

# Just Being?

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This evening I am first going to talk to you about Being (which is never “merely being”), then about being human (which should be just), and finally about how we struggle to be truly human beings and truly just in contemporary societies. The exciting part comes at the end, but I need to lay some deep foundations. And nothing is deeper than being.

## I. Just Being

What is “Being”? That’s a good question, with no simple answers. Being is the great “I am” that God names himself to Moses; there is the “are” of all things, acts, descriptions, ideas – they are; there is the wonder that there *is* something at all. I won’t go into details. I’ll just say that “being” is a big, big theme in philosophy, and also in theology.

For example, Thomas Aquinas says that God, is “something which for all beings is the cause of their being”. Is that perfectly clear? Probably not. Don’t worry, though, I won’t try to explain what he means. But I will try to explain, quickly, why this description of the relationship between God and all beings, including human beings, is relevant to being human, in particular to being human in the best way possible.

Here is a big question. In fact, it is probably the biggest question for our age. Do things and experiences make sense, do they have a “value”? I can also put that question negatively: is everything just random, just pointless, just stupid or silly?

Thomas leads us to the answer. He is saying that all beings – that is you and me, and this table, and also gravity and love – that all being are caused by God, that is they come from God’s will and act. That means that all things and all experiences have something divine about them. Is God random, pointless, stupid, silly? NO, of course not. Then neither is anything that “is”, that has being. Everything has a reason, a purpose to it. Each “thing” “is” only because God made it and wants it to be that way.

In other words, there is no “just being” in the sense of “merely being there”. When something is, it is there because of God. It comes from God, and, Christians believe, it is going towards God. That is true for rocks, flies, leopards, and tables, but – as I will explain – it even more true for people, and for the various communities in which people always live.

Before I get to the explanation of why human beings have a special role in Being, I should say that you don't have to be Christian to appreciate this "not-justness", not merely-ness, of being. You do not have to be a monotheist, or a religious or a spiritual person. You only have to see the world a certain way, to accept or believe that that, "yes – to be, to be in this world, is good".

I like to think of my two grandsons, aged three and a half and almost two. Mostly they are happy, sometimes they are sad, but they are *always* alive, they are always *being* themselves, always trying, doing, loving, sleeping, waking, crying, playing, hating... They are, thankfully, uninhibited in their being. Their parents help them be by loving them – but that love just protects what they are just because they are. Watch them be, and you see the wonder of being.

No mention of God is needed. Far from it. Even the most devout parents generally hold off on the high level theology until the kids are a bit older. The "never-mere-ness" of being is there to be noticed and wondered at. Rocks, tables, flies, and leopards all have it – they are and automatically are wonderful, just for being. And children have it too. Adults also, but it gets more complicated.

## II. Just Being Human

That brings me back to being human. We are different from rocks, tables, flies, leopards, and everything else in the world. To be human, a human be-ing, is special in many ways. For my purposes this evening, two distinctly human ways of being are relevant.

The first is *wonder*. We can and at least sometimes do wonder about everything. A few minutes ago I wondered about a very big questions: whether everything is random or purposeful. I might also wonder about very little ones: say whether my grandson would like some ice cream (the answer is usually "yes") or how and when flies fly. The human difference is that the "everything", the ice cream, and the flies do not wonder back at us. The flies may do some thinking – when you try to swat them, they certainly seem to thinking about what you are up to – but they do not think the sort of deep thoughts that humans cannot help thinking.

My three-year old grandson tells us about his rather practical wondering. "Why is Dada angry? Is he tired?", he asks. He is doing that human thing: he is trying to make sense of the world. We human beings are things that wonder, think, try to make sense of things, in ways that no other animal comes close to. Philosophers say that we are "*rational* animals".

So, even when we do things that other animals do, we are different from them, because we do everything in a uniquely human way. We do things to keep warm, as some other animals do, and we display ourselves for mating and various rivalries, as some other animals do – but we think about our clothing in ways that no animal could. Humans, for example, have always had fashions – clothing styles that changes over time. Also, clothing always has social and psychological meanings: I express

who I am by what I wear – a business guy or a factory worker, a man or a woman, an extrovert or an introvert, and so forth.

If you start thinking about clothing, you'll realise that what my clothes expresses is not just up to me. That "meaning" comes in large part from how I express myself in the "clothing-language" of my time and place. My time-and-place sets the rules, somehow, but I can help change those rules. So, when I was about 13, we had a huge controversy in my school: could girls wear trousers? They were banned in the school's "dress code", but fashions were changing along with women's role in society. I along with other young rebels, wanted our clothing to keep up with the times. The dress code was changed.

