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It is Right and Just: Justice (I)

Justice begins with our relationship with God, shown in our readiness to give thanks. A new editorial in the "Very Human, Very Divine" series on the virtues.

07/10/2023

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Jesus' words are addressed to everyone. Fishermen enjoy hearing him talk about fishing nets (cf. *Mt* 13:47-52); farmers listen attentively

when He talks about the requirement for seed to bear lasting fruit (cf. *Mt* 13:2-9); and every housewife sympathizes with the story of the woman who loses a coin at home, having had the same experience (cf. *Lk* 15:8-10). With images taken from ordinary life, Christ sheds light on the most transcendent truths.

Nevertheless, some of his parables can leave us perplexed. Although expressed in simple language, they place us before paradoxes that force us to reflect. *My thoughts are not your thoughts* (*Is* 55:8), Jesus sometimes seems to want to tell us.

Perhaps one of his stories that causes the most perplexity is that of a property owner who goes out early in the morning to hire day laborers to work in his vineyard (cf. *Mt* 20:1-16). The narrative begins as we might expect: the owner agrees with the workers on their salary for the day, a denarius, and sends them out

into the field. At first we might think that this is a story about the use of time and producing fruit. But as the parable progresses, the owner decides to hire new workers later in the day, who will work fewer hours. And instead of assuring them a fixed salary, he promises to pay them “what is just” (cf. *Mt* 20:4).

“What is just.” This expression necessarily gives rise to certain expectations in listeners and readers. We assume that those who started working later in the day will receive less money than those who worked hard since dawn. Hence when those who started working late in the day are paid a denarius, we naturally think that those who started early in the morning will receive a greater reward for their work. But the owner’s actions surprise everyone. First, those who worked only a few hours, since they received the same pay as the others; but also those who

began working at the first hour, since they would expect a proportionate increase in the agreed upon salary. But perhaps we are the ones who are most surprised, on confronting such an unconventional concept of justice. *Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?* the owner of the vineyard asks (Mt 20:15).

It is right and just

Jesus is not interested in resolving economic or political issues. With this parable He is not trying to clarify a concept as complex as that of a just wage. Our Lord wants, above all, to raise our eyes to God's merciful attitude, his eagerness to welcome everyone, even if they come to Him at the last hour in their life, like the good thief (cf. Lk 23:43). But along with this fundamental meaning, the Master's parable provides us with a narrative framework to help us

reflect on the various dimensions of the virtue of justice in our own lives.

If, as has traditionally been affirmed, justice consists in giving each person their due, what they truly deserve, then we are confronting an interior disposition that highlights the human being's relational dimension. So we can ask ourselves, first of all, what we owe to God or what a just relationship is with the one who is the Source of everything good, beginning with our very existence.

The Eucharistic Prayer of the Mass provides us with a good starting point. This is how the brief dialogue between the priest and the faithful that introduces the preface always ends: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God. —It is right and just."^[1] —
Gratitude and justice might at first seem opposed to each other. A gift is characterized precisely by being undeserved, while gratitude is the

recognition that a person has gone beyond what is strictly due. But when facing God everything changes completely, since He is the source of everything we are and possess. As Saint Paul says, *What do you have that you did not receive? (1 Cor 4:7)*. Our life therefore is a totally undeserved gift; hence, with respect to God, gratitude is a deep duty. We can never pay Him back for everything He does for us, and this is in no way unjust. But it is something deeply due to Him, deeply just: thanking Him for everything.

Discovering that our relationship with God is marked by his free and loving gift helps us to accept joyfully our life as his children and frees us from a view of faith that is excessively focused on the “letter” of the commandments. Instead of being overwhelmed by what could seem an endless list of goals or precepts by which we somehow try to “pay back”

the price of our redemption, we come to see our response to God's love as our willingness to give him every moment in our life, convinced that we will never be able to thank Him enough for everything He has given us. Thus, for example, being faithful to a plan of spiritual life, rather than a burden of conscience in the face of acquired commitments, can be seen as the most direct manifestation of our gratitude to the love God bestows on each one. "If you are really striving to be just, you will often reflect on your utter dependence upon God, and be filled with gratitude and the desire to repay the favors of a Father who loves us to the point of madness: 'For what do you have that you have not received?'. "[2]

His justice is greater than ours

Fostering deep gratitude to God frees us from the danger of seeking to

judge his way of acting. Sometimes, when we are suddenly faced with a situation we didn't expect, we may ask ourselves questions such as "How can God allow something like this to happen?" Perhaps we think other people are more blessed by Him or that He doesn't seem to hear our petitions, and we might think, "How unjust." We behave then like those day laborers who after working all day couldn't accept the owner's "excessive" generosity towards those hired late in the day. Instead of being happy to see these workers given the resources needed to buy something to eat, they are sad because their hope of receiving a greater gift has been disappointed.

