

Short Course in Theology: Catholic Social Teaching

The Good of All of Us

The Common Good in Catholic Social Teaching

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Overview

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- A Catholic Understanding of the Common Good
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- How might we build a common vision of the Good Life?

Classical Thinking About the Common Good

Aristotle

- In classical Greece the *polis* and the common were seen as the sphere of human flourishing
- The private domain was a zone of incomplete humanity
- Aristotle saw the human person as 'by nature a social and political being' (Nicomachean Ethics, 1097 b, 1. 10)
- Happiness is achieved through the public virtues of citizenship, including contemplation of the truth

Cicero

- The commonwealth or *res publica* is not just a collection of people but an assemblage joined in agreement in relation to justice and in partnership for the common good (De re publica, I, xxv, 1)

Desacralizing the Polis

- **Augustine:** the city of God, not the polis, is the final domain of human fulfillment
- **Aquinas:** God's own goodness is the good of the whole universe
- Loving one's neighbour as oneself demands commitment to the common good but does not make the neighbour – individually or collectively – a surrogate for God
- “The final good of every person transcends any good that can be achieved politically, economically, or culturally.” (David Hollenbach, ‘Common Good’, in The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought, 194)

A Catholic View of the Common Good

- God made us for relationship – the good of each person is bound up with the good of the community.
- Every person and group has the right to share in the benefits of living in community, and also shares in the duty to contribute to the good of all.
- The good of the community cannot be achieved by setting aside the dignity and rights of any person or group. All must take into account the needs and rights of others.
- Social conditions, structures, institutions and processes can either facilitate or hinder the common good – structures of Grace and structures of sin.
- The extremes of individualism and collectivism are rejected in a Catholic understanding of the person in community.

The Greatest Good or the Common Good?

A utilitarian approach understands the common good as maximum aggregate social welfare i.e. the greatest good for the greatest number.

- What are some of the implications of the difference between a Catholic understanding of the common good as the good of all of us and the utilitarian understanding?

The Development of the Common Good in Post VII Catholic Social Teaching

Mater et Magistra, John XXIII, 1961

“... a sane view of the common good must be present and operative in men invested with public authority. They must take account of all those social conditions which favor the full development of human personality. Moreover, We consider it altogether vital that the numerous intermediary bodies and corporate enterprises—which are, so to say, the main vehicle of this social growth—be really autonomous, and loyally collaborate in pursuit of their own specific interests and those of the common good. For these groups must themselves necessarily present the form and substance of a true community, and this will only be the case if they treat their individual members as human persons and encourage them to take an active part in the ordering of their lives.” n 65

“... must take into account the demands of the common good of the particular country and of the whole human family.” n 78

The Development of the Common Good in Post VII Catholic Social Teaching

Pacem in Terris, John XXIII, 1963

“Men, both as individuals and as intermediate groups, are required to make their own specific contributions to the general welfare. The main consequence of this is that they must harmonize their own interests with the needs of others, and offer their goods and services as their rulers shall direct—assuming, of course, that justice is maintained and the authorities are acting within the limits of their competence. Those who have authority in the State must exercise that authority in a way which is not only morally irreproachable, but also best calculated to ensure or promote the State's welfare.” n 53

“The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities.” n 54

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Pacem in Terris, John XXIII, 1963

“... it is in the nature of the common good that every single citizen has the right to share in it—although in different ways, depending on his tasks, merits and circumstances. Hence every civil authority must strive to promote the common good in the interest of all, without favouring any individual citizen or category of citizen...

Nevertheless, considerations of justice and equity can at times demand that those in power pay more attention to the weaker members of society, since these are at a disadvantage when it comes to defending their own rights and asserting their legitimate interests.” n 56

“... the common good is something which affects the needs of the whole man, body and soul. That, then, is the sort of good which rulers of States must take suitable measure to ensure.” n 57

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Pacem in Terris, John XXIII, 1963

“It is generally accepted today that the common good is **best safeguarded when personal rights and duties are guaranteed**. The chief concern of civil authorities must therefore be to ensure that these rights are recognized, respected, co-ordinated, defended and promoted, and that each individual is enabled to perform his duties more easily. For "to safeguard the inviolable rights of the human person, and to facilitate the performance of his duties, is the principal duty of every public authority.“ n 60

“Thus any government which refused to recognize human rights or acted in violation of them, would not only fail in its duty; its decrees would be wholly lacking in binding force.” n 61

The Development of the Common Good in Post VII Catholic Social Teaching

Gaudium et Spes, Vatican II, 1965

“Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result **the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment**, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.

