

BEFORE GOD AND MEN

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We are here, '*consummati in unum*' (Jn 27:23), united in our prayer and in our intentions, as we begin this time of conversation with our Lord—with a renewed desire to be effective instruments in his hands. In the presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament—how fond I am of making an explicit act of faith in the Real Presence of our Lord in the Eucharist!—foster in your hearts the desire to transmit with your prayer an impulse of strength that will reach the whole world, to the last corner of the earth where someone is spending his life generously in the service of God and souls. Because, thanks to the indescribable reality of the communion of saints, we are all a part —co-workers, says St John (3 Jn 8)—of the task of spreading the truth and the peace of the Lord.

It is worthwhile thinking about how we are following the Master's example; it is worthwhile stopping for a while to reflect, so that we can learn directly from the life of our Lord how to put into practice some of the virtues that have to shine out in our behavior, if we are really anxious to extend the kingdom of Christ.

Prudence, a necessary virtue

In the passage of St. Matthew's Gospel in today's Mass, we read: *tunc abeuntes pharisaei, consilium inierunt ut caperent eum in sermone*—'the Pharisees gathered together to discuss how they would trap Jesus in his speech' (Mt 22:15). Don't forget that this form of hypocrisy is a common tactic in our time, too. I don't think that the weed of pharisaical

behavior will ever die out in this world; it has always been amazingly prolific. It may be that God allows it to grow, so as to make us, his children, more prudent; because the virtue of prudence is essential to anyone who finds himself in a position of directing, strengthening, correcting, impelling, encouraging. And this is how a Christian should act among those who surround him, taking advantage of the circumstances of his ordinary activities to carry out his apostolate.

As I raise my heart to God at this moment, I ask him for prudence, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary. She is in the Church, but above the

Church: between Christ and the Church, so as to protect, so as to be the Queen, the mother of men, as she is the mother of Jesus our Lord. I ask God to grant this prudence to all men, and especially to those of us who wish to work for him in the midst of all the activities of society. We truly need to learn to be prudent.

And the Gospel goes on: 'and they sent some of their disciples, together with some Herodians, who said to him: Master. . .' (Mt 22:16). See in what a twisted way they call him *Master*; (they pretend they're his friends, his admirers, they address him as one addresses an authority from whom one expects to learn. *Magister, scimus quia verax es*, 'we know that you speak the truth. . .' (Mt 22:16). What deceit! Have you ever heard such duplicity? Take care how you go about in this world. You shouldn't be suspicious or distrustful; but you should feel on your own shoulders—recalling that image of the Good Shepherd that we find in the catacombs—the burden of that lamb which is not just one soul, but the whole Church, all of humanity.

Upon accepting this responsibility gracefully, you will be daring, and you will be prudent in defending and proclaiming God's rights. And then, because of your upright behaviour, many people will consider you their master, and will give you that name, even though you don't want it, because we are not looking for any earthly success. But don't be surprised if, among the many persons who come close to you, there are some who worm their way in with false praise. Keep in your heart what I have told you many times: nothing, whether slander or detraction or human considerations, or 'what will they say?'. . . and much less, hypocritical praise . . . nothing should stand in the way of the fulfillment of our duty.

Do you remember the parable of the Good Samaritan? A poor man was lying on the road, gravely wounded by robbers who had taken his last cent. A priest of the Old Law goes by, and, a little later, a Levite. They both proceed on their way without a second thought. 'But a certain Samaritan as he journeyed came upon him, and setting him on his own beast, he brought him to an inn and took care of him' (Lk 10:33-34). Notice that our Lord does not offer this example only to a few select souls, because he adds immediately, answering the man who had asked him the question, and each one of us, 'Go and do the same yourself' (Lk 10:37).

And so, when in our own life or in the life of others we notice something that needs to be straightened out with the spiritual and human help that should be provided by us who are children of God, a clear manifestation of prudence will consist in using the appropriate remedy, with charity and

fortitude, with sincerity. We can't let ourselves become inhibited. It is a mistake to think that with omissions and procrastinations we can solve any problem.

