

THE VIRTUE OF PRUDENCE

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. My Lord and my God, I firmly believe that you are here, that you see me, that you hear me. I adore you with profound reverence. I ask your pardon for my sins and the grace to make this time of prayer fruitful. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.

As we begin our meditation today, we want to begin a series of meditations on the four cardinal virtues this Advent. And, the first cardinal virtue that we consider today is that of prudence, which is the most important of all the cardinal virtues, which as we know are four: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. The reason that prudence is at the center is because it is really the one that works with all the other virtues. In other words, we cannot be tempered unless we know how to be tempered, and that's what prudence tells us. We cannot exercise courage or fortitude unless prudence tells us how exactly, here and now, we are to be courageous. And the same thing with justice, we cannot be just unless we know how to be just at every moment, here and now. And so, prudence is that virtue which allows us to apply right reason to particular action and it always judges about the particular situation at hand.

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Philippians, exhorts the Philippians and also all of us thereafter to "have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, though he was by nature, God did not consider being equal to God a thing to be clung to, but emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave and being made like unto men. And appearing in the form of man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even to death on a Cross." We have all heard this Christological hymn many times and perhaps even have sung it to music or meditated upon it during Lent and- and at other times. But, what I want to highlight in this Christological hymn is the introduction to it that St. Paul gives us. He says, "Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus." The word for mind here in the original is not the word for mind in Greek, actually. It is a different kind of word, it's the word that comes from- from Nietzsche, and that is a Greek word that doesn't exactly mean mind, it means prudence, it's the same root as prudence, be prudent in the way which Jesus was also prudent, and that's basically what he's saying. And other translations say- have the same feelings or sentiments as Christ did.

So- but they don't- none of these translations get at the heart of the matter which is to think, decide, judge and act like Jesus, and that's what St. Paul is trying to get at. In other words, be as prudent as Jesus was. And his prudence allowed him to actually come to his judgment, came- to

come to- down to Earth, and- and become obedient unto death, even death on a Cross. That's what he judged as right reason in- in the particular situation that the world needed in order to be saved, you know. So it's- it's a superlative kind of prudence. It was really informed out of the divine love for mankind, and that's why he came down as- as a child, he incarnated himself. I mean, but this is the supreme act of prudence, right, the supreme act of right judgment, exercised in favor of mankind.

And St. Paul basically tells us, meditate on the life of Jesus so that you do the same, so that you begin to acquire the way he thought, the way he felt, the way he acted, the way- just everything about him. And that's what imitation of Jesus is really about. It's not about, so much about wearing a beard or wearing sandals or wearing a tunic or something like that, something superficial like that... it's really getting into the way he judged things and then the way he acted as a result of those judgments that he made. And we can apply that everywhere, we can apply that everywhere, you know, and- and that is what prudence allows us to do, that's why it is the most important of all the cardinal virtues.

The prudent man is the one who sees from afar, says St. Isidore of Seville. He's the one that is able to see faraway, look at the horizon. And so, the- the prudent man or woman is the one who actually thinks about the consequences of his or her actions. And we could see right away that a wise person is the one who actually sees more than the one who is quick to action and is rather thoughtless, you know. Perhaps parents act this way, they- they know they've been around the block, they want to give advice to their teenage children, for instance, and they are always telling them what the consequences of their possible actions and choices are. And maybe the teenage child rebels and says, no, I don't think so, and they try it out themselves. And then they- they learn in the school of hard knocks, you know, that their parents were right. And so, they learn wisdom through experience, you know.

But the the one who knows prudence, the one- the prudent person - and by the way, no one is born prudent, you can't be- you can't know prudence innately, it's- it's really something that has to be acquired either through effort and experience and reflection, and coaching, or through grace because we are given the infused supernatural virtue of supernatural prudence which allows us to actually seek what is best for the kingdom of God, and for our holiness and the holiness of others.

