

Lesson Five: Justice 2  
Or: Our Obligations to Societies

As we saw in the last section, justice is the virtue whereby we give others what we owe them. We have already discussed justice in relation to individuals (God and neighbor), as well as the proper relation between justice and the closely connected themes of love and mercy. In this chapter we will look at how we are to preserve our proper relationship to various groups of people. This is the topic of social justice.

**The Family**

The most basic and fundamental of all human societies is the family. Often times the family as such is disregarded, and moral attention is either restricted to the level of the individual, or is expanded to the level of larger communities. This is a grave mistake, for without the solid foundation of healthy families, both the individual (who is originally formed within the family) and the larger society (which is constituted by a multitude of families) will become disordered and dysfunctional. Consequently, it is crucial to look at what we each owe our families.

Firstly, what are the obligations of *children* in families? A common error is to assume that all children are mere recipients of familial benefits, without duties of their own. On the contrary, children have a debt to their family which must be paid as well as possible. Children owe their parents gratitude, respect, and deference, which should, under normal circumstances express itself through obedience. Children owe their siblings a special affection and loyalty. They especially owe their families time, for only by making time to be present can children contribute to the solidification of family relationships.

There is currently a popular misconception about families that presumes children will be estranged from their parents and rude to them, and that they will resent their siblings and only interact with them through quarrelling. Children are expected to take their family members for granted, or treat their families as an embarrassment. This model of the family goes directly against justice, and it is every Catholic's obligation to try and reform this image of the family, beginning with their own.

Secondly, what do *mothers* owe their families? In answer this question it is well to call upon the authority and insight of the late Pope John Paul II, in his treatment on the rights and role of women in society, in his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*.<sup>1</sup> The Holy Father begins by stating that the perfect model for women is to be found in Our Lady. She is the ideal of femininity. He goes on to affirm the right of women to be admitted to public positions and offices.

However, he also states that the good of women will never be truly promoted before clear recognition is "given to the value of their maternal and family role, by comparison with all other public roles and all other professions." John Paul explicitly emphasizes the "original and irreplaceable meaning of work in the home and in rearing children. Finally he declares that "the mentality which honors women more for their

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<sup>1</sup> 22, 23.

work outside the home than for their work within the family must be overcome... society should create and develop conditions favoring work in the home.”

To summarize, the Holy Father is calling attention to the nobility and absolute necessity of those women who dedicate themselves to rearing children and creating a family environment. How different is the Pope’s perspective from the usual one which greets “stay at home moms” in today’s mentality! Today full-time motherhood is considered tantamount to a failed life. “What does your Mom do?” “Oh, she doesn’t do anything. She’s just a stay-home mom. She doesn’t have a job.” Work as a housewife and mother is regarded as insignificant.

On the contrary, experience shows that this work is absolutely indispensable to the flourishing of family life and to the civilization as a whole. Stay at home mothers therefore have the most important and most difficult jobs; after all, whether society succeeds or collapses depends on the family, and the mother takes care of the family.

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* also sheds light on the important obligations of mothers to their families. It states that the prime educators of children are the parents, and that it’s practically impossible to substitute for them. It says that a home must be created where virtue, love, and holiness are going to flourish.<sup>2</sup> *So who’s going to do all this? Who’s going to care for the children, educate and form them, and create a proper home for them?*

This is not to say that mothers must never seek work outside the home. Certainly, there are instances when this choice is inevitable. Nonetheless, ideally the focus of mothers should be on that challenging task of home and family life. We must all do what we can to make society more conducive to and supportive of mothers carrying out their sacred vocation.

Thirdly, what do *fathers* owe their families? Like mothers, fathers must share in the role of forming and educating their children. To quote again from John Paul II: “Where social and cultural conditions so easily encourage a father to be less concerned with his family, or at any rate less involved in the work of education, efforts must be made to restore socially the conviction that the place and task of the father in and for the family is of unique and irreplaceable importance.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, fathers owe it to their families, to their wives and children, to be present to them, and concerned with their personal (not just material!) well-being. This age has often been called an age without fathers, due to the common failure of fathers to assume their responsibilities towards their families. For a father to forsake his family, or become uninvolved in his family, is not only a sin of cowardice; it is a sin of injustice, and one that brings great harm. “As experience teaches, the absence of a father causes psychological and moral imbalance and notable difficulties in family relationships.”<sup>4</sup>

Fathers must make time for their families. Certainly, fathers are normally called to work outside the home, but this work is never to be a cause of division or abandoning the family. Rather, career work is to be moderate, and always directed towards the promotion of the family’s stability and unity.