Prudence requires us to use the appropriate medicine each time that it is required; but totally without diluting it, once the wound has been laid open. When you see the least symptom of disease, be simple and truthful, whether you are the one who needs to help or whether you yourself need this help. In this situation we have to allow a person who has the ability to cure us in the name of God to press in on the infected wound, first from a distance, and then closer and closer, so as to force out all the pus and clean out the point of infection. This is the way we have to act, first of all, with ourselves, and then with those whom justice or charity obliges us to help. I pray especially for parents and for those who work in education and the formation of youth.

Human considerations

Don't ever let yourself be paralyzed by a hypocritical way of thinking; apply the full dosage. But apply it with a motherly touch, with the infinite gentleness that our mothers had when they cured the little or big wounds of our childish games and falls. When one needs to wait for a few hours, one waits, never any longer than necessary, because to do otherwise would mean giving in to comfort or cowardice, which is very different from prudence. All of you, and especially those of you whose task is to shape the character of others, must reject the fear of getting into the wound to disinfect it.

It could happen that someone comes to the one who has to heal, but who can't make up his mind, or doesn't want to face up to his mission, and says with an artful whisper: 'Master, we know that you are truthful. . .' (Mt 22:16). Don't tolerate the ironic eulogy. Those who don't make the effort to carry out their task diligently are not masters, because they don't teach the true way; and they are not truthful, because with their false prudence they minimize or consider as an exaggeration the clear standards, tested thousands of times by proper conduct, age, the art of directing, acquaintance with human weakness and the love of the shepherd for each sheep. . . all of which spur one on to speak, to intervene, to show interest.

False teachers are dominated by the fear of pressing home the truth. The thought of having to apply a painful remedy in certain circumstances makes them lose their peace. This kind of posture, you can be sure, does not involve prudence, or piety, or reasonableness; this attitude reflects a smallness of soul, a lack of responsibility, foolishness

and a lack of good sense. Later on, the same person, in a state of panic because of the disastrous consequences of his inaction, tries to apply a remedy when it is too late. He does not remember that the virtue of prudence requires us to seek and transmit *at the proper time* the serene counsel of maturity, of proven experience, of clear sight and unhampered speech.

Let us follow St. Matthew's account: 'we know that you are truthful, and you teach the way of God according to truth' (Mt 22:16). I'm always amazed when I see this cynicism. They want to twist the words of Jesus our Lord, they want to catch him off-guard, and instead of proposing in plain language what they consider to be an insoluble problem, they try to dazzle the Master with praise that should only come from truthful lips and straightforward hearts.

I'm intentionally dwelling on these tones, not so that we will become suspicious, but so that we learn to be prudent; so that we don't accept the falsehood of flattery, even if it appear clothed with phrases or gestures that in themselves respond to truth. This is what happens in this passage of the Gospel, they are telling him: 'You don't make distinctions; you have come for all men: nothing prevents you from proclaiming the truth and teaching what is good' (cf Mt 22:16).

I insist: we have to be prudent, yes; but not suspicious. Give everyone your most absolute confidence, be very noble. I give more value to the word of a Christian, of a loyal man—I trust each one completely—than to the authenticated signatures of a hundred notary publics; even though some people may have deceived me when I judged in this way. I would rather risk the danger of some ill-intentioned person abusing this confidence, than to withhold from anyone the trust he deserves as a person and as a child of God. I can assure you that I have never lost anything by acting in this way.

Acting with honesty

If the Gospel does not provide us at every moment with consequences that we can apply to our life, it means that we do not meditate on it enough. Many of you are young; some others have already reached maturity. You all want, rather, we all want to bear fruit in our lives—otherwise we wouldn't be here. We want the spirit of sacrifice to be a part of our action, we want to do business with the talent that our Lord has entrusted to us, because we feel a divine zeal for souls. But it is not impossible—it wouldn't be the first time—for one to fall into the trap of that mix—*ex pharisaeis et herodianis*—that is made up of

those who, as Christians, should be defending the rights of God, and instead, in alliance and confusion with the interests of evil, lay out snares to catch their brothers in the faith, their fellow-servants in the service of the Redeemer.

Be prudent; act with simplicity at all times, because this virtue is proper to a good son of God. Be natural in your language and in your activities. Go to the bottom of any problem; don't look at it only on the surface. Remember that, if we really want to fulfill our obligations as Christians, in a holy and honest way, we will have to anticipate unpleasantness for ourselves and for others.

