

# Dolorosa

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

OCTOBER 2019

## A STEP BACK IN TIME



Father Paul Krug, C.S.P.V

—Pompeo Girolamo Batoni. *Esther Before Ahasuerus*. 1738/40. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania.

**P**urim is a festival that is celebrated every year by the Jews on the 14th day of the Hebrew month Adar, which corresponds to February or March depending on the year. During this feast the Jews celebrate Esther's deliverance of their race from the genocidal designs of a wicked man named Aman. The celebration consists of a great feast, the giving of alms to at least two poor people, the sending of gifts of food to two people, music and dancing, and the public reading of the *Megillah* or the Book of Esther. The feast itself dates back to the fifth century B.C. and was first recorded in the Book of Esther (9:26).

Because of her role in saving the Israelite nation, Esther is a prominent figure in Judaism. Her role also holds great meaning for Catholics. According to numerous saints and Scripture scholars, Esther, the Queen of Persia who interceded for her people, prefigures Mary, the Queen of Heaven, who intercedes for her children. Esther ought, then, to have a special place in the hearts of all true children of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Roughly 400 years after the death of King David, the Israelites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

Because of the infidelity and idolatry of the Chosen People, God permitted this to happen. For seventy years, the Jews labored under Babylonian oppression. In 538 B.C., however, everything changed. King Cyrus of Persia and his army laid siege to Babylonia and routed the enemy. Afterward, Cyrus freed the Israelites and permitted them to return to the Holy Land.

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After the Israelites were granted freedom, a large number of them returned home to the Holy Land. However, some remained in Persia. The Persians allowed the Jews to stay and lived peacefully with them, but, at the same time, they looked down on the Israelites. The family of Esther was among those that remained in Persia. Esther, therefore, was born in Persia.

When Esther was only a child, her parents died. Her uncle Mardochai took her into his home and raised her. Under Mardochai's fatherly care, Esther grew up and became remarkable for her holiness and virtue as well as for her beauty.

At this time, the King of Persia was a man named Assuerus, commonly known in secular history as Xerxes I. King Assuerus desired to marry and have a



queen on the throne of Persia. So, he sent messengers into all the provinces, inviting the most beautiful Persian women in the empire to his palace. Among those invited was Esther.

Seeing Esther, King Assuerus was deeply impressed with her beauty and virtue, and thus, not knowing she was a Jew, he chose her for his bride and queen. It so happened that he also appointed her uncle Mardochai as the gatekeeper of the palace.

Sometime after this, King Assuerus raised a proud and ambitious man named Aman to the highest dignity in the empire under the king. Assuerus commanded every one of his subjects to genuflect in Aman's presence, thereby rendering him a certain adoration. One man refused to bend his knee to Aman; this was Mardochai. He did this not out of pride or dislike, but because he would not give to a mere man the honor due to God alone.

Aman perceived this as grave disrespect and even as an act of hatred. His perception enkindled hatred towards Mardochai. What made the situation all the worse was that Aman also discovered that Mardochai was a Jew. So, to get revenge on Mardochai, Aman went to King Assuerus and lied to him. Aman told Assuerus that the Jews in his kingdom were planning a revolt and that they must be stopped. He thereby prevailed upon the king to issue an edict commanding all the Jews of Persia to be put to death.

Messengers were sent throughout Persia, and the decree was published in every province. Hearing of



—Giovanni Andrea Sirani. *Esther Before Assuerus*. 1630. Szépművészeti Múzeum, Budapest, Hungary.

their impending doom, the Jews were, of course, terrified. Mardochai was beside himself with grief. But, in his grief, God inspired him with an idea. Mardochai immediately sent a message to Esther, asking her to go before the king to plead for her people.

At this particular period in history, it was not customary for anyone to approach the king without being summoned. If anyone appeared before the king uncalled—even if it were the queen—he would often be put to death. Because of this, the mere thought of acceding to her uncle's request filled Esther with grave fear. For the sake of her people, however, Esther acted against her fear. She was determined to do what she could to save them.

