

Bishop's Reflection – February 2017

Aloha ke Akua:

Over the past few weeks, I have been pondering again the nature of virtue in the Christian life, and how the Christian ought to speak and act to have the “good life.” I have again been studying Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and, especially, the Gospel and Epistles of John every morning (and most evenings before going to sleep).

We live in a time of the celebration of falsehood, the habitual engagement in name-calling and the denial of basic human dignity. It is an age of instant information – factually true or false. For the Christian, ours is a trying time.

This morning (Wednesday, February 15th) while I was rereading *The Four Cardinal Virtues* by Josef Piefer (1904-1997), I came across the following in the section on justice:

If political life is to regain its dignity, a proper appreciation of the eminence of the ruler's task and of the lofty human qualities required for it must be revived in the mind of the public. This means the very opposite of a totalitarian glorification of power. It implies rather that an arduous and unremitting effort of education should impart to the people an incontrovertible ideal image of the requirements a man must meet if he *is* to exercise authority. It should, for example, be perfectly clear and self-evident to the simplest kind of thinking that wherever prudence and justice are lacking, there can be no fitness for the proper exercise of power. In Aristotle's *Politics*, as well as in the *Summa Theologica* of Thomas Aquinas, these two cardinal virtues are called the virtues characteristic of sovereigns and rulers. Yet according to the moral doctrine of the West the prudent man *is* certainly not merely a ‘tactician’ able to steer an affair successfully to its conclusion. Prudence implies the kind of objectivity that lets itself be determined by reality, by insight into the facts. He *is* prudent who can listen in silence, who can take advice so as to gain a more precise, clear, and complete knowledge of the facts. If such a standard were applied, it would probably mean that even without formally rejecting him – in fact *before* there were any discussion

about him – a rash, brash person, motivated by emotion or craving for power, would *eo ipso* be excluded from running for office, as manifestly unfit to realize the justice of rulers, *iustitia distributiva*. For exercising this justice means, on the one hand, taking the common good into consideration and, on the other, respecting at the same time the dignity of the individual and giving him what is his due.

The Four Cardinal Virtues
(University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), page 92.

Piefer was a German philosopher well grounded in the thought of Thomas Aquinas who wrote in clear language, and identified the enduring relevance of the tradition of wisdom and virtue-based ethics.

While in this section on justice, Piefer is reflecting on the virtues characteristic of the “good” ruler, I suggest that we must be aware of Leo Tolstoy’s warning: “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” As we engage these difficult times, we must each hold to the classic virtues of fortitude, temperance, justice and prudence. It seems to me that prudence tempered with humility will be very important. As we are reminded in the Epistle of James:

Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry. This is because an angry person doesn't produce God's righteousness. Therefore, with humility, set aside all moral filth and the growth of wickedness, and welcome the word planted deep inside you-- the very word that is able to save you.... If those who claim devotion to God don't control what they say, they mislead themselves. Their devotion is worthless. True devotion, the kind that is pure and faultless before God the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their difficulties and to keep the world from contaminating us.

James 1:19-21, 26-27

Our vocation as the followers of Jesus Christ in the coming days will be to speak truth with love, humility and prudence while seeking justice.

Aloha ma o Iesu Kristo, ko mākou Haku,

+Bob