Give to each what is theirs… and to God what is first: a profound Catholic guide to justice in times of selfishness, inequality, and moral confusion

We live in an age in which people constantly speak of rights, equality, social justice, fair wages, political corruption, labor exploitation, and structural poverty. Social media cries out for justice. The streets protest for justice. Courts administer justice. Governments promise justice.

And yet, rarely have we lived in a society so deeply confused about what it truly means to be just.

Because justice, from the perspective of traditional Catholicism, is not simply a political construct, a social ideology, or a legal agreement. Justice is a cardinal moral virtue, a demand of the soul, an obligation before God, and a concrete expression of love for neighbor.

Without justice, there is no true peace.
Without justice, there is no authentic charity.
Without justice, there is no social holiness.

As Sacred Scripture teaches:

> ***"Learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:17).***

Justice is not optional for the Christian.
It is a path to salvation.

I. What Is Justice?

Much more than laws: a divine virtue to order the world

The classical definition, inherited from Aristotle, perfected by Cicero, and elevated by Saint Thomas Aquinas, teaches:

Justice consists in giving each person what is due to them.

But Christianity adds an even deeper dimension: it is not only about "what belongs" to someone in material or legal terms, but about recognizing the sacred dignity of every person as made in the image of God.

To be just means:

- Giving God the worship He is due.
- Giving one's neighbor what is necessary.
- Giving one's family what it deserves.
- Giving the worker a just wage.
- Giving the poor real attention.
- Giving the weak protection.
- Giving the sinner fraternal correction.

Justice is not cold mathematics.
It is moral order.

II. Justice in the Bible: God as Source and Measure

In biblical thought, the just person is not merely someone who follows rules, but someone who lives uprightly before God.

In the Old Testament:

Justice is united to fidelity to divine Law.

> *"The righteous flourish like the palm tree" (Psalm 92:12).*

The prophets continually denounced false religiosity in those who offered sacrifices while exploiting the poor.

In the New Testament:

Christ brings justice to its fullness.

> *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6).*

Jesus did not come merely to forgive individual sins, but to restore the broken order between God and man.

The Cross is the supreme act where these meet:

- Divine justice (sin has consequences)
- Divine mercy (God pays for us)

III. The Three Great Types of Justice

A moral architecture for personal, labor, and social life

A) Commutative Justice

Giving according to what is due

This is justice in exchanges between individuals.

Examples:

- Paying a fair wage
- Not deceiving in sales
- Not falsifying invoices
- Honoring contracts
- Not taking advantage of another's ignorance

If you work 4 hours, you receive 4 hours' pay.
If you sell something, it must correspond to what was promised.

Opposing sin:

Fraud, theft, swindling.

B) Distributive Justice

Giving according to need and dignity

This governs how society, businesses, or the State distribute goods and opportunities.

Examples:

- Special attention to the disabled
- Help for large families
- Protection for the elderly
- Support for the unemployed

This is not blind egalitarianism, but recognizing real inequalities in order to sustain the vulnerable.

Christian principle:

Whoever needs more deserves greater protection.

C) Social Justice

Everyone contributes to the common good

Society cannot endure if each person lives only for themselves.

Examples:

- Just taxation
- Community participation
- Civic responsibility
- Business honesty
- National solidarity

The Church’s Social Doctrine insists that private property exists, but it has a social function.

Saint John Paul II reminded us:

Wealth without solidarity becomes idolatry.

IV. A Fundamental Key: Legality Is Not Always Morality

Here Catholic tradition offers a decisive teaching for our time:

Not everything legal is moral.

Not everything possible is good.

Today, societies may legalize:

- exploitation,
- abortion,
- euthanasia,
- usury,
- corruption disguised in policy.

But an unjust law does not transform evil into good.

Saint Thomas:

“An unjust law is no law at all in conscience.”

Therefore:

Morality always stands above human law.

