

Justice: The First Step Towards God

Loyd L. Fueston, Jr.

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1.1 Introduction

St. Thomas Aquinas taught that justice is the first step towards true religion. In Chapters 119 and 120 of *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence*, Aquinas speaks in terms of the service we owe and uses terminology appropriate to the well-ordered societies of the Medieval Age. The discussion is solid but somewhat distant to modern human beings with our poorly founded and abstract systems of political and moral thought. Moreover, our delusions of equal political and economic rights has simply unleashed the powerful from the bonds which controlled them in the traditional Western societies. The United States and most European countries have become kinder and gentler Soviet republics in which the exploited citizens manage to pretend they are free. Then again, until recently, the exploited citizens have also been the exploiters though there are strong signs that a master class is rising in the United States and probably in most countries in the modern West.

Why do I speak about such matters in an article about the virtue of justice being the first step towards God?

1.2 Centering Our Lives

We cannot serve God and mammon both. We cannot serve God and the gods of the marketplaces both. The gods of the marketplaces include both those which rule liberal capitalism and those which rule the liberal nation-states of the modern world.

We of the modern world are not Christians, not even those who attend Sunday Mass or Sunday Protestant services. We are idolators who have accepted the chains offered by those smiling gods, the chains which they use to seduce us to leave our extended families and our communities of worship, moving us around from one corporate workplace to another on the far side of the continent or from one battlefield in Europe to another in Asia.

We are embodied creatures and not accidentally so. That is, the substance of our bodies exist as God's chosen way of giving us objective independence with some small independence from Him. As embodied creatures, creatures not of spirit but of brain-cells and muscles and bone and glands, we are dependent upon the universe, the physical aspects of this phase of God's Creation. As Alasdair MacIntyre noted, in his Carus lectures and book: we are *Rational, Dependent Animals*. Our strongest bonds are formed by our relationships of dependency. We have chosen to be dependent upon the gods of the marketplaces and to leave our local communities where it is possible to more directly live in the presence of God. To be sure, there have been many extended families and local communities, even many church communities, where the people shielded themselves from the presence of God, but those who serve the gods of the marketplaces, those who have accepted dependence upon the gods of the marketplaces, have to shield themselves from the presence of the God of Jesus Christ in order to get on with their lives. In political terms, this shielding process is called separation of church and state and shows most clearly in those politicians who claim to be Christians, worship in one church or another – even accepting communion in Catholic churches, and then support such God-defying acts as abortion and euthanasia.

But they are simply larger-scale and more public versions of most of us, even church-going Christians, Protestant or Catholic.

We do not render justice to our Creator, the God who is three Persons in One, the God of Jesus Christ. We prefer to render justice to the gods of the marketplaces because we prefer the goods they offer us, a new television

series or a luxury condo or a chance to go to the Superbowl, over any gifts offered to us by God. We prefer a good career path or at least a generous health insurance plan to Heaven just as we really would rather be on the set of *American Idol* than in the presence of God. At least many of us would. How do any of us manage to render justice to God? There are some, probably few in percentage and certainly many in absolute numbers, amongst Americans who engage in such behavior as attending daily Mass when possible or going to weekday hymn sings – in addition to Sunday worship. There are many who pray every day, sometimes more than once a day. There are others make heart-felt and serious sacrifices for others. A true, self-sacrificing love for the brothers of Christ is a sign of some sort of love for God, even if it might be defective or incomplete.

There are many who try hard to render justice to their Maker, to the Almighty Who created all that is and owns all that is, to the Lord God Who is so generous to us. The problem lies with those who consider those gifts to be theirs in a true sense, rather than realizing that they are only stewards. Our very human beings belong to God and we are stewards of our own bodies and our own relationships. There are also many who don't seem selfish in that deep way but they seem to recognize their responsibilities to human institutions but not to God. True it is that some of those faithful tax-payers are merely acting prudently against a government which controls the preponderance of our society's means of inflicting violence.

