

## COLUMNISTS

*Decision-making improves with practice*

One of the greatest masterpieces of moral theology is Thomas Aquinas' treatise on the virtue of prudence. Hardly anyone wants to read that treatise anymore, but it remains the source of several wonderful insights into the moral life and gives us some important hints about our actual moral decision making.

St. Thomas tells us that prudence does not help us arrive at the goal of life, or even the basic inclinations of human beings, which are the virtues. Rather, the job of prudence is to help us figure out how to get to the goals of life and how to achieve the virtues. Prudence helps us make decisions in the concrete here and now of life, helping us to figure out how to bring about good in real life situations.

Thus prudence assumes that we already have an inclination to do the good thing. Prudence assumes that we already love what is good and we want to do it. What prudence contributes to virtues such as justice, temperance or fortitude is the very content of what these virtues are in the concrete. Prudence helps us decide on the means to bring about justice, temperance or fortitude — or the host of other virtues — in real situations.

I suppose it works something like this. We all try to balance a whole host of commitments and obligations in our lives. We have duties toward our families, our jobs, ourselves, our neighborhoods,



the  
moral  
life

By PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

our churches and other associations. On a given evening, we might realize that our spouse thinks we should be taking care of cutting the grass, while our boss thinks we ought to be finishing a report already late from last week. A child wants us to watch a little league contest, and the pastor has asked us to attend an emergency finance committee meeting at church. On top of all this, you might be an enthusiastic Knicks fan and want to watch the NBA playoffs, to which you feel entitled because you've put in a hectic work week already and are fairly conscientious about lots of matters.

This kind of situation plays into the virtue of justice, since it is justice that directs our obligations to others. Sure enough, we want to do the right thing and be faithful to these competing obligations, but the how of achieving that remains unclear. For many of us, if we re-

main on the abstract level and talk in theoretical terms about justice, we are pretty sure of what we ought to do. But as we move further and further away from the theoretical toward the actual concrete situations of life, we become less sure of the exact right way to "do justice."

In the case at hand, we know that all these claims on us are valid. The grass does need cutting. Little league is tonight. The parish is in financial difficulty. The playoffs are right here, right now. How to proceed ...

In Thomas Aquinas' scheme, it is the virtue of prudence that helps us wend our way through all this, so that our goal, to do justice, can be achieved amid these very real claims. It is prudence that might cause us to consider, for example, that we will be free to cut the grass tomorrow, and that our spouse will understand that the little league is tonight and not tomorrow. Furthermore, we could reason that a fellow parishioner will be at the church meeting and will offer better insight that we might ourselves be able to give at this point. Then, little league is usually over before dark, and the playoffs don't begin until later. Our obligations to spouse, child, parish and self can still be achieved, and we have not drifted from our goal.

Thomas Aquinas' treatise will not let us rest here, though, because it goes on

to draw us to even deeper levels of this dynamic. Prudence is the virtue, or trait, that helps us bring about abstract virtues in real life situations. Prudence guides our decision-making so that we find the way to bring about justice in the particular dilemmas we face. Prudence supplies the "content" for justice in life. But the exercise of prudence also works to reinforce our commitment to justice itself. By pursuing justice and trying to do the right thing, and then making a decision based on that goal, we actually become more just. We actually become one who "loves the good" more that we did before.

Moreover, with each decision we make, we actually become a better decision maker. We actually help to shape within ourselves an ease and skill in deciding that becomes part of who we are. We develop a habit of good decisions. It is in this way, I suppose, that the truly wise people that each of us knows came to be that way. Good decisions themselves become the means of shaping us into better people. Not only will we come to love the good more deeply, but we will also become better at achieving it in the real circumstances of life.

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Sister Schoelles is president of St. Bernard's Institute.



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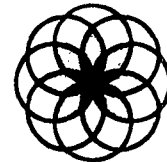
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