

Intersecting Realities:

The Common Good, Jesus' Ethic, Politics and Catholic Social Teaching

by

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The common good, the ethics of Jesus, politics, and Catholic social teaching are intersecting realities. Pursuit of the common good in government and society entails working to make accessible to all persons what they need to lead a truly human life. Jesus' ethic of love and justice provides a framework for government which exists for the sake of the pursuit of the common good. Citizens' engagement in the political process contributes to the attainment of the common good. Hospitable dialogue is a method for forging the common good and each person's political decision-making calls for the exercise of a well-formed conscience aided by the virtue of prudence. Rooted in Jesus' ethic, Catholic social teaching establishes a set of moral principles for informing political discourse and decision making.

THE COMMON GOOD

In the Christian tradition, the notion of the common good was discussed by St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century. In the thirteenth century, St. Thomas Aquinas synthesized Aristotle and St. Augustine's thinking regarding the common good. In contemporary times, various popes have written about the common good as the fundamental principle upon which governmental politics should be based.

At the heart of understanding the meaning of the common good is the reality that we humans are beings whose lives are interrelated and interdependent and that, indeed, we are each other's keepers. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* includes the following statement:

By common good is to be understood the sum total of social conditions which allow people either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily. The common good concerns the life of all.¹

In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI (now Emeritus) reflects that

Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of 'all of us,' made up of individuals, families, and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought ... for the people who belong to the social community. ... To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity. ...

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), #1906, 517.

The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them.²

Promoting the common good entails laboring to secure the well-being of all persons by seeking to protect the dignity and rights of all. According to Jesuit theologian Thomas Massaro, “Everyone has an obligation to promote the common good by making whatever contributions are necessary to improve the lives of all.”³

Pursuit of the common good embraces the global community. As Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley emphasize:

The common good provides for the health, welfare, and dignity of all people and promotes the best interests of everyone, not just the few. ... It also focuses on helping those who need it most: the poor and vulnerable.⁴

All of Earth’s people have the right to adequate food, housing, education, basic health care, transportation, access to culture, freedom of communication and expression, and protection of religious freedom. The universal common good also includes practicing good stewardship of the environment.

God intends that the global human community collaborate in creating a world wherein love of one’s neighbors consistently finds expression in laboring to ensure the common good. In his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, Pope Paul VI succinctly states that

To wage war on misery and to struggle against injustice is to promote, along with improved conditions, the human and spiritual progress of all, and therefore, the common good of humanity.⁵

JESUS’ ETHIC

Indissolubly bound together, love of God and neighbor constitute the core of Jesus’ ethic. During His public ministry, Jesus applied His message of love to the religious, social, political and economic issues of His day. Jesus began His ministry by declaring that He intended to bring good news to poor persons, release to captives, and freedom to the oppressed. Jesus lived at a time when Israel was under Roman imperial governance. Roman rulers exacted exorbitant taxes from the people of Israel to such an extent that they were forced to sell their land and labor for Romans who assumed ownership of former Jewish property and became wealthy at the expense of impoverished Jews.

According to Chris Marshall, Jesus’ ministry

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*. Retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_2_3.

³ Thomas Massaro, SJ, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2012), 85.

⁴ Chris Korzen and Alexia Kelley, *A Nation for All: How the Catholic Vision of the Common Good Can Save America from the Politics of Division* (San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 80.

⁵ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #76 quoted by Kendall A. Ketterlin in *God and Washington: The Meaning of Human Dignity, Freedom, and the Common Good*. (Columbia, Mo.: K2 Publishing, 2010), 5.

... was characterized by a prophetic denunciation of the injustices and social evils of the prevailing social order, on the one hand, including a strident declaration of divine judgment on the existing centers of power responsible for oppression and injustice, and, on the other hand, on the calling together of an alternative community to live according to the standards of God's Kingdom of justice and peace and, thereby, to model and effect the renewal of Israel as a whole.⁶

Jesus, the prophet of God's justice, concerned Himself with pursuing the common good in His society. Jesus stood in solidarity with those on the margins of society: outcasts, destitute persons, women and children, and sick and possessed people. Jesus insisted that weak persons be honored, wealth be shared, and authentic leadership express itself in service of others. Jesus taught His followers to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome strangers, care for the sick and afflicted, and comfort victims of injustice.

