

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND HIS JUSTICE

Justice (II)

It is late afternoon in the town square, and the owner of the vineyard still sees other workers without work. “No one has hired us,” they tell him. The owner sends them out to work in his vineyard, even though the light will soon start to decline (cf. *Mt* 20:7). The conviction that social justice depends on his own decisions leads the owner of the vineyard to hire those unfortunate men. Whether or not it was their own fault, they had wasted most of the day, perhaps despite lacking many of life’s basic necessities. Above all, they would have suffered because of not feeling useful, the source of a deep existential anguish. So the owner does not limit himself to giving them money, but helps them to find meaning in their lives. Jesus is not offering a political solution. Rather He wants to stress that the “hunger and thirst for justice” (cf. *Mt* 5:6) should lead us to seek creative solutions for social problems, since focusing exclusively on personal concerns can never be a Christian attitude.

Warmth of charity, firmness of justice

The same justice that leads us to recognize the differences in others, and therefore to respect everything that belongs to them (their life, their good name, their property) spurs us to reflect on the minimum requirements for a dignified human life, and to act accordingly. God has bestowed on us earthly goods so that men and women can enjoy life in community. Hence we cannot be indifferent to the fact that, while some people enjoy comfortable lives, others are dying of hunger or cannot benefit, for example, from an education that would open the doors to many new possibilities.

“The world exists for everyone, because all of us were born with the same dignity . . . As a community, we have an obligation to ensure that every person lives with dignity and has sufficient opportunities for his or her integral development.”¹ Ecological challenges, for example, cannot be viewed in isolation from a reflection on justice. Regardless of one’s legitimate opinion on the various problems and their possible solutions, a Christian should always feel responsible for the kind of world we want to leave to future generations.

The warmth of our charity and the firmness of our justice will give us the criteria and strength needed to develop our relationships with others in the best possible way. Naturally, the bonds of charity place conditions on our duties of justice. These two virtues determine many of the decisions we make every day, with concern for my family taking priority over other possible social initiatives. The “order of charity”² that Saint Josemaría insisted on so strongly is also an order of justice. My relationship with my sick mother would not be just if I didn’t find time to visit her because I was too busy with solidarity projects that were

¹ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 118.

² Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 4, no. 14; 6, no. 7.

very valuable, but that prevented me from fulfilling my duties as a daughter or son. If the excessive generosity of the owner of the vineyard, his concern that many people find a decent job, were to lead him to jeopardize his own family's solvency, he would not be acting justly towards his family.

But the bonds of justice also help us to be more refined in our charity. Love for one's own family and acquaintances could at times be disordered and lead us to take refuge in our private life, without wanting to concern ourselves with the needs of so many men and women around us. This could also lead us to always seek what is advantageous for those closest to us, even when it harms third parties. That is why the attitude of the owner of the vineyard is a helpful example for us. Even though he enjoyed a comfortable situation in life and most likely had abundant riches, he decided to complicate his life, and goes through the streets several times to offer many workers the opportunity to receive a wage for their work. This is the hunger for justice that should mark those who follow Jesus, which leads them to set aside their own comfort in their eagerness to help others.

Charity and justice, finally, need to be intertwined in a vision of reality governed by a vivid awareness of everything in our life that entails relationships with others. "The justice that can be the stable foundation for peace is the justice of the children of God, justice enlivened by the charity that sees in others brothers and sisters, children of the same heavenly Father."³ Our holiness consists, in good measure, in discovering that others are part of our own life.

Relationships and duties

In Scripture the word "justice" has a much richer meaning than the way it is understood today. "Justice is not an abstraction or a utopia. In the Bible, it is the honest and faithful fulfilment of every duty towards God; it is to fulfil his will."⁴ When we hear, for example, that Saint Joseph was a just man, this implies that he was holy, that in every situation he did the right thing. A very important part of all the holy Patriarch's decisions involved carefully weighing his duties towards God and other people, especially Mary, to order the priorities in his life and his heart. The just person is not the one who thinks he is the measure of all things but the one who allows himself to be measured and who organizes his life according to his relationships with others. *The just shall live by faith (Heb 10:38)*.

