Cardinal Virtues - Acting Justly

Teacher Background

St Augustine identified four cardinal virtues which are prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance.

1. Prudence
   Prudence makes it possible for people to choose that act which here and now best helps them to move in the direction of their final end. The parts of prudence include reasoning, understanding, circumspection, foresight, docility, caution, and memory. But the entire process of prudence has its source in understanding. Without understanding human nature and the fundamental precepts of natural law, prudence is not possible.

2. Justice
   Justice is the virtue that perfects the will. Unless all people are by nature equal before God, there is no natural requirement on humanity's part to be just. Justice regulates the voluntary actions whereby one person is brought into contact with another. Justice is divided into distributive, commutative (particular) and legal (general) justice.

3. Fortitude
   Fortitude is a general virtue in that it implies a certain firmness of mind, which is necessary for the practice of any of the virtues. Fortitude is the virtue that enables us to curb our fears and to moderate our daring. It is the virtue that binds the will to the good of reason in the face of the greatest evils.

4. Temperance
   Temperance is principally, but not solely, concerned with the pleasures of food and drink and about sexual pleasures - those pleasures connected with the preservation of human life. The use of such pleasurable things must be judged according to the needs of this life. This calls for prudence, above all.

Brokenness within relationships

Every relationship depends on two persons to make it work. Human freedom and frailty are factors that impinge significantly on our relationships. There is constant risk of poor communication and misunderstanding, of personal jealousy and pride and of self-centredness. Even such human conditions as tiredness and illness can affect how we relate. Our individual weakness can lead to brokenness in our relationships – within ourselves, with God and with other people. There is a constant need for reconciliation in our lives. Only when we reach out to each other in forgiveness can we find healing.

Jesus as Healer

In the synoptic gospels, Jesus’ healing ministry has a very prominent place. Wherever he goes, the sick are brought to him. Jesus touches them and heals them. Some of these cures are quite miraculous. Frequently Jesus reaches more deeply into people’s lives, makes them aware of their sinfulness, and brings spiritual as well as bodily healing to them. Jesus does not simply use healing as a sign of his divine power. Rather he is full of compassion for people, moved by their brokenness and wishes to bring wholeness back into their lives. This is particularly evident in Luke’s account of Jesus’ healings.
Acting Justly

Teacher Background

Justice is the second of the cardinal virtues. The virtues "are powers rooted in the presence of God, in grace, that enable us to establish and nurture healthy and life-giving relationships with God, our neighbour, the world, and the self" (Catholicism, pp. 926-7). Justice, giving others what they deserve, takes practice. It also takes prudence, the first of the cardinal virtues. Justice flows directly out of prudence. Prudence tells us the right thing to do in a particular circumstance. Prudence gives us the truth, God shows us the way, and we act. Justice is doing that right thing.

The Latin word, Justus, is based on a noun, jus, which means, "that which is binding or obligatory." The Law of Moses was binding upon all Jews. However, following God's law, revealed through Moses, was not meant to be a mindless act. Jews have always felt the Law is a living, growing law that requires human discernment.

Traditionally, justice is often broken into three broad categories, all of which address how we deal with each other, based on our understanding of what God calls us to do:

**Commutative justice.** This exists in our relationships with others and covers a broad range from friendships to political relations between countries.

**Distributive justice.** This deals with how society treats individuals especially the most weak and covers areas like fair wages and the distribution of resources.

**Social justice.** This used to be called legal justice, and relates to the common good of society. It addresses issues such as poverty, health care and less developed nations, as well as the legal system.

Living justly means acting justly. Knowing the right thing to do (prudence) means little if the right thing isn't done. Actions, right actions, are what justice is all about. And right actions consist of more than just our dealings with God. Our dealings with God flow out to all those who belong to God. So justice means acting rightly toward others.

Some useful sources for further reading: Catechism of the Catholic Church; The New Jerome Biblical Commentary; The Collegeville Bible Commentary; Catholicism; Summa Theologica; The Modern Catholic Encyclopaedia; and The Harper Collins Encyclopaedia of Catholicism.

The address of Pope John Paul II on World Peace Day 2002 was entitled: No Peace Without Justice. No justice without Forgiveness. This address contains some useful insights about justice. It can be accessed online at: