

"We need righteous men and women"

In his 3 April general audience, Pope Francis continued his catechetical cycle on vices and virtues, speaking about the virtue of justice.

04/03/2024

Dear brothers and sisters, Happy Easter, good morning!

Here we are at the second of the cardinal virtues: today will talk about *justice*. It is the quintessential social virtue. The *Catechism of the*

Catholic Church defines it as “the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour” (no. 1807). This is justice. Often, when justice is mentioned, the motto that represents it is also quoted: “*unicuique suum*” – that is, “to each his own.” It is the virtue of law, that seeks to regulate the relations between people equitably.

It is represented allegorically by the scales, because it aims to “even the score” between people, especially when they risk being distorted by some imbalance. Its purpose is that in society, everyone is treated in accordance with the dignity proper to them. But already the ancient masters taught that for this, other virtuous attitudes are necessary, such as benevolence, respect, gratitude, affability, and honesty: virtues that contribute to a good coexistence

between people. Justice is a virtue for good coexistence between people.

We all understand how justice is fundamental for peaceful coexistence in society: a world without laws respecting rights would be a world in which it is impossible to live; it would resemble a jungle. Without justice, there is no peace. Without justice, there is no peace. Indeed, if justice is not respected, conflicts arise. Without justice, the law of the prevalence of the strong over the weak is entrenched, and this is not just.

But justice is a virtue that acts on both a large and small scale: it regards not only the courtroom, but also the ethics that characterize our daily lives. It establishes sincere relations with others: it realizes the precept of the Gospel, according to which Christian speech is “simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this

comes from evil" (*Mt 5:37*). Half-truths, double-talk intended to deceive one's neighbour, the reticence that conceals true intentions, are not attitudes in keeping with justice. The righteous person is upright, simple and straightforward; he does not wear masks, he presents himself for what he is, he speaks the truth. The words "thank you" are often found on his lips: he knows that no matter how generous we strive to be, we always remain indebted to our neighbour. If we love, it is also because we have been loved first.

In tradition we can find countless descriptions of the righteous person. Let us look at some of them. The righteous person reveres laws and respects them, knowing that they constitute a barrier protecting the defenceless from the tyranny of the powerful. The righteous person does not think only of his own individual

wellbeing, but desires the good of society as a whole. Therefore, he does not give in to the temptation to think only of himself and of taking care of his own affairs, however legitimate they may be, as if they were the only thing that exists in the world. The virtue of justice makes it clear - and places this need in the heart - that there can be no true good for oneself if there is not also the good of all.

Therefore, the righteous person keeps watch over his own behaviour, so that it is not harmful to others: if he makes a mistake, he apologizes. In some situations, he goes so far as to sacrifice a personal good to make it available to the community. He desires an orderly society, where people give lustre to the office they hold, and not the office that gives lustre to people. He abhors recommendations and does not trade favours. He loves responsibility and

is exemplary in promoting legality. Indeed, this is the way of justice, the antidote to corruption: how important it is to educate people, especially the young, in the culture of legality! It is the way to prevent the cancer of corruption and to eliminate criminality, removing the ground from beneath it.

Furthermore, the righteous person shuns harmful behaviour such as slander, perjury, fraud, usury, mockery, and dishonesty. The righteous person keeps his word, returns what he has borrowed, pays fair wages to all labourers: a man who does not pay fare wages to workers is not just, he is unjust; he is careful not to pass reckless judgments on his neighbour, and defends the reputation and good name of others.

None of us knows if, in our world, righteous people are numerous or as

rare as precious pearls. But there are people who draw grace and blessings both upon themselves and upon the world in which they live. They are not losers compared to those who are “cunning and shrewd,” for, as Scripture says, “He who pursues righteousness and kindness will find life and honour” (*Pr 21:21*). The righteous are not moralists who don the robe of the censor, but upright people who “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (*Mt 5:6*), dreamers who yearn in their hearts for universal brotherhood. And, today especially, we are all in great need of this dream. We need righteous men and women, and this will make us happy.
