

## **Who Will Live the Common Human Good?**

**An Address to the Convention for the Common Good  
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On your behalf and my own, I thank the convening organizations, which developed the process of prayer, analysis, reflection, and discussion that has brought us together this evening. For their tireless, persistent, and efficient handling of so many details, we thank the staff and Directors—Alexia Kelley of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and Sister Simone Campbell of NETWORK, which for more than three decades has made the pursuit of social justice integral in evaluating local, national, and global policies.

For us, **as Catholic citizens of the United States**, this is a remarkable, inspiring, even, daring event. I am humbled by the presence of each and every one of you, who has traveled to Philadelphia this weekend. Your participation concretely exemplifies one way to meet the responsibilities of citizenship in a democracy. Indeed, involvement in this convention and its processes stands as an exercise in piety, a special virtue, wrote Saint Thomas Aquinas, that directs us in carrying out our duties to our country.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, our gathering to discuss **publicly** and **explicitly** our hopes and concerns about the future of our country echoes the efforts of our Catholic forebears, who figured in the creation, defense, and support of the Republic.<sup>2</sup>

My task this evening is to help us think together about how we as Catholic citizens might contribute to this ongoing task in our time and circumstance—and to do so from a theological perspective rooted in the notion of the common good. As its etymology [*theos* / *logos*] suggests, theology is concerned with talk or speech about God, but it also implies that God has a word for us. The frightening task of the theologian is to discern and grapple with that word, then, mediate its meaning in a given time and place and circumstance. Thus, theology must engage the many-sided, even contradictory, ‘nitty-gritty’ dimensions of human living and clarify the cost of living mindfully, humanly; it risks encounter with the dynamic, powerful, and purifying word of God in the messiness of society and history. More importantly, theology always must summon us to look beyond even the best solutions to human problems and turn our minds and hearts and living toward that Ultimate and Transcendent solution, which can only be the gracious eschatological gift of a Just, Compassionate, Merciful, and Provident God.

My remarks are organized in three parts: We, first, consider the notion or idea of the common good—adverting to thinkers key to its Catholic appropriation, then, sketch out a way of grasping what the common good **might be** *and* **what it is not**. My emphasis focuses on human attention, intelligence, cooperation, collaboration, and responsibility. The second part probes some of the tensions in our understanding of democracy as citizens of the United States, who seek to realize the common human good in our context. Finally, at this time in our national life, we are eager for change, we yearn to live humanly. Yet, there is a cost to change, a cost to living humanly, a cost to creation. We calculate the meaning of that cost in the third part.

## The Common Good

While uniquely and intricately entwined with Catholic moral and social theology, Catholic Social Thought as well as papal and episcopal teaching, the notion of the common good boasts a colorful and conflictual biography as it wends its way through nearly all of Western philosophy and intellectual history. Time does not permit a review of that rich and protean narrative, but we take note of four thinkers who have influenced Catholic thinking about the common good.

Ideas about a notion of a common good seem to have originated in the efforts of Plato and Aristotle to clarify the meaning of the best, most choiceworthy way to live. These philosophers argued that the **telos** or goal or purpose of human life was happiness; but happiness, on their account, coincided with a life lived with other persons and a lived life of virtue—courage, temperance, generosity, proper pride and ambition, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, shame, and justice.<sup>3</sup> Saint Augustine recognized the primal human drive for happiness; chastened by his own experience and acknowledging the vulnerability of the human psyche, he worked out a notion of the common good that ordered social, political, and moral life in light of our supernatural destiny as human beings—loving union with God. But, it is Saint Thomas Aquinas, who has shaped decisively Catholic thinking about the common good, about justice in its social—distributive and legal aspects; about human nature as fundamentally graced and good; about our human responsibility for and to one another in constituting the common good; about the gracious goodness of our God, who is our common Beatitude and joyous end.

We have inherited from these thinkers a notion of the common good. I would express it in this way: **the common good is disciplined yearning, deliberation, judgment, and action in concrete realization of the best, most choiceworthy way to live.** The common good stands as a cherished, valued, true good. It is of a high order—implicitly transcendent, befitting the grandeur of God’s human creation, ordering and enhancing and beautifying the interdependence of our living.

