

## THE VIRTUE OF PRUDENCE

"Be as simple as doves, and as clever as serpents." Matt. 10:16

I. Prudence is the "charioteer of the virtues," the ability to discern what is good in particular situations and the best means of achieving it. "The prudent man looks where he is going." Prov. 14:15.

A. Prudence is not simply caution, but rather a willingness both to consider the information available, apply general principles to it, and make a clear decision. Both rushing to a decision and indecisiveness are contrary to prudence.

B. Prudence begins by looking at reality clearly. This ability: (1) includes the disciplining of memory, a willingness to recall what has gone before accurately; (2) the willingness to see the present accurately; and (3) the ability to foresee results of various paths. It includes the knowledge that there will be uncertainty and the ability to deal with it. It also involves both an understanding of the principles of morality to be applied to each case.

C. Prudence also involves docility, which rightly understood means the ability to take the advice and counsel of others, along with an understanding of whose counsel is worth taking. It continues with the ability to apply experience, both one's own and others', to decision-making, comparing the present situation to others. And, when one has practiced these abilities, one develops solertia, the ability to make apply principles to changing reality quickly.

II. Prudence is aided by the other virtues, both insofar as they clear the mind for prudence and insofar as they enable one to carry out the actions that clear-headed reason determines.

A. Temperance is necessary for a person to think clearly free of the distractions of desires or emotions. St. Thomas points out that an attachment to lesser desires makes it difficult to comprehend higher truths. II-II q. 53 art. 6. In addition, passions interfere with the ability to see the truth clearly. Prudence in turn guides temperance by allowing the person to perceive the moderate mean.

- One also needs humility to be willing to take counsel and to see even painful truths clearly. The truth that humility seeks is perceived by prudence.

B. Fortitude is necessary for a person to be willing to face difficult truths and obligations. Fortitude is also necessary to make decisions in the face of uncertainty. Prudence in turn guides fortitude by telling one what risks are worth taking and what risks should be avoided.

C. A sense of justice is necessary for prudence to have the rightful natural goal of giving people what is their due. Without justice, cleverness can quickly become a vice. Prudence guides one in deciding what is due to each person.

D. Faith gives one additional knowledge both of moral norms and about the spiritual realm so that one can make decisions in accord with all of reality. Faith tells one that the counsel given by God and His Church is reliable above all. Prudence guides faith to understand the implications of the revealed truth and to know what is certain and what is not certain. Theology, as St. Anselm says, is "faith seeking understanding." Or, as St. Augustine put it "I believe that I may understand."

- Prayer also guides our decision making, by giving us a calmness of spirit, by subtly suggesting ways of acting, by giving us new perspectives and ability to apply the experience of the Church, and by "illumination," i.e. making us more fully comprehend and appreciate an insight.

E. Hope gives one greater confidence that God will help one carry out the good resolutions that one has formed, and therefore, allows prudence to understand better what is possible. Prudence allows hope to understand what can be done with this unseen assistance. It strikes the rightful balance between deism, which holds that God does not intervene in human affairs, and quietism, the belief that we do not need to do anything for ourselves, trusting entirely in God.

F. Charity gives us the motive to act rightfully, building on justice, but raising it higher to a perfect love of God and neighbor. It guides us to consider the good of others as well as ourselves, and to allow the goodness of God to govern all. On the other hand, prudence guides charity to actions that are truly beneficial to the other, as opposed simply to satisfying the desire to "do something." For compassion is not compassion that care not about effect.

III. The vices opposed to prudence can either involve the decision-making process or can be cleverness but oriented towards a wrongful end.

A. With regard to the decision-making process, there can be a lack of consideration or an excessive deliberation and refusal

to make a decision when one is due.

- Imprudence can be due to thoughtlessness, i.e. the refusal to assess the facts, or inconstancy, the continual change of one's view in accordance with every change in facts. It can also be due to either precipitation, the rush to decision-making, or to indecisiveness, the failure to commit to any decision.

B. With regard to the motives, there are the false prudences of the world, the flesh and the (false) spirit. See James 3:15; Summa Theologica II-II q. 45 art. 1. There is also the false attempt at duplicity.

1. The cleverness of the flesh simply seeks to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. The cleverness of the world is an attempt to maximize security, popularity, and getting along with the world. The cleverness of the false spirit is pride, the desire to have more and more power, gifts, etc., regardless of what one is due.

2. What Aquinas calls craftiness is duplicity and a delight in deceiving others, to gain power or to avoid danger. While this vice involves, like prudence, and accurate assessment of the facts and careful decision-making, it ignores the law of God and leads to a split self.

C. According to Aquinas, these forms of false prudence always involve some form of covetousness, the desire for what one neither has nor is meant to have.