Justice

One of the questions we often hear is: what do I owe God? And the answer is quite simple: we owe Him everything.

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The classical definition of justice has been summed up in a brief phrase: “to give to each his due.” This definition assumes that someone owes and gives something to someone, that is, that there are people in a relationship. Therefore, to think of the virtue of justice is to think of relationships.

The Catechism tell us that “God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions.”[1] Only by considering the equal dignity and freedom of each man and woman is it possible to say that relationships between persons are just. For example, just relations are impossible if some are slaves of others, since this implies denying “who the others are”: persons with an intrinsic human dignity.

But “the statement ‘to give to each his due’ does not express all that is implied in justice, nor make explicit all that is required for a person to be just.”[2] Saint Josemaria said that “justice means giving to each his due. I would however go further and say that this is not enough. However much a particular person is due, we must be ready to give him more,

because each single soul is a masterpiece of God's making."[3]

What do I owe God?

We may ask ourselves: What do I owe God? And the answer is quite simple: we owe Him everything. In fact, justice with God, if we can call it that, is different from justice with other men and women. "The relations between man and God are not relations of justice in the proper sense."[1] [4] The reason lies in the fact that it is on a totally different level: the relationship is between Creator and creature and not creature and creature. So if we want to know how our relationship with God can be just, we need to ask: who is God for us? What does it mean that he is Creator?

St. John tells us in one of his letters that "God is Love" (*1 Jn* 4:8). Therefore the right relationship of human beings with God is a path

inscribed in our very nature, God, who is love, has created us in his image and likeness out of love, and given us the capacity to respond lovingly through our freedom. God wants us to experience our freedom precisely through the most essential act of the divine nature, which is to love.

It is true that our dignity is due to God the Creator, which creates a bond of strong dependence, because we have not created ourselves. But this total dependence does not mean subjection or slavery, since at the moment God created us he made us free. Human freedom is a manifestation of divine freedom and the capacity to respond freely to God – who is Love – by loving.

Sacred Scripture shows us that the just man is the good and holy man, that is, the man who, through his life, in the continuous exercise of his

freedom, chooses what is good.[5] Israel is seen as a people that proves its love for God when, throughout its history, they decides to follow Him as the Highest Good.

Christ was the only truly just man because, being the Son of God, he became man so that we might become children of God.[6] Christ took on human nature in the mystery of the Incarnation, thus bringing all created realities to God in the mystery of the Redemption. He was the only man who was just in the full sense of the word and taught us the path of the just man: a human and divine path of self-giving and correspondence to God the Father's love.[7]

"If God is love, and the experience of love is a human experience, then through love we gain access to a truer image of God and of mankind."[8] Hence the relationship

between God (who is Love) and men and women (who are creatures created out of love in the image and likeness of God) will be just to the extent that we become aware of our condition as children of God and act accordingly out of love.

What do I owe to other men and women?

The second question we need to answer is: what do I owe to others? In this case, when we speak of justice among men, it is easy to confuse the duties that stem from this virtue with those of charity. A duty of justice is not the same as a duty of charity. It is different to ask oneself "what do I owe to a person," than to ask "why should I care for my neighbor?"

The danger consists in attributing to charity "things that in reality belong to the strictest duties of justice, thus falsifying the true nature of social problems. For example, the bonds of

charity that exist between the person who commissions someone's work and the person who carries it out can in no way lead to paying less than what is just, or to carrying out the work in a careless manner."[9] Therefore we need to understand very well the nature of this virtue.

The "object of the virtue of justice is, then, to give to each his due, to give or respect what is his and what is due to him: life, liberty, the goods of which he is the legitimate owner, his reputation, etc. More briefly, we can say that the object of the virtue of justice is what is due to others, but understanding by this what is just in itself, and not what is simply legal."[10]

This highlights three fundamental characteristics of justice. The first is otherness. In the most obvious sense it means that justice is towards others and therefore always requires

two or more physical or moral persons. Obligations and duties with respect to oneself are not the object of justice.

This “otherness” presents us with an essential question: who is the other? Justice is often represented as a woman who is blindfolded. This image highlights the importance of considering that “the other,” whether someone we know and like or not, whether a brother or a stranger, is also a person and therefore has the exact same dignity as we do. Hence authority can never be used arbitrarily, by treating some people different than others or harming their reputation.[11] Rather all men and women need to be treated and considered as what they are: persons with the exact same dignity.[12]

The second characteristic is that justice entails a “debt in the strict sense.” Justice demands giving to

each one what is strictly his or her own. Some examples of the proper attitude of the just man in the sphere of work consist in striving not to delay the work of others, taking advantage of the hours set for work, paying people punctually, etc. Unjust practices such as withholding due wages from workers, theft, fraud or not paying debts are contrary to the virtue of justice precisely because one does not give what is due t someone.[13] "Therefore, 'the other' can actively demand the fulfillment of the duty of justice on our part, and the political community can legitimately use coercion so that the duty of justice is fulfilled."[14]

The third characteristic is equality. This emphasizes that the fulfillment of a duty of justice restores equality between two persons. When work is entrusted to another person and paid for when finished, equality is restored. Justice can only occur

between persons who are on a plane of fundamental equality, that is, if the other is truly seen as a person, with the exact same dignity as oneself.