Whether it's true loyalty to the central powers of the modern world or mere caution, modern Christians fork over 20, 30, 40% or more of their income in taxes and then maybe throw a few dollars in the collection basket on Sunday – if they bother to show up for Mass or for Protestant services. Those same people might also head off to a Patriots or Red Sox game that same Sunday, whether or not they'd bothered to worship God, and dish out \$100 or even \$200 per person to see the game, drink a couple of beers, and eat a hot dog or sandwich.

We pay generously to those gods we truly believe in, the gods of the political and commercial marketplaces and we squeeze pennies and guard our precious leisure time when it comes to the God of Jesus Christ.

1.3 Justice is a Hard-earned Habit

We owe much to God and yet we are not descended from any human couple who lived in a state of grace. A more careful reading of the book of *Genesis* in the light of modern empirical knowledge and also in the light of the remaining books of the Bible will tell us that Adam and Eve were in a state of innocence more akin to animal stupidity than to grace. The history of the human race has been the opening of the human mind, first to an awareness of greater expanses of time and space than that of our cousins, the chimpanzees, who seem to have the highest abstract thinking ability of any non-human animal. Men, at least some, became aware of a cosmos and perhaps a transcendent reality. My purpose is not to lay out a plausible narrative of this process of the human mind opening to greater possibilities. I merely wish to make the point that we are creatures who have a vague sense of a reality, a more real reality, which is transcendent to this world of flesh and rocks, but we are not creatures who can easily live anywhere but on this planet circling the sun.

We have definite human natures at birth but that nature is plastic in any individual human being. We can form ourselves into beings who love to consume the goods offered by the gods of the marketplaces or we can form ourselves into beings who love to enter the peace of Christ.

I'll confess. When I first returned to Christianity as an evangelical Protestant in Georgia, church services bored me. When I entered the Roman Catholic Church a few years later, I found Masses to be sometimes a pleasure but often boring. Prayer was difficult though interesting when I lived near the Benedictine monastery of St. Mary's in Petersham, Ma. for a few years. Contemplative prayer is still sometimes a struggle. I often do not wish to do what God asks of us – for our own good: to sit quietly and let our awareness of His Presence grow until we are thinking and praying not so much to Him as with Him.

God is not looking for servants or for students so much as
He is looking for companions to share His divine life.

That is the wonderful but dangerous insight I would share about rendering to God what is due to God. In the end, we are the beneficiaries of all that work and time expended to make ourselves into joyful worshipers and peaceful conversation-partners with the Almighty. God gains no more than

our companionship, seemingly a pretty poor return on His work in creating this world and us, and just as poor a return on His Son's suffering.

So let me tell one way of rendering justice to God, one way of shaping yourself – and those for whom you are responsible – into God-fearing human beings, but first I'll point out one aspect of creaturely nature which is probably very upsetting to most modern human beings, even those who worship regularly and think themselves to be God-centered.

1.4 Choosing Our Form of Slavery

Aristotle was thoroughly wrong on one moral issue, as Alasdair MacIntyre has told us. There is no such thing as an independent, free-standing human being of the sort he saw – quite wrongly – in the Athenian gentleman. We are all *Dependent, Rational Animals*, as MacIntyre told us in the very title of one of his books. Even the greatest of virtuous pagans, even the humblest of God-centered Christians, cannot transcend their dependency upon other human beings and – usually – upon some of the powers and principalities in this world. Our moral freedom does not lie in some illusory power to avoid dependency upon those powers and principalities but rather in our power to choose God and then to choose those institutions of this world which are most centered upon God or at least not directly opposed to God and His Church.

In the end, that Church Herself, in Her earth-bound incarnation, is the only principality to which we can owe our loyalty, the only one we should voluntarily bind ourselves to. This is not to deny the power of our more ephemeral ties to families and local communities and particular communities of worship. It is to claim that the Church on earth, for all the errors and crimes of Her human leaders over the centuries, is truly the Body of Christ in formation. Even the family and our friendships are, at their best, intended to supplement our membership in the Body of Christ and to nurture our Christ-like persons as they develop. It is sad that so many, even Christians, have reacted to the modern assaults upon the family by returning to a pagan Roman concept of the family as some sort of absolutely binding institution of human life. Parents act as if their children belong to them when all human beings, young and old, belong to the God of Jesus Christ. Parents are stewards of their children and not the owners, and this is the true reason that dog fetuses can be aborted while human fetuses

cannot be aborted without committing the same sin we commit when we murder any human beings. God told us we shall not committ murder, but we didn't learn the reasons for this until the Son of God took on human flesh:

We are the brothers of the Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true man. We belong to God in a special way, more so than any of His other creatures.

