

## THE COMMON GOOD AND THE GOOD SOCIETY:

### THE GENESIS OF A CONCEPT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

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The idea of the common good as the goal of the just society is a key feature of the Catholic intellectual tradition, and, more broadly, Judeo-Christian culture. It can be traced to the teachings of the Bible from the beginning of “salvation history” with the divine creation of the first man and the first woman formed out of the earth and quickened by a divine spirit. It is a part of the three great monotheistic religions claiming descent from Abraham, “the father of all peoples,” as this name means in the Hebrew language.

The creation of Adam (“from the earth”) and Eve (“mother of the living”), “both in the image and likeness of God” implies both a *community* of nature and a unique and unrepeatable *individuality* of each person, oriented to the infinite being of the Creator.

It seems evident from this teaching that in a good society there cannot be any incompatibility between the individual good of each person and the good of the entire community. However, if we look at the idea of the common good in historical perspective, we cannot deny this apparent conflict. In the Catholic intellectual tradition, we can trace the presence of this concept in major sources, from Augustine’s *City of God*, to Aquinas’s *bonum commune*, greatly elaborated by Francisco de Vitoria in the 16th century, and all the way to Paul VI’s “integral good of the *whole* man and *every* man,” developed further by John Paul II’s central concept of *solidarity*.

If we relate the Catholic intellectual tradition to other schools of thought in the history of ideas, we observe a continuous debate regarding the concept of the common good and the nature of the individual and his rights. For example, we may be inclined to think in a Hegelian fashion of an antithetical or dialectical opposition or contradiction between individual and society.

Our purpose here is to make an historical review and reflection of the trajectory of the *common good* based on the Catholic intellectual tradition and to compare it to other traditions.

### 1. Historical Perspective

The concept of person as an autonomous image of a personal God was already in the mind of some of the earliest human beings on earth, as the findings of modern anthropology have suggested.<sup>1</sup> After those primitive societies, later civilizations—India, Persia, Assyria, Egypt, China, Greece—embraced pantheism and polytheism. With the exception of the Hebrews, many lost sight of the concept of person, and lapsed into political absolutism and a slavery-based economy. The ancient Hebrew nation, however, preserved the belief in a personal God to whom every man and woman is responsive and responsible.<sup>2</sup>

The great Greek thinkers, led by Socrates, under his motto “know thyself,” focused once again on the uniqueness of the human being, open to infinity through *logos* (reason) and *eros* (love), *dynamis* (power) and *aretê* (virtue). The Romans, in their turn, through their legal and juridical genius, and enriched by Greek culture, arrived at a concept of *persona* approaching the Biblical view, with their stress on freedom and responsibility, liability and accountability before the law.

### 2. Toward a perfect definition

Boethius, in the 6th century of the Christian era, synthesized the best insights of Greco-Roman culture into the sublime view of the human person found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. His classic definition of “person” was a “*rationalis naturæ individua substantia*,” i.e., an “individual substance of rational nature.” Key elements of his concept include:

(a) “individual,” as opposed to abstract and universal, stands for what is undivided in itself and divided from anything else, implying a relative or

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee* (Münster, 1912-1952), 12 volumes.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Ronda Chervin and Eugene Kevane, *Love of Wisdom: An Introduction to Christian Philosophy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

absolute autonomy and independence, as well as existential actuality;

(b) "substance," as opposed to accident, stands for a being that exists by itself (subsistent) and may be the subject of accidents or beings that exist in another and perfect it, unless it is the perfection of being itself, which therefore does not need any accidents;

(c) "rational" stands for radical and unlimited openness to reality by means of understanding or intelligence, i.e., grasping in a non-material way what is essential in everything (what it is) in the context of existential reality;<sup>3</sup>

(d) "nature" stands for the essence of a substance as principle of operations specific to that substance, in this case the human nature, characterized by rationality and free decision.<sup>4</sup>

This is a classical, logically perfect, definition, inasmuch as it puts forward the proximate genus (individual substance) whereby the human person is classified as an animal, and the specific difference (of a rational nature) whereby the human person is neatly distinguished from other animals, and is in turn defined as a rational or political (i.e. social or other-oriented) animal.