But what is prudence? According to St. Thomas Aquinas, prudence is the virtue which allows us to choose the means to an end, and it presupposes a good end. If it has a bad end, it looks like prudence, but everything about our choices, the choices of the means, will be- will be flawed, and so, it's not prudence. It would be more like astuteness or, you know, street smarts, you know, you can definitely, you know how to, you know, make- cut the deal in the alley or something like that, the drug deal, you know, and that is- it looks like prudence but it's not prudence. Prudence involves, if

it's virtue, it involves having a good end, a good end. And that's what the prudent man or woman is always looking at. They are always looking at the horizon, at that good end, and they love that end first and foremost. And, if we're going to talk about supernatural prudence, it's going to be the goal to give glory to God and to serve our neighbor in order to give glory to God.

And, well, St. Thomas says once you have that end, once you love that end, you have three, or perhaps four parts of prudence that- that we have to follow in order to actually make the right choice. And the first part of prudence, the first motion, if you will, of the prudent person is to gather information, to gather information or to ask for advice when that person does not know how to act. And this information, this data gathering, this advice comes from other people, comes from experience - our own experience and reflection of that experience. It comes from books that we read on the subject, it comes from other experts, it comes from the law that is out there, that has been legislated by the proper authority because they have experience, and that's why they pass that law, right, to guide us- to guide us in right action and just action.

And so, the first thing that the just person does is- is gather, you know, all this information, and especially, I would also say, the particular circumstances that one finds himself or herself in, you know, because it's not just enough to apply a law blanketly, without reflection on any particular situation- that would be really an imprudent thing to do. I mean, think of a simple thing as you're taking someone to the hospital because they're bleeding to death in, you know, in the middle of the night, and there's nobody around but there's a red light. Do you take the red light or not, you know? Well, perhaps if there's no one around and there's- and you're not causing harm to anybody, maybe you do take that red light, right, to get to the hospital and save the life of someone because the prudent thing to do at that point is to take the red light. But if you just say no, the law is the law and I need to obey that law at all cost, the red light law, then- then that person may die, you know, that is in the car with you. So again, there's- this is just an extreme example, I suppose, but it gives you an idea that we can not just apply rules or laws in a blanket way. We need to take into account the particular circumstances in which we find ourselves in and it is the- the prudent person that is able to judge what the right action should be in that particular moment.

An example of this, we find in the Gospel, actually, when Nicodemus, who is a just man, he wants- he's looking for the Kingdom of God. He- he has talked to Jesus at night. We know that he finds him to be a very interesting person not only because he performs miracles but because- precisely because he performs those miracles that he judges him to be an honest man unlike what other people are saying, that he's dishonest or that he has a devil in him or something like that. And Nicodemus wants to give Jesus a chance because he sees signs that are signs of credibility for his message. And so, when the Pharisees want to arrest him and just, you know, kind of plot against his life, what does Nicodemus say? He says, whoa, hold- hold on here, you know. He says, "Does our law judge a man

unless it first gives him a hearing and know what he does?" You know, so Nicodemus hasn't judged Jesus for good or for bad, you know, yea or nay. He's just saying, listen, before we- we make a judgement about how evil Jesus may be, you know, shouldn't we listen to him first? Shouldn't we investigate all that first? Good question, right? Because Nicodemus had- had an insight there and the Pharisees were actually jumping to conclusions.

And this is what happens when we don't gather the right data. We actually are precipitous, and that's what St. Thomas says is- is a defect when we skip this first step, we precipitate a decision or a judgment because we don't have enough data, we haven't heard everybody, right? St. Paul says to Timothy, whom he's trying to instruct in a prudent way. He says: "Take in what I tell you, for the Lord will give you understanding in all things." St. Paul is aware that he has more experience than Timothy and he's trying to pass on that experience. And so, he exhorts him to listen, just listen, don't judge yet, but listen, listen.

