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## CHAPTER VII

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# Characteristics of Social Justice

### *First Characteristics: Only By Members of Groups*

It might be good in order to make the notion of Social Justice clearer, to compare its characteristics with those of individual justice which are already well-known. The first great mark of Social Justice is that it cannot be performed by individuals as individuals, but only by individuals *as members of groups*. Let us give an example. When John Jones pays a debt to Bill Smith he is acting as an individual. *He* contracted the debt and *he* is paying it. We would be tempted to say it is nobody else's business.

### *Example of Indirect or "Commanded" Act of Social Justice*

But there is more to it than that. When he pays his debt, he is continuing a laudable tradition in his society, that debts are paid when they come due. By paying it promptly he contributes to the conviction which is prevalent in his society, that debts are to be repaid promptly. He not only furnishes a payment for his private debt, which is whatever sum of money he happens to owe, but he also contributes payment of a debt which he owes to his society, namely, support of the principle that at the proper time debts are to be paid. Moreover, when Bill Smith gets paid, he is in a position to pay his own debts to somebody else; and thus the healthy tradition of debt paying is still further strengthened. Moreover, the con-

fidence which men have in each other's integrity, a confidence upon which all our social living together is built, is certainly promoted by the fact that both men discharged their obligations when those obligations became due.

Now this "tradition," this "confidence" are *social* things, marks of the society as a whole, which set off that society of honest men from other societies of thieves or cheats or confidence men. These acts then, insofar as they contribute to the health of that society, are *indirect* acts of Social Justice (promoting the Common Good) although they are *directly* acts of individual justice. Now notice that the individual justice is done as an individual. It is John Jones or Bill Smith who pays the debt of John Jones or Bill Smith. But when by their action they contributed to the health of the whole society, it was not merely as John Jones or Bill Smith that they acted but as *members of that society*.

### ***Example of Direct Act of Social Justice***

This is even more clear if we were to describe not an indirect act of Social Justice but a direct one. Suppose for instance, that John Jones' and Bill Smith's society have a long tradition of *not* paying debts. As a result of this fact that nobody ever pays debts, everybody is suspicious of everybody else, and no one will let out money or goods even in an emergency of his neighbor.

Emergencies, however, have a habit of coming up, and people suffer. Likewise, all jobs that are too big financially for one person, go undone, because no one will trust another sufficiently to go into partnership. The consequence is that the economic life of the community as a whole is suffering more and more; and the people are gradually being reduced to destitution.

We will suppose that John Jones notices this condition, and sees what the cause of it is: the whole group is not honest. He sets out, then, to change the group—to reorganize it into an honest community.

### ***The Wrong Way: Individualistic***

The question is: What can John Jones do as an individual? He might, for instance, decide to give the community "a good example" of honesty. That is, he might lend out all *his* money to others, thus showing that he trusts them, and undertake always to pay his debts exactly on time. It sounds good; but, remembering that what is wrong with that community is that everyone considers it *normal* to be dishonest, we might readily calculate the

chances that John Jones' heroic honesty and trust would have of reforming the community. When he starts handing out his money freely, it is rather obvious that most of his neighbors will try to grab off as much of it as they can while the grabbing is good. When he is finally reduced to poverty, it is unlikely that his example will attract many followers.

His mistake was to attack a *social* evil with only *individual* means.

### ***The Right Way: Social***

How should he have gone about it?

First of all, he should recognize frankly that he, as an *individual*, is *helpless* before the accumulated evil of the unjust *system in force*. Then he should go out for help. If he is wise he will not tackle the whole community at once, but will look around among his friends or acquaintances and try to find other people who are as dissatisfied as he himself is with the poverty ridden condition of their community.

With these chosen souls he would sit down to study the sad condition of their community and to see what could be done about it. When it became clear that dishonesty was the big obstacle in the way of a good life in the community, they could very well begin to study the necessity of honesty in their own relations, especially with each other. When all of them are convinced that honesty is absolutely essential to a good life together, it will become possible for them to agree among themselves that they will trust each other. Furthermore, they can agree to stand together against anyone of their number who goes back on his promise to be good. Once this is accomplished they can begin helping each other out, lending money when necessity arises, or joining forces when big jobs come along that they cannot handle individually. Furthermore, since they recognize that it is a social problem which affects the whole community they will be careful not to help anybody outside their "reform" group (which can be trusted to be honest), unless this outside person *joins the group* and himself takes the obligation to meet his just debts.