The metaphysical make-up of the human person is thus constituted by an organic and symbiotic composition of:

(a) physical or material elements, with a potential but passive infinite divisibility which he or she shares with all the bodies of the cosmos;

(b) an active principle of life or immanent self-motion and self-production, which he or she shares with all plants;

(c) a consciousness of the outside world, indefinitely expanding his or her presence in it, which he or she shares with all animals by means of the sensory system and its consequent emotional system of responses; and

(d) an intelligence or reason, opened toward infinity by trans-sensible

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<sup>3</sup> Aquinas widened this Aristotelian concept of rationality (*logos*) to include openness to divine revelation, whereby reason is brought to its full illumination.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the author's *Christian Philosophy* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1980), 13 b; 16 d and e; 17 a, b and d; 23 b; 24 a; 25 f; 32; 33 f; 37 b, d and e; 40 f; 42 a.

knowledge and love, thus transcending or going infinitely beyond the limits of (a), (b) and (c).

### 3. The Total Picture of the Person

This wondrous reality of the human person, astride the physical and the metaphysical, the visible and the invisible, the quantifiable and the qualifiable, the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal, moved Aquinas to remark that the person is the most perfect thing in the whole universe.<sup>5</sup>

That is why God, the most perfect being, cannot be a non-person, i.e. an impersonal force at work in the universe, but the most perfect Person. This is not an anthropomorphic scaling down of God to our level, but a scaling up of ourselves to His level.

The person thus stands out in the cosmos as clearly and essentially distinguished from

(a) mere machines or systems of transmission of motions, whether existing in nature or artificially made by human ingenuity: the human person certainly has mechanical aspects, but it would be a metaphysical blunder of the first magnitude to reduce the human being to them (this is the error of Cartesian mechanism);<sup>6</sup>

(b) mere vegetables and animals: obviously he or she has elements of such, but it would also be metaphysically inappropriate to reduce the human being to them (this is the error of biologism or organicism).<sup>7</sup>

### 4. Person, World and Community

The 20<sup>th</sup> century has witnessed atrocious occurrences of such metaphysical blunders in the name of misguided ideologies attacking

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<sup>5</sup> See the author's *Being Is Person: Personalism and Human Transcendence in Socio-Economic and Political Philosophy* (Manila: University of Asia and the Pacific, 2005), ch. VII.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the author's *The Humanism of Modern Philosophy* (Manila: SEASFI, 1989), ch. IV, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Stanley L. Jaki, *The Relevance of Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), ch. 1, 2 and 7.

the person and his or her surpassing dignity. In view of modern man's inhumanity to man, one ought to shudder at the frequently recurring utterances and judgments reducing persons to machines or animals.

The individual dignity of the human person gives him or her a value transcending the entire physical universe. It renders each person unique and unrepeatable. But that each person is also essentially other-oriented exhibits the social nature of human beings. Human beings are not mere individuals, but also "political animals," as Aristotle said. The person constitutes his or her individual identity in and through association with other persons. Society is for the person, and not the person for society, but the person is not for himself or herself, but for others.

The common good, or good common to each and every person, must be the infinite good, for only this can satisfy the infinite desire of the human person for knowledge and love. But this common good can only be attained in and through society.

### 5. The Image of God

The good or happiness of a human person can only be an infinite good, since such a good alone can satisfy the infinite desire of his or her will for love, as well as his or her capacity for truth, i.e., for the appropriation of reality through knowledge. This ultimate end of the human person can be no less than infinite being, perfect unity, absolute truth, supreme good and the most sublime beauty.<sup>8</sup> This is the *transcendent* common good of man, which human reason, when unclouded by any preconception, identifies as the personal salvific Creator of all things from nothing, the infinitely just, infinitely merciful, infinitely lovable, Father and lover of mankind, with whom every person can communicate directly by prayer of adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petition.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the author's *Christian Philosophy*, 21; and the *Roots of Society*, 2nd ed., (Manila: Sinag-tala, 1984), ch. I.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the astonishing discoveries of anthropologist Edward Horace Mann in *The Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute, 1885).

For Christians, this one and only God has revealed Himself fully to mankind in his Son, the Messiah or Christ, Jesus, Son of Mary, and in the Church founded by Him.<sup>10</sup>

Since every man and woman has the capacity to attain to that transcendent common good, he or she has:

(a) the moral obligation to search for it to the best of his or her ability, an obligation which, given the social nature of man, extends also to society; and

(b) the right to search for, to accept and to profess freely his or her religious faith, without any external coercion, as long as he or she does not disturb public order,

Hence, the insistence of the Catholic Church, especially since the 1965 Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignatis Humanae*) of the Second Vatican Council, on the right to religious liberty or freedom of conscience, understood in the sense of (a) and (b), as one of the most fundamental of human rights, and therefore as an indispensable condition for peace and progress. Pope John Paul II put this very forcibly in his celebrated speech to the United Nations of October 2, 1979.

