

PRUDENCE

Previous reading: *Compendium*, 377-383; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1803-1811.

What is *prudence*? Prudence is the virtue that directs each action towards its lawful end and consequently seeks the proper means in order that the action be well accomplished in all points of view and thereby pleasing to Our Lord (Pius X, Mayor Catechism).

I. [*Prudence, essential notions*]

a) ***Prudence the past.*** Prudence is defined by Aristotle as right discernment on what should be done (cf. *Ethic*, I. VI, c. 5; *STh* 2-2, 47, 2 sed vs.). If what is wanted to be done refers to a particular end (for e.g. the victory in a battle, the well-being of a town) prudence is particular. If it refers to the end of the whole life, then it is the intellectual and moral virtue which judges and it commands what should be done or to omit something in each case to act honestly. Saint Augustine following Cicero defined it as "cognitio rerum appetendarum et fugiendarum" (*Lib. of div. quest.* q. 614, PL 40, 51).

Etymologically derives from the Latin voice *prudencia*, close to *providentia*, of *procul videre*, to see from far, to notice the distant end that one attempts, ordering to it the opportune means and foreseeing the consequences. Providence is an integral part of prudence. Already S. Isidoro in his *Etymologies* defines *prudens*, as who "*porro videns*", those who see with insightfulness, who pre-see the uncertain circumstances that may happen. The virtue of the prudence has also been designated with another word: *discretio* that means election, and yet another; judgment and it is related with the verb *discernere*, to discern. Discernment, meaning sound judgment (ea quae sunt ad finem), is the heart of prudence. In biblical Greek *froneo*: to meditate, to think, to project; *fronesis*: intelligence, discernment, good sense; *fronimos*: prudence, good sense.

In the mythology and the art symbolizes it as a driver (charioteer): *auriga virtutum*, who stand right on his carriage, scrutinizes the road, and incites the horses that represents the

other virtues (cf. *STh* 1-2, 58, aa - 4-5). As one who *scrutinizes* appears the intellectual dimension of this virtue, as one who guides and maintain the carriage on the right road is a moral virtue (1-2, 3, ad 1; 2-2, 181, a. 2, ad 3).

b) *Prudence today.* Prudence is a virtue of the sound reason; it is a practical virtue, ordinate to a concrete action. It helps us to meditate and ponder the effects that can produce our words, our actions and behaviors. It is a point of reference to act with more conscience in front of the ordinary situations of the life.

Our time has become sensitive to *justice* (second cardinal virtue) and did not to prudence that precedes it and gives the authentic sense to justice and to the other moral virtues. The notion of prudence has lost sense for individualistic liberalism (allergy against the moral norms), for democratic liberalism (sovereign will of the people as proposed by Rousseau), for the axiological relativism (it makes the personal conscience as the last instance), for anthropocentrism of the agnostic or of atheist (the man without God) and also for the positivist determinism and for materialism.

Deformations are even given inside Christian sectors. Prudence has suffered a deformation:

a) by *casuistic* morals, which appeals to rules of different moral systems, to give an impersonal formula (legalistic) as a substitute of the prudential conscience.

b) By *moral of situation*, that subtracts a rational verdict, guided by the principles of the *sinderesis*, of the moral science and of the natural order, the concrete and variables experience of each one. The moral conscience is reduced to the psychological conscience: the man's last decision depends on the immediate and internal judgment and not on objective ethics, in which are pondered the circumstances, applying the objective universal law to the particular case.

c) In the socio-political order prudence is replaced by the *prudence of flesh*, following the school of Maquiavelo that proposes even bad means to reach good ends (the goal justifies the means). Be prudent today sometimes requires heroism, while the pseudo-prudent proposes the moral of "do not disturb", a frivolous look, without interest in the common good.

Cf. V. Rodríguez, *Presentation*, in S. Ramírez, *Prudence*, Madrid 1978, 7-11.

II. [*Prudence in Revelation and Christian tradition*]

a) The description of the act of practical wisdom [it means: prudence] it appears in two parables: that of the builder of the house and of the king that goes to the war (*Lk* 14,28-32). These parables oppose the superficial man that doesn't consider the importance of the work that is to undertake and the difficulties of their realization. The proper acts which wisdom imposes (and in which it is manifested) are: deliberation, consideration, reflection, counsel (advice), the study of the diverse options and possibilities. To be prudent is, in this sense, to be reasonable.

b) The typical image of the prudent man (*prhonomos*) is evoked at the end of the Sermon on the Mount (*Mt* 7,24-27): he is the one that puts into practice the words of the Lord; He is the one who builds on rock. The one that doesn't makes it is the foolish builder (*môros*).

