



## THEOLOGY CORNER

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*Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation*

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### “What is the Catholic View on Duty to Country as Citizens?”

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As many of us prepare to celebrate Independence Day with barbecues, fireworks, and trips to the lake, let us specifically reflect at this time on why Americans should express their patriotism through gratitude and reverence to our country. Do we have a duty to our country as citizens? Are we indebted to our country? Moreover, what does this have to do with our citizenship in heaven? In order to answer these questions, we have to shift our perspective from our typical use of the term debt. This term usually correlates to the idea of monetary debt. But there is another sense in which we use the term – something akin to the debt you feel toward your parents or friends. Debt, in the traditional sense, is understood in relation to justice. To be “just” is simply to render what is due to someone.

There are three categories of justice. Consider, credit card debt, for example. Paying the creditor back would be fulfilling what is called *commutative justice*, which involves keeping the agreed upon terms of an exchange between two individual parties. There is also another kind of justice called *distributive justice* which has to do with a larger body (i.e., family, government, community) ensuring that individual citizens receive an equitable portion of goods (e.g., education, security, clean water, etc.). But when it comes to duty to our country, the kind of debt that we owe is called *general justice*, which is the opposite of distributive justice. In other words, while distributive justice pertains to the larger body giving what is due to the individual, general justice pertains to the individual giving what is due to the larger body.

The debt that an individual owes to their parents, which is communicated in the fourth commandment “honor thy father and thy mother” comes from the *benefits* that we received from them (e.g., our lives, protection, shelter, food, etc.). As you can imagine, there is an infinite debt that we owe to God in this regard, and we fulfill this general justice through worship (we call this justice toward God the virtue of “religion”). But there is a sort of middle ground when it comes to debt to our country who also protects us under the law both domestically and foreign, and gives us access to healthcare, education, etc. Therefore, for the common good of society, it is our duty as citizens of our country to do our part in “giving back” by paying taxes, defending our country, voting for worthy politicians, voting on just laws, among other things (“Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s...” - Matt 22:21).

Now where our faith really comes into the picture is the second half of the verse from Matthew where Jesus tells us that we should render “to God the things that are God’s.” We know that we certainly benefitted from the help of our parents, and we currently benefit from the help of our country and local community, but there is nobody we benefit from more than God himself. It is for this reason that St. Paul says, “But our commonwealth (citizenship) is in heaven, and from it we await our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Phil 3:20). It is also for this reason that the Catechism calls us “resident aliens” of our own nations (CCC, 2240). Our permanent dwelling place, so to speak, is in heaven. That is to say, our citizenship on earth is transitory, but our citizenship in heaven is eternal (2 Cor 4:18). Thus, we are forever indebted to God for giving us a participatory citizenship in heaven which dispenses an infinite good to its members.

As you can see, there are degrees to the level of justice that must be satisfied, and our duty towards God is paradigmatic of our duty to our parents and surely to our duty to country. For just as we render to God his due by a reciprocation of love through worship and adoration, in a similar way, we render what is due to our country by loving its citizens and contributing to the common good of the society in which you take part. Let us, then, celebrate the Fourth of July in thanksgiving for the birth of our nation, let us ask for God’s help in preserving our country while also ridding it of its evils, as we make our pilgrimage through this earthly citizenship, and look forward to our eternal citizenship in its entirety – in perfect relationship with the community of Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. May God bless each one of us abundantly, and may God bless America.

**Justice:** Defined by the Christian tradition as rendering to each what is due. We judge whether an action is just by whether we have rendered to another what is due to him.

**Commutative Justice:** Concerns the interactions (what is being given and what is received) between individuals according to a kind of equality. In buying and selling, for example, what is typically due depends on the value of the things being exchanged and the terms of the exchange agreed upon by the two parties.

**General Justice:** Concerns the relationships between individuals and a larger “body” (the family, community, government, etc.), specifically what the individual owes to the community based on what is established by the rightful authority (we must pay our taxes, obey traffic rules, serve on juries when called, etc.).

**Distributive Justice:** Concerns the treatment of individual citizens by the larger “body,” ensuring they receive not only their equitable portion of commonly held goods (like water, electricity, and transportation) but also equitable access to common benefits (like security, education, and prosperity).

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**CCC 2239** - "It is the duty of citizens to contribute along with the civil authorities to the good of society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom. the love and service of one's country follow from the duty of gratitude and belong to the order of charity. Submission to legitimate authorities and service of the common good require citizens to fulfill their roles in the life of the political community."

**CCC 2246** - "It is a part of the Church's mission "to pass moral judgments even in matters related to politics, whenever the fundamental rights of man or the salvation of souls requires it."