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## A SERIES ON THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

### The Virtue of Prudence

*"For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding."  
(Prov 2:6)*

The virtue of prudence is usually considered as the "auriga virtutum"; that is, the moderator or conductor of the other virtues, because it helps us to apply the virtue that corresponds to the given circumstances, in a wise and sensible way. With it we learn to discern things properly, and it teaches us to give the correct response in each situation.

If we keep in mind the other cardinal virtues that we have meditated on during the last few days, as well as the asceticism of thoughts as part of temperance, we will now see that it will be prudence that will help us to apply everything wisely. The virtue of fortitude, for example, should be put into practice for those things that are right and worthwhile. On the other hand, if courage were to be put into practice for insignificant things, to attract attention or, worse still, for evil purposes, it would lose its meaning.

Also in selecting the thoughts that deserve our attention, prudence will be our guide.

Thus, it will be prudence that tells us what to do and what to avoid in order to reach the goal of the spiritual path, which is to draw ever closer to God. "If you want to reach unification with God," prudence tells us, "you must renounce everything that is opposed to His Will. If you want to become a prayerful person, you must cultivate recollection, avoid unnecessary talk and restrain your idleness".

The parable of the ten virgins (Mt 25:1-12) shows us very clearly how necessary the virtue of prudence is. Only the five who were prudent were admitted to the wedding feast; while the other five, who were foolish, were shut out simply because they had not had enough foresight to bring oil in reserve. The Lord concludes the parable with these words: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Mt 25:13).

Prudence, therefore, counsels us to "make the best use of the present time," in accordance with St. Paul's exhortation (Eph 5:16), not letting the opportunities slip by

for doing good, practicing virtue, giving glory to God, contributing to the salvation of souls... Indeed, if we miss an opportunity to do a good deed, it will have been lost forever. Certainly other opportunities will present themselves in the future, but the one we missed will never return.

Our past is in God's mercy and the future in his providence; but we have the present moment to make the best of it in view of our eternal destiny. While cunning or worldly shrewdness seeks to take advantage of time to accumulate as much earthly goods as possible, prudence focuses on imperishable goods: *"But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal (...) But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Mt 6:20,33).

Prudence does not examine things according to their human value, nor according to the pleasure or displeasure they provoke in us, but weighs them simply in the light of faith and in view of eternity: "What good is this to me for eternity? Would I do this if I were to die right now?" -St. Bernard asked himself.

Next, we will mention four points that must be taken into account in order to cultivate the supernatural virtue of prudence:

- We should try to understand things or circumstances in their objectivity and not according to the feelings they arouse in us. Suppose, for example, that we hear rumors about a certain person, but in reality we do not know whether things were as people say... Many times we react sentimentally to these rumors, so that we can no longer deal freely with the person in question. However, on an objective level, we know nothing at all. If we allow ourselves to be guided by prudence, we will not pay great attention to mere rumors, but will look for the objective: What really happened? Is it even important to know?
- The person who wants to acquire the virtue of prudence must always preserve docility; that is, let themselves be corrected. This logically implies a good portion of humility. This docility will be in the first instance towards the Holy Spirit, our first counselor and teacher, who comes to our aid especially through the gift of counsel. But we can also learn and allow ourselves to be corrected by experience and by wise spiritual guides. Sometimes it happens that advice comes to us when we least expect it and from

whom we least expect it, or we read in a book precisely what we needed to know to find direction in a given situation. Here it is important to be willing to listen, while still applying the gift of discernment, in order to be able to distinguish good advice from erroneous or bad advice.

- Once we have weighed everything and come to the right conclusion, it is important to put it into practice without delay. In the phase of discernment we should take care not be too hasty or imprudent, but at the moment of putting into practice what we have recognized, we should not hesitate. Prudence also guides us when the situation is unpredictable and requires us to act promptly.

Christian prudence, then, has nothing to do with worldly sagacity, which aspires only to fleeting earthly happiness. It also far surpasses human intelligence, which is incapable of focusing all our actions on the highest goal, because it knows only earthly goals.