I can't hide the fact that, when I have to correct someone or take a decision that will make someone suffer, I myself suffer before, during, and afterwards, and I'm not a sentimental person. I'm comforted when I think that only animals don't cry. I understand that on certain occasions you too will have to have a bad time, if you are going to fulfill your duty faithfully. Don't forget that it is more comfortable to avoid suffering at any price, with the excuse of not displeasing our neighbor; but it is wrong. Often, this sort of inhibition is a cloak for a shameful fear of our own suffering because it is not usually pleasant to make a serious correction to another. My children, remember that hell is full of people with closed mouths.

Some of those who are listening to me right now are doctors. You'll forgive my boldness if I take another example from medicine. I might say something that is medically silly, but the comparison for our spiritual life is valid. To heal a wound, one first has to clean it well. . . all around it, for some distance. The surgeon knows very well that this hurts, but if it's not done, it will hurt more later on. Besides, the wound is cleaned with an antiseptic. That hurts too—it burns, it stings, and there's no way around it, because otherwise the wound would become infected.

If to protect physical health, we obviously have to apply such remedies for even a relatively minor wound, then when the wound concerns the salvation of the soul or the sensitive points of a man's life, imagine how important it is to wash, to cut away, to cleanse, to disinfect. . . and to suffer! Prudence requires us to act in this way and not to run away from the fulfillment of our duty. To put off applying the remedy would show a lack of thoughtfulness, and even a serious fault against justice and against fortitude.

You must be convinced that a Christian, if he really wants to act with honesty, before God and before men, needs all the virtues, at least in a potential way. You will ask 'Father, but what about my weakness?' And I'll answer: Doesn't a doctor

cure others when he's sick, even though his own disease is chronic? Will his own sickness prevent him from prescribing for others whatever medicines they need? Of course not. To heal, all he needs is the appropriate knowledge and then to put that knowledge into practice, with the same concern with which he treats his own sickness.

Our weakness can heal

If you make your examination of conscience with courage, in the presence of God, you will find yourselves burdened with great defects, just as I am. But when we struggle to overcome them, then they are not really important. We manage to conquer them, even though it might seem that we don't quite eliminate them completely. Besides, over and above these weaknesses, if you see yourself as weak as they are, capable of all kinds of errors and horrors, you'll be more understanding, more considerate, and at the same time more demanding, because you will want everyone to love God with all their heart.

We Christians, children of God, should help others by putting into practice what those hypocrites evilly murmured to our Lord: 'you are no respecter of persons' (Mt 22:16). And so we will reject any kind of favoritism—we are interested in all souls—although, as is natural, we have to begin with a concern for those whom, through one circumstance or another, even if the motive is apparently only human, God has placed at our side.

'Et viam Dei in veritate doces. . .' (Mt 22:16) to teach, to teach, to teach—that means to show the ways of God according to the truth. You shouldn't be afraid that people will see your personal defects, yours or mine. I'm anxious to make my own faults known, and I tell about my personal struggle, my effort to correct myself in one or another of my battles, so as to be loyal to our Lord. The effort to uproot and conquer those weaknesses will already be a way to show others what God's paths are. First, in spite of those obvious errors, with the witness of our Lord, who *coepit facere et docere* (Acts 1:1), began with his deeds, and then, afterwards, taught with his preaching.

After reminding you that this priest loves you very much, and that our Father in heaven loves you more, because he is infinitely good, infinitely Father. . . After telling you that I have to help you to love Jesus Christ and his Church, his flock, because I think I am ahead of you in this — you imitate me, but you are not ahead of me. When in my preaching or in my personal conversations with each one of you I point out some defect, it's not that I want to make you suffer. I only want all of us

to love our Lord more. And when I insist with you that we need to practice all the virtues, I am not forgetting that the needs exist, in an urgent way, for myself as well.