St. Josemaria was very much of the school, and he would say, whenever somebody comes to you and complains about a third person, you know, before judging, listen to the two bells. And then he said, and then know the bell ringer, you know, because there may be, I don't know, a particular situation in which the bell ringer may be prone to exaggerating or something like that. So, you got to know the people that are talking to you and listen to both sides of- of the situation before you judge somebody. St. Josemaria was a man that was very fond of getting advice and he did that many times in his life. One time, for instance, he- he thought it would be a just thing if he claimed a title of nobility which had been kind of dormant there and lost and forgotten in the family, but he needed to claim it, and if he didn't claim it, he would not be able to pass it on to his brother and him to his- to his children. So, he thought it was a just thing to do not for him, not because he cared about that, but because he- he realized that if he didn't claim it, then his brother would not have been able to claim it. And- and before he did this, because he knew that people were going to criticize him, he got advice from others, you know, from third parties, even from a Cardinal. And they all told him yes, go ahead. This is an important thing out of justice, even though, as St. Josemaria would later say, it was more difficult to exercise a right than to fulfill a duty, and so he did.

St. Josemaria also wanted the advice of people that would correct him, and the Holy See told him that founders don't get corrected by the people underneath them. And he complained to them and said, but why should my children in Opus Dei actually have the benefit of fraternal correction, and I, the founder, who am not perfect, why can't I be corrected? And so, they allowed him to have two people that are with him all the time, who are called the *custodes*- the guardians, I guess, of the- of the- of the Father of the Prelate now, and they are there to correct him on anything that they see fit and to guide him, you know, and give him advice on things. Well, this is a very interesting thing that- that- that we recognize our deficiency and that we recognize that we don't have all the answers

to everything, you know. And that's why we need advice, whether it's, you know, reading a book - not all books are good, and even if they're good, not all books are good for me right now. And I need to, you know, realize that I don't- I don't know everything about everything, and that other people may have been down that path and they could help me. And this is ultimately, I think, a matter of humility- of humility, right, to fulfill this first step of- of prudence.

And then St. Thomas Aquinas says that prudence involves judgment of the things that we have discovered in the first step of gathering the data. So, we analyze the data, we look at it carefully, and we discover things. We say, oh wow, look at that. There is, you know, we make connections, we- we start- the lights go on somehow, because we start thinking, we start applying our- our mind to the data and we start drawing conclusions. This is a kind of exercise analysis and- and then we start making judgments, drawing conclusions that are implied in all those premises. And this could be hard work because we need to have a well- kind of trained mind with logic, and sometimes it gets tricky. In difficult situations, perhaps bioethics- bioethical situations, right, whether it is prudent to, I don't know, let someone go and pull them off the oxygen or things like that - these are end of life issues or beginning of life issues, you know, what is the prudent thing to do? So, we need to gather all the data, we need to gather all the science, and then start actually understanding these very complex things and it could take a lot of experts to actually analyze these things. But in an ordinary way, we all do this every single day when we decide what to do here and now, right? And we say, well, what is the best thing that I should be doing right now?

Well, this second step of analysis and judgment of the things that we have discovered in the data that we have gathered, this, St. Thomas says, also has a- a defect that we can fall into if we don't do it well which is called thoughtlessness. Thoughtlessness, right, when we don't apply our thinking because maybe we're lazy or we don't want to actually do the work of thinking through the consequences of our actions, right? And- and one of the- one of the obstacles here is that our mind is blinded. Even if we are very smart we may be blinded by other factors, you know. Obviously, there is ordinary cases and extreme cases, but St. Thomas talks about excessive pleasure or excessive sorrow, or sadness, that can actually cloud our reasoning in this step, right.

And- and- and so, for instance, I give you an example in the Gospel when Herod, actually, he is enthralled with the- with the girl that dances in front of him, which- who is Salome, and she is the daughter of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. And so, because this girl danced in front of him and he really kind of fell in love with her, he does a very imprudent thing, right, which is a very thoughtless action, to offer her even half his kingdom, you know, ask whatever you want and I will give it to you, because he loved the way she danced. I mean, talk about thoughtlessness, right? And- and so the girl, since she doesn't know what to ask for, she goes to her mother and her mother, who doesn't like John the Baptist because John the Baptist always talks about how it is not lawful for

Herod to have his brother's wife, basically says, I want his head on a platter right now. And Herod, who was dismayed at that point because he realizes that was- that was a really stupid thing to do. But of course, because of the "oath" that he took, he did not want to disappoint, you know, he didn't want to lose face in front of the people that he had invited, goes and orders the death of John the Baptist and orders the head to be brought to the girl and the girl takes it to her mother, a terrible, terrible tragedy.

