

THE CARDINAL VIRTUE OF JUSTICE IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

This is the second in a series of four reflections on the Cardinal Virtues, presented by Fr. Anthony Barratt, STL, PHD, ChD, from the Upstate New York Area

We continue our reflections on the four cardinal virtues; remembering that they are called “cardinal” virtues because everything *hinges* on them (the word cardinal originally means a hinge or foundation). This time, let us explore the virtue of justice. It may seem strange to think of justice as a virtue, since we often think of justice as more of a thing or entity, or as a system or process. Two things may help us here. The root of the word justice comes from the Latin “*ius*”; a word that means “right” or “making right”: That is right as in being correct or true (rather than making a right turn, or even our human rights). Furthermore, the *Catechism* (n. 1807) defines the virtue of justice as “the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbor.”

It is a much needed virtue, especially with all the stresses and strains of our uncertain times and the ongoing pandemic. For example, I think that many of us often find ourselves saying that there is no respect anymore; whether it be how people are treated, rudeness, a lack of respect for life, all the negativity and animus in politics, road rage, or whatever. What we are really talking about though is a lack of the virtue of justice. As the philosopher Aristotle wryly noted over 2,300 years ago: “the many forms of injustice make the many forms of justice quite clear!”

Justice is indeed a cardinal or hinge virtue and we certainly notice it when it is absent; yet this virtue is so essential and is part of every person’s calling. This is why in the Beatitudes, Jesus asks us to hunger and thirst for justice (Matthew 5: 6). As Joseph Pieper notes “prudence provides the possibility of being good...justice...is the highest and most genuine form of doing good.”

So, how can we be just and do justice? The definition above from *the Catechism* gives us direction here. The definition mentions a number of crucial things. First, we can notice that justice is about a constant and firm will; in other words, it is a disposition or attitude that is absolutely part of us. That is why we can speak of someone as *being* just. Justice is really then a habit or a life-style and it is about action and dynamism (doing good or doing justice). What is more, a lack of this attitude or habit of justice and respect is really a lack of love. As we read in the great novel by Dostoevsky, *the Brothers Karamazov*: “A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies, becomes unable to recognize truth, either in himself or in anyone else, and he ends up losing respect for himself as well as for other. When he has no respect for anyone, he can no longer love.”

Justice is also about giving what is due. This “giving” is crucial! Justice involves a real sense of giving, and, true giving acknowledges that everything is gift. It is the perfect antidote to selfishness or a sense of entitlement. The little word “due” is also critical. It is a very relational word and makes clear that everything is a gift; but, even more, that something is therefore owed, or that a debt needs to be repaid. Traditionally, there are three types of justice: legal justice (what is due from an individual to the whole community), distributive justice (what is due from the community to the individual) and commutative justice or exchange (what is due from one individual to

another). Living this virtue of justice would therefore help us fight against vices that ignore the idea of gift and what is due to others. Vices such as greed, avarice, selfishness, indifference or gluttony that ignore the needs of others and go against the common good. Vices such as lust or pornography, that fail to respect others, treating them as objects and that deface the image of God in all that are affected. Vices such as a disproportionate anger that degenerates into vengeance or violence and so often end up perpetuating injustices rather than restoring justice.

Finally, justice has a destination and purpose: giving what is due *to God and to neighbor*. As we noted above, the virtue of justice is very personal and relational. Justice is very much about “we” or “us” and well as “I.” We can see this, for example, in the many sacrifices made during the pandemic to help and protect those who are vulnerable, or in how some remarkable individuals have given their very lives in promoting justice and combatting injustices. Let us not forget that justice is also the basis for the respect due to others such as our spouses, children, parents, neighbors, parishioners etc. And, of course, justice is about the reverence, obedience and honor due to God (who is, after all, Justice). That is why in the *Our Father*, we say “hallowed be thy name...thy will be done.” After all, what is due to God...? The answer, of course, is everything!

This wonderful virtue of justice is sorely needed at any time, but especially in our current time. As Fr. Benedict Groeschel, CFR noted, justice is the virtue that “ensures we are Christians rather than religiously orientated people.” So, let us just be just!

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