

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE COMMON GOOD

The 10 second Summary

What does the Church say about the Common Good?

The principle of the Common Good states that the good of each human person is intimately related to the good of the whole community.

- The human person, made in God's image, is both a sacred being and a social being.
- The human person can only flourish in community.
- The rights and duties of human persons are realized and carried out in community, which includes the community of the family along with the wider society and world.
- The good of each individual in society is intimately connected to the good of the wider group or society.
- Participation, peace, proper exercise of limited authority and the safeguarding of rights are necessary conditions for the principle of Common Good.

Two Key Understandings:

The principle of common good relies on two central understandings which provide the conditions necessary to achieve the common good.

1. **The human person is social by nature** (born into a fabric of relationships) and needs others in order to thrive. Life is not lived in isolation but for the formation of social unity. The Common Good recognizes that all persons must contribute to life in society, and all persons must share in the mutual benefits of life in society.
2. **The human person must be surrounded by a set of rights and duties that are guaranteed** so that there are minimum standards that support life in society.¹

Where does this teaching on the Common Good come from?

- **Biblical source: Scripture** – rooted in scripture
- **Moral source: Tradition** – the use of reason and reflection based in the Catholic tradition.
- **Ecclesial source: Church teaching** – expressed in the Pope's Encyclical letters, (This source is often what is referred to as Catholic Social Teaching.) Apostolic letters, Apostolic exhortations, and the Bishops' Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day.

¹ Dwyer, Judith, ed. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, p. 192-7.

How does this teaching on the Common Good connect with my life?

It provides:

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

Common Good defined in Catholic Social Teaching:

From: *Gaudium et Spes*, #26

“Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result the common good, that 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, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspiration of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.”

Three Essential Elements of the Common Good:

1. Respect for the human person - made in God's image
2. Social well-being of the group and the development of the group
3. Peace, stability, and the security of a just order



The Common Good:

- Is a concern for the welfare of the whole
- Recognizes the human person is sacred and social
- Is built upon the principle of human dignity and the equality of all people
- Recognizes that human beings realize their dignity and achieve their destiny in particular communities, not isolation.
- Requires a foundation of basic rights which are minimum standards for life in society
- Is personal and communal
- Must be active at every level of life
- Is directed by a moral concern that each person must participate and share in the benefits of social advances
- Is needed to avoid the harmful forces of coercion, domination or exploitation
- Is needed for the overall just functioning of a society
- Recognizes that governments and political institutions are necessary and have active responsibility for achieving the common good
- Must be an increasingly transnational - or global- reality encompassing the entire human family
- Is not utilitarian in nature: it's not “the greatest good for the greatest number;” because this can allow for the exclusion of individuals or even segments of society

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Encyclicals and the Common Good

What are some of the historical developments that caused the church to take notice and respond to the call for the common good?

What was the reality?

Document & Year

What was presented?

1890's The rise of the industrial revolution created great social upheaval. The previous protections of the working guilds were gone, leaving an open door for worker exploitation and greater social and financial instability. The common good was threatened by these rapid changes.

The Condition of Labor
(*Rerum Novarum*)
Pope Leo XIII
1891

The common good is understood as the **general welfare** of people within a nation state. The Pope calls upon the state to address the needs of the poor because he asserts that the state has the duty of watching over the common good and of ensuring every sector of social life contributes to achieving it.

1930's The Great Depression was a reality both in the U.S. and abroad. Wealth was becoming more and more concentrated into the hands of a few. This translated into increased political power concentrated into the same hands. Self-interest was protected without a concern for the common good.

The Reconstruction of the Social Order
(*Quadragesimo Anno*)
Pope Pius XI
1931

The government has a legitimate role and responsibility in the pursuit of the common good. The **government must contribute** rather than undermine the common good.

1960's The world had been experiencing rapid change. It was the age of the atom, space exploration and the heavy threat of nuclear war. The advances in technical and scientific arenas along with increased efficiency were creating a multiplication of social relationships calling for new forms of cooperation.

Christianity and Social Progress
(*Mater et Magistra*)
Pope John XXIII
1961

The growing complexity of the world is calling for greater recognition of the interdependence of citizens. Concern for the common good must not only be considered within countries, but also across national boundaries. The common good must increasingly be recognized as an **international reality**.

1960's The Cold War was underway and the Cuban missile crisis was looming. The fragile and costly nature of peace was a central concern. The role of authority was examined as authoritarian dictatorships and totalitarian regimes posed real threats by their disregard for human rights. Nations must cooperate and disarm in order to promote and protect the common good.

Peace on Earth
(*Pacem in Terris*)
Pope John XXIII
1963

Pacem in Terris introduces the connection of the common good with the protection of **human rights**. "The common good is chiefly guaranteed when personal rights and duties are maintained." (#60) People have to work together for the common good and active collaboration must be facilitated by civil authorities. This was the first document to be addressed to "all people of good will," and not simply a Catholic audience.

1960's The horrors of World War II highlighted what happened when good people of faith did nothing to stand against the misuse of power. This document asserts the need for the church (understood as the people of God) to be actively involved in bringing about a more just world order.