Before we claim any privileges of being the sons of God the Father and of being the brothers of Jesus Christ, we should realize that these privileges come because we belong to God by way of a special relationship which is probably not possible in the case of any other species of animal. In any case, it is human beings who received the offer and human beings who responded by crucifying He who is both King and messenger.

To believe you own your children, to believe you own your car or even your own body in an absolute sense, is to have already turned away from God. It is one aspect of the modern godlessness which also shows in our willing dependence upon those institutions of this world which are – at best – indifferent to God. Usually, those institutions – including all the secular and governmental agencies of welfare and charity – are more directly antagonistic to God by way of opposing a God-centered life.

We have chosen to be dependent upon the tender mercies of the government and the corporations rather than upon God. We have faith in the Social Security Administration and General Foods rather than having faith in God. We have accepted our dependency upon the Social Security Administration and General Foods and consider our duties to God as optional at best. That is, some ignore their duty to give God what He has asked of us, worship and praise and charity towards our fellow-men. Others give to God what He has requested on a time available basis, that is, time available after they have fulfilled their obligations to their corporate masters and to their favorite sports teams.

1.5 Rendering Justice to God

There is no secret about the ways in which we can render justice to God. The Almighty Himself has told us much in Holy Scripture and those words, given through imperfect human witnesses to be sure, have been interpreted

and explained by various popes and Church councils and holy men and holy women.

We are to obey His commandments first and foremost. In this context, that means we start by believing in Him, honoring His name, and keeping holy His appointed day of worship and rest. Most especially should we worship and pray and not just on the Lord's Day.

We should pray in thanksgiving when we rise from our beds, even if it is a simple, "Thank you, Lord, for this day and guide me in serving you through the day."

We should do what we can to relieve the sufferings of our brothers in Christ, even when – no, especially when – those sufferings are due to their own actions.

1.6 Conclusion

As we are just with God, He will be just with us. When we render to God the pittance He asks in return for our very existence, we prepare ourselves for life with God for time without end. If we give God that minimal which He demands as His due, our required service to Him in Medieval terms, then we are preparing ourselves to receive that great gift which was offered to us in the incarnation, life, suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ:

God became man that man might become God.

Or perhaps better:

God became man that man might share in the life of God.

We might hope that God will return justice despite our general refusal to render justice to Him, but we should not presume this if only for this reason:

We do not come into this world as autonomous agents freely able to choose to act morally, perhaps at the last moment as we die. We are formed by the world. By our own choices, those of our parents and teachers and religious leaders, those of the political and commercial leaders of our society, we become

specific creatures, shaped by our personal lives if you will. We move towards a unified state where we are moral rather than choosing to act morally in individual situations. Or we don't.

In *To See a World in a Grain of Sand*, I advanced the view that we are not born as true persons but rather have a chance to become persons by developing the attributes of unity, coherence, and completeness – the attributes of a true world. We become persons partly by bringing a world into view, and that can only be done by paying proper attention to He who created the physical universe and brings it into a true state of unity and coherence and completeness by ordering it towards His purposes. By viewing a world, we render justice to God. By viewing a world, we become persons.

It is my belief, my fear and my hope, that only such creatures, true persons, are capable of living as God's companions for time without end. For those who do not bring themselves into that state of unity, coherence, and completeness, time without end would bring a continued existence of conflict and the ongoing threat of fragmentation. Such an existence would be hellish and not heavenly.

By rendering justice to our Creator, we do what God most wishes us to do: we become suited to life as true friends of His. We become suited to true life and not to a short life followed by a permanent and never-ending death.

Colophon

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