

## **Righteousness and rendering justice**

Abstract of the speech by Salvatore Natoli

*Seminar “Righteous and witnesses: historic memory and the ethics of action”*

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I have been prompted – unexpectedly – to take my cue from the conclusion of Nissim’s lecture because, via Vasilij Grossman, he introduced a theme that I had actually placed at the opening of today’s talk. I have to some extent re-formulated Grossman’s words saying that, all things considered, absolute evil can in fact never really exist and the very fact that we are here today talking about the Righteous proves that evil cannot really exist, because if evil is the destruction of good, if absolute evil existed, mankind would already have been annihilated. Mankind has not been annihilated; on the contrary, just when it seems that humanity has descended to the very depths of evil, these “lights” shine through the darkness, demonstrating that in human history, evil has never held absolute sway. The absolute *per se* – provided that God exists – is the divine; or, in non-religious terms, good is what is truly positive.

So where does this absolute evil originate? In an intention, nothing more than that. It effectively has no reality. And what is the intention? The intention is in the mind of those who consider themselves holders of good. There have been men throughout history who – perhaps initially for some fairly good reason – have appropriated justice and good for themselves. So absolute evil comes from a form of schizophrenia that externalizes evil from self and blames it on somebody else. It is therefore clear that by requisitioning absolute good, by appropriating good for yourself, anyone different from you becomes the epitome of evil and, as such, needs to be eradicated, totally. There can be no compromise. History shows that evil did not only raise its ugly head during the Holocaust. It does so in our individual lives too. Even in our own lives we sometimes externalize evil and blame it on others. So, this idea of appropriating good for ourselves puts us in a condition not only to commit evil, but to pursue it as if it were a duty because we believe we are doing good.

Totalitarian regimes were formed and found their ideological formulation in an epic of sacrifice. Fascism as an ideology was created at Redipuglia: the martyrs of the First World War, the great proletariat on the move. The ideology behind Hitler’s rebellion was based on the concept of *Lebensraum*, of a castrated Germany and a ravished mother. These were the images of Nazism. And are the perpetrators of these things not the evil that it is my duty to eradicate? This is all part of collective imagination. In other words there were certain basic mythologems that did not originally include this sort of perversion but that subsequently took hold. Once the machinery was in motion, there were those who continued to believe that it would produce good; others, however, began to realize that it was not only failing to produce good but was in fact a deadly machine. Not everyone realized this at the same time, because in spite of everything, the machine worked. So some failed to realize, others realized and were afraid. This is what happens, but then, at a certain point, a feeling of compassion, of humanity, breaks through, because ideals may dazzle, because they are universal, but people are never universal. Individuals are always singular. What is the other dimension of the problem? It is that the dimension of good cannot exist in abstract form; in fact, in his Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle says that virtue can be learned from good men. It is in its individual manifestation that you can see good. And how does good manifest itself? The signs of good are the fulfillment of being. What is goodness if not productivity, generativity, fruit, the maturity of any natural being? This is what good is. If this Aristotelian notion that good can be learned from good men is true, then in the midst of evil certain figures have shone through and shown what it means to ensure that good and the memory of good can blossom. Here the dimension is that of common sense, i.e. all of us can achieve goodness, just as we can all commit evil deeds. The only certainty is that we only have the space of a lifetime because the space of our own lifetime is the only chance we have to achieve good. If anything, it will be other people who will remember and will piece our lives together. In

this sense, good can outlive us. The primary connection between good and virtue is classic. If good is the realization of being, virtue is what leads to the realization of that being. This is what *virtus* means, it is virtual, a synonym for possible. It is the Greek *aretè*. Virtue is something that generates good. Virtue, as we all know, is not a natural quality; it is a good habit that you get into by repeating goodness. And this creates a propensity for good. So let's say that we can build up an idea of what is good, we can start to understand it within ourselves, but here I have to make a brief but important point. Since we are all human beings and hence related to each other, our good can never be achieved unless it is linked to the good of others. On this point, the subject of wishing is indicative. We wish for good, but the wish is always for something else. Our wish can never be complete unless it is in relation to the other man. Without the others the wish will be unfulfilled, so already in the dynamic of wishing, we have a relational dynamic.