The common good is **human good** common for all: It is conditioned by human attention, intelligence, judgment, and responsibility. Yet, consider that the very intricacy, flexibility, and resilience of the human body, that the power of human intelligence and imagination encode in us the conditions for the possibility of the creation of the common human good. This intricacy and power allow us to complexify our world in response to our needs and wants, desires and values; they equip us to improve and demonstrate abilities and skills. At the same time, this very intricacy and power make possible all our decisions and actions, all our relationships and their fulfillment, and, above all, they open us to our own liberty or self-determination and its thoughtful, sensitive exercise.<sup>4</sup>

This intricacy and power make it possible for us to initiate and foster a range of human relationships through neighborhood block clubs, civic organizations, book clubs, cultural associations, volunteer groups, little league baseball teams, carpenters’ unions, symphony orchestras, and garage bands. This basic and essential interest in, attention to, respect and care for other human persons both furthers in us and grounds us in, what a theologian friend of mine calls, “friendly authenticity”<sup>5</sup> through which we seek one another’s well being. Gently, we coax forward the wonder, affectivity, and psychic growth of our youngsters, even as we scrutinize ourselves. We know the delight of the

deepening of authentic human interactions and we cherish their bloom into friendship, into marriage and intimate love, into family.

Basic friendly authenticity lays the groundwork for generating highly differentiated institutions and frameworks for education, health care, agriculture, cultural advancement, entrepreneurial growth and economic exchange, and governance. As the **body politic**, we subordinate ourselves to the laws made by our elected representatives, whether in municipal councils, state legislatures, or Congress. Good law facilitates our participation in the common good and guards against injustices of all kinds, which hold human good and human flourishing in contempt, thus, disrupting human relationships and eroding that friendly authenticity from which human common life grows.<sup>6</sup>

Still, like every finite human achievement, the common good not only enjoys progress, but may breakdown and suffer decline. Moreover, that decline may linger, distorting human intelligence and judgment, degrading our common life, lowering our expectations of one another. We know this in our hearts, in our bones, in our bodies. Our land, our homeland, carries a fault line that runs through every compassionate heart and requires that we recognize the crimes and sins of which we have been and remain so fully capable. We can only open ourselves to divine grace, which interrupts every settled routine, leads us to confess how we deform the human good, and reminds us that we are responsible for one another's flourishing as human persons in this our time and place.

What I have been trying to illustrate is that the common good is the work of human attention, intelligence, judgment, and responsibility. Because of its dependence on the genuineness of human persons and the quality and verve of human relationships, the common human good may bloom and thrive in some contexts, wither and dry up in

others. The common good cannot be set-up from prefabricated material following a manual of instruction even those from the best toolkit. The common good is neither an arithmetical sum of personal or corporate goods, nor instrumental in character.

Rather, the common good is a **human achievement**: It is **us** right here, right now making ourselves, who we are and who we might become, first and foremost, as authentic human persons, as people of faith, as citizens of the United States—constituting ourselves as the nation we are and yearn to become in our collaborations to create, realize, and nurture the good in one another. In this endeavor, Cornel West was quite correct when he insisted that “democracy matters”<sup>7</sup> and to this topic we turn.

### **Democracy and the Common Good**

Democracy matters and in our U. S. context it is problematic. Why? For one thing, our notion of democracy straddles and tries to harness two divergent traditions: the one pertains to the common human good as sketched in the preceding section, with its concern for character formation and virtue, friendly authenticity, obligation and responsibility to and for others who comprise the social whole; the second pertains to individual rights, social contract justice, and tolerance. Call the first tradition, republican; the second, individualist; but both continue to be influenced by the European Enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, competitive market rules, globalization, and technological innovation so sweeping it upends cultural mores and values. But, without friendly authenticity—without mutual trust, fidelity to our moral obligations, and regard for others, especially our community’s most vulnerable members—the common good is jeopardized by our own self-regarding selfishness.

