

A RHETORICAL WANDER THROUGH THE COMMON GOOD

I'm the second of three speakers on "the common good," a phrase that Christians, especially Catholics, have used for centuries to direct attention to our obligations toward those Jesus in Matthew 25 called "the least of these," the disadvantaged.

I am a Christian and take Matthew 25 to heart, but I am also a student of English rhetoric, fascinated by words and phrases—how they come about and how they interact with those who use them.

After a bit of reflecting, I found myself with some misgivings about how the phrase "the common good" was used recently. I decided to invite you to wander with me down a path observing complications in, and raising questions about, the phrase "the common good."

Let me be clear that it is the phrase itself that's mainly under examination with no intention to discount all of the various political and social ideas that users of the phrase may have in mind.

From recent observations, I had suspected that "the common good" was primarily a concern of liberals, so I thought I'd start by asking some of my liberal friends what they understood about the phrase.

In conversations with them, I found that they looked skeptically at high universal truths. Some told me that my "good" might not be their "good," that I'm ok and they're ok, that in this age of diversity, multiculturalism, and the triumph of relativism over absolutes, to talk about a "good" that people are asked to hold in common is simply going against the modern climate.

I was left puzzled by this. If my friends scoff at universal truths, how can they take seriously a "good" that is universal or common to all?

I next called to mind that I had seen the phrase used recently by politicians and other advocates for some social or political goal: for instance, reducing poverty, racism, the cost of health care, the ownership of guns, the influence of wealth, and so on.

But are Americans in agreement about what is "good" when they talk about, say, health care or guns or wealth? Clearly not.

So apparently the advocates mean that their goals are "ideals" that *would* be "a common good" for society if only those recalcitrant millions out there would change their minds and agree that those goals were also a "good" for them.

My next step was to muse about the issue that many people associate with "the common good," public policy toward poverty. In modern times, the federal government, rather than churches or other local groups, has increasingly assumed responsibility for alleviating poverty.

Has government done a better job than local groups? It's safe to say that poverty survived Hoover's "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage," Roosevelt's "New Deal," Johnson's "war on poverty," Clinton's "ending welfare as we know it," Bush's "compassionate conservatism," and Obama's "hope," "forward," and "change we can believe in." Poverty is obviously a tenacious opponent. What to do?

I reflected then on some of the statistics I have seen that emphasize the large economic inequality in America. I'm not sure why so much ink and broadcast time are lavished on the inequality itself rather than on specifically how to help the disadvantaged.

But observing that this inequality is an issue cited by those concerned with "the common good," I asked myself what we should do about that 1% of people who are often weighed against the rest of us 99%.

Forbes Magazine shows that Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey, to take two examples, count their net worth in the billions of dollars. That's BILLIONS, not millions. A billion is one thousand million.

What to do? In Gates's case, should we stop buying his computers and social-media instruments? In Winfrey's case, should we refuse to watch her various programs or read her magazines?

... Why not? Aren't we responsible for, or complicit in, their wealth? Or to ask in another way: could computers and entertainment be considered elements in "the common good"? I don't know. Just asking.

Or do we look once again to the federal government to solve our problems? Should the IRS be authorized to strip away most of those billions?

If the government can take away Winfrey's wealth, what would keep it from taking what it wanted from your savings if the IRS or, say, a new Department of Wealth Control, decided you have more than you actually need?

That last question reminds me of Karl Marx's slogan, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." We're not a Communist society, of course, but it's true that many of us consider the super-wealthy people as the bad guys, and that "the common good" should prevent them somehow from acquiring so much wealth.

In meditating further about poverty, I reflected on another problem, an age-old disagreement about *how* to help poor people.

Conservatives hope that an emphasis on employment, on education (especially training for employment), and on placing the responsibility as locally as possible for caring for those who cannot care for themselves will help reduce poverty.

Liberals place their hope on centralized federal programs to provide an economic floor for those trapped in poverty.

Liberals argue that conservatives are tight-fisted, heartless, and too ready to insist that the poor raise themselves by their own bootstraps.

Conservatives argue that a welfare industry centralized in the federal government is inefficient, wasteful, subject to corruption, and tending to perpetuate poverty rather than lift people from it.

As is so often the case, we can all recognize a problem, but disagree about how to approach it. What some see as serving "the common good" is seen by others as simply a bad idea.

I'm reminded of the ongoing conflict over abortion. A large number of people claim that "the common good" of females includes their control over their bodies and their "reproductive rights." And a similarly large number of people claim that abortion ignores "the common good" of millions of females (and males) who are not yet born and cannot yet speak for themselves.

Maybe dissension is *the* story (or at least *one* story) of America. Recall that the *Federalist Papers* by the founders in the 1780s were countered point by point by the *Anti-Federalist Papers*.

In our ideals, if not always in our practice, we value the rights of individuals, rights that protect us when we disagree with the majority or with the government. We are a pluralist society, one in which “the common good” as defined by some is often a “bad” for a significant number of others and thus not truly “common.”

At this point in my musing, I began to ask myself if the phrase has any meaning at all. Is it merely a slogan like “the American people,” “the community of the well-intentioned,” or “ties that bind citizens together?”

No, I told myself. “The common good” clearly points at circumstances or qualities that people can agree upon as “good.” Let’s see if we can establish some generalizations about which almost everyone, Christians and non-Christians, including atheists, would agree.