And since they know very well what false ideas the community has on honesty, they will make it a condition of joining their group that the newcomers study the necessity of honesty as much as they themselves studied it when they started out—in other words, they will attempt to *form* their new members to honesty. Actually they are setting up a new "social conscience" to take the



place of the old falsified “social conscience” which had made dishonesty a normal thing.

Without going further into this example, it is already evident that in this *social way of action*—this *organization of the community*—something can really be done. These organized men are going to show to their disorganized community an example, not of going heroically broke as a testimony to honesty, but of arriving at economic security by the operation of honesty.

*This* example will attract imitators—in fact, the smaller group will deliberately go out to look for imitators and train them to imitate.

Here you have the difference between individual action and social action and it is clear that Social Justice is never done by an individual as an individual, but only by an individual in cooperation, in organization with others.

### ***Second Characteristic: It Takes Time***

A second characteristic of Social Justice (which comes directly from the fact that it can be done only by groups) is that it moves slowly and gradually. When John Jones owes Bill Smith fifteen dollars on January 2nd, he must pay Bill Smith fifteen dollars on January 2nd or be doing wrong. Individual justice is done all at once at a definite time. But not so with Social Justice. In the example above of the change from a dishonest to an honest community it is clear that the process took some time—probably a long time.

An even better example is the one that Pope Pius XI proposed; namely, that of an individual employer who was helpless to insure justice. The remedy which the Pope suggested was that this employer had the duty to organize with the other employers so as to prevent unjust competition and permit fair treatment to the workers.

Here is an interesting point: When the process of organization begins it is clear that the employer in the Holy Father’s example is not paying a living wage. Furthermore, and this is important, *he will not pay a living wage* until he has succeeded in reorganizing the industry in cooperation with the other employers. For only in the measure in which that reorganization succeeds, will his helplessness to pay a living wage disappear. Yet from the very moment that he *begins* reorganizing that industry with his fellow employers, and all during the time which it takes to reorganize it, he is practicing Social Justice.

When he hears such doctrine, an individualistic moralist will howl to high heaven. He will say that the payment of a sub-living wage is unjust, is wrong; and that the employer is not allowed to cooperate in that injustice. Direct cooperation in evil, he will say, is wrong in all circumstances, and cannot be permitted. Either the employer must pay a living wage, or get out of the dirty business.

Evidently a man who would maintain so intransigent an opposition to evil would have a thirst for justice, but if he should succeed in driving out of that business the only employer who wants to reorganize it, it is difficult to see what good he has accomplished.

Pope Pius XI, in the same discourse on the fundamental instability of human institutions which was quoted earlier, has this to say about the necessary time lag in social work: "To tend to perfection, but to do what is possible: there you have the program to which human forces are permitted to pretend. If God demands something more, then He does it Himself..."

This compromise with reality, this willingness to accomplish one's end slowly and painfully, this "collaboration" in an evil institution until the change can be accomplished, this "remaining in a dirty business" in order to clean it up—all this is hateful to good people who have not grasped the essence of Social Justice.

In the past, these individualists, or "radical non-participationists" as they like to call themselves (from their doctrine of "radical non-participation in evil") could be excused for their attitude, because no one was very clear on how a social problem could be attacked anyhow; and their theory of heroic resistance and even martyrdom was about as good as any. Now, however, that the doctrine of Social Justice has been completed under the inspired pen of Pope Pius XI, many of these good people are going to have to change their fundamental assumptions and ideas. If they do not, they will find themselves willy-nilly "collaborating in evil"—the great evil of social injustice.