Democracy is far more complicated than mere majority rule. As ethicist Kenneth Melchin writes, democracy requires the deliberation of citizens about public goods we hold in common. Moreover, democracy “requires that these deliberations be competent.” We too often disparage theory (read: specialization and competence) at our peril, but neither ought we to dismiss common sense out of hand. Democracy calls for respect for specialists, who are capable of wise decision-making and who have the skills to help negotiate conflicts with and among their fellow-citizens, when such conflicts crop up in the deliberation of various matters.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, democracy requires creativity and bold and deep imagination.

Being a citizen in a democracy is a demanding obligation. On the one hand, we value participation in the political process; on the other hand, unless we hold public office or serve in the military, unthinkingly we identify ourselves as ‘private citizens’—an oxymoron that would have astonished the Greeks as well as the ‘new’ Americans living in Concord, Massachusetts in 1776.<sup>9</sup> But, democracy requires not only citizens fit for military service, not only informed citizens, but citizens willing to educate themselves—from the Internet, to be sure, but also from books, journals, newspapers, and magazines; radio and television as well. Still, the common good flourishes only in a democracy constituted by truly good women and men of well-formed conscience and good values, who orient themselves toward realization of good.

Being a citizen in a democracy is a demanding obligation and a serious responsibility. ‘We the people,’ sociologist Robert Bellah reminds us, are **not** ‘a special interest group.’<sup>10</sup> Yet, with muted protest, we have allowed market economics to provide the primary didactic model and standard for our common life. Inevitably, the market

swallows the citizen and spits out the consumer, thus, damaging the dignity of human life, of political life, of the common good.

Being a citizen in a democracy is a demanding obligation and a serious responsibility, and we need be taught its meaning. Democracy means far more than civic participation and free elections, far more than majority rule. Democracy entails much more than not infringing on the rights of others, and, certainly, far more than mere tolerance. As David Hollenbach has pointed out, there are problems that tolerance cannot handle—poverty, sexism, anti-Semitism, racism, homophobia, and discrimination of human persons because of disability or age or social condition.<sup>11</sup>

A just society, a good society oriented toward the common human good is contingent; it relies upon the women and men who constitute that society. The common human good is fragile; it relies upon a range of sets of probable events coming into being and recurring with successful regularity including the higher integrations that bring about natural, physical, chemical, biological, and neurological life. But the crucial contingency is us—our human attention, intelligence, cooperation, collaboration, and responsibility as authentic women and men, who will pay the cost of living the human good.

### **The Cost of Living the Human Good**

We gather as people of faith to consider the good for our loved ones and ourselves, the good for our fellow citizens, and, above all, the good for our country. We, here, are as a little yeast leavening the whole loaf. We want to live humanly and we want change; but, there is a cost to living humanly, there is a cost to change, a cost to creation.

What will turn us in a new direction? What will it cost us? How shall we calculate the cost?

First, our world, our country, our states, our towns and cities cannot and will not change if **we** do not. Some thirty years ago, the late sociologist Sister Maria Augusta Neal proposed a ‘socio-theology of letting go.’<sup>12</sup> We need a renewal of spirituality, which, at once, relinquishes and embraces: relinquishes excess, embraces the other; which challenges us to open our arms as Jesus did unafraid of the demands of our time and place and circumstance.

Second, perhaps, some of you recall the slogan from General Electric, “Progress is our most important product.” This and similar advertisements have fueled our optimism, and we Americans have a reputation for optimism. Such claims have helped us to believe that knowledge and technical rationality could guarantee a development that was always progress and never decline.

In the midst of unexamined progress and frightful decline, we need to cultivate the virtue of hope. Hope is so much more than optimism or mere wishing. Hope is an act of courage through which we discern when to wait and when to act. Hope never yields to apathy; rather it makes creative, positive, spiritual use of waiting. Hope never surrenders to naiveté; rather it is the work of human imagination and human intelligence. We need to cultivate and live in and out of hope.

