

## **Spiritual prudence**

*Examine, become experienced and perfect all your works.* Osuna is talking here about the necessity to undertake the soul work of examining consciousness, of becoming experienced in spiritual discernment, and becoming increasingly wise and rigorous in our capacity for ever finer, more subtle discernments of what is happening in our own souls.

### **The gift of spiritual prudence**

This work of spiritual discernment is accompanied by – and in fact depends on – the capacity to make discernments ‘prudently’. Perhaps we need to recover the word prudence as it is used in the contemplative tradition. Here, spiritual prudence is one of the attributes of wisdom and it’s spoken of as one of the seven gifts of wisdom. It is a latent potential or gift for wisdom - that is being wakened and gathered in and employed in the work of recollection.

We are being prudent when we are able to see into and differentiate the source, the qualities and impact of inner responses and in the light of love, make life giving choices in how we can be with them. And add to that, Prudence, with a capital P, is also invoked as spiritual presence that personifies Wisdom. Prudence embodies the voice of wisdom. She speaks within us, and by listening and hearing her promptings, her inner urgings, inspirations and insights we grow in wisdom and loving action.

### **Purposeful inner enquiry**

To get back to Osuna’s spiritual advice - *Examine, become experienced and perfect all your work* – the maxim points to the spirit and the purpose of spiritual exercises we undertake to examine our conscience. We bring into this practice the quality of prudent attention in an active, purposeful, ongoing enquiry. To be clear, this soul enquiry is not so much moral enquiry in the usual sense, but a contemplative enquiry into inner experience. This soul enquiry is an awareness practice. And also, as Osuna’s maxim suggests, the further and deeper we go along the more and more subtle and fine-tuned and rigorous our process of examining needs to be. The more penetrating our enquiry the more prudence is needed. It’s like a narrowing path and as we set out we are beginners in exercising prudent discernment, then we

become proficient as we track the path , and eventually it *is* possible to become masterful in 'perfecting' the art of inner discernment.

### **Exercising spiritual prudence with inner responses**

So let's look at the three phrases of the maxim one by one as three phases or modes of exercising spiritual prudence . The first phrase refers to **examining** of our inner experience in its beginning stages. Here we are looking at a bringing our careful and curious attention to our responses coming up to whatever is happening – but also during and after our prayer and meditation. Osuna encourages us to pay particular attention to responses of fear and also responses of pleasure to the experience of recollection itself. So let's take those in turn.

### **Discerning the impact of fear**

First of all, with the voice of experience Osuna assures us that responses of fear are inevitable in our willingness to stay in stillness and darkness of mind. What's at issue here is whether we can discern the distinction between a kind of prudent fear that has a quality of awe or reverence - and the qualities of anxious illusionary fear that discourage us. Some prudent fear is appropriate – when we sail in our little boat of devotion we can be awfully aware of the spiritual depths and breadth of the ocean which we navigate. The boards beneath us will seem frail and our boat very small. But it's a kind of right fearing that shows us what we need – metaphorically speaking -a good map from those who have sailed ahead of us in spiritual journeying, learning ways and means of navigating and keeping the lodestar of the fullness of recollection like a vision ahead to orientate ourselves. It is a fear response that helps us sail on in anticipation and hope.

However – we need careful wise discernment to recognise what Osuna calls a 'fearing when there is no fear to fear'. With the voice of experience he says the *via negativia* is a safe way – so beware of confessors or spiritual directors who instil unnecessary fear. That in itself is a matter that needs great prudence - the choice of our spiritual guides. Osuna warns us that fearful voices , either from other people or from within ourselves, can be accusing us of being mad, or in danger, or being deceived and then we fall into despair. In examining our souls we need to discern the effect of fearful thoughts – hope or despair?

## **Discerning the impact of pleasure**

Then there are the responses coming rising in contemplation that have a kind of consoling, blissful, delightful quality to them. Here too we can examine the effect of them with the same careful prudence. It's a very fine discernment to make whether a delightful response is nourishing to our inner life – or whether, despite the sweet pleasurable quality there is something that is disagreeable, not palatable, not digestible to the soul at this stage. Nourishing – or not nourishing the inner life?

## **Becoming inwardly guided**

The second phrase – **'become experienced'** actually refers to a very significant threshold of growth – when we move into radical dependence on being guided internally. Osuna speaks of this as the soul being taught directly and being educated in heart wisdom by the Holy Spirit. It is a schooling of intellect and will and memory in wisdom for wise insight, wise action, wise speech. This same capacity for spiritual prudence is now consciously used in the service of becoming wise. His advice is this – if we have within us the feeling of grace even though we don't understand it - 'Have this suspicion that what is being given here is one of the seven-fold gifts of wisdom.' It's prudent to follow up this suspicion!

## **Discernment of spiritual gifts**

The work of discernment shifts here to fine tuning our judgments to recognising and receiving spiritual gifts. Part of the art of this is to become sensitive to the way our subtle faculties of spiritual perception work. Some of the time our receptivity is such that we are only conscious of what Osuna calls a single gift. By this he means that we experience grace but not cognitively. Here we exercise discernment to recognise grace using subtle senses - the sweet taste of recognition, the touch of presence, the inner vision of Spirit that infuses our consciousness. There is a need for spiritual prudence to both discern and to receive this fully without foreclosing because we don't have the 'double gift' of clear understanding. We learn to experience this intuitive feeling in heart and we can hold, stay with and fully savour the experience consciously. We can be discerning also of how this gift keeps unfolding and showing in our daily life and relationships. Osuna says - Grace leaves traces of itself in our lives.

## **Becoming the wisdom discerned.**

The full maturing and flourishing of the powers for spiritual discernment comes in the deeper threshold of growth where, even more radically, we begin to embody the wisdom received. We speak the wisdom we hear. We act on insight received. We become the wisdom discerned. There is no separation between the soul receiving wisdom and the giver of wisdom. This is the **perfecting** of contemplative work.

## **Discerning the unity of recollection .**

Spiritual discernment and examining consciousness is no less critical as we go along. In its fullest flowering our capacity for prudence becomes fine tuned to oneness, and picks up on the inner radar of the heart any the hindering vacillations, any fragmenting of energies, any unnecessary afflictions and distortions, any hidden agendas, any hindrances, any distortions, any subtle resistances and avoidances.

Interior examination becomes more rigorous not less. It is, Osuna says, like the dedication of a master craftsman who understands the alchemy of his fiery forge of his conscience to temper and create a precious object. And then the master craftsman goes on to complete his task by cleaning and polishing the object with painstaking love till the gold and silver shines with reflected light.