

## Core Value of Character – Prudence II



### VIRTUE CORNER

Our virtue corner for this month will be the second of a two-part series delving into the Lumen virtue of **prudence**. Prudence is one of the four virtues that support the Lumen Core Value of leadership.

A recent article from Christopher Blum of the Augustin Institute spoke about the virtue of prudence. He contrasts it to our seeming never-ending inclination to find simple, black and white clichés that would solve our problems easily rather than doing the heavy lifting prudence requires of us.

“Aristotle sized up prudence with his customary brevity: *“the reason must be true, and the desire must be correct, if indeed the deliberate choice is to be an excellent one.”* That is an imposing task. For our practical reasoning to be true, we need an adequate understanding of the common good; for our desire to be correct, we must yearn for the common good as our personal good.

Shallow or flighty reasoning undermines prudence, and so does selfishness in its various forms. It would seem to be easier if we were to set aside the troublesome work of perfecting our own understanding and desire and instead were to reach into human nature for some other lever to pull. That is the perennial attraction of social or political science: it offers to replace the vocabulary of the good, reason, virtue, and free choice with a new language that will capture human action in more effective terms.”

(Christopher Blum, <https://www.faithandculture.com/home/2020/9/17/soporific-power> )

So there are two key elements to making a truly prudent decision. The first involves *reason*. We have to work things out clearly and rationally, taking the time to think through the pros, cons, implications, consequences, and perspectives besides our own, etc., so that what we’re seeking is truly good.

The second element has less to do with our head and more to do with our heart. *“...the desire must be correct.”* The question is: what am I truly seeking or desiring as the outcome of the decision I must make? What *really* are my intentions? Here we see again what we studied last month, St. Thomas Aquinas’ concept of *avaritia* (avarice) not as just greediness towards money, but the immoderate striving after all possessions to assure my importance, status, or merit. Is my fundamental motivation something merely selfish, or do I desire an outcome that is appropriate, good, and just? Working through this is not an easy task, and in classical Catholic moral theology, it is called the “purification of our intentions.”

Finally, we should beware of platitudes or slogans that aim to short-cut the difficult work of making prudential decisions. Speaking specifically of easy answers to the Covid-19 crisis such as *“We’re following the science”* and *“Ours is a science-based response,”* Blum calls such phrases *“soporific vapors of intellectual narcotics,”* *“phrases (that) should ring hollow to us... because they are masks for the uncritical application of a limited understanding of some feature of the non-human world to problems that we ought to face as free and intelligent beings pursuing common goods.”* Human life and the circumstances surrounding it are complicated, and very rarely can they be dismissed by a platitude. The practice of the virtue of prudence will help us have the courage to exercise practical reason and to stand by the best prudential judgments we can muster.

Prudence does not mean failing to accept responsibilities and postponing decisions; it means being committed to making joint decisions after pondering responsibly the road to be taken.

**Pope Benedict XVI, January 1, 2008. World Day of Peace**



## SCRIPTURE REFLECTION (30 MIN)

### Pilate and the Virtue of Prudence

Context: Pontius Pilate was the governor appointed by the Roman Emperor to govern over the provinces of Judea and Samaria in Palestine. His task was to maintain and grow Rome's interests in this occupied territory, send the taxes and other goods to Rome, and keep the peace. Within the Jewish population that he governed, intense rivalries and political and religious factions were rampant, and they could quickly devolve into riots, strife, or worse, outright rebellion against the Romans. It is in this context that some of the Jewish leaders brought him a "revolutionary" that they accused of preaching against Rome and the Emperor. His name was Jesus, and it was up to Pilate to decide what to do with him.

### Matthew 27:1-26

Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. [...]

Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?", "You have said so," Jesus replied. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, "Don't you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?" But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor. Now it was the governor's custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, "Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?" For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him.

While Pilate was sitting on the judge's seat, his wife sent him this message: "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him." But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed.

