the shades.
None who enter there come back, or gain the paths of life.
Thus you may walk in the way of the good, and keep to the paths of the just.
For the upright will dwell in the land, people of integrity will remain in it;
But the wicked will be cut off from the land, the faithless will be rooted out of it.

Perspective
Psalm 32:8 (NABRE)
I will instruct you and show you the way you should walk,
give you counsel with my eye upon you.

Bravery
Deuteronomy 9:1-4 (NABRE)
Hear, O Israel! You are now about to cross the Jordan to enter in and dispossess nations greater
and stronger than yourselves, having large cities fortified to the heavens, the Anakim, a people
great and tall. You yourselves know of them and have heard it said of them, “Who can stand up
against the Anakim?” Know, then, today that it is the Lord, your God, who will cross over before
you as a consuming fire; he it is who will destroy them and subdue them before you, so that you
can dispossess and remove them quickly, as the Lord promised you. After the Lord, your God,
has driven them out of your way, do not say in your heart, “It is because of my justice the Lord
has brought me in to possess this land, and because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord
is disposing them before me.”

Deuteronomy 31:6 (NABRE)
THE HAPPY SAINT

Be strong and steadfast; have no fear or dread of them, for it is the Lord, your God, who marches with you; he will never fail you or forsake you.

Perseverance
Psalm 139:5-10 (NABRE)
Behind and before you encircle me, and rest your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, far too lofty for me to reach.
Where can I go from your spirit? From your presence, where can I flee?
If I ascend to the heavens, you are there; if I lie down in Sheol, there you are.
If I take the wings of dawn, and dwell beyond the sea,
Even there your hand guides me, your right hand holds me fast.

Honesty
Numbers 23:19 (NABRE)
God is not a human being who speaks falsely,
   nor a mortal, who feels regret.
Is God one to speak and not act, to decree and not bring it to pass?

Zest
Isaiah 40:28-31 (NABRE)
Do you not know?
   Have you not heard?
The Lord is God from of old,
   creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary,
   and his knowledge is beyond scrutiny.
He gives power to the faint,
   abundant strength to the weak.
Though young men faint and grow weary,
   and youths stagger and fall,
They that hope in the Lord will renew their strength,
   they will soar on eagles’ wings;
They will run and not grow weary,
   walk and not grow faint.

Love
1 John 4:7-12 (NABRE)
Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love. In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him. In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another. No one has ever seen God. Yet, if we love one another, God remains in us, and his love is brought to perfection in us.
Kindness
Psalm 25:6 (NABRE)
Remember your compassion and your mercy, O Lord, for they are ages old.

Psalm 40:12 (NABRE)
Lord, may you not withhold your compassion from me; May your mercy and your faithfulness continually protect me.

Psalm 69: 14-15 (NABRE)
But I will pray to you, Lord, at a favorable time.
God, in your abundant kindness, answer me with your sure deliverance.
Rescue me from the mire, and do not let me sink.
Rescue me from those who hate me and from the watery depths.

Kings 13:22-23 (NABRE)
King Hazael of Aram oppressed Israel all the days of Jehoahaz. But the Lord was gracious with Israel and looked on them with compassion because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was unwilling to destroy them or to cast them out from his presence even up to now.

Social Intelligence
Psalm 139:1-3 (NABRE)
Lord, you have probed me, you know me: you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.
You sift through my travels and my rest; with all my ways you are familiar.

Teamwork
1 Corinthians 3:5-9 (NABRE)
What is Apollos, after all, and what is Paul? Ministers through whom you became believers, just as the Lord assigned each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters are equal, and each will receive wages in proportion to his labor. For we are God’s co-workers; you are God’s field, God’s building.

Fairness
Deuteronomy 32:4 (NABRE)
The Rock—how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways!
A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he!
Forgiveness
Psalm 103: 6-14 (NABRE)
The Lord performs righteous deeds
And judgments for all who are oppressed.
He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel.
The Lord is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness.
He will not always strive with us, Nor will He keep His anger forever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth, So great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
Just as a father has compassion on his children, So the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.
For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust.