c) *Mt* 10,16: "I send you as lambs amid wolves. Then be prudent (*phronimoi*) as snakes and simple (*akéraiōi*) as doves". Keeping in mind that the reference to the wolves is an indication of the Pharisee and scribes, for opposition, the simplicity makes reference to an unyielding rightness, ignorant of the sinuosity of the astute one. But, candor is not synonymous of spiritual weakness. Prudence means readiness and ability for not being allowed to be caught by doctrinal contaminations. It means "to be on your guard."

d) wisdom makes reference to the future, like we see clearly in the astute administrator's parable (*Lk* 16,1-9) that assures his future. In this future sense, prudence has as a proper act, to watch over, and the imprudence appears as sleep while the one who must come has not arrived: cf. all the parables of the vigilance (wise virgins, or the inopportune thief, etc, cfr. *Mt* 25, 1-13; 14-30).

e) Spiritual prudence comes from God. *The sensual mind* (lit., the prudence, Gk., *phronema*; Vulg., *prudential of the flesh*) (i.e., the thoughts and purposes of the flesh), leads to death, but the spiritual mind (lit., the prudence of the Spirit) to life and peace; because the sensual mind (Vulg., *sapientia*

carnis) is hostile to God (*Rom.* 8, 6). If we are deficient in this prudence or wisdom (Gk., *sophia*), we should pray for it and God will grant this gift (*Jas.* 1, 5).

f) In the Tradition of the Church. The school of Christian asceticism and monasticism stressed the need of being *kriticos*, of discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart (cfr. *Heb* 4:12), and exercising the Pauline *diakrisis* (vlg. *discretio*) the ability and training to distinguish between spirits, and between good and evil (cfr. *1Cor* 12:10; *Heb* 5:14). See the teaching of Gregory the great. The note of discretion or discrimination was sounded by John Cassian (d. 435), by the father of Western monasticism: Benedict (d. 546).

III. Definition. St. Thomas and Aristotle define prudence *as correct knowledge concerning things to be done* (*recta ratio agibilium*); or, the intellectual virtue whereby man recognizes in any matter to hand what is good and what is evil. Prudence resides in the practical intellect and is either acquired by one's own acts or infused at the same time as sanctifying grace.

- The material objects of prudence are all human and moral acts (called by Aristotle *agibilia*). The motive of prudence is the property of practical truth and goodness which is discovered in human acts.

The acts of the virtue of prudence are three in number: to take counsel carefully, to judge correctly, to direct. This act of direction (*command*) is the principal and proper act of the virtue.

IV. The parts of prudence – as is true of any other cardinal virtue – there is a threefold aspect: a) integral. b) subjective, c) potential.

a) The *integral parts* of any cardinal virtue are those things which are required for a perfect act of the virtue. For an act of prudence to be perfect St. Thomas lists the following eight prerequisites:

- 1) *memory*, i.e. the recalling of the past;
- 2) *intellect*, i.e. a clear knowledge of the present;
- 3) *docility*, i.e. a readiness to learn;

- 4) shrewdness, i.e. a quick conjecture regarding the means (*ea quae sunt ad finem*) to be used;
- 5) *reason*. i.e. a readiness to infer one thing from another;
- 6) *providence*, i.e. a consideration of future events;
- 7) *circumspection*, i.e. a careful consideration of circumstances;
- 8) *caution*, i.e. care in avoiding evil and obstacles.

b) The *subjective parts* of a cardinal virtue are the species of that general virtue. The chief species of prudence are:

personal prudence whereby one guides oneself, and *political (regnative)* prudence whereby one guides a multitude. *Political* prudence used to be further subdivided into *military, economic, and legislative* prudence, etc.

c) The potential parts of a cardinal virtue are annexed virtues which are concerned with secondary acts or secondary matters. The following represent the potential parts of prudence:

- 1) *eubulia* – the habit of seeking right counsel;
- 2) *synesis* – the virtue of judging aright according to ordinary rules;
- 3) *gnome* – the virtue of judging aright from the higher principles.

The act which proceeds from this virtue is *epikeia* in the interpretation of law.

V. Selected texts:

The chief act of prudence is to command (praecipere, a. 8). “Prudence is ‘right reason applied to action’. Hence that which is the chief act of reason in regard to action must be the chief act of prudence. Now there are three such acts.

1°) The first is *to take counsel*, which belongs to discovery, for counsel is an act of inquiry;

2°) The second act is *to judge of what one has discovered*, and this is an act of the speculative reason.