"Which of the two do you want me to release to you?" asked the governor. "Barabbas," they answered. "What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" Pilate asked. They all answered, "Crucify him!" "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. "I am innocent of this man's blood," he said. "It is your responsibility!" All the people answered, "His blood is on us and on our children!" Then he released Barabbas to them. But he had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified.

### Questions for Discussion: Placing yourself in Pilate's shoes

1. We might say quite casually, "*Pilate made the wrong decision,*" but it is easy to have 20/20 hindsight. Pilate wasn't a Jew and clearly knew little about Jesus. What was appropriate about the way Pilate approached the situation?
2. There are several critical errors that Pilate made. What were they?
3. What virtue(s) was Pilate missing? What were his weaknesses?
4. Knowing what you do about Pilate, the Roman Emperor, and the situation in Israel at the time, how would you have handled the case if you were in his role?
5. What are some situations in which I have found myself that in some way are similar to Pilate's? Can you foresee any such similar situations in the future?





## CASE DISCUSSION (30 MIN)

**2 ways to go about it.** Read the case and discuss afterward how it can apply to your leadership, parenting style. Or ask a member to voluntarily offer their challenges this virtue at home, in the workplace, or their Lumen action (volunteer work). The circle can provide some personal experiences on how they have confronted and resolved similar difficulties.

# Case Study: Flint, Michigan, Water Crisis<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Providing clean water should be no problem in Flint, Michigan. After all, the town is only an hour away from Lake Huron, the third-largest source of fresh water in the world. Yet contaminated water, lead poisoning, and Legionnaires' disease plagued Flint, starting in April 2014.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, currently it has around 100,000 residents, and 41.6% of those residents live below the poverty line. The city's finances suffered. In 2011, Flint's finances were taken over by the state due to a \$25 million deficit. In that same year, the Flint water service had a \$9 million deficit. The water in the Flint River, which flows to the city of Flint had been known to be of poor quality since the 1970s.

Despite this information, in an effort to reduce costs, Flint government officials switched the city to using water from the Flint River instead of from nearby Detroit in 2014. Soon after the switch, residents starting complaining about the "color, taste and odor," of the water and to also report rashes and concerns about bacteria. GM even stopped using the Flint municipal water due to it corroding car parts. In August and September 2014, city officials issued boil water advisories due to high levels of coliform bacteria that could be signs E. coli and other organisms in the water supply. A class-action lawsuit stated the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) was not treating the water of the Flint River with an anti-corrosive agent, violating federal law.

## Course of Action

In October 2014, Susan Bohm, a disease specialist in the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MHHS) wrote colleagues in her agency to document a conversation with Liane Shekter Smith (fired in February 2016), the state's top drinking water official, about problems with the water supply.

*"What she did share with me was interesting – that there have been numerous complaints about the Flint water, that the governor's office had been involved and that any announcement by public health about the quality of the water would certainly inflame the situation."*

Although Gov. Snyder's staffers say they didn't learn about lead exposure and Legionnaires' diseases outbreaks from the Flint water system until March 2015, this email suggests they did in October 2014, which was before the governor's re-election.

The state found that the level of disinfectants in the water exceeded the Safe Drinking Water Act's threshold. A few days after this finding was made public, the water authority offered to

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from the case study at <https://pagecentertraining.psu.edu/public-relations-ethics/transparency/transparency/case-study-tbd/> and in chapter 4, pages 134-136 of "Meeting the Ethical Challenges of Leadership: Casting Light or Shadow" by Craig E. Johnson (6<sup>th</sup> ed., 2018).



reconnect Flint to Lake Huron's water supply waiving the \$4 million fee. However, Flint city officials declined the offer stating water fees could raise to more than \$12 million each year. The questions about an outbreak of Legionnaires' disease continued. In a February 5, 2015 email to Howard Croft, then-director of Flint's Department of Public Works, James Henry, a Genesee County environmental health supervisor, wrote about the difficulties he had with gaining access to information about Flint's water supply.

