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LIGHT & LIFE

FATHER REGINALD MARTIN, O.P., DIRECTOR

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FR. REGINALD MARTIN REFLECTS ON LENT

I write these reflections on the feast of St. Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 74) the great Dominican theologian. He is best known for his systematic presentation of Catholic theology, the *Summa Theologiae*, but his sermons, and the other writings that have come down to us, provide remarkable food for thought – especially as we look forward to Lent and Easter.

St. Thomas asks, “*Why did the Son of God have to suffer for us?*” His answer,

There was a great need, and it can be considered in a twofold way: in the first place, as a remedy for sin, and secondly, as an example how to act...Whoever wishes to live perfectly should do nothing but disdain what Christ disdained on the cross and desire what he desired, for the cross exemplifies every virtue.

St. Thomas presents the cross as an example of love, an example of patience, an example of obedience, humility, and contempt for earthly things. He counsels

Do not be attached, therefore, to clothing and riches, because they divided my garments among themselves. Nor to honors, for he experienced harsh words and scourgings. Nor to greatness of rank, for weaving a crown of thorns they placed it on my head. Nor to anything delightful, for in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.

Lent is a time to consider what we need, and what we can do without; what is necessary, and what may be superfluous. St. Thomas’ words are a valuable reflection on Lent’s call to self-denial. Most of us undoubtedly grew up denying ourselves some special treat during Lent. My friends, I recall, often foreswore candy. I was allergic to chocolate in my youth, so giving up candy was never much of a challenge.

As I grew older, fasting and not eating between meals, proved a little harder. I just celebrated my sixty-third birthday, and I have found no better way to discern what is truly necessary than by asking myself, at the end of



Silhouette by Sr. Jean Dorcy, O.P.

a meal, whether I have eaten enough to keep me from snacking until I sit down to the next meal.

One Lent, when I was in high school, I decided to give up watching television. After two weeks, I concluded I had given up very little, and scrambled about to find another penance. I have never returned to watching television, but I remember one year, shortly after my ordination, when I calculated I was watching about three hours of television a week. I gave it up again, and announced at a meeting of my Dominican community that in the time I’d saved, I had read five novels. One of my brothers said, “*Perhaps you should have given up reading novels!*”

I took his remark to heart a few years ago, and now read no fiction on Lenten weekdays. Occasionally, I discover some work of non-fiction that proves as irresistible as a good novel, but more often I find myself employing the evenings of Lent writing long-ignored

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

The Moral Virtues: I Prudence

By Father Reginald Martin, O.P.

A NEW BEGINNING: THE MORAL VIRTUES

With this issue of *Light and Life* we turn from the theological virtues, which govern our relations with God, to the moral virtues, which are the good habits that guide the will, primarily in our relations with others and the created world. They enable us to know what to do – and teach us how to do it – and give us practical assistance as we strive to do what is right, and strive to do it well.

VIRTUE: DOING GOOD AND DOING WELL

The notion of doing something well is important to our study of the virtues, because doing well means making good choices, even when faced with a multitude of options. In the Old Testament, the Book of Proverbs continually contrasts the actions and fate of the wise and foolish,

*The simpleton believes everything,
But the shrewd man measures his steps.
The wise man is cautious and shuns evil;
The fool is reckless and sure of himself.
The quick-tempered man makes a fool of himself,
But the prudent man is at peace* (Prov. 15:15-17).

VIRTUE AS CAUTION

What separates the wise from the foolish is the wise man's care, the caution with which he judges his options and chooses actions that avoid extremes. Our faith calls this practical ability Prudence, which the Catechism defines as "*the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it*" (1806).

"Practical" reason is the human capacity by which we choose the paths that will lead us to a particular goal. It is less concerned with theoretical knowledge than with the here-and-now realities we must deal with in our everyday lives. To be sure, this requires some knowledge of general principles, but the goal of Prudence is action – specifically, making proper choices. St. Thomas Aquinas quotes Aristotle, saying Prudence is "*right reason applied to action*" (II-II, 47:2). but St. Augustine defines it simply as "*the knowledge of what to seek and what to avoid.*"

PRUDENCE: MORE THAN PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE

As we look at these definitions, Prudence, in many ways, seems to be no more than common sense.

What distinguishes Prudence from "street smarts" is what it shares with every other virtue, the capacity to incline its possessor to make proper choices toward the attainment of good (c.f. II-II, 47:4). Our goal as Christians is to share everlasting life with God. Prudence helps us achieve this goal by enabling us to apply to concrete situations whatever speculative knowledge we may possess. This sounds fairly simple, but making a prudent choice is actually a complex and sophisticated process. It begins with learning whatever we can about the matter at hand and making a judgment about what we have learned. Only then are we equipped to make a prudent choice.

