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Very Human, Very Divine (VI): Prudence in Action

“Prudence is the love that well discerns between what helps and hinders us in striving towards God.” A new article in the series on the virtues.

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In an oil painting on canvas preserved in Berlin, Rembrandt in 1627 portrayed an old man sitting at a table amid darkness, illumined by a single candle. Gold coins and

property titles are piled up around him. Among the objects on the table is a watch, a premonition that his own hours are counted. The old man is wearing glasses to assist his poor vision, and his right hand is blocking the light from the candle that illumines the table and his possessions: an uncertain light, like the thread of life, which will soon be extinguished.

This is how a great artist expressed in visual images the parable that Jesus once told a large crowd: *The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.'* But God said to him, *'Fool! This night*

your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God (Lk 12:16-21).

God himself describes this rich man as “foolish” and imprudent. “The man whom everyone knew as intelligent and successful is in God’s eyes an idiot: ‘Fool,’ he says to him. And in the sight of reality he now appears with all his calculations as remarkably foolish and shortsighted, for in all his calculations he had forgotten the authentic reality – that his soul did not need only possessions and gratification but would one day stand before God.”[1] This man did not realize that the meaning of his life was summed up in love for God and neighbor. So when he had the opportunity to do something for others, he was only able to think about himself. Deep down, he was unaware of “how

things really are”; he couldn’t do good, because “the good is what is in conformity with reality.”[2] That is why he is foolish. That is why he is imprudent.

False prudence

Prudence is the virtue that connects our actions with reality; the prudent person is the one to whom things *seem* as they really *are*. Based on this connection with reality, prudence leads us to choose the appropriate means to achieve a good end, and to carry them out. That is to say, prudence does not accept just any end as good. Saint Josemaría used to say that “we should ask ourselves always: prudence, for what?”[3] And we respond: to love God and our fellow men and women. As Saint Augustine wrote, “prudence is the love that well discerns between what helps and hinders us in striving towards God.”[4]

Prudence needs to be accompanied by faith and charity so as not to degenerate into one of its caricatures. There are, in fact, two forms of false prudence. One is the simple “prudence of the flesh” (cf. *Rom* 8:6), that of the person who focuses only on pleasure and sensible goods, and seeks simply to enjoy and possess them, without considering other more important ends.[5] “He calls it Reason, but only uses it // To be more a beast than any beast as yet,” Mephistopheles says in Goethe’s *Faust*. [6] The second false prudence is “cunning”: the ability to find the means to achieve a perverse end. This bad end need not be something our senses are attracted to, as though pleasure were something bad in itself. It can also involve, for example, a selfish search for one’s own security, without considering the needs of others,[7] as in the case of the rich man in our parable.

True prudence, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means to achieve it.”^[8] This true good is not limited to what our senses are drawn to, but encompasses the whole person; it is the good that arises from the truth of things themselves, and not just from my own desires. It consists in persevering on the path that will truly make us happy – the path of holiness, love, fidelity – despite the difficulties we encounter. It is the enjoyment of pleasures in harmony with the truth of our being.

This definition of prudence speaks of discernment and choice. For the first (“to discern our true good”), we need to guide our will and heart in order to love and desire the true good. This is achieved in conjunction with the other virtues, especially with justice,

but also with fortitude and temperance. For the moral virtues point prudence towards the good: only with them can we orient ourselves towards good ends and “choose the right means” to achieve them. But, at the same time, the definition of any virtuous act includes prudence as its “measure,” since prudence connects our actions with reality and decides, here and now, the middle path, the most excellent one, between two mistaken extremes. That is, prudence is both a requirement for the growth of the other moral virtues, as well as a result of them. It is like a “virtuous circle.” That is why education and the environment in which we grow up are so important. For there we learn to love and savor the true good, not through reasoning, but through identifying ourselves with those we love.

Deliberating: stopping to think

In his careful study of the virtue of prudence, Saint Thomas Aquinas distinguishes in it three acts: deliberating, deciding correctly, and commanding. The first two occur only in our reason; the third, on the other hand, leads us to action.[9] These three acts can be clearly identified in another narrative of Jesus: the parable of the ten virgins, five of whom were foolish and five prudent. In it, our Lord uses part of the Jewish marriage ceremony as an image for the kingdom of heaven and his second coming at the end of time (cf. *Mt* 25:1-13).