I once heard a careless person commenting that the experience of our mistakes leads us to fall into the trap a hundred times more. On the contrary, I would say that a prudent person makes use of those mistakes to correct himself, to learn to do good, to renew within himself that decision to grow in sanctity. From the experience of your victories and your failures in the service of God, you will always be able to draw, together with a growth in love, a greater determination to go ahead in the fulfillment of your duties and your rights as Christian citizens whatever the cost; without cowardice, without fleeing from either the honour or the responsibility, without being afraid of how people will react around you—those could be the reactions of false brethren—seeking, in a noble and loyal way, the glory of God and the good of others.

And so we have to be prudent. Why? So that we can be just, so that we can exercise charity, so that we can serve God and all souls in an effective way. Prudence has rightly been called *genetrix virtutum* (1), mother of the virtues, and also *auriga virtutum* (2), guide of all good habits.

To each his own

Read carefully this passage of the Gospel; take advantage of it to learn the lesson of the virtues that should enlighten our actions. Having completed their hypocritical and adulatory preamble, the Pharisees and Herodians pose their question: 'What do you think: is it legitimate or not to pay tribute to Caesar?' (Mt 22:17). St John Chrysostom comments: 'Observe here their cunning; they don't say, 'Tell us what is right,' but 'Tell us what you think.' They were obsessed with the thought of betraying him and making him hateful to the political authorities (3). 'But Jesus, knowing their malice, answered them: 'Why do you tempt me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin with which you pay tribute.' And they showed him a denarius. Jesus asked them: 'Whose is the image and this inscription?' They answered, 'Caesar's'. Then he answered them, 'Give then to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's' (Mt 22:18-21).

As you can see, the dilemma is as old as the Master's reply is clear and unequivocal. There isn't, there can't be, any contradiction between serving God and serving men; between the exercise of our civic rights and duties, and that of our religious obligations; between our concern for building up and improving the temporal city, and our conviction that

we are passing through this world as on a journey that leads us to our heavenly home.

Here, too, we can see the unity of life, which—as I will always go on repeating—is an essential condition for those who wish to sanctify themselves in the midst of the ordinary circumstances of their work and their family and social relations. Jesus does not allow any division: ‘No one can serve two masters; for he will either hate the one and love the other, or else he will serve the one and have contempt for the other’ (Mt 6:24). The exclusive choice that a Christian makes, when he answers God’s call fully, leads him to direct all things to God, and at the same time to give to his neighbor, also, whatever in justice is due him.

We can’t hide behind apparently pious reasons in order to deprive others of what is theirs; ‘If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar’ (1 Jn 4:20). On the other hand, he who withholds the love and reverence, the adoration due to God as our Creator and Father, or who refuses to obey his commandments, is deceiving himself with the false excuse that some one of them is incompatible with his service to men. St. John explains clearly that ‘in this we have known that we love the children of God, when we love God and do his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments; and his commandments are not burdensome’ (1 Jn. 5:2-3).

You might hear many people, talking in the name of efficiency and maybe even of charity, who preach some theory they have invented, so as to cut back on the manifestations of respect and homage to God. They think that what is destined for God’s honor is too much. Don’t pay any attention to them; go on your way. Those mental gymnastics only produce controversies that lead to nothing unless it is to scandalize souls and to leave unfulfilled the command of Christ that we should give to each his own, practicing the holy virtue of justice with honesty and valor.

Justice towards God and Men

First of all, justice towards God: let us keep this priority clear in our minds, so that it will be reflected in our actions. It is the touchstone of the true ‘hunger and thirst for justice’ (Mt 5:6), which differentiates it from the clamoring of those who are jealous, resentful, selfish or covetous . . . To deny to our Creator and Redeemer our debt of gratitude for the many indescribable gifts he grants us involves the most terrible and ungrateful kind of injustice. If you are really making an effort to practice justice, you will often consider your dependence on God—‘for, what do you have that you have not received?’

(1 Cor 4:7) and you will be filled with gratitude and with the desire to correspond to a Father who loves us beyond all reason.

Then, there will quicken within you a spirit of filial piety which will make you treat God with heartfelt tenderness. When the hypocrites around you want to sow doubts about whether our Lord has the right to ask so much from you, don’t let yourself be fooled. On the contrary, you will be able to stand in the presence of God, without putting any conditions on your service to him, ‘like clay in the hands of the potter’ (Jer 28:6), and you will acknowledge him with humility: ‘*Deus meus et omnia!* My God and my all!’ And, if at any time you suffer an unexpected blow, the undeserved suffering caused by men, you will be able to sing out with a new joy: ‘May the most just and loveable will of God be done, be fulfilled, be praised and eternally glorified above all things. Amen. Amen.’

