

CATHOLIC

Q & A

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What is a virtue? What are the cardinal virtues? What are the different aspects of justice? What does the Church teach about Catholic social doctrine and the principle of subsidiarity?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches in **Part Three -Chapter One- Article 7**, that a virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself. The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers; he pursues the good and chooses it in concrete actions.

Human virtues make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good. The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and the seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with the divine.

Virtues are the connecting thread between the powers that are given to man and the actions that he performs. Animals on the other hand act by instinct and do not acquire virtuous habits. Man therefore is substantially different from the animals, for he can develop the habits seeking the good, which is virtue, or he can develop the habit for evil, which is vice.

Four virtues play a pivotal role and accordingly are called “cardinal”; all other virtues are grouped around them. They are: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance. “If anyone loves righteousness, [Wisdom’s] labors are virtues; for she teaches temperance and prudence, justice, and courage.” (Wisdom 8:7). These virtues are praised under other names in many passages of Scripture.

Justice is the moral virtue that consists in the constant and firm will to give due to God and neighbor. Justice toward God is called the “virtue of religion.” Justice toward men disposes one to respect the rights of each and to establish in human relationships the harmony that promotes equity with regard to persons and to the common good. Justice between individuals in society is called commutative justice. The justice that we as individuals give to the State is called obedience to law. What the State owes to us as individual citizens is called distributive justice.

Catholic social doctrine deals with the right relationship between the individual and the state and begins with the principle of subsidiarity. This principle is taught in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nn. 1883-1885) as follows:

“Socialization also presents dangers. Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of subsidiarity, according to which ‘a community of higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.’Subsidiarity is opposed to all forms of collectivism. It sets limits for state intervention.”

Subsidiarity simply means that fulfillment of human needs begins at the lowest level possible, starting with the individual. Only when necessary should social welfare turn to higher levels of society, and that means that government is the very last resort for the working of social justice.

The Church has always recognized that the temptation for the state is to take complete control of a nation’s economy, thereby in effect making the people dependent on it rather than themselves.

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum* condemned excessive taxation that amounts to public interference with the productive activity of the multitude.

The Second Vatican Council teaches: “Private ownership or some kind of dominion over material goods provides everyone with a wholly necessary area of independence, and should be recognized as an extension of human freedom.” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.71)

Nowhere in papal teachings or other magisterial statements do you find endorsement or recommendation of the welfare state, or for forced distribution of income, or for ever-widening “entitlements.” *Additional Sources-The Wanderer*

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