

The Common Good and Human Participation

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In a world filled with socio-political strife, disagreement, and anger it is necessary to be reminded of the foundational features of society. Society is, in fact, constituted by the ultimate good in which its members all participate. Such a reminder, therefore, requires an expression of the perennial, and hopefully not too foreign, understanding of the “common good.” Chad C. Pecknold of the Catholic University of America once observed that false understandings about the common good, even if implicit or “unconscious,” lead to tyranny,

The “false notion” of the common good remains ubiquitous in our own time. The consequence of this false notion could describe the sorry state of American politics today: A society constituted by persons who love their private good above the common good, or who identify the common good with the private good, is a society not of free men, but of tyrants.

I will be presuming an understanding of the “common good” generally common to the Catholic tradition, with special reference to the book *The Primacy of the Common Good: Against the Personalists* by Charles De Koninck, who once taught at the Université Laval in Quebec.

This essay will give a summary expression of the common good, beginning from the standpoint of God’s own goodness in the act of creation. This diffused good is then explained both insofar as it is found imminently in natural societies and in mankind’s final end in Heaven with God. The former—the good found in natural societies—is explained as a subordinate good ordered to the society of the blessed in Heaven. This hierarchical order of imminent goods is then brought back to the final transcendent common good—God Himself. Finally, there will be a short word on the common good’s intimate connection to the personal goods of individuals. The structure of this essay is designed to show how the good of world ultimately proceed from and depend on God’s

own goodness—within which the “common good” proceeds in its various analogical forms. Such a theo-centrism contributes to correcting a false individualism and tyranny of personal goods.

To begin with what is most essential: in the act of creation God primarily intended the fullness of created perfection. This created perfection of the whole cosmos is more similar to the Divine Perfection than any of its parts. In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Contra Gentiles*, which De Koninck appropriates,

Things participate in the divine goodness by way of similitude, insofar as they are in themselves good. But, that which is better in created things is the good of the order of the universe, which is the most perfect, as the Philosophers says; and this is in agreement as well with Sacred Scripture, where it is said, ‘And God saw all that He had made, and behold it was very good,’ . . . Consequently, the good of the order of the things created by God is also the principal object of God’s will and intention.

Since this perfection proper to the cosmos is the sum of created goods, then the common good of the cosmos is the highest desirable thing humanity is inclined to. Thus, per De Koninck, “The good is that which all things desire insofar as they desire their perfection.” The good immanent to the whole of creation is the highest natural common good which all creation participates in.

The good that God endowed creation with does not come to an end at the cosmos considered as a whole. Goodness must still be found in the many levels, or societies, contained within creation. Indeed, the universal common good is repeated analogously at every social level within the created world. This corresponds to what De Koninck says about the order of the good, “Thus, the good has the note of final cause. Thus, it is the first of causes and consequently diffusive of itself.” He then goes on to say that the more universal this good end is, the more general the diffusion is. Therefore, likenesses of God’s own goodness have been shared throughout the whole of creation, as if diffused through hierarchies of wholes to their parts. Thus, the good of the cosmos permeates to everything contained in it; the good of humanity permeates any given nation; the good of a nation permeates to every family; and the good of each family permeates to all of its members. This formal permeation of ontological goodness in creation, however, does not mean that all things are good in the same way—but that all things are analogically good due to Divine ordination.

As such, there is an integral goodness to any social whole, which goodness must correspond to things desirable and common in the particular community. The Second Vatican Council pinpointed the various goods necessary for human fulfillment as the commonly desired good in society—regardless of the level of society. Thus, *Gaudium et Spes*, says, “the common good [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 fulfillment” (§26). This definition acts as a sufficient summation of what is necessary and desirable within any level of the world—the whole cosmos, a country, a family, etc. The Council Fathers, however, chose to speak of the common good materially in this passage when they spoke of the summation of various conditions. In doing so, they emphasized the concrete goods of life which people normally work toward—like sufficient food for a family or enough funds for an education.

The formal understanding of the common good, however, would consider the right order of individuals and of the whole community. Thus justice between the whole society and its members would be considered, as would justice between individuals, so that proper access to these material goods would be possible. This understanding of formally just relationships corresponds to the abstract understanding of social order, which is the common good imminent to a society. This is why, in his *Politics*, Aristotle said, “But justice is the bond of men in states; for the administration of justice, which is the determination of what is just, is the principle of order in political society.” The common good and personal good overlap insofar as “justice” is the communication of the due good to others. In an essay entitled “On the Christian Idea of Man,” Josef Pieper explained more about how this communicatory relationship may be between individuals or between the whole society and its members (where the latter type belongs more immediately to the common good). Justice is not only these relationships but is the very groundwork from which society arises. Pieper said, “Justice...is the ability to live truly ‘with others’” and that this ability is not merely the “ability to live in community” but which “nearly signifies the ability to live at all.” Thus, the right relationship between the whole community and its members and between individual members is the formal relationship from which common

participation in the good of society becomes possible. And, again, a just social order in which people may live virtuously is the common good as participated in by these very people. This just social order, therefore, is itself the common good immanent to any individual group of people, as *Gaudium et Spes* indicated.