Prudence
Sirach 1: 11-30 (NABRE)
Fear of the Lord Is Wisdom
The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation, gladness and a festive crown.
The fear of the Lord rejoices the heart giving gladness, joy, and long life.
Those who fear the Lord will be happy at the end, even on the day of death they will be blessed.
The beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord; she is created with the faithful in the womb.
With the godly she was created from of old, and with their descendants she will keep faith.
The fullness of wisdom is to fear the Lord; she inebriates them with her fruits.
Their entire house she fills with choice foods, their granaries with her produce.
The crown of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, flowering with peace and perfect health.
Knowledge and full understanding she rains down; she heightens the glory of those who possess her.
The root of wisdom is to fear the Lord; her branches are long life.
The fear of the Lord drives away sins; where it abides it turns back all anger.
Unjust anger can never be justified; anger pulls a person to utter ruin.
Until the right time, the patient remain calm, then cheerfulness comes back to them.
Until the right time they hold back their words; then the lips of many will tell of their good sense.
Among wisdom’s treasures is the model for knowledge; but godliness is an abomination to the sinner.
If you desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord will bestow her upon you;
For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and discipline; faithfulness and humility are his delight.
Do not disobey the fear of the Lord, do not approach it with duplicity of heart.
Do not be a hypocrite before others over your lips keep watch.
Do not exalt yourself lest you fall and bring dishonor upon yourself; For then the Lord will reveal your secrets and cast you down in the midst of the assembly. Because you did not approach the fear of the Lord, and your heart was full of deceit.
Self-regulation
Exodus 34:5-7 (NABRE)
The Lord came down in a cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name, “Lord.” So the Lord passed before him and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity, continuing his love for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but bringing punishment for their parents’ wickedness on children and children’s children to the third and fourth generation!

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence
Genesis 1 (NABRE)
In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth—and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters—

Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” Evening came, and morning followed—the first day.
Then God said: Let there be a dome in the middle of the waters, to separate one body of water from the other. God made the dome, and it separated the water below the dome from the water above the dome. And so it happened. God called the dome “sky.” Evening came, and morning followed—the second day.

Then God said: Let the water under the sky be gathered into a single basin, so that the dry land may appear. And so it happened: the water under the sky was gathered into its basin, and the dry land appeared. God called the dry land “earth,” and the basin of water he called “sea.” God saw that it was good. Then God said: Let the earth bring forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree on earth that bears fruit with its seed in it. And so it happened: the earth brought forth vegetation: every kind of plant that bears seed and every kind of fruit tree that bears fruit with its seed in it. God saw that it was good. Evening came, and morning followed—the third day.

Then God said: Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate day from night. Let them mark the seasons, the days and the years, and serve as lights in the dome of the sky, to illuminate the earth. And so it happened: God made the two great lights, the greater one to govern the day, and the lesser one to govern the night, and the stars. God set them in the dome of the sky, to illuminate the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. God saw that it was good. Evening came, and morning followed—the fourth day.

Then God said: Let the water teem with an abundance of living creatures, and on the earth let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky. God created the great sea monsters and all kinds of crawling living creatures with which the water teems, and all kinds of winged birds. God saw that it was good, and God blessed them, saying: Be fertile, multiply, and fill the water of the seas; and let the birds multiply on the earth. Evening came, and morning followed—the fifth day.
THE HAPPY SAINT

Then God said: Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: tame animals, crawling things, and every kind of wild animal. And so it happened: God made every kind of wild animal, every kind of tame animal, and every kind of thing that crawls on the ground. God saw that it was good. Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth.

God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them and God said to them: Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that crawl on the earth. God also said: See, I give you every seed-bearing plant on all the earth and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the wild animals, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the earth, I give all the green plants for food. And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made, and found it very good. Evening came, and morning followed—the sixth day.

Hope
Psalm 39:7-9 (NABRE)
Man goes about as a mere phantom;  
they hurry about, although in vain;  
he heaps up stores without knowing for whom.  
And now, Lord, for what do I wait?  
You are my only hope.  
From all my sins deliver me;  
let me not be the taunt of fools.

Humor
Genesis 18:12-15 (NABRE)
So Sarah laughed to herself and said, “Now that I am worn out and my husband is old, am I still to have sexual pleasure?” But the Lord said to Abraham: “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Will I really bear a child, old as I am?’ Is anything too marvelous for the Lord to do? At the appointed time, about this time next year, I will return to you, and Sarah will have a son.”