In reading Saint Josemaría's works, it may surprise us that, along with highlighting love and self-giving as distinctive features of the Christian life, he often insists that holiness consists in fulfilling the duty of each moment. "Our life – a Christian's life – has to be as ordinary as this: trying every day to do well those very things it is our duty to do; carrying out our divine mission in the world by fulfilling the little duty of each moment."⁵ That the concept of "duty" enjoys such a prominent place in his writings may cause a certain

³ Fernando Ocariz, "The Spiritual Heritage of Bishop Alvaro del Portillo," March 2014, opusdei.org.

⁴ Francis, Speech, 25 February 2023.

⁵ Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 616.

uneasiness in the contemporary reader or believer. Indeed, converting the Christian ideal into the punctilious fulfillment of an accumulation of commandments is not only unattractive; it can also end up causing us to feel overwhelmed and sad. If Christianity is the religion of love, and therefore of freedom, why does St. Josemaría emphasize such an apparently dry and cold word as “duty”? For despite our surprise at how the owner of the vineyard acts, what awakens our admiration for him is precisely his generosity in going beyond a mere sense of duty.

But we would fail to grasp the depth of St. Josemaría’s thought if we saw his message as just a cold, dry call to fulfill our daily duties in our ordinary life. It is not the fulfillment itself that brings us closer to God, but the love that leads us to carry out each task as perfectly as possible. “Sincere devotion, true love for God, leads us to work, to fulfil the duty of each day, even though it is far from easy.”⁶ But we need the virtue of justice so that charity, which is meant to be the inspiring force and goal of all our actions, never loses sight of what is truly important in each moment. Justice provides us with a “map” that marks out the most important goals for each day. Its definition stems from the principle that every duty is based on a relationship. Hence the most important relationships in our lives define our most important duties.

The duty of each moment

Many duties of justice are the fruit and sign of love, shown by living them with great care. Caring for one’s children and devoting time to them is a duty of justice, which stems naturally from love. Its fulfillment will often bring us joy, and won’t involve any great effort for us. But sometimes it can feel like a more burdensome duty, because it conflicts with other possible activities, or because we are especially tired. Working well is also a duty, not only towards our employer, but also our family and society as a whole. If we receive a fixed salary for a specific time of work and results, it is a matter of justice to strive to achieve these. And, in the end, Christians who try to transform all their jobs into prayer and an opportunity to love God and other men and women discover possibilities of serving others in all the circumstances of their work.

In our work, at times it might seem that demanding respect for certain rights for ourselves could be opposed to charity. But Saint Josemaría always taught that one manifestation of lay mentality (that is, of the awareness of being in the world) is to demand, with charity and respect, what is due to us. For example, fighting for a well-deserved salary increase or for a promise made to us does not mean not being content with what we have or being unable to forgive. Rather it helps strengthen the practice of justice in our environment and in society as a whole, for the benefit of everyone. “If we are just, we will fulfil our professional, family and social commitments without fuss or display, working hard and exercising our rights, which are also duties.”⁷

⁶ *The Forge*, no. 733.

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 169.

Relationships of justice are thus transformed into a very specific path for doing at each moment what is right, that is, what is just. Asking ourselves each day in prayer about our duties helps us to focus our love on the specific bonds that make up our lives. The workers in the parable, regardless of the hour they were hired and the agreement made with the owner, strove to fulfil their duty and obtain the promised reward.

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*And when evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last, up to the first' (Mt 20:8). God wants all men and women to be saved, and He also wants us all to enjoy a life on earth that is as worthy as possible. This leads us to put special care into each of our duties, in order to make this world a more human and divine place. At the same time, we know that full justice will only be achieved at the end of time and that this rests in God's hands. "Only God can create justice. And faith gives us the certainty that he does so."⁸ Truly, *the last will be first (Mt 20:16)*. Those who are striving for *the kingdom of God and his justice (Mt 6:33)* can rejoice in the "justice" of God: *I count all things to be but loss for the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ my Lord; for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but as dung, that I may gain Christ; and may be found in him, not having my justice, which is of the Law, but that which is of faith in Christ Jesus, which is of God, justice in faith (Phil 3:8-9)*.*

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 44.