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"The prudent person is creative"

In his 20 March general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about the virtue of prudence.

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Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

We are devoting today's catechesis to the virtue of *prudence*. Along with justice, fortitude and temperance, it is one of the so-called cardinal

virtues, which are not the exclusive prerogative of Christians, but rather belong to the heritage of ancient wisdom, in particular of the Greek philosophers. Therefore, one of the most interesting themes in the work of encounter and inculturation was precisely that of the virtues.

In medieval writings, the presentation of the virtues is not simply a list of the positive qualities of the soul. Returning to the classical authors in the light of Christian revelation, theologians imagined the septenary of virtues –three theological and four cardinal – as a sort of living organism, in which each virtue has a harmonious space to occupy. There are essential virtues and accessory virtues, like pillars, columns and capitals. Indeed, perhaps nothing better renders the idea of the harmony between man and his continual aspiration towards good than a medieval cathedral.

So, let us begin with prudence. It is not the virtue of the timorous person, always hesitant about what action to take. No, this is a mistaken interpretation. It is not even merely caution. Granting primacy to prudence means that the action of man is in the hands of his *intelligence and freedom*. The prudent person is creative: he or she reasons, evaluates, tries to understand the complexity of reality and does not allow him- or herself to be overwhelmed by emotions, idleness, pressures and illusions.

In a world dominated by appearances, by superficial thoughts, by the triviality of both good and bad, the ancient lesson of prudence deserves to be revived.

Saint Thomas, in the wake of Aristotle, called it “*recta ratio agibilium*.” It is the capacity to govern actions in order to direct

them towards good; for this reason, it is dubbed the “coachman of the virtues.” Prudent are those who are able to choose: as long as it remains in the books, life is always easy, but in the midst of the wind and waves of daily life it is another matter; often we are uncertain and do not know which way to go. The prudent do not choose by chance: first of all, they know what they want, then they weigh up the situations, seek advice, and with a broad outlook and inner freedom, they choose which path to embark upon. That is not to say they do not make mistakes: after all, we are all human; but at least they avoid major setbacks. Unfortunately, in every environment there is someone who tends to dismiss problems with superficial jokes, or to incite controversy. Prudence is instead the quality of those who are called to govern: they know that to administer is difficult, that there are many points of view and one must try to

harmonize them, that one must do not the good of some but of all.

Prudence also teaches that, as they say, “the perfect is the enemy of the good.” Indeed, too much zeal in some situations can cause disasters: it can ruin a construction that would have needed gradualness; it can give rise to conflicts and misunderstandings; it can even trigger violence.

The prudent person knows how to safeguard the *memory of the past*, not out of fear for the future, but because he or she knows that tradition is a patrimony of wisdom. Life is made up of a constant overlapping of old and new things, and it is not good always to think that the world begins with us, that we have to deal with problems starting from scratch. And the prudent person is also *prescient*. Once one has decided on the goal to strive for, it is necessary to obtain all the means to reach it.

Many passages of the Gospel help educate us in prudence. For example: the prudent man builds his house on the rock, and the imprudent builds his on sand (cf. *Mt* 7:24.27). Wise are the damsels who carry oil for their lamps and foolish those who do not (cf. *Mt* 25:1-13). The Christian life is a combination of simplicity and shrewdness. Preparing His disciples for the mission, Jesus recommends: “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (*Mt* 10:16). As if to say that God does not only want us to be saints, He wants us to be intelligent saints, because without prudence, taking the wrong path is a moment’s mistake!

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