PRUDENCE: PERFECTED THROUGH PRACTICE

We have said that virtues are "*firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that guide our conduct....*" (CCC 1803). Obviously, Prudence is something that develops with practice; it builds on what we have learned through earlier experience. Aristotle taught, "*...virtue is both originated and fostered by teaching; it therefore demands experience and time.*" Although it may be difficult at first, Prudence becomes easier as we incorporate what we have learned into the mental processes by which we make our choices. Any act – good or bad – becomes habitual, or "second nature," through repeated practice. The value of the good habits we call virtues is their capacity to "*...make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life....*" (*Ibid.*).

THE INEVITABILITY OF CHOICE

If we look at our lives, we see that we are called to make good choices in many different situations. These include our families, our jobs, and even our political lives. Prudence concerns itself with our choices, so we can find as many different types of Prudence as we have choices to make. What distinguishes them is whether the choice affects our dealing with ourselves, those who are close to us, or the choices we must make for the common good of the larger society in which we live.

THE CHALLENGE TO CHOOSE WELL

In this regard we need to remember that true Prudence has to do with good choices. Criminals can use their knowledge skillfully, but since their choices are intended to deceive and betray, we can only talk about "good thieves" or "good terrorists" as a figure of speech. On the other hand, when we talk about "good drivers" – or

“good sports” – we are truly describing prudent behavior, because these individuals are using their knowledge and skills for a proper purpose. However, this manifestation of Prudence is imperfect, because it is directed toward our own good, and is not concerned with the larger, common good. Our Prudence is both true and perfect when we learn, judge, and act with concern for our whole life, which is a life lived with others.

DEVELOPING PRUDENCE

At some point we must ask how we acquire Prudence, and here we do well to recall Aristotle’s remark that Prudence is fostered by teaching, and is perfected over time by experience. Memory is an essential part of this process: we cannot learn from our mistakes or our successes unless we can remember the outcomes our choices lead to. Understanding is also a part of this process, and here we mean not just mental capacity – each of us undoubtedly knows very intelligent individuals, who nevertheless make very poor choices – but rather the capacity to apply knowledge properly.

SCRIPTURAL REFLECTIONS

If we look at the Bible, we see that Prudence is initially considered the ability to perform some task skillfully. The Book of Exodus praises the skill of the midwives who save the lives of Hebrew children in Egypt, and the Old Testament repeatedly credits with Prudence those who make or build objects that are well-crafted or useful. But as biblical theology evolves, Prudence emerges more and more clearly as excellence in the moral sphere. The biblical writers came to realize that one might be quite adept at a profession, yet a morally empty – or, worse, truly vicious – individual. Thus, they wisely chose to separate occupations from human behavior, and came to attach far greater value to skill in reaching good conclusions than to skill in craftsmanship.

COMPANIONS OF PRUDENCE

Because Prudence is concerned with making the right, practical choices, it is profitably accompanied by a number of attendant skills. Among these are shrewdness, which is the speed with which we can determine something, and foresight, which enables us to see the future effects of some action we perform now. Circumspection enables us to compare the ends and means of our actions, a skill that is useful when we are faced with several ways to achieve the same goal. Caution enables us to anticipate – and, thus, avoid – things that may hinder our pursuit of a virtuous goal.

OPPOSITION TO PRUDENCE

Because habit enables us to do something readily and with ease, our good habits eventually make clumsy efforts graceful and smooth. Like any skill developed by repetition, habits are developed with practice, and destroyed by disuse – or by contrary actions. No one

will be surprised, then, to learn that Imprudence is the vice opposed to the virtue of Prudence. Imprudence can take many forms: ignoring wise counsel, rash and hasty action, and disregard for what we have learned from past experience. Inconstancy encourages us to prefer some personal pleasure over something we know to be a greater good. Because Prudence is always concerned for a choice that will lead to the greatest (often a public) benefit, this desire for personal satisfaction lies at the heart of every deviation from Prudence.

THE “MIDDLE COURSE”

As we look at the virtue of Prudence, and consider the actions opposed to it, three things become clear. The first is that Prudence enables us to choose a virtuous middle course between the extremes of rash judgment and the paralysis that can arise from seeking out and listening to every possible piece of advice. Philosophers teach that “virtue stands in the middle,” and each of the virtues helps us to find the appropriate middle course. St. Thomas Aquinas described virtue as “*a habit of choosing the mean as a prudent man would appoint it*” (I-II, 59.1). The prudent individual is one who can determine when the time for counsel has passed, and when the time for action has come.

The second thing we must consider is that the virtuous “middle course” is not an absolute standard, but one that depends to a large extent on who each of us is, and what individual gifts and skills each of us brings to the decision-making process. Finally, because Prudence is concerned with individual choices, we must also consider the specific goal our choice seeks to attain. Prudence may suggest quick action in one case, a more relaxed attitude in another. Good parents, effective administrators, and successful military strategists are all equally prudent. The essential element is Prudence in its capacity to achieve some end – to get one thing done, and done well – and those who employ Prudence effectively will say that only observation and experience can teach us what action will be appropriate in any specific instance.