But, this is what happens when- when you know we are- we fall into the worldliness that- that the mind of the flesh basically is- is leading us towards, you know. St. Paul also has a lot to say about this. He says, "The sensual man does not perceive the things that are of the Spirit of God," right. If our mind is prone to sensuality, it- we're totally blinded, "For it is foolishness to him, and he cannot understand because it is examined spiritually." So, the things of God are foolishness to this person because the things of God are examined spiritually and we just have a mind that is sensual. He says, "But the spiritual man judges" - here's the key word, judges, "all things and he himself is judged by no man, for who has known the mind of the Lord that he might instruct them, but we have the mind of Christ," here it is, again, the mind of Christ, "and we want to judge according to the mind of Christ."

Now in this second aspect of prudence, we also have the defect that we could blind- be blinded by an excessive amount of sorrow when we're too sad. Maybe there's a person, you know, a lot of people sometimes suffer from depression and they see everything dark, and there's no way out, and you ask them about a certain situation and they just see the negatives and they- they- they are completely taken by only the- the darkest possibilities and they cannot see any opportunities. And it's a very difficult thing, it's a very difficult lesson. We should pray for all those people who suffer from depression. But what we should realize if we ever find ourselves in that situation, or simply because we are too sad, is that this is a kind of hall of mirrors, right? We're in a kind of hall of mirrors, we don't really judge reality properly. And this is where we need to trust others. Again, if we are humble and we are docile, then we can actually come out of that and we have to trust. But here we have to trust others who love us, who love us, right? And, because our mind is clouded and we have to ask for advice and- and- and be led by the hand, right, so that even though we don't see what to do and we think everything's gonna turn out, in the worst case scenario, we have to trust the people who love us and then they can help us come out of our, you know, worst case scenario, mode of life-of living that we fall into and that sometimes we are attached too, and we need to actually be humble enough to be detached from.

In an ordinary way here, we won't have these- these two extremes, but there will be many choices between good and evil, perhaps, I mean, there's always a choice between good and evil, obviously, but- but we will have many good things to choose from, right? A good, a good, and a good instead of

just good and evil. And we will know what good to choose. What do I do right now? There could be many things I do right now, they're all licit and they're all good. But as St. Paul tells us, everything is licit to me, but not everything is good. Not everything is good for me right now, basically. So the prudent decision right now, the judgment is, what do I do now? Out of all these good things, you know, what college do I go to? They're all good, you know, what- any choice that we can- that we can think of that is licit - what car do I buy, whatever ordinary things, but how do I use my time today? What do I begin with, you know, all that stuff at work? This is a matter of prudence.

If we- and here's what we go back to the end, why am I here, you know, how do I integrate this ultimate end into the bigger picture. And I will know, you know, I shouldn't buy this thing right now because I have a family I- I have to feed them, I'd rather spend it on- on them rather than, you know, buying a new item of clothing right now just because- just because it's on sale or something like that and I don't really need it. Well, whenever I have to judge what to do, I always have to go back to the reason, the ultimate reason, that gives meaning to my life. And the higher that reason the more prudent I will be, the more in love I am with that ultimate horizon, the more I will be able to put things in order properly in my life and integrate them into my life, and that is what the virtue of prudence allows me to do.

So, what is the third step of prudence? The third step is what St. Thomas calls command. The command or the decision and the execution of that decision, right, the- the carrying out of what I have decided to do, right. And so, unlike in the first step where St. Josemaria actually counseled, you know, to be slow, and also many others have counseled to be slow, don't rush, right, gather all the information - that was the first step. Here in the third step, once we have decided to do something, we have to act fast because any delay here is actually called inconstancy, or not really consistent with what we have decided to do. And any delay, really, is- is a defect of this third step in the execution of it, you know. Think of the person in the Gospel in the parable of the two sons, you know, one is told, go to my vineyard and he says, I will go but then he doesn't go, you know. So he's not constant in his decision. He- he's kind of, you know, having second thoughts. He makes promises that then he doesn't keep, and this is the defects in this third aspect of prudence in the execution.

