

PRUDENCE



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Addressing the argument regarding
Mercy and Justice

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Cover: Prudence (Luca Giordano 1684-86)

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In street talk a “prude” is someone who will not comply with the sexual proclivities or certain intimacies of a raucous clique. Generally, well brought up kids of high-school age are intimidated or ostracized by less principled individuals who tend to bully them into compliance with their warped sense of decency. For the most part, as maturity advances, this phenomenon fades away, but in some cases serious psychological damage can be done to the particular individual who happens to be the victim. I’m sure many of us have seen similar circumstances as adults often in the work place, club or other neighborhood environments. Educated or not, many unprincipled individuals live with this intimidating attitude all their lives. Marriages often come apart at the seams when one partner lacks the grace to see value in the other. Seeing himself or herself as superior, the relationship usually breaks down; if there are children involved it is generally they who pay the price.

The same thing can and does happen in society. The authoritarians, for the most part, that is the elected elite, the egocentric or the well to do in many cases, see themselves a class above the average citizens and lord it over them so that they will conform to particular political or ideological programs and beliefs, usually for the benefit of the controllers. Unfortunately, even a democracy doesn’t remedy this. Plato’s benevolent king has been a rarity and Lord Acton’s remark: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” seems to be all too prevalent in the post modern world without the mitigating virtues of Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice; the so called cardinal virtues.

“A prude: Old French *prude* meaning an honorable woman is a person who is described as or would describe themselves as being concerned with decorum or propriety, significantly (thought to be) in excess of “normal prevailing standards.” (Wikipedia, my parens) One would think that this original meaning would have positive, ameliorating connotations.

“The name, generally considered as a pejorative term suggests fear and contempt of human sexuality and excessive, unusual modesty stemming from a negative view of sexuality. It is hence unflattering, often used as an insult. A person with such attitude to sexuality may have reservations about nudity, public display of sexual affection, discussion of sexual matters, participating in “romantic” or sexual activity—reservations that seem to exceed the “normal” prevailing community standards. Exhibiting fear and discomfort with sexuality may be associated with advocating censorship of sexuality or nudity in the media, avoiding or condemning any public display of affection.”

“The degree of prudery understood as fearful contempt of human sexuality can vary among different cultures and traditions.”

“Another use of ‘prude’ is as a label and an insult directed to anybody having reservations resulting from standards of modesty or any moral standards and beliefs or which are not shared by the offender. Thus one can be labelled a ‘prude’ for expressing reservations about drinking alcohol, or consuming drugs, or participating in mischief.”

“In this meaning, the term generally has a relative sense. For example, one may be viewed as having relatively lax standards regarding sexuality and drug usage compared to the overall population in which one resides, but compared to a smaller, specific subculture with more permissive standards, one may appear to be unduly strict and thus be labelled a prude when one refuses to participate in more liberal behaviors.”
(Wikipedia)

One can easily see in this swipe from Wikipedia that the writer appears to be bias against what would be a more conservative point of view. In our opinion, being “prudish” may very well be ones saving grace from a person, a clique or a whole society out of control whose propriety is seriously diminished.

“Prudence (Latin: prudentia, contracted from providentia meaning "seeing ahead, sagacity") is the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason. It is classically considered to be a virtue, and in particular one of the four Cardinal virtues (which are, with the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, one of the seven virtues).”

Why is there prudence to begin with— no less Temperance, Fortitude and Justice? One would think it’s because in recognizing our freedom we always have a choice; we can either sagaciously think ahead imagining an outcome for our choices, or bypass prudent thoughts with a willingness to accept whatever effect taking a chance brings. It seems that the cardinal virtues work together. For example, prudence tells us to be temperate i.e., “nothing in excess.” This saying, along with variants like moderation in all things and a certain measure in all things affirms the importance of temperance (Gr: sophrosyne).

If we're prudent we can stand above our thoughts, passions and actions; moderate and (temper) them. When we mindfully moderate thoughts and actions, we use a kind of transcendental consciousness, something quite above the ordinary ego. (Modified Wikipedia) If you believe consciousness or "being" brings with it an a priori tendency to the *good* rather than what is bad for you, you're involved in the eternal struggle between animal nature and human nature. Animal nature being temperate, for the most part, while human nature tends to excesses without the virtue of prudence with temperance to mediate *desire*, a strictly human trait. I desire a Lamborghini but can't afford one. If I consider stealing one, prudence tells me that I might be arrested for aggravated theft and spend a good deal of time behind bars. Justice, another cardinal virtue, would be fairly served.