MISTAKEN NOTIONS OF PRUDENCE

Lest Prudence seem nothing more than a cynical way of “getting by,” or a mechanical formula to “get ahead,” we must remember that the purpose of the virtues is to enable us to make choices that will lead us to everlasting life. One theologian sums up the role of virtue in human life thus,

In a word, we demand an action proper to the image of God: an action proceeding from intellect and will, as God’s actions proceed, deliberately, and to ends worthy of such an agent as man. (Walter Farrell, O.P., A Companion to the Summa, Vol. III, p.142.)

We should also note that although Prudence dictates moderation when choosing among options, Prudence itself is not something to be embraced half-heartedly. Aristotle taught that Prudence directs us to be moderate

in choosing between extremes, but we cannot be moderate in practicing virtue; we are called – always – to be “fully” prudent.

THE PERFECTION OF PRUDENCE

Let us draw these reflections to a close by listening once again to St. Thomas Aquinas, who taught that the virtue of Prudence is perfected by the gift of counsel. This gift is a great deal more than the good advice we receive when we listen to others at a meeting; it is God’s gift, by which Prudence is “*helped through being ruled and moved by the Holy Spirit*” (II-II, 52.2). Prudence directs us to make proper choices that will yield good results.

The Spirit’s gift of counsel elevates this natural capacity to make it a sign of God’s goodness for the world. In this way, the gift of counsel closely allies Prudence with the Beatitude in which Christ promises, “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*” (Mt. 5:7). The reason for this is that Prudence directs us to make proper choices, and counsel directs Prudence to choose the best among a multitude of good options. The best choices we can make are those that will benefit God’s creatures. Mercy (which is compassion for another’s distress, coupled with a practical will to relieve it) is the supremely good act, in which we come closest to imitating Our Savior, who – mercifully – offered His life for our salvation. ■

FR. REGINALD REFLECTS ON LENT *(cont. from page 1)*

letters, or saying a few extra prayers. However I choose to spend the time, I always learn something about how I spend time – and how I might spend it more profitably. Especially as I grow older, I realize how precious time is, and how often I waste it.

I can no longer recall where I read – or who wrote – what struck me as a Lenten challenge each of us might find beneficial: the challenge of silence. No one will be surprised if I remark that the Blessed Virgin provides a remarkable example of silence. When she speaks in the gospel, she says no more than is necessary, and when she allows herself to wax poetic, as she does in her Magnificat, her sentences show the immense power of our words, when we use them to preach God’s goodness.

The Catechism offers a beautiful reflection on Mary’s prayer, which

...is revealed to us at the dawning of the fullness of time. Before the incarnation of the Son of God, and before the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, her prayer cooperates in a unique way with the Father’s plan of loving kindness...In the faith of this humble handmaid, the Gift of God found the acceptance he had awaited from the beginning of time. She whom the Almighty made “full of grace” responds by offering her whole being... “Fiat”: this is Christian prayer: to be wholly God’s, because He is wholly ours (no. 2617).

What better time to strive to “be wholly God’s” than the days of Lent?

Thus far, I have considered Lent only as a time of voluntary deprivation. Modern spiritual writers remind us Lent is also an ideal time to undertake some special activity. If time allows, the days of Lent provide a splendid opportunity to do something extra – to attend Mass more frequently, add a few more minutes to prayer, pay a visit to someone who is ill or living alone. When I worked in campus ministry as a young priest, one of my priest-colleagues urged our college students to attend daily Mass during Lent. I was always amazed at how many did so – and how many continued to attend the daily Masses after Easter.

Once again, no one will be surprised if I summon Mary as our exemplar of charitable activity. Her traveling “in haste” to assist her kinswoman Elizabeth, her quiet intervention in the wedding at Cana, and especially in accompanying her Son to Calvary, Mary invites us to stand by her, to learn from her, and to be strengthened by her courage and love.

The days of Lent lead us to Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, the saving act we witness whenever we gather to worship at Mass. Here, perhaps, we encounter Mary most intimately. Once again, the Catechism affords a remarkable reflection,

To the offering of Christ are united not only the members still here on earth, but also those already in the glory of heaven. In communion with and commemorating the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints, the Church offers the Eucharistic sacrifice. In the Eucharist the Church is as it were at the foot of the cross with Mary, united in the offering and intercession of Christ (no. 1370).

Someone once told me his journey back to the practice of the faith, which he had abandoned for a number of years, was the result of his return to praying the Rosary. “*She doesn’t let go,*” he concluded. Mary doesn’t let go, and we never have to look far to find her hand extended to help, strengthen, and console us. Let us make this Lenten journey with her, and share her joy at the Resurrection of her Son. ■

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