Ultimately, we can actually gather all the right information and get all the advice we want and- and know all the laws and then judge rightly and decide rightly, but then we fail to execute. And then there's, St. Thomas says, there's no prudence at all, we're not prudent at all if we don't carry out the whole thing, the whole action, through and through in the proper manner. And so, this is something that we have to take into account as well, that we have to not just desire to do the good and even kind of academically judge the right thing to do at any one time, but we have to actually carry it out. And that's what grace, you know, allows us to do. We need fortitude for that and we need courage in order to really not- not give in to fear at this last stage, for whatever reason, you know,

because we have decided to do it in the presence of God or whatever it is, you know, and at that point, we entrust ourselves to Our Lord. And- and we- we- we carry out whatever it is that we see, that we have to do in conscience.

And so, you know, this is, and obviously, this last step is, if there's new information that we discover, then we have to go back to the- to the first step. But, unless there's new information, we- we should carry out what we have decided to do. And obviously, here too, what we need is prayer, because we need to ask for help in order to do it properly, you know, and that's what, that's what prudence is all about. Now, prudence is the virtue I think of, that we could say, of what I like to call the laity. Why? Because laypeople are called to order temporal affairs, right, to order the world. And the world is about making many good choices, and there's many possibilities. It's, you know, ordering the world in this way or that way, but they're all good ways, you know. I mean, there could also be bad ways. But, you know, there's an infinite number of good ways that we can- that we can order the world in our society and we can vote for many candidates that are all good and all compatible with the teachings of the Church, with natural law. And so, which one do we choose?

Well, here's where the laity exercise their freedom and responsibility, and that's why St. Josemaria says, *In Passionately Loving the World*, which is one of his most famous homilies, he says, The Christian does not think that they are or should be able to think that there are Catholic solutions to temporal problems, you know, there is no one who can claim to come down from the temple, right, and to be able to say, here is the Catholic solution to this economic problem, or to this insurance problem, or to this health problem. No, there could be many people who are all good Catholics and all good Christians who differ in their- in the way they- in the outcome that they come up with after they gather their data, analyze that data, and then choose and execute their decision. They could actually be at odds with one another and they're all okay and we have to defend that legitimate freedom, right, that- that comes in virtue of the fact that there are many legitimate options. And no one can claim to be the only Catholic solution out there, you know, because then we would be using the Church, or the name Catholic, or the name of Our Lord in order to mix it up with human affairs, you know, like vote for the Catholic party or something like that - well, there's no such thing. We should all be responsible for our actions, and- and- and make our decisions in the presence of God in our prayer but then take full responsibility for them, personal responsibility, not blame them on anybody else or try to rope them in with a kind of clerical mentality. And, you know, use the name Catholic to- to attract other, you know, Catholics who have the freedom to choose otherwise. Well, this is what St. Josemaria says is part of our, you know, secularity, the spirit of secularity, in the world in a good way to understand the the right choices that people have to make and- and in making them, they order society and give glory to God even though between one choice and another that could be a lot of disparity.

Well, if we turn to Our Lady, we certainly can entrust to her every prudent decision that we want to make, every every decision that we need to make, we can ask her for help. She had the habit of pondering all things in her heart and pondering the words of Christ - this is how she got the mind of Christ. The more she meditated on the life of Christ, the more that she was able to act and think like Jesus, and that makes her a very prudent woman. Let us turn to her now and ask her for the grace whenever we need to make a decision because, whether or not we are prudent, we- it means whether or not we give glory to God.

I thank you, my God, for the good resolutions, affections, and inspirations which you have communicated to me in this meditation. I ask for help to put them into effect. My Immaculate Mother, St. Joseph, my father and lord, my guardian angel, intercede for me.



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