The ceremony described in the parable involved leading the bride to her future husband's house. Late in the day, usually at sunset on a Wednesday, the guests were entertained at the woman's home. The groom would arrive at dusk with his closest friends. Illumined by the oil lamps, he was received by the

guests. It was also customary for ten women holding lamps to wait for the bridegroom's arrival. These are the ten virgins who Jesus says *took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom*. The whole procession then had to make its way, accompanied by the light from these lamps, to the house of the husband's father, where the marriage would take place.

But not all of the young women in the parable were equally well-prepared: *five of them were foolish, and five were wise*. (The Latin vulgate here has *quinque prudentes*, "five were prudent," which is found in some English translations). *For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps*. The latter were far-sighted. They realized that the bridegroom might be late in arriving, and that their lamps would not last that long (deliberation). So

they decided to take flasks of oil with them, despite the discomfort involved (decision). And finally they acted accordingly (command). But the foolish women, although perhaps they had heard the prudent speaking about the problem, and even saw them go to fetch the flasks, did not want to complicate their life. They were carried away by precipitation and the games and laughter, and failed to think about other concerns. The parable gives us the impression that the imprudence of the foolish virgins was perhaps due mainly to their lack of deliberation and their silly carelessness.

In the end, what happened was very predictable: *As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.'* Then the young maidens rose and trimmed their lamps, but the foolish ones discovered that

theirs had gone out because of the lack of oil. So they ask the prudent virgins to lend them some of theirs, which they refuse to do precisely because they are prudent: *Perhaps there will not be enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.* But the bridegroom in the meantime arrived and the procession to his own home began, accompanied by the five wise virgins with their lamps lit and the singing and dancing guests. When they reach the bridegroom's house, the door closes and the banquet begins. By the time the five foolish virgins arrive, it is too late. Although they beg for entrance: *Lord, lord, open to us,* they receive the harsh reply: *I do not know you.*

We can ask ourselves: why does Jesus call some of the virgins wise and others foolish? The parable allows us to recognize all three stages of prudent action, but the first one

stands out in a special way:
deliberation. In order to act well, the first step needed is to stop and think about the situation, with an attentive and faithful listening to how things truly are; to recall similar cases, in order to gain experience; and to let oneself be advised by others – by those who are prudent. For as Saint Thomas also says, “in matters that concern prudence, no one is always self-sufficient.”^[10] And finally, we need to be attentive to changing circumstances, which may advise adapting the plan and making a new decision to achieve the desired good. Ultimately, it requires knowing the truth of what exists, which is an indispensable prerequisite for achieving the good. “Good intention” or “good will” are not enough: one needs to “walk in the truth,” because only *the truth will make you free* (Jn 8:31).

Saint Josemaría encouraged us to study questions carefully before making a decision, to listen to all the parties involved and avoid haste.

“The urgent can wait,” he said, “and the very urgent needs to wait.”[11]

He stressed to us the need to ask the Holy Spirit for advice in prayer, because “true prudence is ever attentive to God’s promptings.”[12]

He also suggested seeking advice from those who can assist us, such as a spiritual director or those who share with us the responsibility for making a decision. In this process of deliberation, humility is essential to be able to open ourselves to the truth, to the reality of things.

Deciding: choosing the path

For an example of the second act of prudence – deciding – we can look at Saint Mark’s account of the early hours of the Sunday of the Resurrection. Mary Magdalene and

the other women, who had bought spices to anoint Jesus' body, set out early in the morning for the tomb. They ask one another: *Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?* (Mk 16:3). Although they don't have a solution for all the problems they will face, love for Jesus moves these women to make the correct, prudent decision: they decide to act with the data they have. "It was a huge stone," Saint Josemaría says. "This is normally the case. The difficulties are seen right away, but if love is present, one doesn't focus on the obstacles. With audacity, decision, courage, what has to be done is done! Who will remove the stone? They couldn't on their own; and yet they continue walking towards the tomb. My son, you and I, are we prone to wavering? Do we have this holy determination, or do we have to confess that we feel shame on contemplating the determination, the fearlessness, the

audacity of these women? When they arrived at the tomb, *they saw that the stone was rolled back* (Mk 16:4). This is what always happens. When we decide to carry out what we have to do, difficulties are easily overcome.”[13]

Deliberation, the first act of prudence, cannot go on indefinitely. At some point we have to end it and decide. Indecision is another form of imprudence, which renders prior deliberation sterile: it is useless to discern which is the most virtuous line of action if I don't commit myself to it, either because it doesn't appeal to me, or I'm not in the mood, or I worry about “what others will say,” or am afraid of making a mistake, or for any other reason. It is useless to know what is the best thing to do, if I don't decide to do it. “‘To-morrow’: sometimes it is prudence; very often it is the adverb of the defeated,”[14] Saint Josemaría said. The prudent

person doesn't expect certainty where it is impossible to achieve it; rather, he or she "prefers to miss the mark twenty times rather than give in to an easygoing 'do nothing' attitude." [15] Not deciding is often a lack of prudence, because then others, or simply time, will decide for us. The prudent person does not pretend to have everything under control; they recognize their own limitations and trust in God, because that is what is most in accord with reality.