In His beatitudinal teaching, Jesus called blessed those poor in spirit who are attentive to others' necessities. Jesus championed the pure of heart who proclaim truth fearlessly. He spoke of those who seek peace, not war, and He pointed to those who hunger and thirst for a justice that entails protecting the dignity and rights of all.

Jesus' ethical teaching and praxis serve as a blueprint for Christian engagement in the pursuit of the common good *vis-à-vis* the political process. According to Chris Marshall,

Any modern political programming that marginalizes racial, ethnic or social groups, and which ignores or exacerbates the plight of the weak and downtrodden to promote the interests of the strong is diametrically opposed to the politics of Jesus.⁷

The Christian task is to translate Jesus' vision of the common good into governmental policies in the here-and-now. Today, those who embrace Jesus' ethic are called to establish and endorse political systems that incorporate His values, especially His concern for those who are most vulnerable in society. For example, practitioners of the ethics of Jesus are called to challenge government officials to develop and implement social policies that aid refugees who have no place to call home and sick persons languishing or dying because they lack health insurance. In a word, followers of Jesus continue to employ His ethic of love and justice when they oppose any social or political conditions and institutions that are contrary to His ideals.

HOSPITABLE DIALOGUE

Rooted in Jesus' ethic of love, hospitable dialogue provides individuals the opportunity to listen to a diversity of viewpoints. Dialogue enables one to be in touch with and come to understand others' unique perspectives on a variety of issues.

According to Parker Palmer, humility is key to hospitable dialogue. Palmer explains:

⁶ Chris Marshall, "A Prophet of God's Justice: Reclaiming the Political Jesus," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought & Practice* (August 2006), vol. 14, issue 3, 35.

⁷ Marshall, "A Prophet of God's Justice," 36.

By humility, I mean accepting the fact that my truth is always partial ... so I need to listen with openness and respect to 'the other,' as much as I need to speak my own voice with clarity and conviction."⁸

Hospitable dialogue provides a way to creatively harness the energy of conflicting ideas and beliefs. In the face of diverse opinions, dialogue partners may discover the common good. As Korzen and Kelley note: "Through rational argument, we can discuss ... differences and forge new solutions based on respect for all views and engagement with all parties."⁹ Likewise, David Guthrie comments that persons who engage in hospitable dialogue "will benefit from being in regular conversation with one another – humbly and passionately – to identify ways that they may think more deeply, differently, and faithfully about the common good based on these exchanges."¹⁰

Lastly, it is important to note that hospitable dialogue can involve politely and civilly challenging another's view rather than his or her person. Such dialogue hinges on mutual respect of persons of good faith who may disagree with each other regarding an issue or issues of importance to them.

CONSCIENCE

Political decision-making requires the exercise of a well-formed conscience. Conscience is the voice of truth that speaks to a person, calling one to do what is good and avoid what is evil. Each Christian is obliged to properly inform his or her conscience according to human reason and the teachings of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition.

A Christian possessing a properly formed conscience seeks to make prudential judgments about what is right and just in a particular situation. The process of making a decision according to conscience includes gathering information regarding the issue at hand, seeking the advice of experts concerning the issue, asking hard questions regarding the possible short and long-term consequences of alternative choices, and mulling things over before making a decision. Ultimately, one must follow the judgment of one's conscience, even though, objectively speaking, that judgment might turn out to be in error.

In his encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII offers the way of seeing, judging and acting as a method of engaging one's conscience in decision making. SEEING entails reading the signs of the time, i.e., observing current reality such as global climate change. JUDGING involves viewing reality in the light of the gospels and key principles such as human dignity and the common good. ACTING means determining what action can be taken to address a given reality effectively.

Conscience decision-making includes prayerful discernment of issues. Mercy Sister/Doctor Patricia Talone reflects that:

⁸ Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (San Francisco, CA.: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 43.

⁹ Korzen and Kelley. *A Nation for All*, 113.

¹⁰ David S. Guthrie, "Revisiting a Christian View of the Common Good for Christian Higher Education" *Christian Higher Education* 2018, vol. 17, nos. 1 – 2, 20.

[T]he adult exercise of conscience requires prayer and contemplation. It is only then that one decides upon a course of action. Acting on conscience and discerning the best action implies moving beyond ideologies and allowing oneself to be formed and informed by accurate facts, societal needs, the Gospel and Gospel values and the church's moral and social justice tradition.¹¹

The primacy of an informed conscience, shaped by moral principles and convictions, is always to be respected. This is true generally speaking and specifically in relationship to political choices that a person makes.