For three days, Esther prayed and fasted. She besought Almighty God to strengthen her and grant her success. On the last day, she put on her finest dress and richest jewelry and went “with a mind full of anguish and exceeding great fear” to see the king (Esther 15:8).

Far from being angered at Esther's boldness, King Assuerus, moved by divine grace, was rather pleased to see her. He truly loved her, and he wanted to give her whatever she wanted. So, he said to her: “What wilt thou, Queen Esther? What is thy request? If thou shouldst even ask one half of the kingdom, it shall be given to thee” (Esther 5:3).

Looking into the kind eyes of the king, Esther said: “If I have found favor in the king's sight, and if it please the king to give me what I ask, and to fulfill my petition: let the king and Aman come to the banquet which I have prepared them” (Esther 5:8). “There,” Esther said, “I shall tell you my request.” The king agreed.

The next day, the king came to the banquet, and Aman came with him. While they sat at the table, King Assuerus again asked Esther what she wanted. “What is thy petition, Esther,” he asked, “and what wilt thou have done?” (Esther 7:2)



—Ferdinand Bol. *Esther and Mordochai*. 1650.



Esther turned toward the king and said:

If I have found favor in thy sight, O King, and if it pleases thee, give me my life for which I ask, and my people for which I request. For we are given up, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish. And would God we were sold for bondmen and bondwomen: the evil might be borne with, and I would have mourned in silence: but now we have an enemy, whose cruelty redoundeth upon the king. (Esther 7:3-4)

King Assuerus listened attentively as Esther spoke, but these last words struck a vein. He was dumbfounded that an enemy might be influencing him, and so he just stared in surprise. Recovering from his initial shock, the king asked Esther: “Who is this, and of what power, that he should do these things?” (Esther 7:5)

“It is this Aman,” said Esther, “that is our adversary and most wicked enemy” (Esther 7:6). Hearing these words, Aman went pale. King Assuerus immediately stood up from the table in a fit of rage. He called in the royal guards and commanded them to hang Aman. The king also decreed that the edict against the Jews was null and void. The royal commands were immediately carried out. Ironically, Aman was hanged on the same gibbet he had ordered to be prepared for Mardochai.

It was thus through the intercession of Queen Esther that God saved His Chosen People from the wrath of their enemy.

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Of the numerous virtues Esther displayed throughout her life, one that most stands out is her prudence. In particular, her manner of handling the difficult situation in which she found herself demanded heroic courage, but it also required a profound prudence. She displayed both to an extraordinary degree.

If we’ve ever regretted a decision that we have made or if we have found ourselves in a sticky situation that could have been avoided, it is probably because prudence did not factor into our choices. Prudence is one of the four cardinal virtues. It is both an infused supernatural virtue and an acquired natural virtue. As an infused virtue, prudence is imparted to the soul with sanctifying grace at Baptism and is possessed by the baptized person provided he is in the state of grace. As an acquired virtue, prudence is gained by the repeated practice of the virtue. Acquired prudence is thus not a virtue characteristic of the young, for they have not had time to develop it by practice.

Infused prudence is superior to that which is acquired for the infused virtue is supernatural—above the natural. Because of this, there are times when

—Jan Victors. *The Banquet of Esther and Ahasuerus*. 1640.







supernatural prudence will dictate a course of action that is not recommended by natural prudence. For instance, it is supernatural prudence that moves one to give his life in defense of the Faith or to fast in reparation for sin. At the same time, however, infused and acquired prudence work together. The acquired virtue needs the infused to elevate its action to the supernatural level, whereas the infused virtue needs the acquired to facilitate its exercise in the attaining of one's final end—eternal salvation.

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Supernatural prudence is ever at odds with the so-called wisdom of the world. It does not judge things by the standards of the world, that is, by satisfactions and pleasures, or by material advantages. Instead, this infused virtue helps us to see the satisfactions, pleasures, and goods of the world in the light of eternity and helps prevent us from allowing these things to lead us away from our eternal goal.

In *My Catholic Faith*, Bishop Louis LaRavoire Morrow, S.T.D., tells us: "Prudence disposes us in all circumstances to form right judgments about what we must do or not do." Continuing, he writes, "It teaches us when and how to act in matters relating to our eternal salvation" (87). Prudence is thus of the utmost importance in the work of saving our souls.