### ***Third Characteristic: Nothing is Impossible***

Another characteristic of Social Justice, which was already pointed out in Chapter Two, is that in Social Justice there is *never any such thing as helplessness*. No problem is ever too big or too complex, no field is ever too vast, for the methods of this Social Justice. Problems that were agonizing in the past and were simply dodged, even by serious and virtuous people, can now be solved with ease by any school child. Lest this statement seem too extreme, let us take an actual example of such an insoluble problem of the past.

### ***A Common Problem***

The following problem was proposed on a national radio hookup:

I know many businessmen, lawyers, physicians, who lament the trend to the unethical in the special worlds in which they operate. They tell me that the tide is running against them, that too many of their rivals have reduced business ethics and professional ethics to three principles: 1. Everybody is doing it; 2. If you don't do it, someone else will; and 3. You can't do business nowadays with old-fashioned principles. Especially in the metropolitan cities, they say, the degeneration is obvious. They blame this set of persons and that, but they all seem to agree that decline, if not actual decay, is upon us.

"It's easy enough," they add, "for you preachers to tell us to stand firm, to hew to the line, and all that. But we have families to support, homes to maintain, food and clothing to buy .... We must do what the others do or be sunk. The crowd is running all one way; we cannot forever buck the stream!"

This is a sincere and straightforward statement of a problem as common as any to be met at the present time. In fact, it is an understatement: to complete the picture we should add that the laws of our secularized society are usually in favor of the crowd which is running all one way! It is not too hard to see that this is identically the same problem which Pope Pius XI presented in a passage which we have quoted several times: "It happens all too frequently, under the salary system, that the individual employer is helpless to insure justice."

The radio preacher happened to be a rather pronounced individualist, and the best answer he could give to his own problem was the following: "Right is right if nobody does it. Wrong is wrong if everybody does it. What the businessman needs, and what the professional man needs is a new declaration of independence."

### ***No Solution***

Notice that the first part of this answer dodges the question. The businessman had said in effect, that he as an individual was helpless to insure justice. He knew the system was wrong, but he did not know how to buck it. The only information contained in the answer was that there *is* such a thing as right and wrong. If the



businessman had not known *that* perfectly well *before* he stated his problem, he certainly would not have called his system *wrong*!

The second part of the reply is more to the point; but that “new declaration of independence” which sounds so nice in a speech, is *precisely* what the businessman meant by the last three words of his complaint: “We must do what the others do *or be sunk*.” This certainly is not much help!

It is difficult to see what other answers could have been given from an individualistic point of view. The speaker could of course have told the businessman to “use his own judgment,” or to “do the best he can,” but this once more is not much help; and the businessman is looking for help. The only other solution would be to tell the businessman that since he *has to* make a living, and *has to* pay his debts and meet his other obligations, he should go ahead with his business, since its injustice is something which he cannot help, and which is only indirectly willed. This may indeed offer the businessman a chance to save his individual soul while precariously balancing on a “good intention” in the midst of evil, but it certainly does nothing to remedy the evil.

### ***The Right Answer***

No other answer, except a frank admission that the problem is insoluble, could be given from an *individualistic* point of view. The answer which Pope Pius XI gave to his own statement of the same problem was not individualistic at all—it was *social*; namely, that the employer who found himself thus helpless to insure justice *had a duty to organize, among the employers, institutions* which would make the practice of justice possible. How this organization would be carried out we have seen in the simple example of social action above (the unjust community).

Once more notice how directly and clearly the Pope solved that problem which was *absolutely insoluble* to the radio speaker who had an individualistic philosophy. That is why individuals, at least from now on, will not be very bright. Not only that, but they will be downright wrong—failing against Social Justice.

### ***Fourth Characteristic: Eternal Vigilance***

Another characteristic of Social Justice is that *its work is never finished*. This goes beyond what was said above about the time-lag, about the slowness, with which Social Justice is accomplished. The point is that human institutions are always changing, even the most fundamental ones, in the words of Pope Pius XI already quoted,

and these changes must always be directed to serve the Common Good. We, as human beings, cannot possibly foresee all the consequences of our actions. The inevitable result is that many of these consequences bring about unforeseen evil results; and as we go through life, acting always without ultimate realization of the consequences of our actions, these evil results pile up, one on top of the other, until many aspects of our social life are disorganized—have become unjust. When we try to correct that injustice even by social action it is clear that our actions once more will have consequences which we cannot foresee, and that many of those new consequences will also be evil.