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<sup>2</sup> 2207

<sup>3</sup> *Familiaris Consortio*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

?????????Finally, what are the obligations of *spouses* towards each other?  
Spouses owe each other a debt of committed service and devotion?????????????

### **Our Nation**

The country to which we belong has the right to expect certain things from us as citizens. The privileges and benefits which accompany belonging to a specific nation also carry with it certain responsibilities, among them gratitude, honor and service.

Regarding government officials, we owe them a certain respect for their position. It has become commonplace to treat civil servants as fodder for all manner of contempt, ridicule, and defamation. This is an injustice which does disservice to public leaders as individuals and to the common good which they oversee. It is undoubtedly legitimate and often required that we make our criticisms known to government officials, or even work for their removal from power, but the mockery of those in authority unjustly undermines personal dignity and national welfare.

Also, we owe our nation loyalty and devotion. Of course, this does not mean that we must be blind to the injustice perpetuated by our country and its leaders. True patriotism demands that we seek to end all the injustice disfiguring our beautiful country, especially the legalized crime of abortion.

### **Other Nations**

We are also under particular obligations to foreign countries. We owe them our respect and just treatment. Just as we have a duty to never manipulate other persons as mere means to our own ends, we must also use the same principle when dealing with the various peoples of the earth. All nations are intrinsically valuable in themselves, and are not simply ways of getting what we want. Finally, we owe it to other nations to lend support and aid in times of need (although never in such a way as would be really damaging to our own country).

### **Future Generations**

Realizing that this world is not only our home, but also the dwelling for all humanity which descends from us, it is critical to see to it that we do right by those coming generations. Hence we owe it to them to be careful stewards of the earth's material resources, but more importantly, we have a duty to pass on to future generations the transmission of spiritual goods in our possession: truth, Catholic cultural heritage, virtue, etc...

### **The Church**

The Church is the supernatural society to which we, as Catholics, belong and from which we receive the salvific grace of Christ. In return for these heavenly gifts, we are obliged to make a return to this spiritual organization which exists to sanctify us. Practically speaking, this means we are to be obedient to Church teaching on matters of faith and morals. We are also to support Church officials – the Pope, our bishops, our priests and deacons – through our finances, our friendship, and especially our prayers. We must also see to it that we are obedient to the pastoral decrees of the Pope and bishops, and that we lend our respect and our aid to our parish priests. To fail in these

duties is to fail in gratitude and in justice, and it will lead to the distress of Our Holy Mother Church.

### **Work**

One area of life which should be discussed under the heading of justice is the area of work. Many would be surprised to hear that work is one of our obligations to God, to neighbor, and to society as a whole, but such is the fact. We remember that from the beginning, back in the Garden of Eden, God gave man dominion over all the earth, and commanded him to subdue it.<sup>5</sup> Hence, He calls us to cooperate with Him and with each other in bringing this world to perfection. This is the beautiful gift of work. Our work, whatever it is that we do (student, business man, stay-home-mom, receptionist, sanitation engineer, etc...) is not simply for the sake of earning money. Rather, it is for the sake of making this world a better place.

Perhaps you have never considered how your job helps make the world a better place. Now is the time: ask yourself, "What good does my job do?" and look for the deeper significance to your labors. Once you find that good purpose, that deeper significance, cling to it tightly; don't ever forget it. Often times our jobs are tedious, unpleasant, and disheartening. During those times, if we maintain a conscious awareness of the good we are doing by our jobs, we can stay motivated to do quality work.

Also, when we find that good purpose to our employment, it helps us comprehend the fact that giving a weak effort at work is an injustice on many levels. Not only is it a cheating of our neighbors (in the person of our employer and coworkers), it is also a failure to serve the society as a whole and a refusal of God's commandment to make the world a better place.

(What if you can't find any purpose to your work? What if your job really doesn't seem to make the world a better place? If that is the case, then it is time for some very careful examination, because to be engaged in a useless or destructive task is unjust to God and to society.)

This stress on the importance of noble work is not meant to imply that our jobs are everything. How we view work must be in proper proportion to the rest of our lives. For example, if our work is detracting from the time we owe our families, then of course in justice we have to back off and be more balanced with our career schedules. But work is still an important dimension of justice, and as such demands our attentive reflection.

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<sup>5</sup> Gn 1:28