

## **One**

### **Truth**

The first of all virtues is the virtue of *prudence*. This is the virtue that must ground all the others, because it is a virtue of the mind, of knowledge.

The fundamental fact that our society seems to have largely forgotten is that *you cannot pursue the good unless you know what the good is in the first place*. It's the mind, it's understanding, that enables you to do the right thing in the first place because it tells you what the right thing is.

So the *entire* moral life is based not on your instincts, not on your gut, not on your good intentions. The entire moral life is based on the discipline of reflecting on the truth, being willing to seek the truth relentlessly, to consider it rigorously, and to carry it out with painstaking conscientiousness. Which means, if you've never considered yourself a "reflective" person, if you just prefer to shoot from the hip, if you're not the sort who worries about thinking things through carefully, well, that has to change. Because the first and fundamental virtue is prudence. And you have to care about the truth and about getting the truth right. You have to care about acquiring that virtue.

## **Two**

### **Not Comfort or Safety or Timidity**

One early misconception about prudence that has to be corrected right away is this false idea that prudence is about comfort, safety, or timidity.

People always say “You have to be prudent,” when they’re justifying the safe course of action, the easier course of action. And yes, sometimes prudence does dictate the safer, easier course. Because sometimes that truly is the best option. But very often prudence *doesn’t* dictate the safer, easier course.

Prudence could prompt you to have a fifth kid. Prudence could tell you to dive on a grenade. When Christ spoke to the rich young man and told him to go sell all he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus, that *would* have been the prudent thing to do.

So don’t use prudence as an excuse for not being heroic. Sometimes in every life, heroism is actually going to be the only prudent thing to do.

## **Three**

### **The truth about timeless principles**

Prudence is the virtue that makes you live your life according to the truth about reality.

Prudence makes you live not on your feelings or your own personal experience of things, it makes you live according to the way things are. And that’s why, in order to be prudent, you have to know the ultimate truths of life. You have to know the timeless principles of faith and morals.

In other words, you have to be a well-educated Catholic. Because if you don’t know the general truths of God and man and our ultimate destiny and design, then you’re certainly not going to be able to judge rightly in particular situations.

Just like somebody who didn't have a general knowledge of human anatomy couldn't make a good judgment about what to do during a particularly tricky heart surgery, we will not be able to make good decisions in particular situations if we do not have a good grasp of the general features of the world. And that's what the faith offers us.

So the first part of prudence is making sure you learn the faith. Then you'll be better equipped for individual situations.

## **Four**

### **The truth about the situation**

Prudence, though, is the virtue of being excellent at applying moral truth to concrete situations. That's basically the definition of prudence. Being really good at applying moral truth to concrete situations.

Which means, as we just said, that you need to have a good knowledge of moral truth, and in particular of the moral teachings of the Catholic Church. But you also have to learn to think through a concrete situation. To really see the important truth about it, and not just what matters to your ego, or comfort, or convenience, or feelings.

That's very difficult. So many of us would rather just say, "Well, whatever. We'll go with this and see what happens." But planning and consideration are essential to any form of excellence – and they're certainly essential to virtue. Because, again, virtue is based on truth. And trying to understand the truth about the situation is going to be absolutely necessary to a virtuous life.

## **Five**

### **Practice**

All the cardinal virtues – prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance – take practice. They aren't easy, especially at the beginning. And God is very generous and patient with us. He gives us the opportunity to practice.

Often, when we've made the wrong decision in a set of circumstances, he'll give us an opportunity again to make the right decision in a similar set of circumstances. But the first step is wanting to grow in that virtue. And we have to want to do the work it takes to live thoughtfully, to live prudently, to live according to the truth.