

THE CARDINAL VIRTUE OF PRUDENCE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

This is the first in a series of four reflections on the Cardinal Virtues, presented by Fr. Anthony Barratt, STL, PHD, ChD, from the Upstate New York Area

In the Gospel a few weekends ago, we heard the familiar parable of the ten bridesmaids, five of whom were prudent or wise and the other five who were foolish (Matthew 25: 1-13). The parable suddenly struck me as being particularly relevant to our current situation during the pandemic and how we live and celebrate our faith. How should we be wise or prudent? We can find ourselves torn between wanting to practice our faith (the obvious example being going to Mass) yet following sound medical advice and the science. Many Diocesan Guidelines ask us to make a “prudential judgment” about what we choose to do. I would like to offer some thoughts and reflections about this often forgotten virtue of *prudence* which, hopefully, may be of help as we discern and decide what course of action to take.

Prudence is one of the *cardinal* virtues (“cardinal” is from the Latin meaning “a hinge” or foundation). A virtue, as the Catechism tells us is, “an habitual and firm disposition to do the good” (CCC, n. 1803). The virtue of prudence is not really about being cautious, neither is it about being shrewd or cunning, and nor is it about being a “prude”! It is not about feelings, likes/dislikes or emotions; but it is about the truth and seeing this clearly. It is a virtue that disposes our reason to discern what might be our true good in any situation and then choosing the right way of achieving it. As St. Augustine tells us, it is “the love that distinguishes what helps us to go towards God from what hinders us.”

St. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that prudence is also a virtue that we have naturally; but that it can grow and deepen from practice and living. This happens through spiritual formation and prayer, seeking good advice, weighing our circumstances and that of others who might be affected by our choices and, of course, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

We might say that the opposite of this virtue of prudence is “fear”. As St. Paul writes to his young friend and leader: “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim. 1; 7). Fear can paralyze us and yet, at the same time, it can agitate us. It can damage or destroy our tranquility of spirit and our ability to make good judgments or decisions. We can lose focus, perspective and a sense of proportion. Fear can make us irresolute, hopping around from one thing to another. We can find ourselves creating a hundred scenarios in our mind, yet none of these (or maybe only one) will ever happen. We might add that there is also such a thing as false prudence. This involves running away from a situation or call to action, or not making important decisions, or of being led or swayed without properly informing ourselves first.

Prudence and discerning what to do is such a difficult and tricky thing! This difficulty is particularly so in our current situation. As St. Ignatius of Loyola notes in his Spiritual Exercises, choosing between a good thing and a bad thing is often relatively clear and easy. However, choosing between two goods is so much harder. This is what we face at the moment. On the one hand, we wish to be responsible, charitable and good citizens, following the governmental and health requirements. On the other hand, there is the amazing good of the Mass, the sacraments and

simply gathering together physically. Is there some way that the two goods can meet? The answer is “yes”; the issue though is *how*.

This meeting of goods has certainly been at the forefront recently. For the Church, it has been a case above all of balancing the two goods of a fulfillment of the various governmental/health requirements with the fundamental need for prayer and sacramental life. For us, prayer, the sacraments etc. are not some leisure activity or optional extra, they are essential. They are also, by their very nature, tangible and physical.

Making a prudent decision and avoiding being overwhelmed by fear therefore involves this balance; but, as I am sure you know, there is more. We need to scrutinize ourselves too. Remember that to be truly prudent needs formation and reflection. This reflection often involves seeing in ourselves a spectrum of emotions, as well as a need to examine our thoughts and motivations carefully. In an atmosphere of anxiety or crisis this is most especially true. This careful examination and scrutiny is certainly something that we need to do every day. For example, am I balancing reasons for not doing something with reasons for doing something? Is one of these dominating in a wrong way? Am I allowing understandable fears or anxieties to become rationalized into something else? Am I allowing the undoubted and many practical issues to become simply overwhelming?

Great things are possible, even in tough situations, when we live that virtue of prudence and refuse to be governed by fear alone. Prudence brings forth a discernment and decision that is responsible and balanced, courageous and life-giving. As St. Paul writes: “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil. 4: 8). As we prudentially discern, let us not forget that we also have the help of the Holy Spirit, the Counsellor: thank goodness! May the “Lord, the giver of life”, guide us.

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