Besides that, there are a lot of other people who are not even trying to be good; and the evil consequences of their acts also are continually piling up in all the institutions of life. The result is that Social Justice is not only a full-time job as we have seen before, but it is also an *all-time* job.

### ***A Digression***

Here we ought to digress a little bit to show how Pope Pius XI, who brought the theory of Social Justice to completion, provided also an instrument whereby the Christian world could perform this full-time, and all-time, job.

This instrument, which Pope Pius XI called Catholic Action, was both *world-wide*, in order to be able to face the greatest and most widespread of the modern evils, and at the same time was *specialized* in every walk of life so that in all that vast organization, not a single “amateur” would be at work. When a doctor for instance, or a banker talks to a hall full of workers on the dangers of Communism, we may safely presume that all he knows about his subject is what he read in the papers; but when a worker himself talks to fellow-workers about the dangers of Communism, he knows the hopes and fears, the injustices, the resentments that have made Communism so attractive to the working masses of the world.

Communism is only one example of such widespread evils. The institution of birth control, to take only one more example, is every bit as widespread, and probably as devastating in the damage which it is doing to Christian civilization.

Many older Catholic organizations have not seen what Pope Pius XI was trying to do with Catholic Action, and they spend a great deal of their time trying to get themselves called “Catholic Action” without having the means to accomplish its purposes. If they would keep their eyes upon the two extremes pointed out



here, namely a *world-wide* organization capable of attacking directly the greatest evils of the present day, and at the same time a movement which has *specialized competence* inside every natural medium of life, they would not make this mistake.

It can be seen at a glance that if Catholic Action were organized according to the directions and norms which Pope Pius XI laid down, and which the present Holy Father is continuing, then the work of organization of every aspect of life, whose sheer vastness terrorizes or discourages the individualist, would be greatly facilitated.

Not, however, that Catholic Action works directly in the social order or the “temporal order” as it could better be called. It does not. What it does is to *organize all* Catholics and keep them *formed and ready*, so that when the time comes for them to enter into the reorganization of any aspect of social life, they have the practical unity, and they have the specialized competence, to do it, and to do it well.

No one who appreciates the concept of Social Justice, as it has come from the pen of Pope Pius XI, can afford to neglect his other concept of Catholic Action. They complete and explain each other.

#### ***Fifth Characteristic: Effectiveness***

A kind of corollary of the characteristic of Social Justice which we have just seen—namely, the characteristic that it is never finished—is that one’s work for the Common Good *must be effective*. It is not enough to do something with “a good intention” for the Common Good, and then to turn one’s back. One must “keep his eye on the ball,” and whenever the ball is not in the best position, one must work to put it there. This means that the final criterion of whether or not Social Justice is being practiced, is whether or not society is good. To put it in Pope Pius XI’s own words, from Paragraph 51 and 52 of the Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*:

If Social Justice is satisfied, the result will be an intense activity in economic life as a whole, pursued in tranquillity and order. This activity will be proof of the health of the social body, just as the health of the human body is recognized in the undisturbed regularity and perfect efficiency of the whole organism.

But Social Justice cannot be said to have been satisfied as long as workingmen are denied a salary that will enable them to secure proper sustenance for themselves and for their family; as long as they are denied the opportunity of acquiring a modest

fortune and forestalling the plague of universal pauperism; as long as they cannot make suitable provision through public or private insurance for old-age, for periods of illness, and for unemployment.

***Sixth Characteristic:  
You Can't "Take It Or Leave It Alone"***

Another corollary of this characteristic of Social Justice (that it is never finished) is that it embraces a *rigid obligation*. In the past when it was not seen very clearly how the duty of reform would fall upon the individual conscience, the idea became widespread that reform was a kind of special vocation, like that to the priesthood, or the religious life. It was all very good for those people who liked that sort of thing, but if one did not like that sort of thing, he left it alone.