Let's have a look at prudence with regard to Fortitude and Justice. "Fortitude: Strength of mind that enables one to endure adversity with courage" (Word Web). Philosophically, most of us know that for every up-side there's a down-side. Life experiences tell us that if we have a habit of acting rashly without prudence chances are we more than likely will find our selves in trouble. You seldom find a rash twenty year old guru; still, "there is no fool like an old fool." It is well known that the elderly often revert to childhood. Strength of mind, of course, depends on the person. Some of us may be naturally stoic, others anxious. No matter how prudent we tend to be there's no "free-lunch." When adversity arrives, fortitude is put to the test. In our drug culture those who are anxiety prone have the Valium or an alcohol escape hatch to induce artificial fortitude; there seems to be no doubt that courage is not usually natural to human beings. Our survival instinct might very well be the motivation for what could be called "natural" fortitude. On the other hand the courage displayed by certain individuals on the

battlefield or under other adverse conditions is seldom mentally understood by the person performing the act. People who more inclined to the *good* are those who would become heroes or heroines under conditions of duress. Cowardice is the flip-side of courage. The Lord did tell us that: *“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,”* so heroism is attributed to those who have much love to give— even ones own life under certain circumstances. Prudence surely prepares one to bear things with patience when adversity shows up, but the virtue of fortitude is never a simple easy act of the will. The fact of disintegration tends to emphasize the Christian teleological understanding of the Incarnation and redemption of Christ, where eternal life is offered to the faithful thereby abolishing temporal death, a death from which the Savior was resurrected by the Father. Spiritual death, or the victory of sin over grace, is another story completely.

Prudence with regard to Justice is a little less tenuous than it is with fortitude. Justice appears to be straight forward. “Let the punishment fit the crime”; or “What is right is right.” Yet it all depends on who is meting out the justice. In a civil society, “Justice is the quality of being fair and reasonable”(Oxford). Unfortunately we are all not perfect people, we have a tendency to be self centered. As far as we know there appears to be only one man who escaped that bias, and he paid the price for the rest of humanity’s predilections. It was he whose sole purpose was to bring the good news of salvation and redemption to mankind, and according to scripture will be the Juste judex of both the living and the dead at the end of time. It isn’t as though he doesn’t know us, he was one of us. He was tempted as we are; it’s just that he never gave-in to the corrupting of human freedom by making the wrong choices. Being well aware of our weaknesses and our proclivities, confident in our repentance and pangs of conscience— he was

and is the personification of mercy as he forgives our infractions touched by the sincerity of our contrition. How do we know this? It is all quite clear from hundreds of examples given in the Scriptures.

From the beginning, humanity had not always had a truly clear understanding of the quality of mercy. Raw instinct generally didn't stop for compassion. In time, Sapiens recognized his and her tendency to the *good* as the thought processes ameliorated. Value in one another became apparent as meaning and love of the *good* became obvious in each human soul. A sense of order in any clan, cult or society; a sense of fairness and reasonableness i.e., justice, is impossible without the quality of mercy; in our opinion simply an extension of the love of the intrinsic *good* or God. The "common good" cannot be served without a concession to the spirit of *intrinsic good* in each individual. The worthiness of the life of every person without distinction as a creature of God is sacrosanct. Even those who do not comply with what is *just* are those to whom mercy is shown. In a civilized world the spirit of the law must always be based on forgiveness, on reconciliation and redemption.

"You shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor." (Lev19: 15) It is not always easy for free people to comply with this commandment of God. The average person does not have the capability of subsuming all the facts in every situation. It is undeniable that we are all sinners and to judge our neighbor in ignorance may be sinful in itself. Pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth find no distinction in race, class, color or creed, but by example every person's eventual Judge warned of the pitfalls of hubris and arrogance by our assuming the role of a god. He spent his time with us ministering to the spiritually sick not to the righteous. But if you're a bible reader

you know he didn't forget those either, most notably the Centurion and the Good Samaritan and others. For those who sincerely followed him, he offered the promise of eternal life. The primary message was of love and mercy by living in the truth of his words. Prudence tells us that justice is not ideological, it is not speculation; but the moral principle of "rightness" found only in the *good*. It is inexorably tied to mercy. "Mercy does not abolish justice, but fulfills it and exceeds it. Thomas Aquinas can even say: 'Justice without mercy is cruelty; mercy without justice is the mother of disintegration;' therefore, both must be bound together." (MERCY, Walter Cardinal Kasper)

We have seen this first hand. The Bishops who moved confessed priests around after their sexual molestation of children thought they were being merciful; what they overlooked was accompanying justice. I don't suppose we'll ever know just how much "disintegration" that caused among the faithful.