3°) and the practical reason, which is directed to action, goes further, and its third act is *to command*, which act consists in applying to action the things counseled and judged. And since this act approaches nearer to the end of the practical reason, it

follows that it is the chief act of the practical reason, and consequently of prudence”.

Solicitude pertains to prudence (a. 8). “A man is said to be solicitous through being shrewd [*solers*] and alert [*citius*], in so far as a man through a certain shrewdness of mind is on the alert to do whatever has to be done. Now this belongs to prudence, whose chief act is a command about what has been already counseled and judged in matters of action. Hence the Philosopher says: ‘one should be quick in carrying out the counsel taken, but slow in taking counsel’ (*Ethic.* VI, 9). Hence it is that solicitude that belongs properly to prudence”.

As Pieper indicates, there are two types of speed and of slowness: at deliberation and at work. The deliberation may take a longer time yet the deliberate action should be quickly done (2-2, 47, 9). The ability to capture at a single glance the present situation and to make a new decision at once (*solercia*), is one of the acts that constitutes the perfect prudence. Solicitude is the wise and objective vision in front of an unexpected thing. Solicitude makes quickly what reason thinks slowly.

VI. Vices contrary to Prudence:

a) Sins by defect against prudence are:

1) *precipitancy*, which acts before due consideration has been given;

2) *want of thought*, which neglects to take due consideration of the circumstances;

3) *inconstancy*, which changes resolutions too quickly;

4) *negligence*, which does not take sufficient care of the operation of the intellect.

b) Sins by excess against prudence are:

1) *prudence of the flesh* which eagerly seeks means of living according to the flesh.

2) *astuteness, deceit, fraud*, which devise and use evil means to obtain their purpose;

3) *solicitude for things of this world* and for the future which prevent man from attaining to the true purpose of his life.

- c) St. Thomas notes wisely that
- the vices opposed to prudence by defect usually arise from *lust*,
 - those which are opposed to the virtue by excess usually take their origin from *avarice*.

VII. Means to grow in prudence.

The practice of a given virtue will differ in the various stages of the spiritual life, and according to the age and circumstances of a given person. This is especially evident in regard to the virtue of prudence, which is usually lacking in the very young, due to their lack of experience and the predominance of emotions over reason in their lives. Consequently, it is of practical help to point out certain basic practices by which an individual can cultivate prudence according to his needs and circumstances.

Beginners, whose principal concern should be to remain in the state of grace and not to turn back, they should seek principally to avoid the sins opposed to prudence.

1) They should always *reflect before acting*, especially before more important decisions, never postponing decisions until the last minute or being unduly influenced in their decisions by passion or selfish caprice.

2) They should do their utmost *to envisage the good or evil effects of an action* and the *circumstances* surrounding a given act.

3) They should endeavor *to remain firm in their good resolutions* and not be influenced by inconstancy or negligence.

4) They should take special *precautions against carnal prudence*, which often uses subtle pretexts and rationalization to excuse them from their obligations or to induce them to yield to the demands of the passions.

5) They should *proceed always with utmost simplicity*, avoiding any duplicity or any semblance of deceit or craftiness.

6) They should live for the day and give full attention to the duty of the moment, without being too much concerned about the morrow, having a firm trust in divine providence.

So much for the negative aspect.

It is likewise necessary to have a positive orientation if one is to perfect the virtue of prudence.

1) Hence it is a salutary practice *to refer all things to the ultimate end* and to make sure that in every act and in the use of all created goods one refers all to God.

2) Likewise *it is of great help to keep constantly* in mind the basic question: what does this profit me toward eternal salvation?

Advanced souls, who will be even more solicitous in perfecting the virtue of prudence, will gain great assistance from raising the level of their daily actions even higher, to the domain of the glory of God, seeking that first and always.

More immediately concerned with personal sanctification than with salvation, they will begin to apply that higher rule of prudence which states that, even of those things that are lawful, not all are prudent in view of sanctity and the glory of God.

Consequently, they will practice a more intense mortification and self-denial and will strive to be ever more docile and attentive to the movements of grace and the impulse and inspirations of the Holy Ghost. In the actual performance of their daily actions they will keep in mind the important question: what would Jesus do?

Those who are perfect. Those who are perfect in charity will practice the virtue of prudence under the impulse of the gift of counsel, of which we shall soon speak. (Royo Marin A., *Theology of Christian perfection*, 371-372).

VIII. Questions:

What virtue is needed most, prudence or justice? Why? When I have to make a decision, do I take time to reflect on the presence of God and on doing his holy will? Am I quick in making important decisions? On the contrary am I negligent in delaying to make important decisions? Am I open to receive and to ask for counsel in order to make right decisions? What are the means I need more to practice prudence?