



PRUDENCE

# THE CARDINAL VIRTUES : PRUDENCE AND JUSTICE



JUSTICE

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## PRUDENCE

Prudence is the cardinal virtue that “disposes the practical reason to discern, in every circumstance, our true good and to choose the right means for achieving it” (Catechism, no. 1835). Prudence enables us to choose good means to a good end. It guides our practical decision making in individual, concrete circumstances and provides for effective execution once a decision is reached. With the help of prudence, we learn from our experiences and correctly apply moral principles to real-life situations (Catechism, no. 1806).

The three stages of prudence acting properly are deliberation, judgment, and decision. Note that hesitation is appropriate when it comes to deliberation: One can and should consider all the facts and moral principles that bear on the situation and be open to human and divine counsel. However, a considered decision should be performed swiftly. For example, if a person in authority asks us to do something that may be inappropriate, we should consider whether it would be prudent to obey. However, as soon as we discern that such a request constitutes a legitimate exercise of authority, our decision to obey should be promptly acted upon.

Errors in judgment can creep in through defects of prudence or through “false prudence.” Defects include thoughtlessness, rashness, negligence, indecisiveness, and inconstancy in execution. False prudence takes two forms. One is the giving in to the “prudence of the flesh,” thus making decisions based solely on serving the goods of the body, which St. Paul criticizes as being displeasing to God and leading to death (cf. Rom. 8:6-8). The other form is what St. Thomas calls *astutia*, which is often translated as “cunning” or “craftiness.” *Astutia* is concerned more with “tactics” than living in the light. True prudence isn’t only concerned with a good end, but also good means to that end. Conversely, *astutia* is the insidious temperament of the intriguer who will use any means to obtain the good.

Prudence is often called the first of the cardinal virtues. As the “charioteer of the virtues,” it guides the other virtues and guides the judgment of conscience (Catechism, no. 1806). Indeed, there is no way we can have a well-formed conscience without the virtue of prudence (cf. Catechism, nos. 1780, 1788).

In the Book of Tobit, we are advised: “Seek advice from every wise man, and do not despise any useful counsel. Bless the Lord God on every occasion; ask him that your ways may be made straight and that all your paths and plans may prosper” (Tob. 4:18-19).

This passage encourages us to learn and take counsel from others in true humility and docility. It also encourages us to seek the Lord’s assistance. Through the gift of counsel, one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (cf. Is. 11:1-3), prudence is purified and directed toward our ultimate good, God Himself.

## JUSTICE

“Justice consists in the firm and constant will to give God and neighbor their due” (Catechism, no. 1836). Justice in relation to God is called the virtue of religion. Justice toward our neighbor disposes us to respect the rights of others and to foster harmony in human relationships rooted in the truth (cf. Catechism, no. 1807).

The “debt” of justice we owe to others is called a duty. Before there can be a duty, however, the other person must have a corresponding right. I don’t have a duty to pay a \$10 debt unless my creditor has a right to receive it. Rights can arise in a variety of social, economic or political contexts. However, there are some fundamental rights that pre-exist human laws or business transactions. These are rights given to us by God that we have by virtue of our being created in His image and likeness. These include the right to life, the right to religious liberty, and the right to earn an honest living. When individuals or governments fail to recognize these rights, they act contrary to the truth of creation, and they act unjustly.

Psalm 112 calls the just man a “light in darkness.” Conversely, when we succumb to injustice, and call “evil good and good evil” (Is. 5:20), we are “already on the path to the most alarming corruption and the darkest moral blindness” (Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 25).

Justice is distinct from charity, but they are not opposed to each other. We can and must be both just and charitable in our dealing with others. The distinction may be summed up as follows: Charity is based on the union that exists with one’s neighbor. That’s why the most intimate human relationship—marriage—is presented in Scripture as the two becoming one (cf. Mt. 19:6), and Our Lord commands us to love others as ourself (cf. Lk. 10:27). Justice, however, recognizes that we maintain our individuality despite our communion. Justice demands a distinction of parties, otherwise a debt cannot be owed to the other.

There are three basic forms of justice (cf. Catechism, no. 2411). Commutative justice is the justice that individuals owe each other. Distributive justice describes the relation of the whole to its parts. Specifically, it describes the duty the government owes its citizens—including the protection of their fundamental rights. Legal justice describes the relation of the citizens to the state. For example, this includes that obligation to “render Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mk. 12:17), such as the payment of taxes.

Also included under justice is the Church’s social teaching, which often comes under the general heading of “social justice.” The social doctrine of the Church has seen remarkable development over the past century beginning with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* authored by Pope Leo XIII, followed by the landmark Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), and up to the three social encyclicals of Pope John Paul II. This body of teaching provides principles about social and economic matters that involve the promotion of fundamental human rights and the common good (see generally Catechism, nos. 2419 et seq.).

## **THE FAMILY OF MORAL VIRTUES**

All the moral virtues are in some way related to one of the cardinal virtues. Here are some examples:

### **Prudence—making good decisions**

- Good counsel profits from the advice of others when confronted with difficult decisions.
- Common sense is the ability to judge things according to the ordinary rules of conduct.
- Good judgment involves attentiveness to the mind of the lawmaker.
- Innocence helps us to see the truth clearly (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3).
- Docility is the ability to be taught.

### **Justice—giving others their due**

- Religion is the worship we owe to God.
- Piety is the duty that we owe to our parents (and by extension to clergy, our spiritual fathers, and to our family) and to our country, or “fatherland.”
- Observance refers to the respect owed to those persons distinguished by their office or some dignity.
- Obedience is the duty owed to those in authority.
- Truthfulness ensures that our communications reflect objective reality.
- Gratitude is the duty owed to one who has conferred benefits on us.
- Zeal involves eagerly leading others to the good or protecting them from evil.
- Restitution is the making of reparation for harm done to others.

Catholics United for the Faith, Faith Facts: The Cardinal Virtues; <http://www.cuf.org/2005/02/morality-is-habit-forming-the-cardinal-virtues>.