Human desires, choices, and responsibilities are individual, but never solitary. We can only be fully human beings within human communities. My grandsons find out who they are in the community of their family, the clothing of the boys and girls in my school were chosen and found their meaning in the community of the school. Human communities range from subnuclear families through neighbourhoods and nations all the way up to the community of all humanity, past, present, and future. Philosophers say that we are *social* or *political* rational animals.

So we are uniquely socially rational beings. That first distinction makes us, roughly speaking, the least "merely" or being of all created beings (excluding angels).

How good to be human, you might say, but then there is second distinction that I want to make: we are uniquely able to *be bad*. Worse than that: every one of us sometimes *is* bad. Each of us, on our own, does bad things, has bad thoughts, makes bad choices. Because we are social, some *we* – our families, neighbourhoods, nations, the human race – sometimes make bad choices.

Rocks certainly cannot do that. Neither can flies, or even dogs. Dogs can be well or badly trained to do what humans think is good, but they do not make moral judgements. Only humans can truly be good or bad, because only humans can tell the difference.

We have to learn about morals. My older grandson is just now starting to understand that the reason Dada is angry is because he, my grandson, has done something bad. Christians might say that he is *being* sinful. As my grandson is learning, to be a human being is to make choices of good and evil. We want to be just humans, that is just and good human beings.

### III. Being Just Humans

But what does justice, being a just human being, actually involve? It means, roughly speaking, treating everyone and everything the world justly, that is as he, she, or it deserves. But what do I, or you, or we, or they, or the world, actually deserve? What is it good for X to have, and why? These justice questions are tough. There is no YouTube video series telling you how to be a just human being.

The arguments about the good and the just can get pretty intense quite fast, but I will dodge them by talking about what is sometimes called Christian anthropology. It's anthropology in the sense that it tells us about *Anthropos*: the human. It's Christian, because it comes from Christian revelation, in particular from what the fully human but sinless Jesus reveals to us about human nature as it should be (that is like him, without any badness).

From the actions of Jesus, who is fully God, we can learn how God wants us to treat each other, that is how we should be just. I'm talking in Christian terms – I think that's OK, since I'm in a cathedral – but most of what I will say has taken at least some root in the post-Christian society that surrounds us.

What I will do now is talk about six key words that Christians use when they talk about justice: that is about being people who treat each other justly and living in communities and societies in which all people are treated justly. My choice of words is influenced by the Catholic Church's Social Teaching, but I am merely presenting basic ethical concepts. As you listen, I'd like you to think about how these concepts fit into the way we live now, because that is what I will talk about next: how difficult it is to be just human beings in our technological, bureaucratic, impersonal, and materialistic age.

I promised six words. The first one is *love*. Justice is built out of love. My grandson loved his mother before he was born, and I hope and expect that they will love each other forever. But love is not just between mothers (and fathers) and children. It is certainly not just sexual or romantic. It is an attitude and an offer: the earnest desire for the good of the beloved, and the offer to unite the good of the lover with the good of the beloved. Exactly to the extent that I give someone something less than the total gift of love – say I try to frighten him or to get more from her than I give her – to exactly that extent I am a less just human being than Jesus.

Notice the giving in that description of love. My second word is *gift*. To be truly just to my neighbour I must love her, and to love her I must offer her as many gifts as I can. That does not mean I need wrap up some presents every day. The idea is that my promotion of his or her good cannot be merely kind thoughts – it has to take form in the world: gifts in words, deeds, and non-deeds as well as in things.

You might be worried that being a just human being requires gifts. Isn't it enough to be fair? Why should we be giving stuff away? The Christian theological answer to these questions is that God does not treat *us* fairly. No, he loves us, sinful human beings, well beyond fairness. In the 14th century, Saint Catherine of Siena said that God was "pazzo d'amore", crazy in love, with each of us. He was willing to be incarnate and crucified, to give up his fully human life, to promote our welfare. That's our standard of giving and loving!

If you find that standard too high or too Christian, I can also offer a psychological explanation of why fairness is not enough giving to be just. What *I* think is fair is going to be based on *my* understanding of the situation, but I have too much badness to see other people correctly, that is to see them as just as important as me.

In effect, we never fully outgrow my grandson's firm belief that he is the centre of the world, so that what's fair is that he gets all the attention, all the goodies. To say that we should be always be giving more than we think is fair is to adjust fairness for this deeply rooted moral weakness of human beings. To paraphrase Therese of Lisieux, and I paraphrase here, we human beings are such a moral mess that anything other than mercy, for us and from us, is not really just, not really fair to who we are.

