

TRUE PRUDENCE

WILLIAM CURRAN, O.P.



HE common opinion that connects prudence almost inseparably with the conservatism and caution of old age has something to answer for. That opinion would make prudence a staid and respectable virtue with about as much place in a young and active life as a snowplow in the heart of an African jungle.

Youth and the radicalism that usually goes with it have no exclusive claim on lack of prudence. An unhealthy conservatism is as much opposed to prudence as an unhealthy radicalism; and to limit imprudence to sin by excess is often an attempt to throw up a smoke screen to hide such vices as indecision, timidity, and carnal prudence.

There are some in America today who have recognized that American Catholics as a class are guilty of an unhealthy conservatism; that the vices of timidity and carnal prudence have too long protected themselves from attack by assuming the name and, in so far as this is possible, the appearance of true prudence. True prudence has been used by these vices to play the same rôle that the name and endorsement of an honest and respected citizen sometimes plays for the dishonest schemes of a racketeer. And just as the honesty and respectability of the duped citizen are likely to become the target for the sneers and distrust of his outraged fellows when that for which his honesty and respectability was a screen is disclosed, so true prudence will be in danger of suffering the same contempt which should be the portion of timidity and carnal prudence, when it is apparent that true prudence was the cloak these vices assumed.

True prudence must rise from the ashes of past error. It would be as great a mistake to let the fire of an admirable fervor to better present conditions sweep on unchecked and uncontrolled, as it would be to continue in the shameful state in which timidity and carnal prudence usurp the place of the virtue which the Angelic Doctor so justly calls wisdom in human actions.¹

¹ *Summa Theol.* IIa IIae, q. 47, a. 2, ad lum.

Prudence seeks the middle way, the way of virtue between sin by excess and sin by defect. "Prudence is the virtue of the practical intellect which keeps action straight. It is the queen of the moral virtues, born to command."² The moral virtues, justice, fortitude, and temperance, all have their proper ends which they seek to attain. But without prudence they are blind. Indeed without prudence they are not virtues at all but powerful and dangerous inclinations like blind horses who the more swiftly and strongly they run are the more likely seriously to injure themselves.³ Without the counsel, judgment, and the command of reason, the moral virtues merely incline the will to that good which is in harmony with reason. In order that the means that best attain the good of reason be discovered and commanded, the work of reason is necessary. And the virtue whose particular work it is to counsel, to judge, and to command the means to the end of the moral virtues is prudence. Justice, fortitude, and temperance without prudence are like travelers lost in a desert, knowing indeed where they want to go but without the slightest notion how to get there. Or they are like ocean liners which need the urging and the direction of massive piles to guide them as they come into their moorings.

Because prudence seeks the mean between excess and defect, it must not be pictured as a colorless virtue that discourages any activity, as a virtue that has reached its perfection in the man who saves himself from acting wrongly by not acting at all. More often than not, abstention from action is lack of prudence in its most dangerous form. It is the timidity and carnal prudence that have already been mentioned. Is a swimmer in a race less active because he remains in a well marked lane that will take him directly to his goal and conserves energy that would be wasted in thrashing from side to side? There is nothing soft or bloodless about true prudence. As Maritain has pointed out, true prudence is a queen born to command. It is the introduction to wisdom, teaching men how to attain to that lofty virtue, preparing the way to it as a doorkeeper for a king.⁴

Human prudence is a term that seems to lend itself to confusion with the vice of carnal prudence. Carnal prudence makes an end of some carnal or worldly good, permitting it to take the

² *Art and Scholasticism*, by Jacques Maritain, translated by J. F. Scanlan (New York, 1930), p. 6.

³ *Summa Theol.* IIa IIae, q. 58, a. 4, c. et ad 3um.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, Ia IIae, q. 66, a. 5, ad lum.

place of man's ultimate supernatural end, to which carnal goods must be subordinated as a means.⁵ Human prudence, however, is acquired or natural, as distinct from infused or supernatural prudence. Human prudence is not a vice but a virtue, although it is not a perfect virtue. For only the infused virtues are perfect and, absolutely speaking, virtues.⁶

Acquired or human prudence, like any other acquired habit, is the outcome of repeated human acts. It is the result of the use of a natural ability by a natural agent.⁷ Acquired prudence is not a perfect virtue because it stops short at the good measured by human reason. For example, human prudence would command that the company of notorious criminals be avoided in order that one's good name be preserved. The purpose of human prudence is the attainment of natural order. Its end is the proper adjustment of man in human society.⁸

Infused prudence is the work of God. It can come from God alone.⁹ Its end is to counsel rightly in the things that pertain to the whole life of man and to the ultimate end of human life.¹⁰ In this it differs from human or acquired prudence. For human prudence seeks only the natural good of human reason. The formal object of infused prudence, then, is measured by the divine law and the supernatural end of man. The formal object of acquired prudence is measured by human reason.

Thus, infused and acquired prudence differ in their origin and in their object. The former is from God, and its end is supernatural. The latter is from man himself, and its end is natural. But they differ also in the mode in which they operate. For although an act of acquired prudence and an act of infused prudence may look exactly alike, they are as different as night and day, as different as nature and grace. Infused prudence proceeds from charity, the virtue that turns to gold everything it touches. Acquired prudence is built upon nature and can never rise above its source. It can only drag and creep where supernatural prudence soars.

It might seem that with the infusion of the theological virtues, faith, hope, and charity, the acquired cardinal virtues, of which the first is prudence, would suffice and that the infusion

⁵ *Op. cit.*, IIa IIae, q. 55, a. 1, c.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, Ia IIae, q. 65, a. 2, c.