Jesus gives us eloquent example here. In the Gospel, He is seen as someone who knows reality, his destiny and true good. He prudently awaits the arrival of his "hour." For example, at Cana Jesus says to his mother: *My hour has not yet come* (Jn 2:4). Later, on two occasions, Saint John tells us how He makes his way through the crowd *because his hour had not come* (Jn 7:30; 8:20). At one

point, we even see that his desires and feelings do not coincide (cf. *Mt* 26:39). Nevertheless He chooses to carry out the good. His directive before his arrest in Gethsemane, *Rise, let us be going!* (*Mt* 26:46), is a prudent choice, a heroically prudent one.

Commanding: taking action

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks about the wise and prudent person: *Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man* [some English translations have a “prudent man” here] *who built his house upon the rock ... And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand* (*Mt* 7:24-26). The prudent person is distinguished from the foolish one by the ability to put into practice what has been learned.

Deliberating and deciding is not enough: we need to act. This is the third act of true prudence: command or execution. Saint Thomas says that this is the most important of the three, since knowing the way is useless if I don't take it.^[16] One can be imprudent not only through haste or indecision, but also (and this is more frequent than it might seem) through being deterred by obstacles or failing to do what should be done, often due to simply forgetting about it.

“Think slowly and act quickly,” Saint Josemaría once advised Blessed Alvaro del Portillo.^[17] He wanted to warn him against both the mistakes that precipitation leads to, and also the lack of prudence involved in needlessly delaying the decision and its implementation. Daring is not a lack of prudence. Moreover, if it is true daring it is true prudence. “What has to be done, is done...

without hesitation, without more worrying. Otherwise, Teresa of Avila would not have been Saint Teresa: nor Iñigo of Loyola, Saint Ignatius. God and daring!”[18]

Unnecessary delays in carrying out what has been decided can also harm others: particularly if one has a task of formation or government, such as parents with respect to their children, or managers with respect to those under them. Strength is required to overcome fears, the temptation to do what is most comfortable, or excessive attachment to one's self-image. We see this clearly in a letter from Saint Catherine of Siena to Pope Gregory XI, urging him to tackle the excesses of some ecclesiastics: “This kind of indulgence, which stems from self-love and love of relatives, friends and an earthly peace, is really the worst cruelty, since if a wound is not cleansed with a hot iron and the

surgeon's scalpel when necessary, it becomes infected and eventually leads to death. Applying sweet-smelling ointments can be pleasant for the sick, but they won't get better by doing so.”[19]

Naturally, the daring of true prudence does not conflict with the effort to find the best moment to carry out what has been decided, always giving primacy to charity, the good of those involved. At times we need to know how to wait patiently. Other times it will not be prudent to wait, because the consequences of doing so would be worse, or the opportunity may not arise again, or for other reasons. The prudent person is the one who, here and now, “grasps with a sure glance whether a specific action is the path that really leads to attaining the end that is sought.”[20] In any case, only carrying out what has been decided, after prudent deliberation, will make

that deep desire of Jesus a reality in our life: *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven* (Mt 5:16).

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(Cover image: "The Parable of the Rich Fool" by Rembrandt: Wiki Commons)

[1] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Yes of Jesus Christ*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1991, p. 15.

[2] Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*.

[3] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 85.

[4] Saint Augustine, *De moribus Ecclesiae*, I, 15, 25.

[5] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 47, a. 13.

[6] *Faust*, “Prologue in Heaven.”

[7] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 47, a. 8, ad. 3.

[8] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806.

[9] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 47, a. 8.

[10] Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*.

[11] Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid, 2000, p. 165.

[12] *Friends of God*, no. 87.

[13] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken during a meditation, 29 March 1959.

[14] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, no. 251.

[15] *Friends of God*, no. 88.

[16] Cf. S. Th. II-II, q. 47, a. 8.

[17] Letter to Alvaro del Portillo, 28 February 1949, cited in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *El Fundador del Opus Dei* III, Rialp, Madrid, 2003, p. 153.

[18] *The Way*, no. 11.

[19] Sigrid Undset, *Saint Catherine of Siena*.

[20] Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*.

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