

Fraternus Year-End Mass – May 9, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Alabama – 6:30pm – 1,225 words

St. Paul's sermon at the Areopagus in Athens was quite possibly his least successful attempt at evangelization in the course of his exalted apostolic ministry. It was obviously quite learned – he tried to speak to the Athenians on their own philosophical terms. It was very eloquent, drawing upon his training in letters and in rhetoric. It was very personal – he tried to start from their own religious and cultural sensitivities and lead them toward the true God. It was not entirely without success, either – he did gain some followers as a result of having spoken there. But overall, it fell rather flat. Some of the people responded to him, “We should like to hear you on this some other time” – a polite way of saying they really were not interested at all.

What was it that caused this poor outcome? If we study St. Paul's writings carefully, we can readily find the answer. The conclusion of this passage said, “After this he left Athens and went to Corinth”. And when we look at the First Letter to the Corinthians, in at least two places near the beginning we can see how St. Paul makes a distinction between eloquent speech, the wisdom of the Greeks, and worldly wisdom, and what he calls the folly of the Cross.¹ Then he says, “When I came to you, brothers... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” Go back to his speech at Athens: He had not specifically named Christ even once! He had not spoken of his suffering and death on the Cross! He had only spoken of him indirectly – and then, only of his Resurrection.²

Between Athens and Corinth St. Paul figured out what went wrong: he needed to preach boldly and directly about the suffering, death, and resurrection of the Lord. God was not calling him to give eloquent philosophical discourses that only ended up watering down the message. What St. Paul effectively learned was that in Athens, he had been imprudent; yes, it was a good and noble thing to try to evangelize the Athenians – but he chose the wrong means to arrive at the goal. Prudence requires both a good end and the right means to attain it. Therefore, in First Corinthians, St. Paul said how he “resolved” not to do that again: Christ's suffering and death is what saves us – what saves the world – and that had to be the heart of his future preaching.

We Fraternus men talk a lot about virtue; more than talk, we hopefully also strive for virtue and put it into practice, of course with many failed attempts, occasional frustration, but also successes and growth. Many in our modern world today could not even list the virtues or say what ‘virtue’ is – other than to repeat the old phrase, “patience is a virtue”; our society has forgotten about virtue and now is riding the wave of feelings and “good vibes”. But not us. The manly moral strength that enables us to do what it is good easily is what we strive to acquire through repeated effort and good use of the spiritual resources at our disposal: prayer, the sacraments, godly friendships, and accountability. That is what Fraternus is about!

But whether we are striving for the virtue of chastity, or the virtue of patience, or trying to grow in the supernatural virtue of faith, there is another virtue that is always involved: prudence. It has been called the “charioteer of the virtues”. “It guides the other virtues by setting rule and measure”, the Catechism tells us.³ Again, prudence helps us not only to aim for what is good in a given situation, but also choose the right means to attain it. Again, St. Paul was trying to do the right thing, but he ended up not doing it the right way. But he learned from his mistake, and so grew and did not repeat his error again. He grew in the virtue of prudence and that helped him to grow in the other virtues that ultimately made him a saint.

¹ See especially 1 Corinthians 1:17-25 and then 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

² The foregoing interpretation comes from the writings of the Servant of God, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1806.

As we wind down our Fraternus year, one of the things we can do is look back at the many noble undertakings and successes, as well as the failures, and ask: Did we always go about it the right way? Were we prudent? We take for granted, of course, that we were aiming for the right thing, but maybe there were times that we did not choose the right means to our end. With so many frat nights, discussions (one-on-one and in groups), gatherings, articles, king's messages, emails, and so forth, there is much to consider and we can ask: What were our successes? What were our failures? How were we prudent? How were we not? This examination applies to us all, and like St. Paul, if we do it, we will grow in prudence.

We do well to remember another truth about prudence, however: namely, that, in itself, it is only a natural virtue. In a certain sense we could say that it helps us only as far as the limits of this created universe – it is not sufficient unto eternity. Our prudence, therefore, must be elevated by a supernatural gift. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that the gift of the Holy Spirit known as “counsel” is what perfects prudence in the light of eternity.⁴ Aided by the gift of counsel, we do not judge what is right – and the right means to attain it – only in what pertains to our life on earth, but we “see and choose correctly what will help most to the glory of God and our own salvation”.⁵

When we seek counsel about earthly or spiritual matters we might go to someone who is older, wiser, holier, or otherwise more experienced than us. But with the supernatural gift of counsel, God himself informs and guides us through the action of his Holy Spirit. Today's gospel speaks of the Spirit who gives glory to Christ by leading us into the truth. This, also, is what Fraternus is meant to be about: leading us more fully into the truth of who we are as men, so that we might give glory to God.⁶ All of these virtues that we are learning are not just so that we can be more successful in family and in business, or even gain the respect of others. These virtues must ultimately lead us to eternity – to heaven. It is not enough for us to be prudent: we must also seek and use the gift of counsel.

The hymn that we will shortly sing, then, is an important one for us at this moment. “Come, Holy Ghost, Creator blest, and in our hearts take up Thy rest”! Guide us ever forward on this great adventure. Help us to become the men you created us to be, fully alive in God and so glorifying him through our lives of virtue. Lead us aright on the paths of this life, perfecting our prudence with your divine counsel so that we may always know both what is good and how to obtain it. And may St. Paul, our patron, pray for us, so that we, like him, may learn from our experiences and keep the crucified Christ boldly at the center of our lives. Amen.

⁴ Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIa IIae, q. 52, art. 1, ad primum.

⁵ *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1917), Gifts of the Holy Ghost, accessed at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07409a.htm>.

⁶ Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book IV, Chapter 34, Section VII: “The glory of God is the living man” (*Gloria enim Dei vivens homo*).