The infinite good of every human person can already be somehow enjoyed in this life through earthly society, but it can only be securely possessed after this life. In this earthly life, man does not have a sufficiently clear vision of that supreme good, because of the condition of the body, as Plato suggested in his famous myth of the cave. The human person's soul or principle of life, however, through the faculties of intelligence and free will, can transcend these bodily conditions, both in space and in time. It can plunge into the unknown without horizons, as the history of philosophy and culture, science and art, proclaim, and as the co-relative and symmetrical human capacity for evil likewise indicates throughout the length of human history.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Manuel Piñon, O. P., *Religion and "Religions"* (Manila: RTP Foundation, 1980).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. the author's *Christian Philosophy*, 31 and 45 b and c.

Unlike matter, the human soul is incorruptible or deathless, and so it enters into eternity as soon as it leaves the body, an eternity of infinite happiness if its final choice remained the infinite good, or of infinite pain if its final choice was its own self: the radical and irrevocable frustration of human nature, made for the infinite.<sup>12</sup>

The path to attaining the supreme good passes through earthly society, which, therefore, has its own value. The good of earthly society or the immanent common good, as distinct from the transcendent common good which is God, must be that which makes earthly society a suitable means for each person to attain his or her own good. Society must become good, so that man can be good. The person and the community thus interact in the creation of good for each other.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. The Good of Society

That the good of society remains within society and does not transcend it shows that the immanent common good is not absolutely good but only relatively so. In other words, while the good of society is for the sake of the good of the person, the good of the person is found ultimately in loving wholeheartedly the supreme good, Who is the Creator. But this also entails loving all His creatures with order and justice. This is the ultimate metaphysical foundation of social ethics.<sup>14</sup>

It is also the metaphysical foundation for the distinction between Church and State.<sup>15</sup> The latter is mainly concerned with the immanent common good, while the former is directly concerned, so to speak *ex officio*, with the transcendent common good. Both of them are interrelated and they even overlap, but they must be clearly distinguished.

Human activity is not, of course, confined to political activity, nor is political activity confined to economic activity, since the human person transcends both matter and society. Political activity is basically

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 29 d; 38 e; 39 e.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the author's *The Roots of Society*, ch. III and IV.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Christian Philosophy*, 38 d.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the author's *Politics and the Church* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1987), ch. 10, and *The Church and Temporal Realities* (Manila: SEASFI, 1988), ch. 2.

ethical, as ordained to the common good, both immanent and transcendent. It is not just a technique, or the machine of government, or economic activity regardless of morals.

The role of government in civil society is the temporal or immanent common good, as we have argued. But, the temporal common good is ultimately both material and spiritual. "Temporal" should not be identified exclusively with "material," just as "spiritual" is not equivalent to "eternal." The "spiritual" is anything in which the human person is involved, whether in this life (temporal) or in the next (eternal). It is with the latter that the Church is concerned as its own proper domain.

There should thus be continuity and harmony between the temporal common good (which is the primary concern of the State) and the eternal common good (which is the primary responsibility of the Church), although they are distinct. Strictly speaking, they should not be "separated," since there are common areas of responsibility, i.e., all that has to do with morality or what leads persons to their ultimate good or last end. But they should indeed be distinguished, since:

- (a) they have exclusive areas of their own competence (e.g., for the State the system of government or the fiscal laws; for the Church the administration of the sacraments and the appointment of ministers); and,
- (b) their respective authorities are different in nature, although both come from God: one is "natural" and arguably "democratic" (people power—of the State), and the other "supernatural" and "hierarchical" (sacred power—of the Church).<sup>16</sup>

In other words, it is the ethical or moral aspect of temporal matters with which the Church is properly concerned, not the technical aspects. This is why the Church ought not to ally herself with any particular economic or political ideology or party.

In what is strictly temporal, the Church can only give orientation as to the moral principles involved, not as to the prudential choices to be made, since temporal considerations are by their nature changing and multiple. And, in what is strictly supernatural, the State has no

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. the author's *The Church and Temporal Realities*, ch. 2 and 4.

competence. However, taking into account the subordination of the immanent common good to the transcendent common good, the State should both:

- (a) protect and facilitate public morals, as related to the eternal; and
- (b) favor and facilitate the worship of God, in accordance with the dignity of the human person.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. the author's *Work, Culture, Liberation* (Manila: Vera-Reyes, 1985), ch. 10, and "The Roots of International Law and the Teachings of Francisco de Vitoria," *Ave Maria Law Review* (2004: 2): 123-51.