

Catholic Social Thought and the Common Good

By Fr. Fred Kammer, S.J.

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Critical to Catholic thinking is the fundamental concept of *the common good*. The Catechism, following Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* and Vatican II, defines the common good as: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”¹ The common good applies to each human community, but its most complete realization occurs in the political community where the state’s role is “to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.”²

Three Essential Elements

The Catechism notes *three essential elements* of the common good: *respect for the individual, the social well-being and development of the group, and peace* which results from the stability of a just society. The common good’s conceptual roots lie in Greek and Roman philosophy as the goal of political life, the good of the city (*pólis*), and the task entrusted to civic leaders.³

Regarding the first essential of individual respect, the Catechism notes that all “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.”⁴ This means far more than the utilitarian “greatest good for the greatest number,” but insists that majorities respect individual rights.

The common good’s second element—the group’s social well-being and development—maintains that authority’s proper function is to arbitrate between various particular interests in society. Essential to this is ensuring the accessibility to each person of “what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.”⁵

The third element of peace and stability of a just social order presupposes that “authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the security of society and its members.”



Whose Responsibility?

First of all, everyone has responsibility for the common good as an embodiment of charity and justice. In Pope Benedict's words, "The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*."⁶ The pontiff indicates that this is the "institutional path" of charity—addressing juridical, civil, political, and cultural institutions. When animated by true charity, this path has greater worth than a merely secular and political stand.

The state shares responsibility for the common good since "*the common good is the reason that the political authority exists.*"⁷ The State must ensure the coherency, unity, and organization of civil society "in order that the common good may be attained with the contribution of every citizen."⁸

A Global Duty

Common good responsibility is not just about "my country." The Church speaks of a universal common good resulting from the increasing human interdependence of globalization.⁹ According to Pope Benedict, this common good and the effort to achieve it must 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*."¹⁰

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ENDNOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1906, citing Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, no. 65 and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 26.
- 2 *Catechism*, no. 1910.
- 3 Rev. Charles E. Bouchard, OP, STD, *Catholic Healthcare and the Common Good*, *Health Progress*, May-June 1999, pp. 34-40, at 34.
- 4 *Catechism*, no. 1907.
- 5 *Ibid.*, no. 1908.
- 6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), no. 7.
- 7 *Catechism*, no. 168.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, no. 1911.
- 10 Pope Benedict, *op. cit.*, no. 7, emphasis in original.



REFLECTION: CST

“The underlying 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.

~ Pope Francis
Laudato Si’ (#157)

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Pope John XXIII declared that the common good meant allowing every human being to reach his or her “fulfillment more fully and more easily.” Do you think this is a surprising way to define the concept of the common good? Why or why not? What would make you more fulfilled, give you a deeper sense of life and meaning? What kind of structures and systems in society would help you reach this kind of fulfillment? What kind of structures and systems in society would help others reach their fulfillment, such as someone struggling to find even a low-paying job to feed his family, or a young person whose family has no funds for a good education for her, or for an elderly adult, who worked for years as a cleaning woman but whose employers never put money into social security for her, as she faces great poverty in her last years?
2. Father Kammer tells us that the first element in the common good is a society’s respect for the dignity and well-being of every individual. How would helping the individuals mentioned at the end of Question 1 above (unemployed male, young woman, older woman) move them to a fulfilling life, or one of “human flourishing,” as many Catholic Social Thought documents name the goal of society? How would helping these people contribute to the overall common good of society, or the “group’s social well-being and development,” the second element of the common good? How do we all benefit when everyone is able to flourish as God intended that person to flourish?
3. The third element of the common good is peace and stability in a just society. Today we read and hear more and more about violence in our world, even from members of society who are charged with keeping the peace. Some have said that the roots of this violence go back many years, decades, and even centuries; what are some ways we as a society can begin to recognize roots of violence and begin a path to a more nonviolent community? What are some ways we, as individuals and as members of parishes, schools, community organizations, groups, etc., can work towards the common good through the healing of social justice and nonviolence?
4. Finally, Father Kammer calls us to realize we must also be concerned with the common good of the global community, a point Pope Francis has echoed in his recent encyclical calling for an “ecological common good.” Pope Francis reminds us that we are all connected to one another and the ecology of our planet. Why has it been difficult in the past for citizens of our country to take a more global perspective on the common good? What makes it imperative now to take a global perspective on our world’s common good? What are some ways we can become more aware of our global community, and how peace and flourishing can be developed for all human beings?



PRAYER

You have created us to flourish in community, God of all,
And to recognize that in helping our neighbors,
We move to our own fulfillment.

In this time, when we see so many being visibly violent
Toward their brothers and sisters,
Or being violent in a more subtle way by ignoring
The sufferings of our sisters and brothers,
Move us to recognize the common home we share,
The common goals we have, the common end we are all made for.

Guide us to work for the common good of our society
And the common good of our global community.

Help us go ever more deeply into our Church's social teaching,
Guided by Pope Francis and graced by the Holy Spirit. Amen.



FAITH IN ACTION

1. Since society cannot flourish without peace, pledge to build a culture of peace and nonviolence in our homes, our communities, our nation, and our world.

Go to CampaignNonviolence.org to see what local groups are doing and what you can do to join in developing a more peaceful world. Practice peace and non-violence toward yourself and all others every day, speak out for peace and for respect for all people in your communities.

2. Pope Francis has spoken eloquently about the common good of the planet in terms of understanding we are all connected to each other and to our ecological systems. He urges us all to act as individuals to change our own lifestyles but also to act as members of groups and as citizens to save God's precious gift of Creation. Make a commitment to do at least one act a day that will help the environmental common good (e.g., avoid buying plastic bottles) and join others in group efforts to ensure national and international commitments to reverse the destruction and degradation of God's Creation.

