

# SUMMARY OF THE VIRTUES

## Virtues

CCC 1803      A virtue is an habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions. The goal of a virtuous life is to become like God.

**Faith** is when you hold something to be true based on the testimony of *God*. With the Theological Virtue of Faith, God tells you something you couldn't have known on your own, and you make the decision to accept what He tells you as true. Faith is therefore the virtue of knowledge. God shares His knowledge with us. We in turn willingly respond with obedience. Faith entails an acceptance of God's authority in our lives, and thus we believe all that He teaches through Christ and His Church based on His authority, who can neither deceive nor be deceived (Act of Faith).

**Hope** is the virtue that strives for Heaven as something which is possible but not yet certain. It is the decision never to quit in the pursuit of union with God and never to take one's relationship with God for granted.

**Charity** is the virtue by which we love the way that God loves: selflessly and sacrificially – giving all you have, even to the point of death.

**Prudence** is the ability to look at a concrete situation, and know what ought to be done. It is the ability to make right judgments. *Prudence* gives you the knowledge of what must be done, when it must be done and how it must be done.

**Justice** is the virtue in which we give God, others and society what is their due, what we owe them. In justice we respect that other people are just as valuable as we are.

**Fortitude** is the virtue that helps us overcome any danger, obstacle, feeling, fear, suffering, or sacrifice in the pursuit of good. These will not stop me. I am always willing to sacrifice or risk a lesser good for the sake of a greater good.

**Temperance** is what keeps us from sinning, even when we want to, especially in the areas of food, alcohol, sex, anger and the like. It protects us from corruption.

Many other virtues fall under the theological and cardinal virtues: Humility, Meekness, Chastity, Honesty, Goodwill, Generosity, Zeal and diligence, just to name a few.

## Three Parts of a Prudential Act

Let's look at how to make a prudent decision. There are several steps we must all take if we want to practice prudence in our choices.

**Step one: *Deliberation*.** This is the stage where we gather all the relevant information, starting with a consideration of moral principles. This includes an awareness and acceptance of the authoritative teaching of the Church's Magisterium; since the Church's teaching gives us true principles, it's important to see if they teach anything definitively about the issue at hand. For example, if the Church says that a certain act is immoral, then you don't need to deliberate about that act anymore; you know not to do it.

While deliberating, we must also give a careful examination concretely to be sure that we have understood it as fully as possible. It is also sometimes advisable to take counsel with those who are themselves experienced, prudent, and knowledgeable about the matter at hand. With this step it is absolutely critical that we be completely honest. *So we can't let our own feelings or preferences get in the way of a true understanding of the facts.* Today, married couples, government officials, and even moral theorists never seem to be able to agree about the right thing to do in any situation. This is because they base their decisions on feelings and preferences, not on truth. This is the error that we have to overcome in our own lives; we *must* base our decisions on a careful and conscious examination of the truth. So often we don't deliberate honestly, but rather focus on the aspects of the situation that we want to see. Prudence demands openness to the whole truth of the situation.

Failure to deliberate is called *rashness or thoughtlessness*. This is when someone just rushes headlong into everything, without ever taking a moment to think it over. It is very dangerous to "act without thinking," to not consider carefully enough before action. It may work in a Star Wars universe (don't think; just trust your feelings, Luke!), but in the real world it's deadly.

**Step two: *Judgment*.** After deliberating, we must weigh all the evidence fairly, and then figure out the best course of action. Judgment separates the relevant information from the irrelevant information, and then applies it to the problem at hand. You can't just think about something forever; you have to come to some sort of conclusion.

Failure to make a judgment is called *indecision*. Procrastination, beating about the bush, fiddling around, are all ways of expressing this common vice. Thinking about some issue without actually arriving at a practical result does no one any good.

**Step three: Execution.** Once we judge the right thing to do, we have got to act! If you figure out the proper action, but then fail to perform it, what's the benefit? You do not have the virtue of prudence until you actually do what you have judged to be right.

Failure to carry out what you believe to be the proper decision is called *irresoluteness*. Plenty of people make hoards of decisions, and never manage to keep any of them.

A helpful exercise might be to analyze these three stages and see where it is that you most often fail in your own life. Are you thoughtless? Indecisive? Inconstant and undependable? Once you identify your weakness, you can make the conscious decision to work on that area of prudence, and so hopefully improve in this fundamental virtue

### **Some Further Practical Guidelines for Prudence**

One very helpful technique for strengthening prudence is the following rule: Take your time in consideration, but once you have reached a judgment, act quickly and decisively. *It is unwise to rethink an act when you're in the process of carrying it out.* Think about it before you begin it, and then just do it.

Also, don't wait until you have absolute certainty before making a practical decision. As Josef Pieper states, "The prudent man... does not deceive himself with false certainties." Remember that practical matters don't have the same logical exactness or clarity as mathematical equations, so if you wait until you've perfectly proven the right thing to do, you'll never do anything. All you can do is to try and understand the situation *as best you can*, given the information and time available. Then make a decision and carry it out faithfully.

We have to realize that every practical decision entails risk; there is no security that our decision will not result in difficult consequences. But we must be able to make decisions and act with abandonment and trust to divine providence. After we go through the necessary steps of prudence (deliberation, judgment, and execution), we've done our part, and we leave the rest to God.