We are a moral mess, but we are also special. We are, to use the biblical phrase, made to be rational in God's image. We have this special, tremendous, great value in God's eyes, just for being human. We are made of the dust of the earth, destined to die, and yet God invites us to be with him in eternity. That is true of the person you see in the mirror, but it is equally true of everyone you see, and of the people you should see but do not bother to look at.

These days, this quality, this value in the eyes of God, is typically described by my third word, *dignity*. To be just is to respect the dignity of every human being, and I mean everyone: close and far, good and bad. Like God, who justly makes the rain fall on the just and unjust alike, we must give our love to the just and unjust alike, because the unjust have just as much human dignity as the just. Of course, it's easy for God to be just – he is the perfection of justice. We have to work at it.

The fourth and fifth words, *charity* and *sacrifice*, tell us how to do the work to be just.

Any of you who know your Latin might complain that charity is just another word for love, so I am repeating myself. In a way I am, but as any spouse will tell you, repeating love-words is not boring. It is part of loving! In any case, charity has come to refer to a rather specific kind of love – the active love for people who are least able to give me the same gifts that I give them. It is charity to give money to the poor, to give comfort to the unpleasant, to help the hopeless and helpless, to give kindness to people who are trying to persecute or kill you.

This charity is a sort of extreme-love, like one of those extreme sports that people do these days. It is a way of showing that you see this person who seems to be so different and distant from you, even so hostile to you, as actually another person with the same, exactly the same, human dignity as you.

Charity does not have to be heroic. Grand gestures are sometimes called for, but as Saint Therese explained, the greatest challenge is often in the little things that keep coming at you. Am I charitable in my demands for a higher salary or pension, which mean less money for someone else, someone who seems distant from me? Am I charitable in wanting to get a bargain when I shop, when my low price is someone else's low wage? And if I am not charitable, then I am not just, not a just human being.

This extreme-love of charity requires me to give up on things – on goods, time, energy, affection – that I would otherwise want. In other words, I must make a sacrifice. It's not easy to make sacrifices, but that's the point. Because we are bad, being just is hard work. As I always like to say, if being good were easy, more people would do it.

I have already mentioned the sixth and last word that describes being a just human being: *community*. I already pointed out that we are all always members of many communities: at home, work, and play; in politics, religion, and so forth. Each of these communities can be more just or less just. For us to be just as individuals, it helps to live in a more just community, one that encourages and embodies the other five words:

- In a just community, it is love – not fear, power, pleasure, convenience, or efficiency – that guides the rules, rewards, and punishments.
- In a just community, our relations are based on gifts, not on a narrow vision of fairness. We give and expect to receive, but we each and always try to give more than we, selfish as we are, think is fair and accept receiving less than we, selfish as we are, think is fair.
- In a just community, the dignity of every member – from the unborn child to the moribund old person, from the richest to the poorest, woman and man, old member and new – the dignity of every member is unquestioningly accepted.
- And in the just community, the least receive the most – that is charity – while those who have give up what they have for those who lack – that is sacrifice.

#### IV. Just Being Human in the modern world

The discussion of community provides a good link to my last topic, which is just being in our contemporary affluent and secular societies. Are our societies just? Do they promote love? Encourage gifts? Support our dignity? Promote charity and welcome sacrifice? And if not, what can we do, as individuals, as Christians, as communities, as churches, as nations, to become more just, which is really to become more fully human in our being?

Now, some of you may be expecting me to answer these questions with a huge condemnation of everything in our current society. The whole world, according to the first letter of St John, “is under the control of the evil one” (5.19), but maybe it is even more under the devil’s sway these days. Such a condemnation might seem to go well with the theme of this series of talks, which is civic and spiritual renewal. We need renewal because the old is in such bad shape.

Some of you might have a different expectation – that I will tell you that renewal does not require great change. It is basically a matter of doing more of what supports community and less of what undermines it. If you are thinking that way, I hope you have some ideas about spiritual renewal, because Christians of all sorts have been working on various sorts of “new Evangelisations” for decades without great success. The best results seem to be slowing down the rate of decline of the numbers of churchgoers.

I firmly believe that the loss of faith as actively practiced in worshipping, loving, gift-focused, charitable, sacrificial communities is at the centre of the civic and social decline that I am about to talk about, but I am not going to talk about that. What I will focus on are other deep flaws in our communities and the ways that these flaws thwart our ability to love one another.

However, I don’t simply want to condemn. To see the flaws clearly, it is necessary to understand what our contemporary societies are *trying* to do. That requires us to recognise that the societies’ goals – and their accomplishments – are in many ways good, indeed very good. Better than that, we, in our societies, are in many ways succeeding at being good.