Why prudence is a cardinal virtue and should precede most of our activities can be clearly shown in the dispensing of mercy. Once again Jesus has shown us the way. Since we are all sinners without exception, all of us are beggars for the mercy of God if one cares about participating in the promises of Christ. Seeing someone (or many) in dire need, and say: "There for the grace of God go I" without making an effort to, in some way, physically help the person in need, may not be enough to claim having the "grace of God." Seeing a person in *real* need and just being sympathetic to his or her plight simply says that you're glad it's not you in trouble. Those who step up to the plate so to speak, most certainly show mercy in a way that is much more than having a disposition to be kind. Though mercy may start with a compassionate heart it is the *act* which seeks justice that legitimizes it. Justice is always inclined to the

“common good” i.e., the good in *every* creature of God. Of course it is a bit Panglossian to think that everybody will always act in a *good* and graceful way, that is, in conformity with the will of God by showing mercy in justice. True justice is inclined to mercy only because of the ultimacy of God’s love. John even tells us that God is *Love* itself. Judging from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus it would be difficult not to believe in his mercy. The Father granted mercy through Jesus to those whose “faith” proved worthy in truth of God’s great love. Jesus gave us the reason as to why he offered forgiveness to his murderers. He showed them mercy out of their ignorance. Still in a separate incident he was determined to teach us a great lesson in humility with mercy tied to justice:

“One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, ‘Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other rebuked him, saying, ‘Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ He replied, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.’ (Luke 23; 43)

It is possible to draw an analogy here; those who seek mercy with a contempt for truth may very well not deserve it.

“Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy” ought to make just as much sense to the ignorant as well as to the compassionate. Its hard to believe that there are people who are so abysmally ignorant that there is no cognizance of this fact. Rather, it very well may be a matter of ill-will in motion than good-will, and that constitutes a choice. Where the grace of God appears to be missing only an “eye for an eye” holds sway. Someone who subscribes to that conceit surely must understand

the other because it was the first gouged-eye that motivated him or her; ill-will blinds charity and clemency is impossible. Only vengeance survives, as we revert to barbarism. Prudence will tell you that greed is known by rich and poor alike, still, no-one can deny the truly destitute— mercy— with preferential charity is a matter of justice. In a free society social justice belongs to all of the people; if justice dies for some, the death of mercy soon follows.

Each and every person *is* responsible, through the grace of God, to see herself or himself in the other. Those who think this a platitude have neither known mercy nor justice. The “Enlightenment” in many ways could be thought of as the dawn of science— but also as the threshold of the post modern dark ages where spirit in the heart of mankind is being extinguished, where prudence herself is succumbing to recklessness, carelessness and total disregard of the other. In this age of Social Media, the virtue of prudence is more important in our view than ever before. The Genie is out of the bottle as even identities are being stolen. We know *of* one another but we really don’t *know* one another in a familial, loving and generous way. The world is connected by bits and bites and not necessarily by personal interest and sincere generosity. Institutionalism and ideologies are replacing communion, consolidation and magnanimity. When many of today’s gurus in schools of higher learning call the age of faith the “dark ages” they’re in a misplaced time warp. We appear to be living in the dark ages today. “*Strive first for the kingdom of God and his justice*” ... (Matthew 6: 33). We still have hope. The question is, will we strive? Without the grace of God can we fully contribute to the common good? Where in our life is this grace of God to be found?

First, *grace* is not a natural acquisition like reason, although ultimately they both are gifts of God for the believer, since man is made in the “image of God” as a matter of faith. If we were “created” there is something of God in all of us just as the vision of Michelangelo is in the stone. The most obvious likeness to God is our freedom, similar to the way a child is free from its parents, essentially and eventually its life is its own regardless of genetic and cultural ties. “Prudence is ‘right reason in action,’ writes Aquinas, following Aristotle.” Human reason develops over time, it is the faculty by which we are able to think rationally, detect inferences, and discriminate between what is good for us and bad for us. Those who contend that there is “a reason for everything” automatically eliminate mystery. When one banishes mystery nothing is un-reasonable. Though *nothing*, of itself, *is* un-reasonable. The problem is there are many things in life which do not provide answers that reason can easily perceive, recognize or understand; still the scientific determinist will pursue them ’til doomsday, and that’s a good thing. We all hope for the cure of dreaded diseases, and the elimination of hate. We’re pretty sure we’ll find answers to the first one, but are not at all too sure about the second. When you think about it for a while, there really is no good reason why all God’s creatures shouldn’t be compatible, but a lot of bad reasons why they aren’t.

