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Knights of Malta

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## Chancellor's Update

### Prudence – The Forgotten Virtue

#### Works of Mercy

For years Catholic prayer books and catechisms contained a list of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Whenever the reader located them, the reader did a little exercise to see how many of them he could remember. “To feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to visit the imprisoned ...to bury the dead.” Eventually it appeared that two of them were different in presentation or meaning. What was happening? Which version was correct?

1924: To feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbor the harborless; to visit the imprisoned; to visit the sick; to bury the dead.

1932: To feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbor the harborless; to visit the sick; to visit the imprisoned; to bury the dead.

1943: To feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to visit the imprisoned; to shelter the homeless; to visit the sick; to bury the dead.

1962: To feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to visit the imprisoned; to shelter the homeless; to visit the sick; to bury the dead.

Another version: to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to harbor the stranger; to visit the sick; to ransom the captive; to bury the dead.

2016: To feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to welcome the stranger; to heal the sick; to visit the imprisoned; to bury the dead.

#### Origins

The major origin for a Christian is found in a sermon by Jesus, who made reference to an admonition by the prophet Isaias.

Rheims New Testament (A.D. 1582) *For I was hungred, and you gave me to eat: I was a thirst, and you gave me to drink. I was a stranger, and you took me in: naked, and you covered me: sick, and you visited me. I was in prison, and you came to me.* (Matthew 25, 35:36)

Confraternity Version (A.D. 1942) *For I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in; naked and you covered me; sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me.* (Matthew 25, 35:36)

The New American Bible (A.D. 1991) *For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.* (Matthew 25, 35:36)

Isaias, Chapter 58 v.7: *Deal thy bread to the hungry, and bring the needy and harbourless into thy house: when thou shalt see one naked, cover him.* (Douay Version of the Old Testament 1609 A.D.)

Practicing works of mercy originated with the Israelites fulfilling their duties to God and their fellow man. The elder Tobias daily went among his kindred, who were in want, and as he was able, fed the hungry, gave clothes to the naked, and was careful to bury the dead. (Tobias 1:19-20) In suggesting how his fellow Israelite should fulfill his duty to his fellow man, the prophet Isais emphasized *breaking bread for the famished, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked.* (Isais 58:7) (Heinisch–Heidt, Theology of the Old Testament, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1955)

### The Contemporary Situation

Whether on an individual basis or by a community outreach, everyone is familiar with providing food, drink and clothes to those in need. Visiting the sick and assisting in burying the dead are commonplace occurrences. Visiting a relative or friend in prison is fairly easy, but such an act of charity to others may require proper identification and/or registration. Fires, floods, tornados, storms, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions destroy thousands of homes every year. When relatives, friends and neighbors suddenly become homeless, people often open their homes to cherished ones in need. When the number of such victims is too great, people often help through charitable organizations.

However, the average person or a householder responsible for children or other family members might balk at the idea of bringing into his house a total stranger. Who is this stranger? Is he or she a thief or sexual predator or kidnapper or murderer or rapist? A number of years ago a teenage girl was abducted at night from her own bedroom. When she was finally rescued, the abductor was someone who had performed odd jobs at the family home. The teenager's father had hired the man through his church because the man was in need of employment. People in situations of responsibility must be aware of their duty to those in their care.

To return to biblical sources the Book of Sirach cautions the Israelite, "Often one who is presumed a friend and given confidences turns out to be an enemy. Therefore hesitate before striking a friendship; seek to live peaceably with everyone, but be intimate only with a chosen few." (Heinisch–Heidt, Theology of the Old Testament, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1955)

### The Forgotten Virtue

In this day and age everyone seems to be aware of the virtues of faith, hope and charity, but they seem to be less aware of the virtue of prudence.

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.' 'Keep sane and sober for your prayers.' Prudence is 'right reason in action,' writes St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle. It is prudence that immediately guides the judgment of consciences. 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. (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1994)

Whenever a general rule of conduct, such as ethics devises, must be applied to a concrete case, prudence is called for. Rules cannot be given for prudence itself, because all rules must have some universality and prudence deals with the single instance (Editor's note, immigration)... The widest possible observation and experience of human behavior are the only teachers of prudence. (Austin Fagothey, Right and Reason, C. V. Mosby Company, Saint Louis, 1963, p. 200-201)

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