Third, as Catholics, we are heir to a rich trove of theological, spiritual, literary, and devotional resources. Perhaps, we might draw on these in preparation for the coming election. Let me suggest that all of us pray and that those of us who are able consider taking on the disciplines of prayer and fasting from this Sunday, July 13, when Sister

Helen Prejean will commission us, until November 4<sup>th</sup>. And, we need not conclude these disciplines with the election. No matter the outcome, the next president cannot reverse in four years our country's disastrous slide into decline. Perhaps, we might consider continuing to fast or discipline ourselves in some way for the sake our country's realization of the common good.

### **Conclusion**

The common good is a **human achievement**—it is human good common to all, yet distinct in each instance through human particularity, need, imagination, and creativity. The human good is us making us ourselves, making us who we are and who we might become, first and foremost, as authentic human persons, as people of faith, as citizens of the United States—striving to make our country our best hope this side of the Reign of God.

The common good is a human achievement of high order yet, that achievement always is relativized in the light of our supernatural end. We trivialize both its dignity and that of the American dream when we reduce these to acquisitive individualism, professional success, and a nine-figure income.

To use other, older, and still very valuable theological language, I have been suggesting the intimate relation between life, good or virtuous life, and eternal life, for as the theologian teaches us “the ascent of the soul towards God is not a merely private affair but rather a personal function of an objective common movement in that body of Christ which takes over, transforms, and elevates every aspect of human life.”<sup>13</sup>

Our ability to realize (or not) our country as an instance of the common good is contingent upon each and all of us who are citizens. When we live so that the truth, intelligibility, goodness, and beauty of our social order is attractive, then so is our country. When we work and collaborate seriously thoughtfully, creatively for justice, then our country is just. When we respond freely and joyously to the gift of divine life and love, the gift of grace, then we and our social arrangements contest the reign of sin, the power of evil. For it is only through the gift of grace realized in human lives and hearts that we can meet the effects of sin with healing and creative solidarity. We here are a little yeast; let us commit ourselves to this task no matter the cost.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, trans. Blackfriars (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), II-II,q., 101, a.3.

<sup>2</sup> Among others, this group of men and women include Charles Carroll, who signed the Declaration of Independence; his brother Daniel and Thomas Fitzsimons, who signed the Constitution; Mary Waters, who nursed soldiers during the revolutionary war; and John Barry, whose cunning and courage helped to win the war at sea (<http://www.catholichistory.net/Spotlights/SpotlightFounding.htm>, 5 July 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Plato, Republic, trans., Allan Bloom (New York: Basic, 1968); Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925).

<sup>4</sup> Beyond the structure of the human good lies the transcendent goodness of God and the pre-human good—the natural physical, chemical, biological, and neurological series of schemes of recurrence, which are the physiological and environmental conditions for the possibility of the human higher integrations of the good. See Patrick H. Byrne and Richard Carroll Keeley, “LeCorbusier’s Finger and Jacobs’s Thought: The Loss and Recovery of the Subject in the City,” in Fred Lawrence, ed., Communicating a Dangerous Memory: Soundings in Political Theology (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 63-108, especially 88-90.

<sup>5</sup> Kathleen M. Williams, RSM, “Friendly Authenticity in a Fractured World: On the Way to Peace,” Paper read at the Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, June 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Summa Theologiae, I-II, q.90, a.2, resp.; a.3, resp.; II-II, q.59, a.1.

<sup>7</sup> Cornel West, Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Kenneth R. Melchin, “Three Challenges in Christian Ethics,” Paper Read, Lonergan Workshop, June 2008, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Riesenberg, Citizenship in the Western Tradition: Plato to Rousseau (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 269.

<sup>10</sup> Robert N. Bellah et al., Habits of the Heart, Individualism and Commitment in American Life (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 271.

<sup>11</sup> David Hollenbach, “Problems Tolerance Cannot Handle,” 32-61, in his The Common Good and Christian Ethics (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2002).

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<sup>12</sup> Marie Augusta Neal, A Socio-theology of Letting Go: The Role of a First World Church Facing Third World Peoples (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Bernard Lonergan, "Finality, Love, Marriage," 27, in Frederick E. Crowe, ed., Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S. J. (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967) 16-53.