The circumstances of that servant in the parable who owned ten thousand talents (cf Mt 18:24) reflect very accurately our situation before God—we, too, find ourselves without the means to repay the immense debt that we have contracted for so many proofs of God’s goodness to us, and which we have increased to the tune of our own personal sins. Even though we struggle with insistence, we can never return to our Lord the love that he has shown in forgiving us. But God’s mercy makes up for what is impossible in human justice. He can be pleased, and take away our debt, ‘because he is good, and his mercy endures forever’ (Ps 105:1).

That parable, which you remember very well, ends with a second part, which is like counterpoint to the first. The servant, whose enormous debt has just been forgiven, does not have mercy on a fellow servant of his who only owes him a hundred denarii. This is how the callousness of his heart shows itself. Strictly speaking, no one will deny his right to demand what is his; but something in us rebels at the thought of his intolerance, and suggests to us that this is not true justice. It is not just that someone who, a moment before, had been treated with such mercy and compassion, should not at least have a little patience with his own debtor. Remember, justice does not consist only in an exact accounting of rights and obligations, as in mathematical problems that are solved by addition and subtraction.

Christian virtue is more ambitious. It leads us to be grateful, generous, open to others. It makes us behave as loyal and honest friends, in good times as well as in times of adversity. It encourages us to obey laws and to respect legitimate authority, and to correct ourselves immediately when we realize that we have made a mistake in dealing with some

particular matter. Above all, if we want to be just, we will attend to our family, professional, social and other obligations, without making a show of it, but simply working with insistence and exercising our rights, which are also duties.

I don't believe that a lazy person can be just, because with that *dolce far niente*, as they say in Italy, they sin, at times gravely, against the most fundamental principle of justice, that of work. We cannot allow ourselves to forget that God created man *ut operaretur* (Gen 2:15), so as to work, and that there are others—our family, our country, mankind as a whole—who also depend on the effectiveness of our work. My children, what a poor idea of justice people have who reduce it to a mere distribution of material wealth!

Justice, and love for freedom and truth

From my childhood, or, as Holy Scripture says, since I had ears to hear (cf Mt 11:15), I have been hearing constantly about 'social Problems'. There's nothing special about this; it's an old topic. It's been with us just about forever. It probably arose as soon as men became organized in some way, and their differences, in age, intelligence, capacity for work, interests, and personality, began to show.

I don't know whether or not we can avoid having social classes. In any case, it's not my job to talk about these things; much less here, in this chapel, where we have come to talk about God—in all my life I don't want to talk about anything else—and to talk with God.

You can have whatever opinions you want, in matters that God, in his providence, has left to the free and legitimate discussion of men. But my condition as a priest of Jesus Christ makes me go beyond matters of opinion, and to recall to you that, in any case, we cannot allow ourselves to abandon the exercise of justice in a heroic way if it is necessary.

We have the obligation of defending everyone's personal freedom, knowing that 'it is Christ who has acquired this freedom for us' (Gal 4:31). If we didn't, what right would we have to defend our own freedom? We also have the duty of spreading the truth, because *veritas liberabit vos* (Jn 8:32), the truth makes us free, while ignorance enslaves men. We have to defend everyone's right to live; to own what he needs for a decent existence; to work and to rest; to choose a state in life, to found a family; to bring children into the world in matrimony and to be able to educate them; to spend in peace his times of illness or old age; to have access to education and culture; to associate with other citizens for legitimate aims; and, above all, to know and love God in all freedom, because one's conscience, if it is moved

by a right motive, will always be able to discover the Creator's mark in all things.