We find ourselves on a planet at just the right distance from the sun to support our form of life. The earth gives us light and darkness; it gives us land to walk on; it distributes water through rain and streams; it gives us food from animal and plant life.

We have bodies that can move, take in information, reproduce, and (most stupendous of all) can reason, remember, communicate, and create a culture. Who would dispute that these circumstances are “a common good” for human beings?

And let’s leave universals behind and consider whether there are “common goods” for specific groups. Of course there are.

It is self-evident that a baseball team, for example, has “common goods”: for instance, a base hit when the team is at bat and a double play when it’s in the field.

A group of people in a tight-knit religious community can certainly have “a common good.” So can families, clubs, associations, or groups of any kind that gather like-minded people around a cause, an idea, or a hobby.

But how does a nation such as the United States, with a radically diverse population, achieve “a common good”?

At this point, I decided I had better stop my musing and start reading and studying.

I was surprised at how ancient the issue of “the common good” is, going back through the centuries in our two streams of Western culture: the so-called classicism starting in Greece and continuing in Rome, and Judeo-Christian culture stemming from ancient Israel. These two streams are often symbolized as ATHENS and JERUSALEM, our founding cities.

Let’s look at ATHENS first. Almost every notion that Western thinkers have struggled with, including “the common good,” goes back some 24 centuries to Plato.

Among his many endeavors, Plato studied the word “good.” He placed “goodness” in the category of “forms” or abstractions that he considered as “real” as material things we perceive with our senses.

He maintained that “goodness” is the topmost of these forms and is what all other virtues aim at.

In his *The Republic*, Plato set out to discover how people *ideally* could best live in groups in a political structure centered on justice. And justice, for Plato, was a virtue that aimed at “a *common good*,” not at *individual* good.

How could these ideal circumstances be achieved? The Republic would be ruled by an elite group, which Plato called “guardians,” who would be prohibited from owning property or otherwise acquiring wealth and could thus be considered as incorruptible.

These guardians would choose a “philosopher king,” the wisest and most virtuous man among them, as the absolute ruler. The “common good” would thus inevitably be achieved because this king could define and enforce it.

Plato’s student was Aristotle, another giant thinker of Athens whose writings helped shaped Western civilization. As did Plato, Aristotle argued that man is essentially social and thus develops his ethical standards in interaction with other human beings.

He argued that “the good” is a quality he named as *eudaimonia*, translated as “happiness” or “flourishing.” This quality was not simply pleasure or honor or money or power but a life of rational actions motivated by virtue, a life leading to fulfillment or *eudaimonia*.

Aristotle, like all of us, was a person of his times. He believed, as did Plato, that a society needed a strong ruler, who could create conditions for an enlightened and virtuous citizenry drawn to “the common good.”

Shifting now from Athens to the Judeo-Christian stream, Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of 13th-century Italy, adopted Aristotle’s propositions that the good life is “social” (human beings interacting with one another) and that the good of the community should take precedence over the good of the individual.

Aquinas’s “common good” was closely tied to law and to political authority, both of which, for him, were natural and necessary in a sinful world. He endorsed the authority of government as not only a practical necessity but also a worthy human institution approved by God and taking its moral value from its service to “the common good.”

To skip over hundreds of other religious leaders and philosophers and come to recent times, Vatican II, under the leadership of Pope John XXIII, brought forth a modern definition of “the common good” in these words:

“... 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.”

If you are left wondering what exactly are those “conditions of social life,” or what does “access” include, or what does “fulfillment” mean . . . I’m sorry, but that’s the best we can do.

You will have noticed in my account to this point that neither Plato nor Aristotle nor Aquinas nor John XXIII has made it clear exactly what “the common good” is.

If we Christians see the phrase mainly as a reminder of the teachings of Jesus (especially in Matthew 25) about “the least of these,” the poor, ill, or otherwise disadvantaged, we may think that the meaning of “the common good” is self-evident.

But still, Christians and non-Christians continue to struggle with ideas about *how* best to help “the least of these.”

Which brings me to my final thoughts. Is the phrase “the common good” useful or appropriate in political or social discussions in the U.S.?

Perhaps in some contexts. But I would rather use words that describe a particular goal, a particular piece of legislation, a particular set of actions.

It’s a useful caution to remember that dictators in history (and not only the benevolent rulers envisioned by Plato and Aristotle but also the bad ones of recent times) have thought that they knew what “the common good” was for their people.

Fascism, communism, socialism, and a number of other isms have lifted up “the collective good” over the good of the individual.

Even in nations that are considered to be free societies, like our own, advocates for “the common good” appeal to and trust a dominant centralized government, a departure from the republic envisioned by the founders, a departure that many Americans are uncomfortable with.

Despite everything that has gone wrong in the U.S., we still operate mostly in accordance with our founding documents, giving us a rule of constitutional law, a governmental arrangement of checks and balances, and a regard for human rights. These ideals in themselves, corrupted as they often have been, are still a precious “common good.”

In my reading, I noted that most of the questions I have raised about “the common good” have been debated for centuries.

The key issue in those conversations has been how best to construct a society (and its government) to provide opportunities for all, to protect the disadvantaged, and to make fair and workable compromises between individual rights and collective benefits.

In our small way in this series of three sessions, our church is participating in a conversation about these issues.

And I say amen to the continuation of these conversations.