

Aquinas on the Emotions: Forming Hearts for Virtue

A Resource for Parish Formation and Religious Education

Catechist Handout · RCIA / Adult Faith Formation · Suitable for classroom or small-group use

SECTION 1 — WHY EMOTIONS MATTER IN THE LIFE OF FAITH

When we think about holiness, we may be tempted to imagine a saint who feels nothing — serene, unmoved, beyond the push and pull of human experience. But this is not the Catholic vision. **God gave us emotions.** They are not obstacles to holiness; they are part of the very nature He created and redeemed.

St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the *passions* — his term for the emotions — belong to the sensitive appetite of the soul and are, in themselves, morally neutral. They become morally good or evil only insofar as they are governed (or not governed) by reason and will:

Aquinas — Summa Theologica I-II, Q. 24, Art. 1

"The passions of the soul, in so far as they are contrary to the order of reason, incline us to sin; but in so far as they are ordered by reason, they belong to virtue."

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this clearly:

CCC 1763-1764

"The term 'passions' belongs to the Christian patrimony. Feelings or passions

are emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that incline us to act or not to act in regard to something felt or imagined to be good or evil. The passions are natural components of the human psyche; they form the passageway and ensure the connection between the life of the senses and the life of the mind."

Key Message for Catechists: The goal of the Christian life is *not* to eliminate emotions, but to order them rightly through virtue, so that they serve love of God and neighbor. To feel is to be human. To feel rightly — guided by reason, will, and grace — is to be holy.

SECTION 2 — THE TWO APPETITE FACULTIES: A QUICK OVERVIEW

Aquinas follows Aristotle in recognizing that human beings have a *sensitive appetite* — an interior faculty that responds to perceived good and evil at the level of sense experience. He divides this sensitive appetite into **two powers**:

Faculty	What It Responds To	Basic Movement
Concupiscible (<i>from lat. concupiscere, to desire</i>)	Simple good or evil — straightforward attraction or aversion	Moves <i>toward</i> what seems good; moves <i>away</i> from what seems evil
Irascible (<i>from lat. irasci, to be aroused</i>)	Arduous or difficult good/evil — when an obstacle or threat is involved	Mobilizes us to <i>overcome</i> obstacles or <i>resist</i> difficult evils

Together, these two faculties give rise to the **11 passions** — six concupiscible and five irascible — which Aquinas identifies and examines systematically in the *Summa Theologica* (I-II, QQ. 22-48). Each passion has its proper object, its proper role, and its proper place in the ordered Christian life.

SECTION 3 — THE ELEVEN PASSIONS: DEFINITIONS AND ROLES

The table below presents all eleven passions as identified by St. Thomas Aquinas, with a brief definition, a catechist note, and a Scripture connection for each. **This table is the heart of the handout** — use it as a reference during discussion.

#	Passion	Definition	Catechist Note	Scripture Connection
CONCUPISCIBLE PASSIONS (6) — Concern simple attraction toward good or aversion from evil				
1	Love <i>amor</i>	The foundational passion — a movement of attraction toward a perceived good. All other passions flow from love.	Love is the root of every other passion; disordered love explains most sin, while rightly ordered love is the beginning of virtue.	<i>"God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God." — 1 John 4:8</i>
2	Hatred <i>odium</i>	Aversion from what is perceived as harmful or evil; the opposite of love. It is the natural response of the soul to that which destroys or opposes good.	Hatred of sin — not of the sinner — is a properly ordered passion; Scripture calls us to hate what is evil and cling to what is good.	<i>"The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil." — Proverbs 8:13</i>
3	Desire <i>desiderium</i>	Longing for an absent good not yet possessed. The soul	Ordered desire directs us toward God Himself; disordered desire turns us	<i>"As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for</i>

#	Passion	Definition	Catechist Note	Scripture Connection
		reaches out toward what it knows to be good but has not yet attained.	toward created goods as though they were ultimate ends.	<i>you, O God."</i> — <i>Psalm 42:1-2</i>
4	Aversion <i>fuga</i>	The movement away from an absent evil, seeking to avoid it before it arrives. It is the counterpart of desire.	Prudent aversion keeps us from near occasions of sin; it is different from cowardice, which flees not evil but difficulty.	<i>"Avoid evil as you would a snake."</i> — <i>Sirach 21:2</i>
5	Joy / Delight <i>gaudium / delectatio</i>	Rest and satisfaction in a present good already possessed. The soul settles into what is truly good and rests there.	Spiritual joy — rejoicing in God and in goodness — is both a fruit of the Holy Spirit and the destination of rightly ordered love.	<i>"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice."</i> — <i>Philippians 4:4</i>
6	Sorrow / Sadness <i>tristitia</i>	Pain or distress at a present evil; the experience of something good being absent or lost. It is love's response to loss.	Sorrow over sin (contrition) is a holy passion; the tears of repentance reflect a heart rightly ordered to the good that has been lost.	<i>"Jesus wept."</i> — <i>John 11:35</i>
IRASCIBLE PASSIONS (5) — Concern arduous goods and difficult evils; they mobilize us to overcome obstacles				
7	Hope <i>spes</i>	The confident expectation of attaining a future, difficult good. It believes the	The theological virtue of Hope elevates this natural passion, anchoring it in God's promises rather than	<i>"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope."</i> —