When Jesus said that “God, is Spirit” and that he knows the Father firsthand, what reason would we have *not* to believe him especially with our understanding that he was raised from the dead? We would have to say that we are not Christian and the Bible is a fabrication, even though we obviously don’t know that for a fact. We would be part of the human family that believes it is religion that invented God. For others, it was the primitive knowledge of the existence of God that mandated ritual practices, aka religion. Even today neither understanding

can show empirical proof to the other in these differences of beliefs. The Supernatural Being or The Great Spirit was a reality understood by primitives the world over, though in vastly different ways. The natural order dis-order phenomenon gave primitive reasoning its first flights. A fixed comprehension of good and bad beyond the agent placed causality above his own power. Ritual methods created to satiate or control that power, in our opinion, was the start of religion. Primitive man began by asking the question “why?” With the domestication of fire and as he became the toolmaker he started to inquire into “how”?

“But if today there is agreement on the fact that the Paleanthropians (primitives) had a religion, in practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what its content was. The investigators, however, have not cried defeat; for there remain a certain number of testimonial “documents” (articles) for the life of the Paleanthropians (primitives), and it is hoped that their religious meaning will one day be deciphered. In other words, it is hoped that these “documents” (articles) can constitute a “language,” just as, thanks to the genius of Freud, the creations of the unconscious, which until his time were regarded as absurd or meaningless— dreams, waking dreams, phantasms, and so on— have revealed the existence of a language that is extremely precious for a knowledge of man.

These documents are, in fact, comparatively numerous, but they are “opaque” and not very various: human bones, especially skulls, stone tools, pigments (most abundantly red ocher, hematite), various objects found in burials. It is only from the late Paleolithic that we have rock paintings and engravings, painted pebbles, and bone and stone statuettes. In certain cases (burials, works of art) and within the limits that we shall examine, there is at least the certainty of a religious

intention, but the majority of the documents from before the Aurignacian (Upper Paleolithic) (30,000 B.C.)— that is, tools — reveal nothing beyond their utilitarian value. Yet it is inconceivable that tools were not charged with a certain sacrality and did not inspire numerous mythological episodes. *The first technological discoveries*— the transformation of stone into instruments for attack and defense, the mastery over fire— not only insured the survival and development of the human species; they also produced a universe of mythico-religious values and inspired and fed the creative imagination. It is enough to examine the role of tools in the religious life and mythology of the primitives who still remain at the hunting and fishing stage. The magico-religious value of a weapon— be it made of wood or stone or metal— still survives among the rural populations of Europe, and not only in their folklore.” (Eliade, Mircea (2014-02-14). *History of Religious Ideas, Volume 1: From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (p. 6). University of Chicago Press. Kindle Edition.)

Prudence, the virtue of foresight, sagacity, and to a degree a pause for wisdom, may also help us out with a bit of necessary hindsight at this point. Thinking back to those first humanoids how could anybody conclude that they arose from dead matter regardless of the fact Genesis 2 tells us that the Grand Potter made the first one from clay and the second one, a female, from a rib of the first one. Genesis 1: 27 gives us a little simpler story:

*So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

Looking behind these words of Genesis tells us that they may not be too far from the truth. Just as Freud and the

Psychologists revealed the source of the unseen unconscious, Cosmologists and Physicists are slowly determining how our universe originated. In a revelatory way we can see the very beginning right from its initial stages all the way to the first signs of life on our planet Earth. If we concede as we have done before that those first single cells had *life* generated by chemistry, we need to step back and realize that the matter formed by the elements out of the grand expansion had a hand in producing such cells and the life they exhibited. So far no one has stepped behind the veil of Oz and exposed the Wizard pulling the levers and twirling the dials to ask him why he did all this behind our backs. When the original philosopher/theologians introduced physics to the rest of us. they seemed to have no problem with the “form” of all the matter we see. The Spirit, the unseen *life* in the cosmos, being, consciousness the generative notion from the mind of God who created the whole physical world with its orderly arrangement and continuously sustains it. This is *why* God can be said to be everywhere. Many of his creatures still ask, “how” can that be? Reason is needed.

Although *revelation*, i.e., seeing, hearing, sensing in every way the wonder and beauty of all, is its aesthetics; coincidentally including its opposites, its downside of disintegration, death and turmoil is still a human endeavor. What *is* can surely be appreciated and legitimately feared in every conceivable way by mankind *but* it is still not grace. Grace is the spirit of man living in the Spirit of God, as they say: “participation in the life of God.” Love is a joining, a communion, a joyful being “with and in” the other, not figuratively but actually in spirit and if in spirit in the reality of the true joined life of God and man. This was brought to human understanding by the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God with us as his brothers and sisters in the love of the Father *in* G the Spirit. This

Sanctifying grace is obtained by the communion of the Father through the Son in the Spirit and in us.

“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one.”

“Abide(Live) in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides(lives) in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide(live) in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides(lives) in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

This is a calling apparently requiring an answer! A positive answer to this invitation asks us to set aside what is considered reasonable by surrendering to the love of God and each-other. Only then one can in all honesty say “I am a Christian.”

Sunday, The Feast of Christ the King