Lesson 27 Opening Thoughts On the Cardinal Virtue of Prudence:

Webster’s definition of **PRUDENCE**

1: the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason  2: sagacity or shrewdness in the management of affairs  3: skill and good judgment in the use of resources  4: caution or circumspection as to danger or risk

Prudence is an intellectual habit enabling us to see in any given juncture of human affairs what is virtuous and what is not, and how to come at the one and avoid the other.

**Natural prudence** is about making right decisions from a purely natural perspective and **supernatural prudence** is about making good decisions in accordance with God’s will, which is good and the very best for me, that will benefit me both now and eternally.

- **The natural virtue** of prudence is basically common sense in sound judgment regarding practical matters. It assists people to arrange their lives and activities in order to achieve the goal of a happy life. It is naturally prudent to look both ways before crossing the street.

- **The supernatural virtue** of prudence makes us order our activities, desires, resources, and behavior in accordance with the Gospel so that we may come to eternal life. The Church reminds us that we must use supernatural prudence and courage when we are faced with evil. We can do many things that are imprudent from a worldly perspective but which are prudent for eternal life. The martyrs are celebrated for their living witness of supernatural prudence—they gave up their natural life for Jesus’ sake. An example involved those Christians who protected Jews from death camps.

One of the major crises of the modern world is that we go on feelings instead of truth. **This is the error that we have to overcome in our own lives; we must base our decisions on a careful and conscious examination of the truth. So often we don't deliberate honestly, but rather focus on the aspects of the situation that we want to see. Prudence demands openness to the whole truth of the situation.**

"Follow your conscience" is much more precise. It means "Do what you know is right." That's it! Maybe that sounds so obvious we shouldn't even have to say it, but the fact is that many people never even think about whether they know what is right. They just do what feels right. **Conscience isn't about feeling; it's about knowing that something is right.** Another translation of "Follow your conscience" is "Follow what prudence tells you," or "Apply moral principles to concrete situations, and then act accordingly."

Take your time in consideration, but once you have reached a judgment, act quickly and decisively. It is unwise to rethink an act when you're in the process of carrying it out. Think about it before you begin it, and then just do it.

We must be able to make decisions and act with abandonment and **trust** to divine providence. After we go through the necessary steps of prudence (deliberation, judgment, and execution), **we've done our part, and we leave the rest to God.** At that point we need **faith** in Him, **faith** that He'll use even our imperfect human choices in bringing about His plan. Even if we don't see externally discernable results or successes coming from our attempts at prudential decision-making, God may be doing great things with our efforts.
Lesson 27 Closing Thoughts on Prudence:

A virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good. Our task is to ask for and cooperate with God’s grace in developing the virtue of prudence, and allowing Him to perfect it in us. In addition to studying the Catholic Faith, determine who in your life will offer you good counsel in order to help you develop the virtue of prudence.

As we heard in the Gospel today – examine your conscience. We must form our conscience in accordance with Truth. Jesus Christ and his bride the church speak God’s truth.

Prudence depends on us having a conscience that is formed in truth. It builds up our intellect by using both reason and faith and by the habitual practice of virtue which seeks the good of others. It isn’t about feeling what is right but knowing what is right and good and then doing it.

We develop prudence by using a well formed intellect to Deliberate, Judge and Execute our decision; or in a sound bite: Deliberate – Decide – Do It.

Why do we need the virtue of prudence?

- Prudence helps the intellect to see the right thing to do and to choose the right means for achieving it. Choosing wisely involves taking good counsel while obtaining knowledge from the past and present.
- Prudence entails the application of good moral principles to particular cases assisting us to know what to seek and what to avoid.
- Prudence is necessary in order to seek the common good for all.
- Prudence helps us to see what aids our salvation and what hinders our progress. Supernatural prudence may involve a certain degree of discomfort or even risk of the things that we cherish. We always seek first the Kingdom of God by following the example of Christ.
- Prudence aids us in not going along with evil in the event that we do not know what to do or because we are afraid of the consequences of opposition to the prevailing point of view.

Prudence is about smart living. It's not about being smart in school, or sports or business. It's about being smart in life. Just like all the other virtues, this takes practice. Experience is a great aid to prudence, not just your own, but also the experience of others. Seeking counsel of wise persons can be very valuable.

Most importantly, you want to seek out the counsel of the wisest sources: The Blessed Trinity, Our Lady, the saints and angels. Go to them in prayer, and ask for their wisdom and guidance in making the right decisions in your life. Read the Scriptures, or the Lives of the Saints, for insights on how to make prudent choices.

Prudence is the hinge virtue around which all the other virtues operate. We become more prudent by habitually making moral choices and becoming more virtuous. Prudence is deciding how, when and where to use our virtues to attain a good now and for eternity.
Lesson 27 Questions and Answers

What is a virtue?

*Human virtues* are firm attitudes, stable dispositions, and habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good.

The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love.

What is the virtue of Prudence?

*Prudence* is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; Prudence is "right reason in action," writes St. Thomas Aquinas. It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. The prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid.

What are the three stages of an act of Prudence?

**Step one: Deliberation.** This is the stage where we gather all the relevant information, starting with a consideration of moral principles. This includes an awareness and acceptance of the authoritative teaching of the Church's Magisterium; since the Church's teaching gives us true principles. If the Church says that a certain act is immoral, then you don't need to deliberate about that act any more; you know not to do it. While deliberating, we must also give a careful examination of the concrete situation, to be sure that we have understood it as fully as possible. It is also advisable to take counsel with those who are themselves experienced, prudent, and knowledgeable about the matter at hand. With this step it is absolutely critical that we be completely honest.

Prudence is about **truth**, the truth of what is and what must be done. It is the truth that sets us free; remember, we have to know what is true before we are free to do what is good. So we can't let our own feelings or preferences get in the way of a true understanding of the facts.

**Step two: Judgment.** After deliberating, we must weigh all the evidence fairly, and then figure out the best course of action. Judgment separates the relevant information from the irrelevant information, and then applies it to the problem at hand. You can't just think about something forever; you have to come to some sort of conclusion. Failure to make a judgment is called indecision. Procrastination, beating about the bush, fiddling around, all are ways of expressing this common vice. Thinking about some issue without actually arriving at a practical result does no one any good.

**Step three: Execution.** Once we judge the right thing to do, we have got to act! If you figure out the proper action, but then fail to perform it, what's the benefit? You do not have the virtue of prudence until you actually do what you have judged to be right.
What is Prudence about?

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What three emotions can hinder making a prudent decision?

**Anger.** A prudent person will, whenever possible, avoid making a decision while he is angry. He will sleep on it, postpone it or put it aside until he can weigh things calmly and coolly.

**Lust.** Lust can be a very powerful feeling, with the potential to negatively influence our ability to think clearly. There is nothing like desire to interfere with the proper working of our reason. St. Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to say that imprudence is caused chiefly by lust. The prudent person will step back and give himself space and time before allowing himself to be ruled by lust.

**Discouragement.** When we are close to despair, our view of reality will be skewed. We will be overly pessimistic, and so the decisions we make will be based on error. Having suffered a failure, or fallen in sin, or having made a stupid move; all these things discourage us, and so we should avoid decisions at such times.

What is the difference between Prudence and problem solving?

Problem solving is an intellectual process; it can be used for good or evil depending on the disposition of the person solving the problem. Prudence is always seeking to do the good and avoid the evil.