Living and acting in conformity with one's own conscience on questions of politics ... is the way in which Christians offer their concrete contribution so that through political life, society will become more just and more consistent with the dignity of the human person.¹²

PRUDENCE

The virtue of prudence exercises a critical role in the exercise of conscience. Prudence enables one to bring one's faith to bear in guiding the judgment of conscience in applying moral principles to concrete issues and situations in an imperfect world. Through the exercise of prudence, one discerns what in the here-and-now will best promote the common good.

Prudence enables one to make decisions after prayerfully and carefully weighing options. Prudence informs and shapes one's ability to deliberate over available alternatives in order to determine what one believes is the most fitting decision, all things being considered. Prudence is "vital for navigating one's way through our contemporary political terrain."¹³ Voting for political candidates and issues, for instance, is ultimately a decision made prudentially in good conscience between a person and his or her God.

Concerning candidates for political office, one does well to review each candidate's past actions, his or her current position on issues, and, theoretically, how he or she may act in the future. The prudent, conscientious citizen endorses candidates and issues that she or he believes will do the most to promote the common good. Richard Gaillardetz asserts that

It is legitimate and necessary to consider not only a candidate's stated positions but also the likelihood that the candidate would actually

bring about the implementation of some social value. ... So, for example, a candidate might say all the right things about education reform but a careful study of his past record and speeches may reveal that this issue is in fact very low on the candidate's list of priorities.¹⁴

¹¹ Sr. Patricia Talone, Ph.D., "Your Conscience and Your Vote," *Health Progress*, (Sept.-Oct. 2012), 62.

¹² Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, retrieved from http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20_6.

¹³ Richard Gaillardetz in *Voting and Holiness: Catholic Perspectives on Political Participation*, Ed. by Nicholas P. Cafardi (New York: Press, 2012), 67.

¹⁴ Gaillardetz in *Voting and Holiness*, 76.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Rooted and grounded in Jesus' ethic, the social teaching of the Catholic Church provides a moral framework for conscience-based, prudential engagement in political life. A lodestone of Catholic social teaching is concern for the common good that proceeds from Jesus' injunction to love one's neighbor that entails commitment to the welfare of others.

Themes in Catholic social teaching that intersect with the principle of the common good include: the dignity and sacredness of life; the needs of poor and vulnerable people; the dignity of work and the rights of workers; the right to health care; immigration; just war; and the care of the earth.

THE DIGNITY AND SACREDNESS OF LIFE

- Each person is an image of God and, thus, has inherent dignity that must be respected.
- The sanctity of life from conception to natural death is to be profoundly respected.
- Abortion denies that human life is a precious, inviolable gift from God. Economic support needs to be available for lower-income women who do not seek to have an abortion.
- Racism, genocide, torture, and euthanasia are also grave affronts to the dignity of the human person.

THE NEEDS OF POOR AND VULNERABLE PERSONS:

- Half the people in the world (i.e., nearly 3 billion) live on less than two dollars a day.
- The main cause of poverty is the shortage of jobs that pay a living wage. The stress and burden that result from parents working at multiple low-wage jobs or from underemployment or unemployment often undermine family life.
- For people struggling to escape poverty, access to a good education is essential.
- It is imperative that there be a strong safety net (i.e., programs such as unemployment insurance, social welfare, and Medicaid) for those whose income does not allow them the security necessary for sustainable living. It is a mistake to assume that all who live on the margins of society do so by choice. Assistance should be provided for those in need in a way that promotes their eventual autonomy.
- As Charles Gutenson notes, it is important that "To affirm a preferential option for the poor does not mean that the well-to-do are not intended by God to flourish but rather that their flourishing should not come at the cost of those less fortunate."¹⁵

THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS:

- Work is a fundamental human right. Through work, a person discovers meaning in life and is able to contribute his or her talents to advancing the common good.

¹⁵ Charles E. Gutenson, *Christians and the Common Good: How Faith Intersects with Public Life* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Brazos Press, 2011), 73.

- Workers have the right to a just, living wage, to safe and humane working conditions and to leisure time.
- Economic policies should foster the creation of jobs for all who can work.
- Pope Benedict XVI insists that
 Being out of work or dependent on public or private assistance for a prolonged period undermines the freedom and creativity of the person and his family and social relationships, causing great psychological and spiritual suffering.¹⁶

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH CARE:

- Health care is a fundamental human right. Thus, it is a social responsibility to ensure that all have access to safe, quality, and affordable health care.
- The government should not require religious institutions to compromise their moral convictions to participate in government health care programs.