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		good is real, possible, and worth striving for.	human effort alone.	<i>Romans 8:24-25</i>
8	Despair <i>desperatio</i>	The abandonment of hope; judging a future good to be unattainable and giving up the pursuit. It is the opposite of hope.	Despair is always a temptation, not a verdict — the Lamentations remind us that God's mercies are new every morning, even in darkest grief.	<i>"The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end." — Lamentations 3:21-23</i>
9	Fear <i>timor</i>	Withdrawal from a future, difficult evil that seems unavoidable or overwhelming. The soul recoils before a perceived threat.	The fear of the Lord is a gift of the Holy Spirit; rightly ordered fear of God leads us away from sin and toward His embrace.	<i>"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil." — Psalm 23:4</i>
10	Daring / Courage <i>audacia</i>	The impulse to confront and overcome a difficult obstacle or threatening evil. It is hope in action — the movement toward the arduous good.	Holy daring is not recklessness but the fruit of trust in God; the saints undertook great works precisely because they dared to believe God's call was real.	<i>"Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened; the Lord your God is with you." — Joshua 1:9</i>
11	Anger <i>ira</i>	The response to a present, unjust evil — the drive to resist, correct, or set right what has been	Righteous anger is good and necessary; Jesus' cleansing of the Temple shows that love of God and hatred of desecration are inseparable in	<i>"Making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the Temple." — John 2:15-17</i>

#	Passion	Definition	Catechist Note	Scripture Connection
		violated. It is sorrow's active counterpart.	the holy soul.	

SECTION 4 — HOW VIRTUE ORDERS THE PASSIONS

Virtue does not suppress emotion — it *perfects* it. The four cardinal virtues each play a distinct role in ordering the passions toward their proper ends. As Aquinas explains, when passions are governed by reason and will, they do not merely accompany virtue: they can themselves become virtuous acts.

Aquinas — ST I-II, Q. 24, Art. 3

"The passions, under the governance of reason and will, can themselves become virtuous acts — for when reason commands that we fear what ought to be feared, or desire what ought to be desired, the passion itself shares in the goodness of the act."

Cardinal Virtue	How It Orders the Passions	Passions Principally Governed
Prudence <i>(Practical Wisdom)</i>	Helps the intellect recognize what is truly good and direct our emotional responses accordingly.	Guides all passions by illumining what is truly worthy of love, desire, fear, or anger.
Temperance	Orders the concupiscible passions, moderating attraction and aversion so they do not become disordered.	Love, Desire, Joy — ensures they are directed toward proper goods and not to excess.

Cardinal Virtue	How It Orders the Passions	Passions Principally Governed
Fortitude	Orders the irascible passions — enabling proper courage and hope while restraining excess fear and despair.	Hope, Daring, Anger, Fear, Despair — keeps these in right proportion to real goods and evils.
Justice	Relates all our passions rightly toward other persons — ensuring love, anger, and sorrow are directed in accord with what others are owed.	Anger, Love, Sorrow — ensures our emotional responses respect the dignity and rights of others.

Catechism of the Catholic Church — §1767

"In themselves passions are neither good nor evil. They are morally qualified only to the extent that they effectively engage reason and will. Passions are said to be voluntary, either because they are commanded by the will, or because the will does not place obstacles in their way."

For the Catechist: Help your students understand that emotional maturity is not emotional absence. A person who never feels anger at injustice, never grieves over sin, and never hopes with conviction is not holier — they may simply be less alive. The saints were *passionate* people whose passions were deeply ordered by grace and virtue.

SECTION 5 — EMOTIONAL FORMATION IN SCRIPTURE

One of the most powerful proofs that emotions are part of God's design is found in the life of Jesus Himself. Our Lord, fully human and fully divine, experienced all eleven passions — perfectly ordered to the Father's will. He is our model of integrated emotional life.

