**The Cardinal Virtue of Justice**

Justice is the Cardinal Virtue that inclines us to good relations with others. Sometimes people consider justice simply an external matter of what we do that impacts others. Often, there is a bright and dark contrast between right and wrong. That is a partial picture. The external focus needs to include how our habits, character, and overall direction in life shape our relations with others. Justice begins inside us.

Aquinas described justice as “to each his due” or what they deserve. When the virtue of justice prevails, peace and harmony are present. To Aquinas, the just person has an internal disposition to give each their due. The catch is, what is due to the other? We have the scripture-based Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you have done unto you” (Matt.7:12). We have the Great Commandment of Love God and Love Neighbor. But it is not that simple. Think of the playground competition where one child firmly sees something as “Mine” while another just as firmly, “No, Mine!” We also experience the emotion of “he deserved it,” reflecting on some unpleasant impact on another in the name of justice.

We are social animals. Aristotle made that claim by saying that living a good life is done with others. In thinking about who the “others” are in Aristotle’s claim, he was going beyond a local group. He believed that humanity is interdependent. Living a good life is not just being in harmony with those like us. It is in harmony with humanity. With our 21st-century connection to the world, that integration as social animals is vast. Increasingly we use the term “common good.” The Vatican II document, *Gaudium et spes,* defined the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and easily.” In society, the desire for the common good generates rules for living in that society. Families do the same thing.

Living the virtue of justice can be challenging. Like the kids on the playground, entire societies may see things differently. That’s where we must strive to build an informed conscience—individually and socially. To do that, a second Cardinal Virtue comes in: prudence. Prudence guides us to “see rightly.” With prudence, we recognize extremes and elect to return to a moral middle ground. Whenever we are ready to scream, “Unjust,” we need to invite prudence to guide us to the common good.