Psalm 2:4 (NABRE)
The one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord derides them,

Psalm 126:1-3 (NABRE)
When the Lord restored the captives of Zion, we thought we were dreaming. Then our mouths were filled with laughter; our tongues sang for joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The Lord had done great things for them.” The Lord has done great things for us, Oh, how happy we were!
Leadership
Psalm 136 (NABRE)
Hymn of Thanksgiving for God’s Everlasting Mercy

I
Praise the LORD, for he is good;
for his mercy endures forever;
Praise the God of gods;
for his mercy endures forever;
Praise the Lord of lords;
for his mercy endures forever;

II
Who alone has done great wonders,
for his mercy endures forever;
Who skillfully made the heavens,
for his mercy endures forever;
Who spread the earth upon the waters,
for his mercy endures forever;
Who made the great lights,
for his mercy endures forever;
The sun to rule the day,
for his mercy endures forever;
The moon and stars to rule the night,
for his mercy endures forever;

III
Who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
for his mercy endures forever;
And led Israel from their midst,
for his mercy endures forever;
With mighty hand and outstretched arm,
for his mercy endures forever;
Who split in two the Red Sea,
for his mercy endures forever;
And led Israel through its midst,
for his mercy endures forever;
But swept Pharaoh and his army into the Red Sea,
for his mercy endures forever;
Who led the people through the desert,
for his mercy endures forever;
THE HAPPY SAINT

IV
Who struck down great kings,
for his mercy endures forever;
Slew powerful kings,
for his mercy endures forever;
Sihon, king of the Amorites,
for his mercy endures forever;
Og, king of Bashan,
for his mercy endures forever;
And made their lands a heritage,
for his mercy endures forever;
A heritage for Israel, his servant,
for his mercy endures forever.

V
The Lord remembered us in our low estate,
for his mercy endures forever;
Freed us from our foes,
for his mercy endures forever;
And gives bread to all flesh,
for his mercy endures forever.

VI
Praise the God of heaven,
for his mercy endures forever.

Humility
Philippians 2: 6-7 (NABRE)
Who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.
Rather, he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
coming in human likeness;
and found human in appearance,

Gratitude
Mark 1: 9-11 (NABRE)
The Baptism of Jesus. It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”
The Lord’s Prayer. He was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.” He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name,

your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread

and forgive us our sins

for we ourselves forgive everyone in debt to us,

and do not subject us to the final test.”
My Strengths are Jesus’ Strengths

For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:27 New American Bible Revised Edition)

Directions: Using the table below, highlight your top ten strengths from your VIA Character Strengths Survey. Then, look up the passage, or passages in the Bible to see when Jesus exemplified this strength. How do you see the strength come through? How does this strength come through for you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VIA Character Strengths</th>
<th>Jesus’ Strengths</th>
<th>How does Jesus exemplify this strength?</th>
<th>What is one way I exemplify this strength?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>John 6:33-35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Matthew 6:19-21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luke 12:10-21</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luke 11:42</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Matthew 28:20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>Luke 6:38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 5:9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Matthew 5:7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luke 19:29-30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Matthew 6:19-21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Luke 18:11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 17:27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Mark 10:45</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippians 2:58</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Romans 15:3-4</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 Peter 1:3</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>Scripture References</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Romans 8:35-39</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ephesians 5:2</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Luke 6:35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kindness</td>
<td>John 15:15</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Matthew 11:28-29</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>John 10:38</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Matthew 26:41</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>Matthew 11:29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Luke 22:17</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>John 17:1-3</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Matthew 5:7</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mark 6:48-51</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</td>
<td>Matthew 21:16-17</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 Timothy 4:4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>John 16:22</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mark 11:17</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Mark 11:24-26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luke 17:3-4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>John 16:33</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>Matthew 24:12-14</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 5:6</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>Matthew 24:28-29</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John 6:15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John 11:15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>John 14:26</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Matthew 10:5-10</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>John 6:10-12</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luke 6:13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John 13:3-9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
<td>Luke 21:34</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 Peter 2:22-23</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Reflection Questions:

Based on the above, what are your reactions? How does it feel to know that your most authentic strengths are also the strengths of Jesus?

Sainthood is a practice, creating the habits of virtue in everyday life. How might you begin to create the habits of virtue with your signature strengths? *Name at least 5 specific ways you can put your strengths into practice this week.*
Appendix K

My Pathway to Virtue: Practicing Sainthood

Reflect: what virtue are you wanting to focus on in your life right now?