I will start with an important example, a modern accomplishment that is so obvious that we hardly notice it: people living longer and healthier lives. That is something we want for people we love. Our communities, especially our large state-business-institution Complexes, provide these longer and fuller lives.

I just mentioned a large state-business-institution complex. What I have in mind is our governments with all their agencies, rules, budgets, and systems, but also the businesses of the so-called free market. State and market are supposed to be ideological enemies, but they more like twin brothers who work closely together, with a few fraternal spats. The Complex is not just state and market, though. It also includes many big and small institutions: universities, churches, charities, media, think

tanks, and so forth. These get most of their money, much of their and direction, and frequently many of their ideas from government and business.

What good has this Complex done? What love has it shown? Lots and lots. The longer and healthier lives lived in advanced economies go along with less wretched poverty than ever. There is also greater literacy, more higher education, more travel and communications (both sources of dignity-enhancing experiences), more respect for the dignity of some of the people left behind, for example the physically disabled. There is more concern than ever about various kinds of unjust discrimination. I could go on. In so many dimensions, our communities have never ever been more just.

I want to emphasise that those are not trivial accomplishments. If you could have described them to a person living in earlier centuries, he or she would have said that they sounded like miracles. And if the person asked, “But at what cost? Surely, these wonders require some sort of misery.” You could honestly reply. “The major costs are a lot of big, impersonal bureaucracies, a widespread feeling that life isn’t fair, and, well, a certain attitude in the air that bothers many people. And there is environmental damage.”

You might want to add, a little less honestly, “And we are working on those problems. We’re always streamlining bureaucracies, adding new rules to make them even more just, and deploying new technologies to help with environment”.

But what about that attitude that is in the air? The Complex can give out more anti-depressants and legalise marijuana, but there is still something somehow inhuman, and thus unjust, about it. In the way that it works and thinks, the Complex mostly ignores and sometimes attacks people’s dignity. It substitutes a mean sort of calculation for loving justice.

I will close this talk with my explanation of what has gone wrong, but first I want to give you two examples of the problem.

The first is the systematic attack on human dignity during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, stretching into 2021. I know that opinions differ on this – I am here as a Catholic who argues with the pope on this subject! But a consensus is building about some of the restrictions imposed: they did far more damage than good. Most notably, it was a bad mistake to close schools for months, in parts of the U.S. for years.

What happened? The Complex decided to favour caution over the well-being of children. That showed a remarkable lack of charity to some of the people least able to speak up for themselves.

But even if you think that this or other parts of the anti-Covid agenda were necessary and sensible, you should note some alarming signs:



- How easily the Complex set the agenda,
- How few people worried that breaking up the normal lives of love and gift would break the social ties that allow us to thrive,
- How the compulsory sacrifices were promoted by many more messages of fear and guilt than of love and care,
- How little charity and dignity were shown to not only children, but the dying, the lonely, and possible victims of abuse – an evil that always lurks in any community.

You might also notice how everything was done by The Complex from the top down, with almost no attention paid to what people in actual communities – families, neighbourhoods, and schools, for example - thought or wanted. Again, even if you think that the same policies would have been enacted willingly and enthusiastically from the bottom up (what Catholic Social Teaching calls subsidiarity), I think you should be concerned that such an approach was not even considered.

What happened was the politicians first asked scientists for commands, then almost never questioned whether these commands might not be just. The people were not only expected to obey their distant bureaucratic masters, but they also almost all did as they were told, without worrying much about justice or dignity.

Something seems to be deeply wrong in all this. It is not the existence or even the power of our big impersonal bureaucracies. It is that this impersonality was easily, almost effortlessly, turned in possibly unjust directions. The gigantic welfare and police systems, which had long supported the poorest and neediest, unquestioningly and unhesitatingly shifted to enforcing policies which hurt those groups disproportionately.

The healthcare system, another huge bureaucracy of charity, was also turned. Before the pandemic, it was a reasonably effective provider of universal care, helping the poor almost as much as the rich, and focusing on the ill most in need of care. Without hardly any consideration or resistance, it shifted to denying and discouraging many treatments and almost totally ignoring the care of most of those most in need.

There is something deeply wrong in systems that so easily make such choices, choices which are at best ethically doubtful, with almost no self-questioning. The moral foundation, and the social foundations that support that moral foundation, seem to have been structurally unsound.

I already mentioned a few aspects of my second example, the welfare state. This includes the governments' transfer systems, which first extract roughly 20% of the money spent and earned in the economy and then turn these tax payments into benefits for the old, ill, unemployed, and so

forth. Another 20% of total spending is taken in taxes and converted into payments to the providers of services, most notably healthcare and education.