Gaudium et Spes
(*The Church in the Modern World*)
Second Vatican Council
1965

This document noted that humans were created for life in community, not isolation. Because the person is **social by nature** the good of each person is bound up with the good of the community. Here a definition of the common good is given and includes the **social conditions necessary** for humans to reach their fulfillment.

What was the reality?

1960's This document was one of the last to be issued by Vatican II. It was written to make the case that the right to religious freedom was based on the dignity of the human person. Where previous popes had argued for the union of church and state, after World War II it was clear this was not going to work. This document created a new basis upon which to argue for the right to religious freedom – no matter what the faith.

Document & Year

The Declaration on Religious Liberty
(*Dignitatis Humanae*)
Pope Paul VI
1965

What was presented?

The state is responsible for the promotion of justice, public order and public peace. The state has an active but limited role in promoting the common good. It is responsible for that part of the common good that enables society to function as a community of citizens, but it must not interfere in other spheres such as family life, religion, etc. where it is incompetent.

1960's Awareness that “development” was not benefiting all peoples or nations equally raised new questions. A closer analysis revealed that large segments of the world were left out of the process of development. As a result, the social teaching called for global cooperation which would focus on the common good of all nations, not just the rich ones.

The Development of Peoples
(*Populorum Progressio*)
Pope Paul VI
1967

A new treatment and articulation of the meaning of “authentic human development” emerged. It proposed an entirely new foundation for human development – not based on existing Western economic models and realities but centered on the person in community. Here the common good takes into account the development of all of humanity.

1980's The tensions since the Cold war between Eastern bloc communist countries and western blocs distracted efforts to work towards the achievement of an international common good. This rivalry was noted as a “structure of sin.”

On Social Concern
(*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*)
Pope John Paul II
1987

Endorsement of western democracy had been held at arms length as a model to promote but here the encyclical of the positive role democracy can play in promoting and protecting the common good is recognized. For the first time the environment is included in an understanding

1990's The events of Eastern Europe in 1989 and the impact of the resulting fall of communism are a central underlying focus. Socialism, atheism, and consumerism are real threats to human flourishing. One theme treated here is the need to create or restore harmony between various social groups for the sake of the common good.

One Hundred Years
(*Centesimus Annus*)
Pope John Paul II
1991

For the first time consumerism is treated in some detail noting how it can distort or eclipse a true sense of striving for the common good. Consumerism and ecological devastation are connected and both present obstacles to pursuing the common good. The economic market is not capable of and is insufficient in achieving the common good. War is a clear and sure threat to the common good.

What Does the Catechism Say About the Common Good?⁴

Paragraph

- #1918** "There is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom 13:1).
- #1919** Every human community needs an authority in order to endure and develop.
- #1920** "The political community and public authority are based on human nature and therefore . . . belong to an order established by God" (GS 74 § 3).
- #1921** Authority is exercised legitimately if it is committed to the common good of society. To attain this it must employ morally acceptable means.
- #1922** The diversity of political regimes is legitimate, provided they contribute to the good of the community.
- #1923** Political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order and must guarantee the conditions for the exercise of freedom.
- #1924** The common good comprises "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (GS 26 1).
- #1925** The common good consists of three essential elements: respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person; prosperity, or the development of the spiritual and temporal goods of society; the peace and security of the group and of its members.
- #1926** The dignity of the human person requires the pursuit of the common good. Everyone should be concerned to create and support institutions that improve the conditions of human life.
- #1927** It is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society. The common good of the whole human family calls for an organization of society on the international level.

⁴ See also paragraphs # 1905-1912. Source: Catechism of the Catholic Church. New York: Doubleday, 1994.

How has this teaching developed?

- A vision of the “good life” has been shaped through Western Classical Greek moral philosophy – Aristotle and Plato, Cicero and Socrates, etc. The idea of the “polis” or the Greek city-state was the place where citizens made decisions about self-governance and their life in common for the sake of noble actions, not just companionship. The polis or political society was not necessarily a geographic location, but an association of citizens where the exercise of the public virtue of citizenship was achieved. The common good was understood as seeking the “general welfare” of the polis.
- Augustine built on the Greek understanding of polis but insisted that the full and complete common good of the polis exists only partially here in the earthy realm, and only completely with and in God in the eternal realm. The common good takes on a divine understanding in addition to a political one.
- Aquinas further clarified that the ultimate good that is sought is not anything to be achieved on earth but is only achieved in the fullness of life in God. Concern for the common good therefore is not merely a political aim, but has a divine aim and therefore transcends the limits of human political rulers.
- With the dawn of the Enlightenment in the 18th century a new emphasis was placed on human reason and scientific investigation. Philosophers and thinkers of this era brought ideas of freedom, liberty, equality, and individual rights to the center (among others). These ideas and their influence gradually shaped the social teaching on common good.
- An understanding of the linkage between the common good and human rights came largely through the work of Jacques Maritain in the 1940’s recognizing that the person in society needed secure protection to exist and thrive in society.
- Modern global realities and contemporary thinking have further expanded the teaching to look at the international scope necessary to achieve a global common good as well as an awareness of new threats that endanger or thwart the common good. Pluralism, war, technological advances, ecological awareness and globalization all create new challenges in seeking the common good of all.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. In your own words how would you summarize the principle of the Common Good?
2. Can you describe a time when you made a decision that was for the good of others and not just yourself? What impact did it have on others? On you? What did you learn?
3. What challenges and threats to the common good would you identify as the most significant at this point in time?
4. How are human dignity and human rights related to the common good?
5. Which elements of American culture do you think provide the biggest obstacle to people working together cooperatively to seek and promote the common good?
6. How can technology be used to promote the common good? What kinds of technology can actually work to prevent the work of the common good?