Think about: Are you wanting to grow in the more “thinking-oriented” strengths (wisdom)? What about taking more courageous action (courage/fortitude)? Maybe you want to build stronger relationships with others (humanity/charity)? Are you wanting to become more focused on improving your community (justice)? Or maybe you want to control your vices (temperance)? Finally, are you wanting to improve in your relationship with God or develop stronger meaning/purpose (transcendence/faith and hope)?

The virtue I want to build is ____________________________________

What are the strengths that align to this virtue? Define each one.

Which of my signature strengths aligns to this virtue already? (You are already on your way!)
What is one new way I can implement these strengths in the next few weeks?

What other strengths align to this virtue that I can develop? Name these here. It’s best to focus on only one or two.

What are ways in which I can use those strengths in the next few weeks?

**My Plan for this Semester: Set Some Goals**
Research shows that positive future thinking is not enough to get us to act, we need to identify the current reality and potential obstacles that might get in our way towards our goal (Oettengin, Pak, and Schnetter, 2001). Below, write out your plan, create specific timelines, recognize who you will need as support and finally, what might be your obstacles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>New way to use the strength</th>
<th>When I will take these actions…</th>
<th>Who will hold me accountable? What support do I need?</th>
<th>What might get in my way from taking this action?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Used with permission.
### Appendix L

