

V. Wisdom

Wisdom is a virtue which gives us knowledge of the most exalted things through the most excellent principles so that we may act accordingly.

It differs from prudence for the latter merely presupposes a praiseworthy end, whatever it may be. Whereas, wisdom considers directly its object, and does so not only as good and praiseworthy but also as being very great and important.

It can even happen that one of these two virtues may be present while the other is not. Let us give an example in general terms. We wish to have the last sacraments administered to someone suffering from a malady said to be serious and life-threatening. This is obviously an act of wisdom. But is it always an act of prudence also? No, doubtless; for we need to be morally sure, or to have at least a reasonable suspicion, that the illness is real and dangerous. In such a case, it is possible to be mistaken and to fail against prudence if, to inform oneself about the facts, one fails to fulfill the dictates of prudence, namely, by not carefully examining the circumstances, by judging of them too hastily, and in consequence, by acting in a manner lacking in consideration.

Let us take another example, referring to the subject which we are discussing at present. A teacher wishes to give his students a lesson on the subject he teaches them, let us say, catechism. This is obviously an act of wisdom by which he seeks to fulfill his duty. But if he speaks to the children in too high-flown a manner, so that they do not grasp what he tells them, or if he makes use of vulgar expressions inappropriate for dealing with the dignity of the truths he must teach them, he certainly sins against prudence. There is, then, an essential difference between the two virtues we are here considering.

In what, then, does the wisdom of the good teacher consist? It consists in making him know, love, and fulfill the exalted and infinitely precious object which he is responsible for; from this it follows that a good teacher must begin by imitating the example of Solomon who spoke humbly to the Author of all good, the God of Knowledge, the Father of Lights: (Wisdom 9: 4, 10, 11, 12) *“Give me,” said this prince, “wisdom, which is seated by thy throne and reject me not from the number of Thy children. Send her forth from Thy sanctuary in heaven, and from the throne of Thy grandeur, so that she may be with me and work with me, and that I may know what is agreeable to Thee; for she is the knowledge and intelligence of all things; she will guide me in all my works with circumspection, and will protect me by her might; and thus my acts will be agreeable to Thee.”*

However, it is not enough for a good teacher to pray; he would act imprudently if, while teaching the students, he did not seek to instruct himself concerning what he wishes to teach them. Thus, he will apply himself to study, as we mentioned in speaking of prudence, but wisdom will also show him, and make him deeply cognizant not only of the truths he is obliged to teach, but of the principles of these subjects. Otherwise, he would be a reciter of formulas, and the students would only learn names, which they would promptly forget.

Moreover, while imparting to them what he knows, he should take great care in particular not to tell them anything offensive or disdainful, or that might lead them to become ill-disposed towards himself or the school. He should never be led by hazardous opinions, nor by false prejudices, but always by Christian principles, by divine and human laws, and also by those of his nation.

To teach children with greater benefit, wisdom requires that he himself should practice the virtues which he must cultivate in them. *“If you show yourself firmly convinced of what*

you teach," says St. Bernard, "*You will give to your voice the voice of power; the voice of action is much more impressive than that of words; act as you speak...*" (Sermon 59 on the Song of Songs). Thus he will teach his students how to direct their actions in conformity with the true rules of behavior; to moderate and correct their passions; to become truly and genuinely happy. He will, therefore, make sure to give them the example of what he wishes to teach them; he will strive for his own sake and for the sake of instructing them, to distinguish what is truly good from what is such only in appearance; he will lead them to choose rightly and to persevere in every enlightened choice; to arrange all things with order and measure; in a word, to fulfill exactly their duties toward God, toward themselves, and toward others.

In this way he will acquire this sublime wisdom which includes the most excellent science of all, without which all others are nothing in comparison: the science of salvation, which makes the soul relish the things of heaven, because it shows to us all the sweetness and suavity of these things. It teaches us to follow what religion urges us to do; for example, to find our wealth in poverty, joy in suffering, true elevation in God's eyes, in lowly occupations and in those which men hold in slight esteem; to make good use of the blessings and the ills of this life; not to take any resolution save with upright and worthy views; not to pursue our aims except by legitimate means; to unite, in dealing with children, a just firmness with a praiseworthy mildness; example with practice; always to seek the spiritual advantages which enrich us for eternity rather than the temporal benefits which are only fleeting, being firmly persuaded that it is of no use for a man to gain the entire world if he then loses his soul; that earth and all its goods will pass away, but that whoever does the will of God will abide forever. Such, in fact, is true wisdom, which St. James exhorts us (James 1:5) to beg of God, and which above all will be the glory and crown of a good teacher.

The defects contrary to this kind of admirable wisdom are: first, to prefer a merely human satisfaction to an act of supernatural virtue, and to the perfect accomplishment of God's will; for instance, to show oneself more eager to acquire external talents and profane science rather than the necessary knowledge of religion. Second, to apply oneself more willingly to teaching what flatters one's self-love rather than to what can form Jesus Christ in the hearts of the students, to seek their friendship rather than to correct them of their defects, etc.

There is another kind of wisdom which does not come down from on high, but on the contrary is earthly, animal, diabolical, as St. James says (James 3:19:62). This is a false wisdom blinded by passion: it follows only the suggestions of the malignant spirit; it adopts exclusively the maxims of the world, while rejecting those of the Gospel. It takes more pains about acquiring the virtues which may be agreeable to men rather than those which can please God. It acts only according to interested motives, seeking only what can be of benefit to itself. Moreover, in order to deceive and lead others astray more easily, it strives to disguise itself by appearing affable, mild, friendly, and polite; but it does not hesitate to make use of intrigue, ruse, fraud, artifice, subtlety, and trickery to achieve its ends. This is therefore nothing but true folly, as its unfortunate consequences - contention and jealousy - only too clearly show.

“Wisdom is full of light, and its beauty never fades; those who love her easily find her, and those who seek her find her.” (Wis. 6:13)

“She is an infinite treasure for men; those who follow her become the friends of God, remarkable by the gifts of knowledge. Wisdom opens the lips of the dumb, and makes eloquent the tongues of little children.” (Wis. 10: 2, 21).