It is precisely for these reasons that I have to repeat, not involving myself in politics but reaffirming the teaching of the Church, that Marxism is incompatible with the faith of Christ. Is there anything that is more contrary to faith than a system that bases everything on eliminating the loving presence of God from the soul? Say it out loud, make yourselves heard clearly—we have no need of Marxism in order to practice justice. On the contrary: this grave error, because of its exclusively materialistic solutions that pay no heed to the God of peace, raises obstacles in the way of happiness and understanding among men. It is within Christianity that we will find the clear light that will enable us to answer all problems—it's enough for you to work so as to be definitely Catholic, *non verbo neque lingua, sed opere et veritate* (1 Jn 3:18), not with words or with the tongue, but with deeds and in truth. Say this, every chance you have—look for the opportunity to say it, if you have to—with courage, with daring.

Justice and charity

Read Holy Scripture. Meditate, one by one, on the scenes of our Lord's life, on his teaching. In a particular way, pay attention to the advice that he gave to that handful of men whom he was preparing to be his apostles, his messengers, from one end of the earth to the other. What is the key to his teaching? Isn't it the new commandment of charity? It was this love that paved the way for them in that corrupt pagan world.

Be convinced that, with justice alone, you will never solve any of the great problems of the world. When only justice is done, we shouldn't be surprised if people are hurt; the dignity of man, as a child of God, requires much more than that. Our justice needs to be accompanied by, and saturated with, this charity, which makes everything lovable because it makes us like God—*God is love*. We have to act out of love for God at all times, because then we will find it easier to love our neighbor, and our earthly loves will be purified and raised to a higher level.

There's a long way to go between strict justice and the abundance of charity. There aren't many who persevere along this way to the end. Some people are satisfied when they reach the threshold—they leave justice aside, and limit themselves to giving a little to some good cause; and they call it charity, without realizing that they're only doing a small part of what they are obliged to do. And they're so satisfied with themselves, like the Pharisee, who

thought he was fulfilling the law of God perfectly, just because he fasted twice a week and paid tithes of all that he had (cf Lk 18:12).

Charity is like a generous overflowing of justice. It requires, first of all, the fulfillment of one's duty—you begin with strict justice, and then go on to what is more right. . . . But in order to love, you need a great finesse, a great thoughtfulness, a great amount of respect and consideration for others. You need to fulfill the Apostle's advice: 'bear each other's burdens, and thus you will fulfill the law of Christ' (Gal 6:2). If we do this, then we will really practice charity, we will fulfill the commandment that Jesus has given us.

I can't find any clearer example of this practical uniting of justice and charity, than the behavior of a mother. She loves each one of her children with exactly the same love, and it is precisely that love that leads her to treat them differently—with an "unequal" justice—because each one is different. With those who surround us, charity completes justice and perfects it, it leads us to behave differently with different persons, and to adapt ourselves to their specific circumstances. In this way, we will give joy to a person who is sad, knowledge to one who lacks it, affection to one who feels that he is alone. . . . Justice demands that we give to each his due, and that doesn't mean giving each person the same. A Utopian idea of equality is the source of the worst injustice.

If we want to act in this way at all times, like mothers with their children, we need to forget

ourselves and to renounce any aspiration that is not that of serving others; like Jesus, who taught that the Son of Man has not come to be served, but to serve (Mt 20:28). This requires a great deal of integrity—submitting our will to the divine example given us; working for all; struggling for the eternal happiness and the well-being of others. I know of no better way to be just than that of a life of self-surrender and service.

Perhaps one of you thinks I'm being naive. I don't care. And even though I may be labeled as such, because I still believe in charity, I assure you that I shall always believe just the same. And so long as he grants me life, I shall continue to work as a priest of Jesus Christ so that there may be unity and peace among those who, as children of the same Father, God, are each other's brothers; so that all men may have understanding with each other; so that all may share the same ideal, the ideal of Faith!

Let us seek out the presence of Holy Mary, Virgin most prudent and faithful, and of St. Joseph, the perfect example of a just man (cf Mt 1:19). They practiced, in the presence of Jesus, the Son of God, the virtues we have been contemplating; they will win for us the grace of having those virtues take firm root in our souls, so that we may always act as good disciples of the Master; with prudence, with justice, with a fullness of charity.

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *In III Sent.*, dist. 33, q. 2, a. 5. 2. St. Bernard, *Sermon XLIX in Cantica*, n. 5 (PL 183, 1018 D). 3. St. John Chrysostom, *In Matthaicum homiliae*, 70, 1 (PG 58, 65).