In addition to the explanation given by Bishop Morrow, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* enumerates several definitions to help us understand in what natural prudence consists. The dictionary states that prudence is "the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason." It also tells us that prudence is "shrewdness in the management of affairs" and "skill and good judgment in the use of resources."

Prudence can be attained by experience, that is, by learning from mistakes made in the past. We can even learn from the mistakes of others. We should not, however, confine ourselves to learning from the bad judgments and decisions of others; rather we should also strive to imitate the good qualities we see in them.

Caution or circumspection regarding danger or risk is also characteristic of prudence. The prudent person is aware of his surroundings and reflects on what he is about to do, how he is going to do it, and what is the best means to attain his goal. Prudence is thus needed in all aspects of life, for it is the guide of how to act virtuously.

In his masterpiece *Summa Theologica*, Saint Thomas Aquinas describes prudence as the "charioteer of the other virtues." He does this because prudence directs all the other virtues just as a charioteer directs the horses under his charge. As the chariot driver holds the reigns of the horses to guide them, so, too, does prudence guide the other virtues, pointing them to their proper end. Without prudence, then, one's life might look like a runaway horse and chariot without a driver—hurry, energy, and chaos, headed in the wrong direction.

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It was prudence that directed Esther in petitioning King Assuerus on behalf of her people. She was scared to approach the throne and therefore had to call on her fortitude, but, at the same time, she prudently thought out her course of action and calculated her words to move the king's heart.

Like Esther, we must strive to acquire a greater degree of prudence, for how well we develop this virtue will affect nearly every aspect of our lives. It takes prudence, for example, to direct us how best to save our souls and the souls of those entrusted to us. But, aside from being requisite in the work of eternal salvation, prudence is also necessary in our natural lives. It takes prudence to raise one's children well, to advance one's career, or just to make those little day-to-day decisions that we are often called on to make. To buy a car or a house and to make a good financial investment also take prudence.

To help develop this essential virtue, let us follow a few practical steps.

### *Prayer*

As it should be in every phase of life, prayer is the first step in acquiring and sharpening prudence. We should pray daily for an increase in this virtue. When situations arise which require us to make a decision or act, we should pray for the grace to know what to do and how to do it.

### *Reflection*

The exercise of prudence often involves much reflection. To reflect means to think something through. When one reflects, he attempts to attain a clear vision of the situation at hand, foresees the goal and consequences of an action, and considers any special circumstances involved. Reflection also enables one to learn from his past mistakes in order not to make them again. Contrary to reflection are two enemies of prudence: impulse and passion. The impulsive person gives little thought to a decision and runs with his initial reaction. He fails to think through his course of action. The person who acts on passion allows himself to be carried away by his emotions. Whether it be the passion of anger, joy, love, or whatever, emotional decisiveness has led to innumerable poor choices. Let us combat these enemies by reflecting before acting.

### *Seek Counsel*

In the Book of Proverbs, we read: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he that is wise hearkeneth unto counsels" (12:15). In other words, the wise and prudent man seeks advice from others. We don't have all the answers, even when we think we do. We are human beings with a fallen human nature. We must therefore



learn from others. Whether it be learning from their successes or their failures, from their words or their deeds, we must be docile and receptive to the advice of others. The imprudent and, we may say, stubborn person refuses to gather information from others or to take the time to weigh a decision. One who tries to make a difficult decision without seeking counsel is like a man who does not know how to get to his destination but refuses to ask his passengers how to get there, to consult a map, or to pull over at a gas station to ask for directions. Such a one would rather drive on and on and on rather than admit defeat and seek counsel. Let us not be that person; let us, rather, be ever ready to seek wise and prudent counsel.

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In all the events of life, may we always strive to act prudently so that the acquired virtue may grow in us and that the infused virtue may flourish in our souls. When the path to a decision is obscure, when we must venture off the beaten path, when the leading lights go out, let us not fail to invoke our heavenly Mother for direction. May she, the Esther of the New Testament, be our light in the darkness and guide us to our heavenly home.