

VIRGO PRUDENTISSIMA

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THE idea is current that virtue and intelligence have little to do with each other; the idea implied in the line of the song, 'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever'. We may readily agree that virtue has little to do with mere smartness, or with that slick mental dexterity so much admired in the lower reaches of the commercial world; but it is certain doctrine that mature, adult virtue cannot dispense with intelligence since the will is the executive or directive faculty of the intellect.

The planning directive virtue of the moral life is prudence, and it is an intellectual virtue in the sense that its seat is in the intellect, and its function is to teach us how to act, applying general principles to conduct here and now in given concrete circumstances. It enables us above all else to keep the end or reason of action in view.

We have only to recall that our Lady's intellect is unspoiled by original sin to realise that her conduct was always and in the highest possible sense wholly according to reason; that no part of her conduct arose from whim, fancy, or imperfectly controlled emotion. The best of us find that we do act from impulse, or that whim and emotion often master our conduct.

There are three main acts which go to make up the virtue of prudence: normally the initial process consists in deliberation—the considering, the thinking out of the problem. This it is well to remark may lead us to ask advice of those who are expert in certain matters or who have had the sort of experience we may lack. Discussion with others is seldom valueless: the mere attempt to state a problem commonly clarifies it.

The thoughtful cogitative side of our Lady's character is one of the things which emerge clearly from the Gospel narrative: it caused St Luke to remark how 'she kept all these things in her heart'. At the very beginning of the Gospel story we hear her asking, 'How shall this be done

since I know not man?': How shall the birth of the child Jesus be brought about since she is, and intends to remain, a virgin?

It is perhaps not fanciful to think that the weeks Mary spent with St Elizabeth before the birth of St John the Baptist, were weeks during which she learned all that was needful for an expectant mother to know, that she profited by the knowledge of the older woman, and on the highest level that she discussed with her the religious and spiritual significance of all the wonderful events of that time, with all the insight and discretion inspired by a supernatural prudence.

Prudence is concerned with the formation of a right conscience and in that the mind must play a dominant part. How I think and judge determines my conscience. Consequently the second act of prudence is judgment. The spirit of christian prudence is not one of merely cold calculation. Moral judgments are not like judgments in mathematics; we cannot weigh sin, nor can we measure virtue by any material yardstick. It is the vice of excessive casuistry to think that we can. Nor is christian prudence merely content to ask, 'Is this a sin?' (with the rider that if it is not I will do it). The frame of mind which is interested in how far we can go in any line of conduct without sin has little to do with prudence. At a minimum level the mind may ask, 'What action does God's known will demand?': this we might call a *minimum prudence*, without which a man will sin, and perhaps gravely. At a higher level the question may be, 'What action is best if I am to save my soul?': this we might call a *normal christian prudence*; and finally, at the highest level, 'What action will best promote the glory of God?': and this we might call *maximum or perfect christian prudence*.

Deliberation and judgment are often fused together in the act of prudence, as is seen in the events which we group under the Annunciation; judgment seems to follow instantaneously on deliberation. This is wholly in line with the nature of high sanctity: that an intuitive sense is given to those who are wholly under the influence of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, enabling them to discern with a perfect accuracy the right and prudent course of action in the most

complex circumstances of life. Prudence, for all that we have emphasised its intellectual character, remains a moral virtue. Intellect and will, heart and mind are forever acting on one another in our moral lives. As we are, so we shall judge. There is no moral virtue without prudence, but no genuine virtue of prudence can develop independently of a good life.

It follows on deliberation that we judge; on judgment that we make a decision. I deliberate, I judge, I decide; the intellect commands the will and the will obeys. Without the decision there would be no action and all our intellectual activities would be valueless.

'Behold the handmaid of the Lord'—a decision of the most exalted prudence inspired by the most exalted supernatural wisdom, by a will perfectly in tune with the divine will. None the less the decision involved deliberation and judgment, and out of all this was born the crucial decision which did not so much change history as reveal to us its inner meaning. Without thinking that our Lady's decision to do God's will was ever for a single moment in doubt; without minimizing either its sovereign freedom, her *Fiat* is the expression of the most momentous decision ever taken by a human will and it remains all along a most perfect manifestation of the virtue of prudence.



THE ANGELICAL SALUTATION

ST FRANCIS DE SALES

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[The style of this sermon preached by St Francis de Sales indicates that it belongs to the first year of his mission to the Chablais. It is not unlikely that it was delivered on the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March, 1595. The text here followed is that of the Annecy Edition, *Oeuvres de Saint François de Sales*, VII, pp. 240-243.]

'Hail, thou who art full of grace.'—Luke 1, 28.