

IV. Prudence

Prudence is a virtue which makes us understand what we need to do and what we need to avoid. It indicates to us the sure and legitimate means of attaining a praiseworthy end. It, therefore, determines the use we must make of our intelligence and of our mind to turn us aside from what we might have to regret in the undertakings or actions of life. Besides, the means it uses will always be legitimate if they are inspired by reason or by faith; and they will be sure that they are neither insufficient or excessive.

Since the good teacher's main aim is the education of the children, prudence enlightens him about the means he must use to bring them up properly by educating their minds and hearts. Hence, this virtue is highly to be esteemed; it is even a most excellent art, says St. John Chrysostom because, as he adds, a good teacher stands far above a clever painter, a skillful sculptor, and other similar artists; from which we may conclude that to such a one especially we may apply the words of Holy Scripture: "*Happy the man rich in prudence!*"

Since the operations of this virtue are: to deliberate carefully, to judge rightly, and to order all things properly, a teacher must seek to accomplish all these goals. He cannot, in fact, achieve his objective which is the education of the children, unless he is sure of the infallibility of the means he uses in bringing them up correctly; and he cannot be sure of this unless he has examined, discussed, sought for and found what these means are.

Still, it is possible in general that he may be mistaken in his judgment; but he will not be if he acts with prudence, for the matter he is judging is either evident or doubtful. In the former case, he cannot be mistaken; and in the latter, before deciding he brings in all the requisite attention to make sure that he says only what he knows as true, and that he takes as conjectural only what is doubtful.

But to carry out the functions of prudence properly, he takes care to make use of the different elements it includes, which are eight in number: memory, intelligence, docility, skill, reasoning, foresight, circumspection, and precaution.

1) **Memory.** Prudence requires that we apply to the future the experience of the past. Nothing is more like what is going to happen than what has already happened. A good teacher, then, will profit by what he has learned; he will gather useful lessons from the failure and the success of others which he has heard about; and will not fail to follow faithfully the book of the *Conduct of Christian Schools*, which was drawn up and is based entirely on the careful consideration of long experience.

2) **Intelligence.** Prudence requires that we grasp fully the matter we are dealing with, and the means most appropriate for imparting it to the students. Thus, a teacher will seek first of all to study carefully and in depth the temperament and the character of the students, to adapt his lessons to their capacity and their needs, thus making them useful. For instance, one boy can be controlled by fear, while another is discouraged and disheartened by it; some students can be found from whom nothing can be gotten except by dint of effort and application; there are others who study only by fits and starts. To want to put them all on the same level and subject them all to one and the same rule, would be to do violence to nature. The teacher's prudence consists in holding to a middle course, equally distant from both extremes; for in this area, evil is often right next to good, and it is easy to mistake one for the other. This is what makes guiding the young such a difficult enterprise.

Secondly: the teacher shall carefully prepare the matter for every lesson he wishes to teach. This leads us to explain again, as we announced above, this topic which is so important, and which moreover should naturally make up part of a work which seeks to explain the virtues of a good teacher. Thus, we say that Prudence requires of a teacher to prepare himself carefully before each lesson he gives to his students. For he needs to recall to mind with precision the principles which can easily slip his memory, and which, if forgotten, might lead him to serious mistakes. He needs to search for arguments to back up his principles, to gather them together with discernment and discrimination; he must not haphazardly seize upon whatever might offer itself to him in a quick and superficial reading. He must give clarity, order, and proper arrangement to what he has to say, to make it more easily grasped and to prevent the disorientation which confusion and disorder would infallibly produce in the students' minds.

Finally, he must determine how to express himself with the dignity and propriety which become a teacher, and without which what he says might often inspire boredom, lack of interest, and even sometimes the scorn of those who have to listen to him. All this obviously demands preparation and effort; and if, while neglecting either, one expects God to make for the deficiency by an extraordinary help, this expectation would resemble the temerity of a man who tempts God, rather than the security of the one who rightly trusts in His goodness and power.

