



Virtue Corner: Common Good

In our first circle on the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC), we discussed what SDC is: **a body of doctrine which offers a set of principles, criteria, and guidelines with an eye to forming and sustaining a society worthy of the human person.** We then explored a foundational theme of all SDC, rooted in the human person as the image of God, giving each one of us dignity, rights, and responsibilities. There are five basic principles of SDC which are: the common good, the universal destination of goods, subsidiarity, participation, and solidarity. This month we unpack the principle of the common good.

What does the Church mean by the common good? Many erroneous notions of it are bandied about in our society, so let's establish clearly what it is *not*:

- **It's not adding up parts to attain a whole.** It's not the collection of all the goods of each individual in a society summed up, constituting some abstract "common goods." This understanding is insufficient because it violates the principle of human dignity; each individual is a free person, destined for God, needing space and the conditions to realize their own personal good. Properly understood, the common good is the sum of conditions allowing each person to flourish.
- **It's not a cost/benefit calculation.** The common good is also not just the greatest amount of happiness for the greatest number of people. In this misguided notion, there's an unspoken assumption that happiness is quantifiable and a commodity to be produced by society.¹
- **It's not a decision for the majority.** If we followed the prior erroneous line of thinking, when you can't meet everyone's good, you'd have to sacrifice some individuals' good for the sake of others. In that mindset, if we achieve the good/happiness of 95 people in a society, it would be fine to violate the good and dignity of five others. No, every person must be respected.

The Christian view of the common good stems from a realization that each man or woman is *essentially* social. "The human person needs to live in society. Society is not for him an extraneous addition but a requirement of his nature. Through the exchange with others,

¹ At the root of erroneous ideas about the Common Good, there are mistaken conceptions of a person's good (human dignity), what society is, and how it is formed. Enlightenment philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau posited that society was the result of individuals making a social contract (i.e., a transaction) to get the greatest possible peace and happiness for themselves. This individualistic and utilitarian approach leads to a view of "the Common Good" as the result of this transaction. This does not align with Catholic teaching.

mutual service and dialogue with his brethren, man develops his potential; he thus responds to his vocation” (Catechism of the Catholic Church #1879). Society emerges as the fruit of us fulfilling our God-given nature, not primarily as a social contract.

The Catechism (#1906) defines the Common Good as **“the sum total of social conditions which allow people as groups or individuals to reach their fulfillment more easily and more fully”**.

Let’s break this down:

1. **“The sum total of social conditions.”** This is the basis for equal opportunity. It entails a level playing field where each person has a chance to thrive and succeed.
2. **“Which allow people as groups or individuals to reach their fulfillment.”** The fair conditions are oriented to foster flourishing, creating, building, and ordering the world. Remember the mandate of God to Adam to cultivate the garden and bring order. In this conception, both individual and social flourishing are organically linked, not opposed to one against the other.
3. **“More easily and more fully.”** This indicates a dynamic nature. Society should positively foster the conditions to make it easier for each person to flourish. We seek a society where it is easier to be good, not harder to be good. To flourish means to live full alive within our God-given human dignity and in his will.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* offers us several numbers to complement what is said above.

166. The demands of the common good are (...) above all the commitment to peace, the organization of the State's powers, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, some of which are at the same time human rights: food, housing, work, education and access to culture, transportation, basic health care, the freedom of communication and expression, and the protection of religious freedom. Nor must one forget the contribution that every nation is required in duty to make towards a true worldwide cooperation for the common good of the whole of humanity and for future generations also.

167. The common good therefore involves all members of society, no one is exempt from cooperating, according to each one's possibilities, in attaining it and developing it. (...) Everyone also has the right to enjoy the conditions of social life that are brought about by the quest for the common good. The teaching of Pope Pius XI is still relevant: “the distribution of created goods, which, as every discerning person knows, is laboring today under the gravest evils due to the huge disparity between the few exceedingly rich and the unnumbered propertyless, must be effectively called back to and brought into conformity with the norms of the common good, that is, social justice”.

168. The responsibility for attaining the common good, besides falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason that the political authority exists. The State, in fact, must guarantee the coherency, unity and organization of the civil society of which it is an expression, in order that the common good may be attained with the contribution of every citizen. The individual person, the

family or intermediate groups are not able to achieve their full development by themselves for living a truly human life. Hence the necessity of political institutions, the purpose of which is to make available to persons the necessary material, cultural, moral and spiritual goods. (...)

169. To ensure the common good, the government of each country has the specific duty to harmonize the different sectoral interests with the requirements of justice. (This is), in fact, one of the most delicate tasks of public authority. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that in the democratic State, where decisions are usually made by the majority of representatives elected by the people, those responsible for government are required to interpret the common good of their country not only according to the guidelines of the majority but also according to the effective good of all the members of the community, including the minority.

Scripture

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit upon his glorious throne, and all the nations will be assembled before him. And he will separate them one from another, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you?’ And the king will say to them in reply, ‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’ Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you accursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, a stranger and you gave me no welcome, naked and you gave me no clothing, ill and in prison, and you did not care for me.’ Then they will answer and say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?’ He will answer them, ‘Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.’”