⁷ Sylvius, *Comm.* in Iam IIae, q. 63, a. 1.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*, q. 63, a. 4.

⁹ IV *Sent.* Dist. 14, a. 2, ad Ium.

¹⁰ *Summa Theol.* Ia IIae, q. 57, a. 4, ad 3um.

of prudence and the moral virtues would be unnecessary. But the inadequacy of the acquired virtue of prudence (and also of the acquired moral virtues) cannot be too strongly insisted upon. Acquired prudence cannot operate in the supernatural order because there is no proportion between it and the object to be acted upon. It does very well in its own field; but to expect it to take the place of infused prudence is more mad than to look for reason in a rabbit or wisdom in a worm. The theological virtues occupy much the same place for the infused virtues as the first natural principles, both speculative and moral, occupy for the acquired virtues. These natural principles supply the natural end for which man is to strive, but they do nothing about the means to that end. So also the theological virtues in the supernatural order are not enough. They ordain man to his supernatural end, their immediate work having nothing to do with the means to that end.¹¹ This is the work of the infused virtues and they alone can accomplish it.

The place of the acquired virtue of prudence in those who have not the infused virtue is readily apparent. It is the life-giving principle ordering all the virtues to the good of reason, just as in the supernatural order charity informs all the supernatural virtues, ordaining them and their proper ends to the ultimate end of man—union with God.

But has acquired or human prudence any place in the life of a man who is in the state of grace and therefore possesses the infused virtues in all their perfection? Suppose that a train starting from Washington had for its ultimate destination the city of Chicago. In the course of its journey it will pass through Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh is like the acquired virtue. It is included in the end of the infused virtue which may be likened to the ultimate destination of the train, Chicago. Acquired prudence, then, has a very definite place in the life of such an individual. It is not destroyed by the infused virtue. On the contrary, it is perfected and elevated. What is opposed to the infused virtue of prudence cannot possibly be in accord with the acquired virtue in the man who possesses both. Granted that the infused virtue knows an end and terminus of which the acquired virtue does not even dream, the acquired virtue has been elevated beyond its natural limitations and must accept as the good of reason that which the infused virtue dictates to be

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, Ia IIae, q. 63, a. 3, c. et ad 2um.

its good. In other words, the acquired virtue is not contrary to the infused virtue. It is used and surpassed by it.

It is impossible for a man who possesses both the infused and the acquired virtue to suspend for a moment the acquired virtue and utilize only the infused. It would be as if a man who wanted to run the one hundred yard dash, refused to run the first ten yards; or as if the train which runs from Washington to Chicago refused to go from Washington to Pittsburgh.

It is impossible, too, for a man who possesses both acquired and infused prudence to suspend even for a moment infused prudence and use only the acquired virtue. For, the moment that infused prudence is suspended it is lost. To exist it must operate in every human action. For every human action which proceeds from deliberate reason, considered individually, is necessarily either good or bad.¹² If it is good it is prudent. If it is bad it is imprudent. Venial sins are not thoroughly imprudent acts. They are acts which are not perfectly prudent. For a thorough-going act of imprudence a mortal sin is required; and by such an act the infused virtue is lost, together with grace and charity upon which it depends.

In this sense the popular dictum that it is impossible to put an old head on young shoulders is quite apparently false. An old head must be found on young shoulders wherever those young shoulders are the property of a friend of God.

It might seem that infused prudence is a very intangible sort of virtue which is practically inoperative in every day affairs and which can coexist with a very strong habit of imprudence. First of all, as has been said, infused prudence cannot coexist with imprudence to which it is directly opposed. The only habit of imprudence with which infused prudence can coexist is the acquired habit of imprudence. And when, the infused virtue is present, this acquired imprudence is not really a habit, for it is already on its way to extinction and so is more properly merely a disposition.¹³ Further the infused habit of prudence is perfectly operative immediately upon its infusion. It can be impeded, it is true, and very often is, just as a habit of science is impeded by sleepiness or ill health. Yet the habit of science is perfectly operative and when the impediment is removed, does its work perfectly. So also the infused habit of prudence may find difficulty in its operation because of some contrary

¹² *Op. cit.*, Ia IIae, q. 18, a. 9, c.

¹³ *De Virt.* a. 10, ad 16.

disposition. When this difficulty is removed, infused prudence will operate perfectly. The same difficulty is not present with the acquired virtue. The acts by which the virtue is acquired are directly opposed to the impeding disposition; hence as prudence is acquired, the disposition is destroyed.¹⁴

To sum up, true prudence must not be rejected with the vices which have long misused it, to be replaced by an unhealthy radicalism. Timidity and carnal prudence must be proclaimed for the hateful vices they are. But they must not be confused with human or acquired prudence which, while it can never take the place of infused prudence, is nevertheless a true virtue, necessary to man's perfect operation.

Infused prudence like every best gift and every perfect gift is from above.¹⁵ It is given with grace. It can come only from God, and it is received in its perfect flowering. Man can be foolish and lose it, or he can be wise and know that "she is more precious than all riches; and all the things that are desired, are not to be compared with her. Length of days is in her right hand, and in her left hand riches and glory."¹⁶

¹⁴ *Summa Theol.*, Ia, IIae, q. 65, a. 3, ad 2um.

¹⁵ *Epist. of St. James*, i, 17.

¹⁶ *Prov. iii*, 15-16.