These three characteristics "show that justice fundamentally implies recognizing that every person, by the fact of being a person, has the same intrinsic and fundamental dignity."[15]

The path that St. Josemaría teaches for practicing justice in its three characteristics implies, in the first place, fulfilling one's duties.[16] These duties arise in the course of one's daily life: contracts that are agreed upon; caring for one's family; working as well as possible; concern for friends and neighbors, etc. This way of living justice has at its foundation the realization of 'who others are' and giving them what is due to them.

The family setting is a privileged place for living the virtue of justice.

For example, concern for the tiredness on the part of one's spouse at the end of a hard day is part of the virtue of justice. A consequence of this concern will be the practice of some aspects of the virtue of charity, such as kindness in mutual dealings and asking for help. Other examples of the virtue of justice in the family are the respect of children for their parents and grandparents, collaborating in caring for the children and household chores, dedicating to children the time each one needs in accord with their specific circumstances, etc.

Do I owe to the others what I owe to God?

We can ask ourselves one last question: do I owe to others what I owe to God? The recognition of the intrinsic link between a just relationship with God and justice in relationships with others leads us to

see clearly that “when love for God is present, a Christian is never indifferent to the fate of others.”[17] Hence “we do not love justice if we do not wish to see it fulfilled in the lives of others.”[18]

The inseparability between what we owe to God (to adore, obey and love Him; to give Him all that we are and have, because everything is His) and what justice should be with regard to other men and women (not only giving each person his or her due, but valuing and appreciating them as persons), deeply influences the Christian way of living justice towards others. On the one hand, knowing that God has given us everything and that he loves us, leads us to want to love others as God loves them. This is the measure established by Christ: “even as I have loved you, that you also love one another (Jn 13:34). On the other hand, to be just towards God, to truly love Him,

means also to be just towards others and to want a more just world.

The Church's Magisterium has repeated this on numerous occasions when it insists that peaceful coexistence is necessarily based on both justice and charity. One without the other is never enough. As Saint John Paul II said, "the experience of the past and of our own time makes clear that justice alone is not enough."[19]

In St. Josemaría's teaching, work is the place where the practice of justice and charity are harmonized. In work the inseparability between being just with God and just with other men and women shines forth. He summed this up clearly when stating that a basic duty of justice consists in working well: "the work of each one of us, the activities that take up our time and energy, must be an offering worthy of our Creator,"[20]

And our work is also a task that improves the lives of other men and women. Each of us, in reflecting on our daily lives, can find many areas and aspects that can help us to do grow in the virtue of justice.

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[1] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1730.

[2] M. A. Ferrari, *Justicia*, in J. L. Illanes (ed.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Monte Carmelo, Pamplona 2013, p. 705.

[3] *Friends of God*, no. 83.

[4] Á. Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo per essere santi, III: Morale Speciale*, EDUSC, Rome 2008, p. 39.

[5]]"The 'good man' is 'just because he fulfills the divine law (Prov 10:28; Wis 3:10; etc.); the Messiah will be the 'just' man par excellence (Is 45:8;

53; Wis 2:18); 'he who is just practices justice and right' (Ezek 18:5); justice and holiness are intimately related (cf. Mt 3:15; 5:6-10; 6:1-33, 15:20; 21:32); the man faithful to God is 'just' (cf. Mt 23:34; Lk 1:6; Acts 10:22; 2 Pet 2:8); the 'just' man par excellence is Christ (cf. Mt 27:19; Lk 23:47; Acts 3:14)" (Ferrari, *Justicia*, p. 706).

[6] Cf. Athanasius of Alexandria, *De Incarnatione*, 54, 3.

[7] Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965, "AAS" 58 (1966), no. 22.

[8] I. Adeva Martín, "Caridad-Amor," in *Diccionario de Teología*.

[9] Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo, III*, p. 43.

[10] *Ibid*., p. 37.

[11] Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 2493-2499.

[12] “Hear the causes of your brethren, and judge fairly between a man and his brother, or between him and a stranger. You shall not respect persons in judgment; you shall listen to the small as well as to the great; you shall not be intimidated by anyone, for judgment belongs to God. If a case is too difficult for you, send it to me, and I will deal with it” (Deut 1:16-17).

[13] Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2240.

[14] Rodríguez Luño, *Scelti in Cristo, III*, p. 38.

[15] *Ibid*.

[16] Cf. Ferrari, *Justicia*, p. 706.

[17] *Ibid*., p. 67.

[18] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 52.

[19] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Dives in Misericordia* (December 20, 1980), AAS 72 (1980), no. 12.

[20] *Friends of God*, no. 55.

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