Welfare states have done wonderful things, by almost any standard of justice, dignity, and human flourishing. Look back at descriptions of the life of the poor in the 19th or any earlier century if you doubt me. Today's poor are much better treated. They fed and clothed, the prisons, whose occupants mostly poor both materially and spiritually, are more humane. With a little paperwork, the poor can gain access to the well-trained helping hands of social workers, care workers, and any number of healthcare professionals. Once the forms are filled out, most people whom you or I or anyone would describe as in need gain that access.

And yet, and yet.... That paperwork, the bureaucracies, the nationally standardised rules, the replacement of loving if less competent family members with trained strangers who have shifts and annual leave, the distant hospitals where care is better but visits are harder to arrange... Something important is lost in all that, something at the heart of the mercy and justice that makes life just.

The welfare state leaves little or no room for local support, for neighbours helping neighbours – that is past a certain point, when social services have to intervene. And even when there is room for such support, the possibility of getting help from the distant and impartial government changes the dynamics. Love, charity, sacrifice and all the complexity of family relationships seem like hard work in comparison to climbing into the lap of what the American Catholic activist Dorothy Day called “holy mother the State”. It is much easier to answer a long questionnaire.

Consider old age pensions. These have undoubtedly done good things. Thanks largely to them, there are far fewer old people in wretched poverty than ever before. But, but, but...

With state pensions, children paying taxes are effectively supporting all pension-receiving people, parents and non-parents alike. The taxes leave adult children with less money for directly helping their own progenitors, but that does not seem like a bad thing. The children end up richer than they would be if they bore this responsibility alone, since taxes from people without living parents also go to pay pensions.

The old folks are also happy. They can say, “Thanks to the pension, I don't have to be a burden on my children”. But maybe those burdens, those sacrifices, build love.

Thanks to the pension system, young adults thinking about their future can say, “I don't need to have children? When I'm too old to work, the State will force other people's children to keep me fed and warm. Thank you, Holy Mother the State!”. Put it all together, and pensions tend to weaken family ties in all directions, by encouraging behaviour that is the opposite of sacrifice and community.

I hope you get the idea. This Complex – big government, big businesses, powerful institutions – has developed systems to do many seriously good things, but leave the human beings who are enhanced and protected feeling deprived of some of the basic community they need to live justly as human beings. Living under and inside the Complex, it is easy to end up feeling just barely human. Indeed, it is hard not to.

People response to this being just barely human – the wrong kind of just – in various ways. You have all heard and probably experienced many of them: anxiety, depression, fear of commitment, despair, anger, addiction, crime. One communal response is to cling to some part of the Complex: the state, the Science, the Leader – anyone or anything that seems to offer some respect for our dignity or something like a loving community.

That is all wrong. There must be a better way. But what is it? What can we do to help human beings live justly: with dignity, in communities build on love, charity and sacrifice? As a Christian, I would start with the way I and we live our religion. We should be better Christians. We need to get better at accepting and expressing the love of God. That is both the love that God shows us, in creating us and even more in redeeming us from sin and death, both that love and the love that we offer to God by loving our neighbour.

But how does *that* work?

Well, our first ideas are likely to involve imitating the Complex. How could it be otherwise? The Complex teaches us how to think, it is the water we swim in, it provides almost all the organisational arrangements in which we live and move and have our being (to twist a line from Saint Paul). So we think we should set up dignity-projects, write action plans, establish KPIs, plan for assessments, and so forth. We can deliver more love that way, avoid scandals, scale up...

But maybe that response is wrong. Not entirely wrong, to be sure – the Complex borrowed a lot of its systems and bureaucracies from the churches, and any effort to build or rebuilt communities of charity require organisations. But the hardest thing to do is not to design good organisations. It is to give, to love to the point of charity and sacrifice.

What I mean by charity is what the Catholic Social Teaching calls the preferential option for the poor. Find the people who need love most, whose dignity has been most injured, and give them the most love and the most dignity. In our cities and towns, the poorest people are sometimes that who are short of material things, but with welfare states, the deepest poverty is almost always spiritual.

To live justly, to give fully, we must find and comfort the people without hope, the people whose spirits are crushed rather than freed by the Complex, the people whose lives are disordered in some basic way – their families, their health, the minds. We must not classify them by identity group.

Rather, we must affirm the dignity of particular human beings, person by person, family by family, street by street.

If you ask me whether this sort of effort will succeed, I will say that it depends what you mean by success. I don't see the Complex changing much in the near future. It does too much good for that. Besides, we are all quite ensnared in its ways and values. But if we can understand our own being human as an expression of God's love, and if we can share that love in our own communities, then our hearts, souls, and churches can come alive with dignity and justice.

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