IMMIGRATION:

- The Gospel mandate to “welcome the stranger” requires Christians to care for and stand with immigrants.
- Immigration provides refuge for those fleeing persecution and exploitation.
- The immigration system must protect the dignity of immigrants and their rights to due process and fair naturalization.

JUST WAR:

- In the case of a just war, it is important to avoid and limit the effects of war. Direct and intentional attacks on civilians in war are never morally acceptable nor is it ethical in war to use weapons of mass destruction (including nuclear, chemical and biological weapons) or weapons that cannot distinguish between civilians and the military.
- Whenever possible, nations in the global community should seek to resolve their conflicts by peaceful means.
- It goes without saying that any nuclear exchange would risk the destruction of life as we know it on planet Earth.

CARE OF EARTH:

- Care of the earth entails respect for the intrinsic worth of all of God’s creation. The human community has the moral obligation to practice good stewardship of the planet on which it lives. Human exploitation of the environment has led to global warming, depletion of non-renewable natural resources, endangerment and extinction of species and pollution in a variety of forms.
- The global community is responsible for policies that protect the land, water, and air it shares. The principle of the universal destination of goods insists that earth resources must be utilized in ways that benefit everyone, not just a few.
- In his encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI asserts that “The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations, and towards humanity as a whole.”¹⁷ The Pope also insists that “[W]e must recognize our grave duty to

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 12.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 27.

hand the earth on to future generations in such a condition that they too can worthily inhabit it and continue to cultivate it.”¹⁸

- In his encyclical *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home*, Pope Francis comments: “Never have we hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last 200 years.”¹⁹ The Pope stresses that creation is a sacred gift from God; the universe expresses God’s “boundless affection for us”;²⁰ and each creature that exists “reflects in its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness.”²¹

According to Pope Francis, humans need to embrace an approach to sustainability that correlates the on-going needs of the Earth and its poor persons. Integral to such an approach is the imperative that humans in developed countries become liberated from their compulsion to over-consume Earth’s resources. With this in mind, the Pope states that “it is not possible to sustain the present level of consumption in developed countries and wealthier sectors of society, where the habit of wasting and discarding has reached unprecedented levels.”²²

In his encyclical, Pope Francis emphasizes that what is needed today and into the future is a global culture committed to the wise use and conservation of Earth’s resources. This being the case, the Pope insists that the human community needs to limit its use of non-renewable resources such as coal and oil and efficiently develop and recycle renewable ones such as solar energy and wind power so that there are sufficient resources for current and forthcoming generations. Furthermore, the Pope reflects that it is false to believe that past and present human exploitation of Earth’s renewable resources can quickly and easily be restored.

Catholic social teaching seeks to ensure the common good by applying Jesus’ ethic of love and justice to a panoply of social issues. Likewise, Catholic social teaching upholds the principle of solidarity with Earth by seeking to eliminate human abuse of it.

CONCLUSION

Jesus’ ethic and Catholic social teaching that derives its principles from Jesus’ moral teachings provide a solid framework for Christians’ exercise of their social responsibility through political involvement with the goal of promoting the common good. As Massaro reflects:

Under the influence of theological principles and the religious imagination, people of faith have consistently supplied ordinary politics with indispensable portrayals of ideal order, virtue, and pure motivation that have served the common good in many cultures and contexts.²³

Government exists to serve the common good by seeking the welfare and flourishing of society-as-a-whole. Government officials are entrusted with the task of establishing and implementing policies that safeguard the common good. According to Korzen and Kelley, “To

¹⁸ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 28.

¹⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_2015052_#53, p. 14.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, #84, p. 22.

²¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, #69, p. 19.

²² Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, #27, p.8.

²³ Massaro. *Living Justice*. 26.

build a culture of the common good, we need courageous and creative policies that respond to the urgent moral issues of our time. We need laws to help create more just and equitable social structures and to protect everyone's rights."²⁴ Christian citizens who exercise hospitable dialogue and possess well-formed consciences are poised to prudentially participate in the political process as a way of promoting the common good. Though citizens may choose differing ways to respond to social issues, they do not differ in their ethical obligation to work together to build a more just and peaceful world.

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²⁴ Korzen and Kelley, *A Nation for All*, 17.

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