All that is changed! Since we know that everyone, even the weakest and youngest of human beings, can work *directly* on the Common Good at the level where he lives, and since each one "has the duty" to reorganize his own natural medium of life whenever it makes the practice of individual virtue difficult or impossible, then every single person must face the direct and strict obligation of reorganizing his life and the life around him, so that the individual perfection both of himself and of his immediate neighbors will become possible. This idea should not be taken alone, it should be held only in conjunction with the characteristics we have already seen, namely, that one cannot practice Social Justice alone as an individual, but only with others; and that the realization of Social Justice takes time.

***A Footnote to a Chapter of Ethics***

Now for a final remark, which is not exactly a characteristic of Social Justice, but rather a consequence of our present understanding of this virtue. In the past, when the way in which Social Justice could be realized was not too well understood, what is known to moralists as "the principle of double effect" was applied to the social order as well as to the individual order. This principle runs about as follows: "It is permitted to perform an action in itself good or indifferent, which has a double or multiple effect, namely, one or the other good effect and one or the other bad, on condition: first, that the good effect is immediate; secondly, that the end of the agent is honest; and thirdly, that there exists a proportionately grave cause." This principle is nec-

essary to free the individual conscience from responsibility for evil effects which are thus “indirectly” willed, and so permit the accomplishment of the normal and necessary duties of life. Its ultimate basis is, of course, the absence of power to impede the evil effect: “No one is held to the impossible; hence, no one, if he does not do that which he cannot do, sins by omission.”

When for example a doctor can stop an otherwise fatal hemorrhage *only* by ligating a blood vessel which at the same time sustains the life of a non-viable fetus, the fact of the matter is that the life of the un-born child is then simply behind his control and hence outside his responsibility; so that when he ligates the blood vessel to stop the hemorrhage, and the un-born child dies as a consequence, there is nothing more to be said or done. If some means were open to his art to preserve that life after the ligature, the responsibility of the surgeon would still be engaged and he would have to try to save that life.

### ***How About the Social Order?***

Now comes the crucial question: Is this absence of power to impede the evil effect, ever verified in the social order? We have seen the answer above: no problem can ever be too big, too complex, too widespread, too vast for Social Justice to tackle. There is in the field of Social Justice no such thing as an impossible situation. The conclusion is that the principle “of double effect” does not belong in the social order in the same way that it belongs in the individual order. We have seen this already in the example of Social Justice which Pope Pius XI cited. His “individual employer” was “helpless to insure justice.” In the field of *individual* justice, therefore, that is the end of the story. Nothing more is to be said. The employer simply goes on paying an unjust wage (*materially* unjust) for the very simple reason that he is *helpless* to do anything else. But how about the *social* problem, the fact that his industry is badly organized and thus forces this helplessness upon him. In this social field there is no helplessness whatever. He can change the industry (by social, organized action) whenever he wants to start organizing, and he had better not wait too long because the words of the Sovereign Pontiff are explicit: “*He has the duty.*”

Another example: Suppose a senator is faced by a bill which he judges necessary for the Common Good, but which has a “rider” attached to it which he thinks to be unjust.

In individual justice he is permitted to vote for that measure which he has judged necessary, despite the fact that in so doing he



also permits the unjust rider to become law. This latter effect is willed by him only “indirectly” insofar as he cannot safeguard the Common Good without permitting it. Formerly, we would have thought that that, too, was the end of the story, as for the surgical operation outlined above. He need give the unjust effect no further thought, because he was helpless to prevent its occurrence.

Now, however, we know differently. He can vote for the necessary bill as before, but it was a social organization (legislative procedure) which linked together that necessary bill and the unjust rider. It was this social organization, this system of law, which prevented him from doing full justice—that is from safeguarding the Common Good completely by the exclusion of the rider from the bill which was necessary. Faced with this helplessness, he has the duty to organize socially against it. That is, he must after the passage of the bill, or even before it, if that is possible, round up sufficient support among the other senators to defeat the rider or to repeal it. This process may take a long time, but he *must keep working at it to be just*.