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in the *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*, goes beyond considering the common good as only pertaining to an individual political society, of the sort which Aristotle considered in the above quotation. Rather, the Pontifical Council explains the order between the good in an individual society and the good intended for the whole of humanity, “The common good of society is not an end in itself; it has value only in reference to attaining the ultimate ends of the person and the universal common good of the whole of creation” (§170). In other words, the common good internal to any political society is a subordinate good. Thus, political societies exist for the sake of humanity, and humanity exists for the sake of the proper perfection of all of creation—in which humanity has a princely place. As God’s goodness was analogically diffused in creation throughout the cosmos, so do the goods of subordinate societies incline toward their source in God.

Therefore, the goods of natural societies incline their people to higher goods. If there is a supernatural society to which mankind can be elevated, however, then there would be a higher good common to that supernatural society. Therefore, if the Christian Church is real, it specifies mankind to a higher good than any subordinate society does—e.g., the common good in which the faithful participate in the Church is higher than the common good found in any individual. And indeed, *Gaudium et Spes* says,

As God did not create man for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity, so also “it has pleased God to make men holy and save them not merely as individuals, without bond or link between them, but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness” (§32).

For a society to be imminently ordered to holiness with God is a far higher common good than what is found in any other human society. As grace builds upon nature, the supernatural common good proper to the inner life of the Christian Church builds upon all goods within subordinate human societies. Moreover, the Church elevates the good of the cosmos, as the loftiest created society with the highest common good of any part within the cosmos. The common good of the Christian Church is life in grace, which God wishes to share with all humanity. In other words, this common good is life in Christ and His Mystical Body, whereby the faithful participate in the Divine Life as sons in the Son of God. Despite humanity’s sinfulness, the Mystical Body of Christ and this sanctified vision of the cosmos remains the highest immanent common good within creation. It receives its perfection, however, in Heaven. There, the imminent common good of the society of the blessed will be participated in most clearly without admixture of error or sinfulness.

There is one more step beyond this. As the Triune God is the creator of all things, including all subordinate goods found in every stratum of the cosmos, so He is the highest common good. De Koninck again quotes St. Thomas’s *Summa Contra Gentiles*,

Thus, it is not without reason that the good as such is said to be diffusive, because, the more a being is good, the more it diffuses its goodness to beings which are more distant from it. And because that which is most perfect in any genus is the exemplar and measure of all that are comprised in that genus, it follows that God who is the most perfect goodness and who shares it in the most universal fashion, should be, in the diffusion of his goodness, the exemplar of all beings which share their goodness.

This is well supported by the *Compendium on the Social Doctrine of the Church*, “God is the ultimate end of his creatures and for no reason may the common good be deprived of its transcendent dimension, which moves beyond the historical dimension while at the same time fulfilling it” (§170). He is not only the transcendent common good of the society of the blessed in Heaven, but of every society. From His transcendent goodness, God has chosen to create the manifold goods of the whole cosmos, down to each individual, sharing what it is to be ontologically good with all. De Koninck expresses God’s position as the transcendent common good and as the ultimate source of every good in the cosmos in the following way; “It is thus that God, a purely and simply universal good, is the proper good that all things desire naturally as

the highest and best good, and which confers on all things their entire being.” As such, God is also the highest common good—not as creation’s imminent good but as the transcendent Creator.

To return to an account of personal goods, it should be remembered that the common good is not alien to individual’s own good. Rather, the common good is the formal source for the good as possessed by individual people. As De Koninck says,

The common good is better for each of the particulars which participate in it insofar as it is communicable to the other particulars: communicability is the very reason of its perfection. The particular does not attain the common good under the note itself of common good if it does not attain it as communicable to others.

De Koninck affirms that this communicability is not some kind of occasional relationship between a cause and its various effects. Rather, it is a stable formal relationship. Thus, the communication of the common good to individuals is not found in the occasional good works of any individual political regime, for example, since governments often make bad political decisions. Indeed, the communication of the common good to individuals is the ontological foundation to why political structures are supposed to do good and how they are capable of doing good in the first place. As personal goods formally participate in the common good, they first participate in the imminent common goods of whatever worldly societies an individual is a member of. Then, these personal goods, if the individual is elevated in grace, further participate in the common good of the Church and ultimately the society of the blessed in Heaven. These created goods (natural and supernatural; personal and common), which make up the whole cosmic order, formally depend upon the transcendent common good Who is God. As such, personal goods only exist because they are ordered from and to this transcendent good, who is God. De Koninck speaks of a corollary to this account of the holistic participation of all personal and common goods. Those common goods which are infused into the world by God, at each level of society, are only common precisely because they are also proper to every individual of these communities.

Therefore, the common good is the perfection proper to any community, which is desirable for the whole social group. By analogy, the “common good” can be either immanent to the various societies which make up the cosmos or be transcendent to all created communities. Such a hierarchy of participated goods further shows that all created goods are inherently ordered to the transcendent goodness of God. Moreover, created common goods are, in justice, related to individuals’ own personal goods. By Divine ordination, these layers of created goods are images and vestiges of God’s own blessed goodness and are the core of what every society is. Social and political infighting never directly uphold the common good or allow people to properly participate in this same goodness, though justice can require stronger measures to restore these goods. Yet, only where space is made for people and society to instantiate this goodness will we experience society and politics as true goods ordered to just tranquility and ordained to life in Christ.

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