Matthew 25:31-46

Questions for Discussion

This passage is entitled “The Judgement of the Nations” and shares in detail how God will call all peoples at the end of time and judge them. His criteria connect with how we treated one another, how we cared for basic needs, or how we neglected to do so. There is a clear link between our eternal salvation and our dealings with one another, i.e., the common good.

1. According to this Scripture passage, how are our dealings with others connected to personal salvation?

2. Are there “sins of society” or “structures of sin” that limit human flourishing, for which we share some collective guilt? What might some of those sins or structures be in our society?
3. How does a just society – whether it be a family, business organization, or civil society – promote the common good?
4. What have you done in your company to promote the common good, i.e., conditions to help your employees flourish?
5. How does this passage connect human dignity, the common good, and eternal salvation?

Inspiring Quote

“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. 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. (...) Our history — the personal and collective effort to elevate the human condition — begins and ends in Jesus: thanks to him, by means of him and in light of him every reality, including human society, can be brought to its Supreme Good, to its fulfillment. A purely historical and materialistic vision would end up transforming the common good into simple socio-economic well-being, without any transcendental goal, that is, without its most intimate reason for existing.”

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, n. 170

Case Study

“Dorothy Day remains the conscience of American Catholicism... with a dual passion for social justice and intimacy with God.” --The Atlantic

Even before her death in 1980 at the age of 83, the Servant of God, Dorothy Day was already being considered a future saint in the Catholic Church. This Brooklyn born former communist and anarchist, social activist and both Church critic and Church lover may soon join the company of those she so admired: St. Francis of Assisi and St. Teresa of Avila.

The story of Dorothy Day reflects all her complexities, devotion and contradictions. As a child she survived the great San Francisco earthquake. As a young adult in Chicago she fell in love, had an abortion, married, divorced and twice attempted suicide. She moved to New York City, rejected religion and had a child out of wedlock. In Greenwich Village she shared stories and drank whiskey with her writer friend, Eugene O’Neill. And through it all, she continued to develop her skills as a writer.

But in 1932, Day befriended Peter Maurin, a De la Salle Brother, who introduced her to Catholic social teaching and her life took a dramatic turn. Soon after, the two began the Catholic Worker movement. It launched first as a newspaper with an initial run of 2,500. Within a few years -

despite the Great Depression - circulation grew to 100,000. The paper's principal competitor in distribution and ideology was the Communist Daily Worker. Day opposed its atheism, its advocacy of "class hatred" and violent revolution, and its opposition to private property. The first issue of the *Catholic Worker* asked: "Is it not possible to be radical and not atheist?"

In her 1952 autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Day describes serving the poor on a daily basis as anything but romantic. She shares how difficult it is to love people who accept charity but offer no expression of gratitude. Some can be disruptive and foul-tempered. Day was a small, prayerful woman who attended Mass every morning, but meekness was never in her nature.

Over the years the *Catholic Worker* remained committed to the principals of non-violent resistance. During World War II they were widely condemned and during the Cold War there were questions about communist affiliations. Throughout it all Dorothy Day held firm. Day wrote in one of her memoirs: "I had a conversation with John Spivak, the Communist writer, a few years ago, and he said to me, "How can you believe? How can you believe in the Immaculate Conception, in the Virgin birth, in the Resurrection?" I could only say that I believe in the Roman Catholic Church and all she teaches. I have accepted Her authority with my whole heart. At the same time, I want to point out to you that we are taught to pray for final perseverance. We are taught that faith is a gift, and sometimes I wonder why some have it, and some do not." Dorothy Day has been accepted by the Catholic Church as a "Servant of God," the first step toward official sainthood.

Questions for Discussion

1. Dorothy Day felt a strong call to serve the poor, the worker and pursue social structures to help them via nonviolent means. Why are saints confused with or accused as non-conformists?
2. What are some aspects of the common good that our current society lacks and to which Dorothy Day would rally to change?
3. One aspect of the common good is the spiritual good of the human person. How can you further promote the flourishing of this aspect of the persons in your family or work environment?
4. Are there ways in which your family, work or local society frustrate the good of individuals? How can you respond to address those?

Self-Assessment (10 minutes)

Spend 10 minutes in silence assessing positive and negative examples of how you pursue the common good in your relationship with God and others. The below quadrant can help in jotting down some of your assessment as well as a tool for the whole Lumen Circle and how you can let it be a leaven in your life.

What struck me in this circle and how I might apply it to my THINKING. What CRITICAL ISSUES am I facing? What are the biggest CHALLENGES with these issues I face and what OPPORTUNITIES does it present?

Prayer:

Family:

Business:

Lumen Action:

What ACTION STEPS can I take now or long term? Develop a concrete resolution for how you can improve in your efforts to improve your relationships with others during the next month. Your resolution should be a specific action or activity that is easily measured.