Selected Quotes from Catholic Social Teaching on the Common Good

Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result the common good, that 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, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspiration of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.”

Gaudium et Spes, #26

It is imperative that no one ... would indulge in a merely individualistic morality. The best way to fulfill one’s obligations of justice and love is to contribute to the common good according to one’s means and the needs of others, and also to promote and help public and private organizations devoted to bettering the conditions of life.

Gaudium et Spes, #30

The political community exists, consequently, for the sake of the common good, in which it finds its full justification and significance, and the source of its inherent legitimacy. Indeed, the common good embraces the sum of those conditions of the social life whereby people, families and associations more adequately and readily may attain their own perfection. Yet the people who come together in the political community are many and diverse, and they have every right to prefer divergent solutions. If the political community is not to be torn apart while everyone follows their own opinion, there must be an authority to direct the energies of all citizens toward the common good, not in a mechanical or despotic fashion, but by acting above all as a moral force which appeals to each one’s freedom and sense of responsibility.

Gaudium et Spes, #74

All Christians must be aware of their own specific vocation within the political community. It is for them to give an example by their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good. In this way they are to demonstrate concretely how authority can be compatible with freedom, personal initiative with the solidarity of the whole social organism, and the advantages of unity with fruitful diversity.

Gaudium et Spes, #75

As for the State, its whole *raison d’être* is the realization of the common good in the temporal order. It cannot, therefore, hold aloof from economic matters. On the contrary, it must do all in its power to promote the production of a sufficient supply of material goods, “the use of which is necessary for the practice of virtue.” It has also the duty to protect the rights of all its people, and particularly of its weaker members, the workers, men, women, and children.

Mater et Magistra, #20

It is necessary that public authorities have a correct understanding of the common good. This embraces the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby persons are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection. Hence, we regard it as necessary that the various intermediary bodies and the numerous social undertakings wherein an expanded social structure primarily finds expression, be ruled by their own laws, and as the common good itself progresses, pursue this objective in a spirit of sincere concord among themselves.

Mater et Magistra, #65

The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and effective fulfillment.

Mater et Magistra, #74

“The common good, in fact can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good.”

– Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, #164

Assuredly, the ethnic characteristics of the various human groups are to be respected as constituent elements of the common good, but these values and characteristics by no means exhaust the content of the common good. For the common good since it is intimately bound up with human nature cannot therefore exist fully and completely unless the human person is taken into consideration and the essential nature and realization of the common good be kept in mind.
Pacem in Terris, #55

The very nature of the common good requires that all members of the state be entitled to share in it, although in different ways according to each one's tasks, merits and circumstances.
Pacem in Terris, #56

...the common good touches the whole person, the needs both of body and of soul. Hence it follows that the civil authorities must undertake to effect the common good by ways and means that are proper to them; that is, while respecting the hierarchy of values, they should promote simultaneously both the material and the spiritual welfare of the citizens.
Pacem in Terris, #57

Moreover, if we carefully consider the essential nature of the common good on the one hand, and the nature and function of public authority on the other, everyone sees that there is an intrinsic connection between the two. And, indeed, just as the moral order needs public authority to promote the common good in civil society, it likewise demands that public authority actually be able to attain it.
Pacem in Terris, #136

Political power, which is the natural and necessary link for ensuring the cohesion of the social body, must have as its aim the achievement of the common good. While respecting the legitimate liberties of individuals, families and subsidiary groups, it acts in such a way as to create, effectively and for the well-being of all, the conditions required for attaining humanity's true and complete good, including spiritual ends.
Octogesima Adveniens, #46

Just as within individual societies it is possible and right to organize a solid economy which will direct the functioning of the market to the common good, so too there is a similar need for adequate interventions on the international level.
Centesimus Annus, #52

Scripture Passages for Prayer and Reflection

Deuteronomy 30:19

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.

Nehemiah 2:17-18

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.

Isaiah 10:1-2

Woe to you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!

Matthew 25:35-40

For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you? And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Ephesians 4: 1-7, 12

I call you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were to prepare all God's people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ.

John 10: 11-18

Jesus said to the Pharisees, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for my sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."

Acts 2: 44-45

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

Galatians 5: 22-25

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

I John 4:7-10

Beloved, let us love one another, because love comes from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed to us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.