The Emotions of Jesus in the Gospels

Passion	Scriptural Witness in Christ
Love	<i>"Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus."</i> — John 11:5. Christ's love for each person is the pattern of all human love.
Sorrow	<i>"Jesus wept."</i> — John 11:35. The shortest verse in Scripture is among its most profound: God weeps with us.
Anger	<i>"Making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the Temple."</i> — John 2:15-17. Righteous anger at desecration — love of the Father in action.
Fear	<i>"His sweat became like great drops of blood falling upon the ground."</i> — Luke 22:44. The agony in Gethsemane reveals Jesus' fully human experience of dread before suffering.
Joy	<i>"In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit."</i> — Luke 10:21. Jesus exulted with delight at the Father's wise design.
Desire	<i>"I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."</i> — Luke 22:15. Christ longed deeply for communion with those He loved.
Hope	<i>"For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross."</i> — Hebrews 12:2. Jesus endured all things in hope of the redemption of souls.

Key Theological Point

Jesus' passions were always perfectly ordered to the Father's will. He is not merely an example of emotional health — He is the *source* and *model* of every rightly ordered emotion. In Him, we see that holiness and human feeling are not opposites; they are inseparable.

The Passions of Our Lady

Mary, the Mother of God, likewise exemplifies the fully ordered emotional life. **She pondered** in her heart the mystery of her Son — an act of loving wonder and contemplative desire (*Luke 2:19*). **She grieved** at the foot of the Cross with a sorrow no mother had ever known — the *Stabat Mater* preserves this holy anguish for the Church. **She rejoiced** at the Annunciation, her Magnificat pouring forth the joy of a soul entirely surrendered to grace (*Luke 1:46-55*). In Mary, the passions are formed by perfect docility to God — a model for every disciple.

SECTION 6 — PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR CATECHISTS

A. Discussion Questions

For use in classroom, RCIA, or small-group formation settings. Allow 3-5 minutes per question.

1. Which of the eleven passions do you find easiest to recognize in your daily life? Which is hardest to name?
2. When has a strong emotion — like anger or fear — helped you do something genuinely good? When has it led you astray?
3. What does it mean to *let reason guide* your feelings rather than suppress them entirely? Can you give an example?
4. How did Jesus model properly ordered emotions in the Gospels? Which Gospel scene strikes you most?
5. Which of the four cardinal virtues — prudence, temperance, fortitude, or justice — do you think most helps you order your emotions? Why?

B. Formation Activities

Activity 1 — Passion Mapping

Have students identify an emotion they experienced this week. Which of the eleven passions was it? Was it concupiscible or irascible? What was it directed at — a true good, a true evil, or something disordered? Discuss as a group how reason and will could order that passion toward God.

Activity 2 — Gospel Emotion Walk

Read **John 11:1-44** together (the raising of Lazarus). As you read, have students identify every emotion expressed by Jesus, Mary, Martha, and the crowd. Chart them on the board. Discuss: How were Jesus' emotions perfectly ordered? What do they reveal about how God relates to human suffering?

Activity 3 — Virtue Journal

Invite students to write briefly about one passion they want to bring more fully under virtue this week. Ask them to name: (1) the passion, (2) what it has been directed at, (3) which virtue they will practice — temperance, fortitude, prudence, or justice — and (4) one concrete action they will take. Close with a short prayer.

Activity 4 — The Emotion Compass

Draw a large compass on the board. Label the cardinal directions: **Love (N)**, **Sorrow (S)**, **Hope (E)**, **Fear (W)**. Discuss how all eleven passions navigate toward or away from God as our ultimate good. Ask: What does it mean to let God be the *true north* of our emotional life? Where does your compass needle

usually point?

C. Closing Prayer for Ordered Emotions

This prayer may be used to open or close a formation session. All respond together.

A Catechist's Prayer for Ordered Hearts

*Lord Jesus, You who wept at the tomb of Lazarus
and rejoiced in the Holy Spirit,
who loved with a love that bore all things
and were moved with righteous anger at injustice —*

*Teach us to feel as You felt:
with hearts governed by reason, lit by grace,
and anchored in love of the Father.*

Order our desires toward what is truly good.

Transform our fears into holy trust.

Kindle in us a hope that does not disappoint.

*And grant us the courage to love rightly,
act virtuously, and follow You with our whole heart.*

Mary, Queen of rightly ordered love, pray for us.

St. Thomas Aquinas, patron of truth, pray for us.

Amen.

Key References & Further Study

- **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, §§ 1762–1775 — The Passions (full treatment)
- **CCC 1767** — Passions and moral qualification through reason and will
- **CCC 1770** — Moral perfection consists not in eliminating passions but in ordering them
- **CCC 1771** — The passions are good when they contribute to a good action, evil when they contribute to a bad one
- **Summa Theologica**, I-II, QQ. 22–48 — St. Thomas Aquinas on the passions (full treatise)
- **ST I-II, Q. 24, Art. 1 & 3** — On the goodness and evil of the passions of the soul
- *For classroom use, the New Advent edition of the Summa is freely available at www.newadvent.org.*

"Feel strongly, love rightly, act virtuously."

— Catechetical Summary Principle | Catholic Mainstream Parish Formation Series