We can satisfy our wish with the other man, we can even achieve it falsely by using the other man, we can achieve it loftily along with others, sharing with others, and it is on this point that the notion of justice is configured. A notion that I take from Aristotle: "consequently in a first sense things that are just are things that can produce and preserve happiness and its parts for the community". As you can see, in this definition there is no mention of the idea of duty, but that of goodness and there is therefore a deviation of the wish in those who are unjust. That is why the unjust do not love themselves. Aristotle says that justice and virtue go together, but, in a way, justice is the perfect virtue with respect to the others and the basic reason is that in virtue we try to achieve our own fulfillment, or in other words our goodness, we try to succeed but, when we do, we may sometimes use other people, we may abuse our power over them. So personal virtue is still a virtue if it is a relational virtue, but if it is relational virtue it inevitably has to become law, because only in law is there a relation. The other is a law for me but before the law has been written. So justice transfers virtue from the individual plane to the relational plane and it is thus the perfection of all virtues. From this point of view it is universal, because in every action there is always the relational aspect and since the relational aspect is always present, justice always has something to do with it. Therefore legal justice is not part of virtue but it is virtue in its entirety. Is justice just one of the virtues or is it the most perfect virtue? It is the most perfect virtue, because it is part of all virtues. So in what way does it differ from individual virtues? What is specific about it? Its specificity is its relational character. According to Thomas Aquinas, if you consider the same act in relation to another it is called justice, while if you consider it as the ability to act for the sake of goodness, it is called virtue.

Can we render justice if we are unrestrained ourselves? Is public justice possible if there is a tendency to resort or a habit of resorting to private justice? Here the law presents itself in two ways. Indicating either a guideline or a sanction, because precisely when concupiscence interrupts relations with another person, the law has to punish this lack of virtue. This instance is very important. All we have to do is avoid externalizing evil because within us the possibility of evil is always immanent. Now I would like you to reflect on certain minimum consequences. First of all, being Righteous means: do not harm. Or in other words, do not harm others, the golden rule common to most western traditions, starting from the Bible. Secondly: love the other man, take responsibility for your fellows, and this is particularly relevant to the figure of the Righteous, who not only avoids harming others, but cannot countenance the spread of evil.

So being righteous implies not harming others, loving, caring and taking responsibility for them. As they should do for you, it is reciprocal. Deep down, if you think about it, there is an air of solitude about not harming. Withdrawing into yourself. But imagine being ill or needy, at that point you realize that not harming is not enough to keep the other person alive, it is not enough for us.

Rendering justice means making up for wrongdoing. And this is what the law does. Legality can do this, but there is a more profound dimension to rendering justice and Dostoyevski described it magnificently: feeling in some way co-responsible for the evil circulating in the world and for having failed to prevent it. How can we tackle instances of injustice that are happening here and now! There are a number of variants and it is worth considering them. The first concerns the need to

rebel against injustice. This dimension may depend upon the historic emergency in which we find ourselves. Here there is a risk of going too far, because when you are caught up in a spiral of violence you end up killing more than you should. Often, however, the historic situation forces you to rise up and fight, but, by risking your own life, you involuntarily risk overstepping the mark and using violence not to defend someone from evil but for the sake of violence itself.

Another dimension is that of non-violence. In non-violence you can try to stop the spiral of violence by demonstrating its arbitrary nature and impotence and above all by revealing the arbitrary dimension of evil. Recognize that your way of opposing evil is to be evasive towards it, i.e. you are not strong enough to prevent the killing, but you are strong enough to help the victim escape. The actions of the non-violent are based on an instant feeling of human kinship, i.e. compassion for your own species. This leads us to work with justice in any condition and to do whatever we can, and more. Often the Righteous move in an invisible dimension, which needs to be brought to light. This is the constant, daily dimension of good. And it is my tragic optimism, or my pessimism of strength that convinces me that if the world does not collapse it is because there is silent good. Because, judging by what we see all around us, the collapse of the world should already have happened long ago. There is the invisibility of good. Witnesses emerge purely by chance because if someone did good in order to be seen, he wouldn't be a witness. In some cases the Righteous become witnesses because there is a public dimension that forces them to show themselves as such.

I conclude by saying that in this ordinariness of life we are always in an ethical dimension, as Levinas suggests, because we are always connected to and in the presence of others.

The other man precedes us, he precedes us for the simple reason that we did not produce him, we did not create him from nothing, he precedes us even if he is a child, he precedes us not temporally, but ontologically. It is his face that I see before me and before each face I am in a position to kill or help, destroy or love. I cannot be indifferent. Our relationship with others is an inevitable relationship of justice and injustice and if we have virtue we will be capable of the perfect virtue, the virtue *par excellence*, involved in every deed: justice; if we are not virtuous, either because we are sinful or because we are cowards, then we will surrender to the injustice of the world. The Righteous figures that we commemorate show us that it can be done, that evil can be curbed.