Virtue and Happiness

I. Introduction
   a. We can talk about the goal of Sherpa Club by looking at happiness and what people need to achieve happiness.
   b. We assume that happiness is what parents most want for their children:
      i. That they do well in life.
      ii. This includes that they do well for eternity (the “big” life).
   c. The goal of Sherpa is to help fathers help their sons to have happy, successful lives.

II. Happiness depends on acting a certain way
   a. We can ask what happiness is or what makes a person happy.
   b. Basically it is a question of activities.
      i. Not primarily a question of possessions (rich people are no happier).
      ii. Not a question of talents: many very highly talented people are very unhappy (think of all the famous people who commit suicide).
      iii. Not primarily a question of where you live or the weather.
      iv. More a question of what kinds of friends/relationships you have (biggest single relationship is that with God).
   c. The kinds of relationships you have depend on your activities.
      i. The relationships you have (family, friends, even political) are built upon activities. If you act well, your relationships will be good; if not, they will not be good and you will not be happy (think of what you need to do to have a good marriage).
      ii. Your work (a major activity in your life) is satisfying if you are doing what really contributes to the good of others. If you are not doing that, you will not find satisfaction (even if earning a big salary; how you get people to quit). That is, for your work to be satisfying, you have to be engaged in the right sort of activities.
   d. What sort of activities?
      i. With respect to God
         1. We need to honor God: worship.
         2. We need to talk to God: prayer.
         3. We need to join in the work of salvation: apostolate and evangelization.
ii. Treating other people well
1. We need to treat others fairly, respecting their rights (everyone, even strangers).
2. We need to treat others loyally (in friendships).
   a. Truly seeking their good even without advantage to yourself.
   b. Being honest with people; not cheating them; fair in our dealings with them.
   c. Doing what they like even at the expense of what you like, etc.
3. Promoting common goods within communities to which you belong, as opposed to acting selfishly.

iii. Leisure activities: enjoying beauty, etc.
e. A person who can consistently act in these ways will have a good life, even in the midst of hard external circumstances (for example, people have been happy in prison).
f. A person who does not act in these ways will tend not to have a good life.
   i. Person who easily becomes angry with others.
   ii. Person who drinks too much.
   iii. Person who does not live marital fidelity.
   iv. Person who is lazy and selfish and does not put out for others or for group goals; he ends up by himself because others don’t want to be with him.
   v. Person who does not respect rights of others (ends up in jail).
   vi. Person who complains all the time: people get tired of being around him.
   vii. Think of people where you say, “If only he would . . .
      1. Get his drinking under control.
      2. Work harder.
      3. Not spend so much.
      4. Not get so angry.
      5. Be more understanding of other people’s faults and shortcomings.

g. These vices are like illnesses. You only need one illness to be sick and to be unhealthy, not many illnesses. So too with the vices: any one, if serious, can ruin your life.

III. Virtues as basis for activity that leads to happiness
a. To be happy a person has to act in certain ways, and he needs to act consistently in those ways. Just every now and then will not do. How do you ensure that you will do something consistently and do it well consistently?

b. The answer is a habit: a fixed inner disposition to do something a certain way. That is what you develop with a golf swing, playing a musical instrument, etc. You develop the habit and then you can do it well consistently (e.g., you always hit the right keys at the right time, in the right way).

c. The virtues are the inner habits of acting in the ways we have described. There are internal, fixed, dispositions (habits) toward good actions (virtues). They are formed over time, and once formed, are pretty stable. Possessing these virtues is the secret of having a happy life.

d. This is a tradition of 2500 years. It started with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and was taken up by Christians. It was most highly developed in St. Thomas Aquinas (we will follow him, although I will not be quoting from the Summa). The virtues are part of Catholic doctrine and are discussed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (see nos. 1803-1845).

e. There are many distinct virtues (good habits), each dealing with a different aspect of life. Some examples:

1. Fortitude: for handling difficulties (difficulties are found throughout our lives in most areas of our lives).
2. Temperance: moderation of desires and pleasures (all kinds, and especially bodily pleasures).
3. Justice: our dealings with others (specifically respecting their rights and giving them their due).
4. Meekness: for handling anger well; the right amount, at the right time, in the right way (could be called “calmness”),
5. Generosity: for handling money well.

f. Virtues are necessary.

i. Other skills are good, but not necessary (e.g., playing the piano, learning chemistry, doing auto mechanics, playing tennis, etc.).

ii. Virtues are necessary; without the virtues, the other good things will be ruined. For example a person with a drinking
problem will undermine his job, his sports, his piano playing, etc.

iii. Virtues or character are like the operating system; if it is not stable, it will crash and so the applications, no matter how good they are, will not function well.

iv. The virtues are not selected or named arbitrarily. They are precisely the good habits a person needs to lead his life well and without which he can ruin his life (e.g., if you do not handle drink or anger well, you can end up without job, family and friends).

g. So, if you want your sons to be happy and lead good lives (this being what most decent parents most want for their children), you need to pay attention to virtue. Besides being concerned about their health, clothing, nourishment, school education, you have to always be asking what habits are they forming.

IV. Why it is important to know about the virtues
a. If you want your sons to be happy, the most important thing you can do for them is to instill in them the virtues.

b. To do this, you need to know about them and understand their basic structure (what they are, what kinds there are, how they function).

c. You need to know how they are acquired, since this is especially where you want to help your sons.

d. You need to be able to identify them (or their absence).
   i. You should be able to identify them by name; like a doctor who doesn’t just know you are sick, but has to identify the disease; we all tend to know when someone lacks virtue, but not everyone can say just what virtue is lacking.
   ii. You need to be able to teach sons about virtue; identify the virtues for them (as we do with trees and birds) in themselves, and around them in others, and in literature.

V. How the virtues are acquired
a. By habituation: by a person repeatedly doing the good action.

b. By example: seeing models that can be imitated.

c. Instruction: actually talking about character and virtues with your children.

VI. Future talks
a. Each month the talk will have two parts: 1) virtue in general and 2) a specific virtue.

b. Virtue in general: we will talk about the kinds of virtue, the structure of virtue, the role of reason and passions/impulses, the relationship to personality, etc.

c. Specific virtues: classic cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, Temperance) but also the many virtues that fall under them. E.g., under temperance comes not only moderate eating, sobriety (drinking), and chastity (sex), but also humility (self-aggrandizement), meekness (anger), studiosity (desire to know) and eutrapelia (playing games).