V. The Values of Justice

When giving to neighbor becomes a path to holiness

Christian justice is not limited to “not stealing.”
It includes sharing.

What you have in excess while another lacks may become a moral obligation.

A) Corporal Works of Mercy

Material justice in action

- Feed the hungry
- Give drink to the thirsty
- Clothe the naked
- Shelter the pilgrim
- Visit the sick
- Visit prisoners
- Bury the dead

These works are not merely optional charity.
They are concrete expressions of justice and love.

> *"For I was hungry and you gave me food…" (Matthew 25:35).*

Christ identifies Himself with the needy.

B) Spiritual Works of Mercy

Justice of the soul

Economic help is not enough.

We must also:

- Teach the ignorant
- Give good counsel
- Correct those who err
- Comfort the sorrowful
- Forgive injuries

- Bear wrongs patiently
- Pray for the living and the dead

Today, in a culture that fears correction, warning someone who is destroying themselves is also justice.

Silence out of comfort can become a form of abandonment.

VI. Sins Against Justice

When the heart becomes disordered, society becomes corrupt

A) Personal Sins

1. Avarice

Loving money more than God.

> ***"For the love of money is the root of all evils" (1 Timothy 6:10).***

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2. Wastefulness

Spending irresponsibly while others lack necessities.

3. Gambling and disordered betting

When the desire for quick wealth replaces work, prudence, and responsibility.

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4. Absolute greed for profit

Living only to produce and consume.

Man’s worth comes from being a child of God, not from generating revenue.

B) Labor and Social Sins

Robbery

Taking what belongs to another.

Theft

Unjust possession.

Retention

Withholding what is owed.

Corruption

Manipulating decisions for personal gain.

Fraudulent claims

Lying to obtain benefit.

Today we would also add:

- corporate exploitation,
- unjust tax fraud,
- financial manipulation,
- labor trafficking,
- bribery,
- political corruption.

VII. Justice and Work: A Theology of Labor

Work is not a punishment; it is participation in God's creative work.

Therefore:

- The unjust employer sins.
- The dishonest worker sins.
- The corrupt politician sins.
- The irresponsible consumer may also sin.

Justice requires balance between:

productivity + dignity + solidarity

VIII. Justice Without Charity Can Become Cruel

But charity without justice is hypocrisy

The Church teaches that charity perfects justice; it does not replace it.

It is not enough to give alms if you exploit wages.
It is not enough to pray if you defraud.
It is not enough to donate if you corrupt.

Justice is the moral minimum.
Charity is the Christian maximum.

IX. Christ, King of Justice

Jesus Christ did not merely preach justice:

He IS Justice.

In Him we see:

- Truth without relativism
- Mercy without complicity
- Order without oppression
- Love without injustice

Therefore, every Christian must ask:

Am I just in my wages?

Am I just with my family?

Do I pay what I owe?

Do I help the needy?

Do I use my possessions as a steward or as an idol?

X. A Practical Pastoral Guide to Living Justice Today

At home:

- Share responsibilities
- Do not manipulate
- Keep your word

At work:

- Be honest
- Do not steal time
- Do not exploit or take advantage

In finances:

- Avoid irresponsible debt
- Practice generosity
- Help discreetly

In society:

- Vote with moral conscience
- Denounce corruption
- Promote human dignity

In spiritual life:

- Examine your conscience regarding money
- Confess injustices

- Make restitution if you have harmed others

XI. Conclusion: Justice Is Love with a Backbone

Justice is not an ideological trend.
It is an eternal virtue.

In a world where many demand rights but forget duties, the Christian is called to be light.

To be just is not merely to obey rules.
It is to reflect God's order in a wounded civilization.

Where justice exists, peace flourishes.

Where injustice reigns, social sin grows.

> ***"Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:33).***

Because in the end, we will not be judged by how much we accumulated…
But by how justly we loved.

Authentic justice begins when we understand that everything we have is a gift from God… and that one day we will have to give an account of how we used it.