Justice in the Christian Tradition

Teacher Background


Commutative justice calls for fundamental fairness in all agreements and exchanges between individuals or private social groups. It demands respect for the equal human dignity of all persons in economic transactions, contracts, or promises. For example, workers owe their employers diligent work in exchange for their wages. Employers are obligated to treat their employees as persons, paying them fair wages in exchange for the work done and establishing conditions and patterns of work that are truly human. http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx (#69).

Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet. The Second Vatican Council stated: "The right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. The fathers and doctors of the Church held this view, teaching that we are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of our superfluous goods". Minimum material resources are an absolute necessity for human life. If persons are to be recognised as members of the human community, then the community has an obligation to help fulfil these basic needs unless an absolute scarcity of resources makes this strictly impossible. http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx (#70)

Justice also has implications for the way the larger social, economic, and political institutions of society are organised. Social justice implies that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of society and that society has a duty to enable them to participate in this way. http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx (#71)

Ten themes can be identified in scripture pertaining to justice:

a) the kingdom of God is at hand (Lk 4:16-21 and 7:18-23)
b) the wisdom of the poor (Sirach 13:1-23)
c) meeting the poor, meeting Christ (Mt 25:31-46)
d) a God who is known through the liberation of slaves (Ex 2:23 - 3:20)
e) Christ took on the condition of a servant (Phil 1:2-11)
f) the word of a prophet confronts injustices and inequalities (Am 5:1 - 6:7)
g) God listens to the cry of an oppressed woman (Gen 6:1-5 and 21:8-21)
h) laws in favour of the poor (the three legislative Codes of the Pentateuch)
i) seek first the kingdom (Lk 12:16-32)
j) no more poor among you or sharing of all your goods (Acts 4:32-5:11)