At the same time, however, there is a growing awareness of the exalted dignity proper to the human person, since he stands above all things, and his rights and duties are universal and inviolable. Therefore, there must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human... “ n 26

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Sollicitudo rei Socialis, John Paul II, 1987

“When interdependence becomes recognized in this way [*as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political and religious elements, and accepted as a moral category*], the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a “virtue,” is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all.” n 38

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Centesimus Annus, John Paul II, 1991

“It is the task of the State to provide for the defence and preservation of **common goods** such as the natural and human environments, which cannot be safeguarded simply by market forces. Just as in the time of primitive capitalism the State had the duty of defending the basic rights of workers, so now, with the new capitalism, the State and all of society have the duty of defending those **collective goods** which, among others, constitute the essential framework for the legitimate pursuit of personal goals on the part of each individual.

Here we find a new limit on the market: there are collective and qualitative needs which cannot be satisfied by market mechanisms. There are important human needs which escape its logic. There are goods which by their very nature cannot and must not be bought or sold.” n 40

The Development of the Common Good in Post VII Catholic Social Teaching

Caritas in Veritate, Benedict XVI, 2009

“To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, **there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good**. It is the good of “all of us”, made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or “city”.” n 7

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Caritas in Veritate, Benedict XVI, 2009

“The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practise this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*...

Man's earthly activity, when inspired and sustained by charity, contributes to the building of the universal city of God, which is the goal of the history of the human family. In an increasingly globalized society, the common good and the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the earthly city in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided city of God.” n 7

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Caritas in Veritate, Benedict XVI, 2009

“There cannot be holistic development and universal common good unless people's spiritual and moral welfare is taken into account, considered in their totality as body and soul.” n 76.

“God's love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all, even if this cannot be achieved immediately and if what we are able to achieve, alongside political authorities and those working in the field of economics, is always less than we might wish. God gives us the strength to fight and to suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, our greatest hope.” n 78.

The Development of the Common Good in Post VII Catholic Social Teaching

Laudato Si', Francis, 2015

“The climate is a common good, belonging to all and meant for all.” n 23.

“An integral ecology is inseparable from the notion of the common good...” n 157.

“Underlying the principle of the common good is **respect for the human person** as such, endowed with basic and inalienable rights ordered to his or her integral development. It has also to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, applying the principle of **subsidiarity**... Finally, the common good calls for social peace, the stability and security provided by a certain order which cannot be achieved without particular concern for distributive justice; whenever this is violated, violence always ensues. Society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good...

“... where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to **solidarity** and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters...” n 158.

The Development of the Common Good in Post VII Catholic Social Teaching

Laudato Si', Francis, 2015

“The notion of **the common good also extends to future generations**. The global economic crises have made painfully obvious the detrimental effects of disregarding our common destiny, which cannot exclude those who come after us. We can no longer speak of sustainable development apart from **intergenerational solidarity**. Once we start to think about the kind of world we are leaving to future generations, we look at things differently; we realize that the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others. Since the world has been given to us, we can no longer view reality in a purely utilitarian way, in which efficiency and productivity are entirely geared to our individual benefit. Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us.” n 159

“Let us keep in mind the principle of subsidiarity, which grants freedom to develop the capabilities present at every level of society, while also demanding a greater sense of responsibility for the common good from those who wield greater power.” n 196

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Laudato Si', Francis, 2015

“An adequate understanding of spirituality consists in filling out what we mean by peace, which is much more than the absence of war. Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life.” n 225.

“Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also “macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones”. That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a “civilization of love”. n 231

From Vatican II to Francis

What themes or developments did you notice in the teachings?

Challenges to Understanding the Common Good Today

- Pluralism and different understandings of the good
- Retrieving the spiritual dimension of the common good in a secular society
- Including creation itself as part of the moral community whose good is to be pursued

Intellectual Solidarity as a Way Forward

“... a key aspect of the common good can be described as *the good of being a community at all* – the good realized in the mutual relationships in and through which human beings achieve their well-being.”

David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2002, 82.

- The common pursuit of a shared vision of the good life can be called intellectual solidarity.
- **Intellectual** - it needs serious thinking about distinctive understandings of the good and their implications for society.
- **Solidarity** – it can only occur in active dialogue across boundaries of religion and culture.