But blaming God for the evils we see in the world makes no sense. Many of these evils are the result of human freedom, of our own and others' actions and omissions. Moreover, we need to reach the conviction in our

prayer that God is Lord of our life and of history; and also that, although He doesn't really owe us anything, He is always seeking the best for each person since He is Love, transforming evil into good in surprising ways. Saint John Paul II said that "in a certain sense, justice is greater than man, greater than the dimensions of his earthly life, greater than the possibilities of establishing in this life fully just relationships among all men and women."^[3] —

The prayer of those who know they are children of God is marked by trust in the One who loves us infinitely and always wants what is best for us. Jesus prayed in the garden of olives: *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done* (Lk 22:42). Faced with situations that we fail to understand fully and that perhaps cause us suffering, while trying to find

solutions, we can tell God: “Let your justice be done and not mine. I know that I am in good hands and that in the end everything will be for the best.”

Justice is both a desire and a mystery. A desire deeply rooted in our heart, but also a mystery that transcends us, in the sense that God alone has the last word on what is just and on the specific ways to restore justice. Hence it would not be a Christian attitude to desire the punishment of our enemies, as though it were up to us to decide on this, or to refer too readily to divine justice admonishing people who act immorally or base their lives on values very different from our own.

Certainly, faith in divine justice should comfort us when we suffer an injustice or when we are saddened by negative events in the world. “There is justice. There is an

‘undoing’ of past suffering, a reparation that sets things right.”^[4] —
Like the owner in the parable, God fulfills his promise and rewards those who have worked well. But God’s revelation of Himself also leads us to trust that his mercy will spur Him to always give new opportunities for conversion to those who do evil. “It was not strict justice, based on theoretical calculations, that led the Son of God to ask his Father for forgiveness on our behalf, but a gratuitous love that thinks only of what it can do for others.”^[5] —
Hence, the owner of the vineyard does not sit by idly after hiring workers early in the day; even at the eleventh hour he wants to give work to those who are about to waste a full day. In short, as Saint Josemaría writes, “God does not let himself be outdone in generosity.”^[6] —

The others are free

When reflecting on justice as a virtue that should shape our relationships with others, it is often stated that justice is only a minimum requirement for coexistence: respecting the other person in his or her “otherness.”^[7] Justice could then be seen as a cold attitude that highlights the differences between people more than what they have in common. While charity seeks unity, justice would emphasize separation. However, if we look closely, the relationship between charity and justice is more subtle.

The fact that each person is given what corresponds to him or her, as required by justice, is intrinsically related to the proper distribution of goods, to compliance with contracts and one’s word, and the respect we owe to each person. One could say, then, that justice truly helps us to lead a peaceful life in society,

providing clear rules and preventing us from hindering one another.

Hence it is not something small or trivial to acknowledge the “otherness” of other people and the right they have to be as they want to be. As Saint Josemaría stressed: “We have a duty to defend the personal freedom of everyone, in the knowledge that ‘Jesus Christ is the one who obtained that freedom for us.’ If we do not do so, what right have we to claim our own freedom?”^[8] This is precisely what the owner of the vineyard reproaches the early workers for, who feel cheated: *Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for a denarius? Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to this last as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity? (Mt 20:13-15).*

Sometimes we can be tempted to disqualify in advance the opinions of someone who has a different view of the world or is guided by other values. We then overemphasize the unitive dimension of charity, thinking that any difference should be overcome to make room for true love, and we confuse justice with mere equality. However, “justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI's words, ‘the minimum measure’ of it, an integral part of the love ‘in deed and in truth’ (1 Jn 3:18).”^[9] This virtue reminds us, first of all, that we all have the right to be as we want, to manifest that way of being outwardly and to enjoy our own goods. As Pope Francis writes, “no human individual or group can consider itself absolute, entitled to bypass the dignity and the rights of other individuals or their social groupings.”^[10] —

Saint Josemaría frequently spoke about the very diverse numerator enjoyed by the people who followed him: the different ways of being, the free opinions and personal options of each one, in political, cultural, scientific, artistic, professional matters, etc. He distinguished this from a common denominator, very small in comparison, made up of the fundamental truths of faith and the charism they all shared. It does us a lot of good to value, respect and love the legitimate differences with the people who live with us. “This pluralism should be loved and fostered, although someone may find this diversity hard to accept at times. A person who loves freedom manages to see the positive and attractive aspects of what others think and do in these broad areas.”^[11] —

Thinking otherwise would mean falling into the subtle temptation of wanting to help others based on our

own parameters, without discerning what they really need and, above all, what we owe them. It would be unjust, for example, to pay someone working for us a salary less than what corresponds to the work they have done, simply because we think it is better to give them a bonus that makes up the difference. In this sense, the owner of the vineyard does not sin against justice by paying everyone the same. Perhaps we might think he has an unusual criterion of just payment, but at no time does he break his word. Those who agreed to a denarius received exactly what was promised; and the others received what seemed just to the master. This is how God is: the just keeper of his promises, but also a generous Father, to whom “a smile, a word, a gesture, a little bit of love is enough for him to pour out his grace bountifully on the soul of his friend.”^[12]

[1] Cf. *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer.

[2] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 167.

[3] Saint John Paul II, Audience, 8 November 1978.

[4] Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, no. 43.

[5] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 16 February 2023, no. 8.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 623.

[7] Regarding “otherness” as a fundamental dimension of justice see Joseph Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, pp. 68ff.

[8] *Friends of God*, no. 171.

[9] Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 6.

[10] Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 171.

^[11] Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 9 January 2018, no. 13.

^[12] Saint Josemaría, *The Way of the Cross*, 5th station.

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