*"The Genesee County Health Department has attempted to obtain specific information regarding the Flint water distribution system from your office since November 2014. Your office has not provided a return phone call or response to emails. A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request was sent electronically and mailed to your office on January 27, 2015, in attempt to obtain information. The response from your office on February 4, 2015, did not include any information that was requested. I am still hopeful that we can work collaboratively to protect the health of the community and resolve any issues with the Flint water supply."*

In March 2015, MDEQ Communications Director, Brad Wurfel, stated in an email to Harvey Hollin, the governor's director of urban initiatives, and MDEQ director (at the time) Dan Wyatt, 40 cases of Legionnaire's disease were reported in Genesee County since April 2014. Wurfel goes on to say that that number is more than what had been reported in the previous five years combined. Similarly, Laurel Garrison of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on April 27, 2015, wrote in an email to Genesee County health officials, "We are very concerned about this Legionnaires' disease outbreak. It's very large, one of the largest we know of in the past decade, and community-wide, and in our opinion and experience it needs a comprehensive investigation." These emails seemed to demonstrate that local, state, and federal government officials knew about the outbreak many months before the governor's office officially announced the outbreak in January 2016.

For 19 months, state and federal officials failed to respond to the water crisis. They acted only after the national press focused on Flint's plight.

### Questions for reflection

1. Prudence is sound judgment in determining actions. Were the cost-cutting measures implemented at local and state levels prudent? How could officials have exercised more sound judgment?
2. The exercise of public trust by government agencies and officials requires integrity, character, and a search for the common good. What are some aspects in which they betrayed that trust? What could they have done differently to exercise greater prudence?
3. The dangers of the water supply were not fully acknowledged for 19 months, until after elections and significant national media pressure. What is the difference between the core value of prudence and the duplicity displayed by officials in this case?
4. To make prudent family, business, and life decisions, what *people, processes, or safeguards* have you found to be most helpful?



## Resources:

### The Wisdom of the Church on Prudence

Catechism of the Catholic Church #1806

Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it; "the prudent man looks where he is going." 65 "Keep sane and sober for your prayers." 66 Prudence is "right reason in action," writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle.<sup>67</sup> It is not to be confused with timidity or fear, nor with duplicity or dissimulation. It is called *auriga virtutum* (the charioteer of the virtues); it guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of conscience. the prudent man determines and directs his conduct in accordance with this judgment. With the help of this virtue we apply moral principles to particular cases without error and overcome doubts about the good to achieve and the evil to avoid.

#1810 Human virtues acquired by education, by deliberate acts, and by a perseverance ever-renewed in repeated efforts are purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's help, they forge character and give facility in the practice of the good. The virtuous man is happy to practice them.

#1811 It is not easy for man, wounded by sin, to maintain moral balance. Christ's gift of salvation offers us the grace necessary to persevere in the pursuit of the virtues. Everyone should always ask for this grace of light and strength, frequent the sacraments, cooperate with the Holy Spirit, and follow his calls to love what is good and shun evil.

*The Spiritual Life*, Adolphe Tanquerey. p. 481

"To act prudently, three conditions are particularly necessary: mature *deliberation*, a wise *choice*, and right *execution*."



## Self-Assessment and Key Takeaways (10 min)

**Core Values Assessment.** Spend 10 minutes in silence assessing positive and negative examples of how you live this lumen virtue in your relationship with others and God. What times work best for you to prayer and what essential elements do you include in your prayer. The below quadrant can help in jotting down some of your assessment as well as a tool to jot notes down during this Lumen Circle.

**What struck me in this circle and how I might apply these inspirations to my THINKING. What CRITICAL ISSUES am I facing? What are the biggest CHALLENGES with these issues I face and what OPPORTUNITIES does it present?**

Prayer:

Family:

Business:

Lumen Action:

*What ACTION STEPS can I take now or long term? Develop a concrete resolution for how you can improve in your efforts to exercise Influence in your interactions with others during the next month. Your resolution should be a specific action or activity that is easily measured.*