**Underuse-Optimal Use-Overuse of Character Strengths**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Strength</th>
<th>Underuse</th>
<th>Optimal Use</th>
<th>Overuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>Conforming; dull; unimaginative</td>
<td>Uniqueness that is practical; original, clever, imaginative</td>
<td>Eccentric; scattered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>Bored; uninterested; apathetic</td>
<td>Intrigued; open; novelty-seeker</td>
<td>Nosy; intrusive; self-serving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgement</td>
<td>Unreflective; closed-minded; illogical</td>
<td>Seeing 360-degrees of details; analytical; detail oriented; rational; logical; open-minded</td>
<td>Narrow-minded, rigid; indecisive; lost in one’s head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of Learning</td>
<td>Smug; uninterested; complacent with knowledge/growth</td>
<td>Going deeper with knowledge; information seeking; lifelong learner</td>
<td>Know-it-all; elitist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Shallow; superficial; lacking confidence</td>
<td>Sees and offers the wider view; wise; integrating viewpoints beyond one’s own</td>
<td>Arrogant; overbearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bravery</td>
<td>Cowardice; unwilling to act; unwilling to be vulnerable</td>
<td>Facing fears; confronting adversity; valor</td>
<td>Risk-taking; foolish; overconfident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perseverance</td>
<td>Lazy; helpless; giving up</td>
<td>Task completer; persistent and gritty; overcoming all obstacles</td>
<td>Stubborn; fixated; struggles to let go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Phony; dishonest, inauthentic</td>
<td>True to oneself; authentic to others; truth-sharer and seeker; sincere; without pretense</td>
<td>Self-righteous; rude; inconsiderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zest</td>
<td>Sloth-like; passive; tired</td>
<td>Enthusiasm for life; happy; active; energized</td>
<td>Hyper; overactive; annoying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>Isolating; not relating; cut off from others</td>
<td>Genuine; reciprocal warmth; connected; relational; fulfillment</td>
<td>Emotional overkill; misaligned to the needs of others; sugary sweet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indifferent; selfish; uncaring to self; mean spirited</td>
<td>Doing for others; caring; compassionate; generous; nice and friendly</td>
<td>Compassion-fatigue; overly focused on others; intrusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Intelligence</td>
<td>Clueless; disconnected; emotionally insensitive</td>
<td>Tuned in; knowing what makes others tick; savvy; empathic; emotionally intelligent</td>
<td>Over-analytical; self-deception; overly sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>Self-serving; individualistic; going it alone</td>
<td>Participate; contributing to group efforts; loyal; socially responsible</td>
<td>Dependent; lost in groupthink; blind obedience; loss of individuality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Prejudice; partisanship; complacency</td>
<td>Champions equal opportunity for all; care-and justice-based; moral concern</td>
<td>Detached; indecisive on justice issues; uncaring justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Follower; compliant and mousy; passive</td>
<td>Positively influencing others; organizing groups; leading around a vision</td>
<td>Bossy; controlling; authoritarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>Vengeful; merciless; easily triggered by others</td>
<td>Letting go of hurt when wronged; giver of second changes; accepting shortcomings</td>
<td>Permissive; doormat; too lenient or soft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Arrogant; braggadocio; self-focused; heavy ego needs</td>
<td>Clear view of oneself; focused attention on others; sees limitations of self; modest</td>
<td>Self-deprecation; limited self-image; subservient; withholding about oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prudence</td>
<td>Reckless; thrill-seeking; acting before thinking</td>
<td>Wisely cautious; thinks before speaks; planful; goal-oriented; risk-manager</td>
<td>Stuffy; prudish; rigid; passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Regulation</td>
<td>Self-indulgent; emotional dysregulation; impulsive; undisciplined; unfocused</td>
<td>Self-manager of vices; mindful; disciplined</td>
<td>Constricted; inhibited; tightly wound; obsessive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</td>
<td>Oblivious; mindlessness; stuck in auto-pilot</td>
<td>Seeing the life behind things; awe-wonder in presence of beauty;</td>
<td>Snobbery; perfectionistic;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>admiration for excellence; elevation for the goodness of others</td>
<td>intolerant; unrelenting standards</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Entitled; unappreciative; self-absorbed</td>
<td>Attitude of thankfulness; connected; appreciating positives</td>
<td>Ingratiation; contrived; profuse; repetitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Negative; pessimistic; part-oriented; despair</td>
<td>Positive expectations; optimistic; confidence in goals and future</td>
<td>Unrealistic; Pollyanna-ish; head in the clouds; blind optimism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Overly serious; stiff; flat affect</td>
<td>Laughter/joy with others; seeing the lighter side; playful</td>
<td>Tasteless/offensive; giddy; socially inappropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>Lack of purpose or meaning in life; disconnected from what is sacred; unaware of core values</td>
<td>Connecting with the sacred; pursuing life meaning; finding purpose; expressing virtue</td>
<td>Preachy; fanatical; rigid values; holier than thou</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Major Psychological Disorders as Dysregulation of Strengths List (abridged)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence of Symptoms</th>
<th>Dysregulation of Strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major Depressive Disorder</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depressed mood, feeling sad, hopeless, slow, fidgety, boredom</td>
<td>Lack of joy, delight, hope and optimism, playfulness, spontaneity, goal orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: prudence, modesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminished pleasure</td>
<td>Lack of savoring, zest, curiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: self-regulation, contentment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatigued, slow</td>
<td>Lack of zest, alertness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: relaxation, slacking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diminished ability to think or concentrate and indecisiveness, brooding</td>
<td>Lack of determination and resolution winnowing, divergent thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: overanalytical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicidal ideation/plan</td>
<td>Lack of meaning, hope, social connectivity, resolution, winnowing, divergent thinking, resourcefulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: carefreeness (defensive pessimism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Generalized Anxiety Disorder</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying excessively about real or perceived danger</td>
<td>Lack of perspective, wisdom, critical thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: caution, attentiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling restless, fatigued, fidgety, jittery, edgy, difficulty concentrating and sleeping</td>
<td>Lack of equanimity, mindfulness, spontaneity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: farsightedness, composure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recurrent, persistence, intrusive, unwanted thoughts, urges, or images</td>
<td>Lack of mindfulness and letting go, curiosity, perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: reflection and introspection, mortality or fairness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitive behaviors or mental acts individual feels compelled to do to prevent anxiety</td>
<td>Lack of contentment with less than perfect objects and performance, creativity, flexibility, ability to restrain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: reflection and introspection, planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failing to give close attention to details, not seeming to listen when spoken to directly</td>
<td>Lack of vigilance and social intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: watchfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty organizing tasks and activities</td>
<td>Lack of discipline and managing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: gusto, eagerness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding or disliking tasks requiring sustained attention or mental effort</td>
<td>Lack of grit and patience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: hedonic pleasures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive fidgeting, motor activity, running, pacing</td>
<td>Lack of calmness and composure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excess: agility, fervor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talking excessively, interrupting or intruding on others, difficulty awaiting turn</td>
<td>Lack of social intelligence, self-awareness Excess: zest, initiative, and curiosity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix N

Author’s Dimensional Strengths Report

Note. From “VIA Pro: Character strengths profile (a personalized report),” VIA Institute on Character, 2019 (https://www.viacharacter.org/profile-reports)