There are, it is true, teachers so richly endowed with everything that can contribute to the instruction of their pupils that they often undertake to teach various topics without any preparation. These Jesus Christ compares to a father of a family who is always ready to draw from his treasure-house riches both ancient and new; for their assiduous efforts in the past have acquired this happy state for them. But we must admit that this readiness and this abundance, which are the result only of a superior talent joined with a long practice of teaching, are not the lot of the many; and that for most teachers, to undertake without due preparation to deal in public with the principal truths of religion is an act of temerity, presumption, or perhaps a sign of deep lack of esteem for the educator's role.

3) **Docility.** Even those whose more mature age has provided them with experience must be ready to learn more if they wish to be prudent. For St. Thomas says that no one is always entirely self-sufficient in what pertains to prudence. A good teacher, therefore, will mistrust his own lights, as we mentioned previously, and will never undertake anything of importance without consulting whomsoever he is bound to consult.

4) **Skill.** This concerns the carrying out of the just projects one has decided upon. Thus, prudence demands that a teacher should always prefer the means which seem to him the most proper to insure the success of what he undertakes. It also demands for example, that he should give his words and actions the same attention he would use if he were acting in the public view. He must give proof of perfect discretion, without which he cannot succeed; he must be so reserved that the students may not always know what he is thinking, and everything he plans for them.

5) **Reasoning.** This means the art of reasoning correctly so as to avoid the errors one might fall into. The prudent teacher must excel in this art, so as to lay down incontrovertible principles in the subjects he teaches, and to deduce therefrom certain and sure consequences, which will succeed in convincing the minds of the students.

6) **Foresight.** This is the wise arrangement of the means which lead to the end desired or, if one prefers, it is the action of the mind by which we recognize in advance what may happen, following the natural course of events. Under the first aspect, prudence requires a time to deliberate, if one does not wish to expose himself to see an undertaking fail; in like manner it forbids him to spend too much time deliberating, if he does not want to lose the occasion for acting appropriately. Prudence, moreover, regulates and modifies the other virtues of the good teacher: thus, it assigns its proper rule to each thing; it considers how it foresees and coordinates all the virtues, the proper means for practicing them, and the proper application that must be made of them.

Under the second aspect, prudence makes the teacher look ahead at how useful or not the means he may use will turn out to be, so as to reject them or make use of them in greater confidence.

7) **Circumspection.** This is a reflected attention which thoroughly examines a plan before giving it final approval. Thus, a prudent teacher will not act unless he has carefully considered what he has to do; he will make it a practice to choose the most appropriate methods, given the circumstances of time, place, temperament, and persons.

8) **Precaution.** Finally, precaution carefully avoids the inconvenience in what one may wish to carry out. This is why a prudent teacher will never punish students without witnesses present, and will never be alone anywhere with a student unless he can be seen by someone. This will also lead him not to do or say anything in the presence of the students which they may blame him for, or may be scandalized by. So also, when reproving in public faults publicly committed he will not always make known to all the students the faults which all of them may not know, because loss of reputation, or scandal, might ensue. Finally, it is through prudence that he will so regulate all his external conduct that his students may never have any reason to think that he is afraid of them on account of the natural defects which they may observe in him.

From all this it is easy to conclude that a teacher with good judgment, with ordinary knowledge, and with the information gained from study, will carry out perfectly the duties imposed by prudence; and it is clear, also, how necessary this virtue is for him.

One sins against prudence in two ways, by defect or by excess.

One sins in the first way by hastiness, thoughtlessness, temerity, lack of attention to what one is doing by lack of consideration; by light-headedness, negligence, inconstancy, blind attachment to one's own opinions, blind confidence in merely human resources, etc.

One sins in the second manner by false prudence, which Scripture calls "prudence of the flesh." It judges only by the senses and has no other object in view than to satisfy some ill-regulated love, or too high an opinion of self; thus it anxiously bothers about temporal concerns, either in the present or in the future; and the means it uses to succeed in what it undertakes are guile, fraud, and deceit.

“Be ye wise as serpents.” (Matthew 10:16).

“Learn prudence which is more precious than gold.” (Proverbs 16:16)