

The Human Person and the Common Good in the Social Teaching of John Paul II

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Karol Wojtyła's philosophy is based on two main schools of thought:

- Thomism: a clear application of the reflection of Thomas of Aquinas (1224-1274) on the nature of a human being (Summa, Ia, q 75) and his analysis of ethical responsibility (IIa, IIae).
- Phenomenology, especially Max Scheler's ethics, on which Wojtyła wrote his postgraduate thesis in 1953 in Krakow.

Both these schools of thought emphasise the strong connection between the human person and the common good. Indeed, one book which has a central importance in John Paul II's philosophical thought is entitled *The Person and Common Good* (Jacques Maritain, DDB, 1947), in which the close relationship between the fulfilment of the human person and the search for common good is developed.

If John Paul II (hereafter "JP2") criticized Max Scheler for excessive emphasis on emotions, he was inspired by the role Scheler gives to values and to the moral life. JP2, however, accords more importance to Aquinas' thought, taking from him his realism and the insight that human beings are creatures to whom intelligence and freedom have been given by God the Creator.

In his book *The Acting Person* (Springer, 1979; first published in Poland in 1969; subsequently translated into French as *Personne et Acte*, Le centurion, 1983), JP2 sought a balance between Scheler and Aquinas. He stated that the human person is an active agent and not merely subject to impersonal forces. The human person is

able to channel his/her natural instincts and activities within the limits set by reality (ie, ruled by natural law). The human person is capable of understanding truth and, given his/her intelligence and freedom, to love God. Therein resides the dignity of the human person: he or she has been created in the image and likeness of God. Human dignity has also its root in God's desire to have every person with him and to be in direct union with every individual. Furthermore, God has given all human beings the capacity to learn how to behave from him, in such a way to please him, through living a moral and evangelical life. Human dignity is the gift of God, a transcendent quality that is neither produced by, nor derived from, either society or economic and political relations.

Because of the Creator and his love, Christians have a positive understanding of the human being. In *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) JP2 focuses on the profound love of God given to the human person through the Incarnation, in which the Eternal Word of God took on human flesh, thereby endowing the human person with dignity and value. Incarnation provides for the Redemption of all human beings even if they are still touched by sin. The love of God helps the individual to pursue his journey through life, driving him to the accomplishment of his potential.

Human dignity transcends the claims of all human authorities. It is a gift of God. It stems from ontological worth, as the human person is a being in the image of God. JP2 makes a distinction between an objective and a subjective sense of this dignity. In the former sense, the Pope refers to the universality of human nature and stresses intelligence and free action as components of human dignity; in the latter, he underlines the uniqueness of each individual. The human person may employ his/her intellect and will creatively to constitute the individual self.

All human beings are endowed with the same dignity and are worthy of respect, regardless of race, sex, culture or economic status. Because of this, JP2 is able to affirm that equality in dignity is a major aspect of Catholic social thought and that the Church has a responsibility to advocate and promote this human dignity for each and for all.

“At stake is the dignity of the human person, whose defence and promotion have been entrusted to us by the Creator, and to whom the men and women at every moment of history are strictly and responsibly in debt. As many people are already more or less clearly aware, the present situation does not seem to correspond to this dignity. Every individual is called upon to play his or her part in this peaceful campaign, a campaign to be conducted by peaceful means, in order to secure development in peace, in order to safeguard nature itself and the world about us. The Church too feels profoundly involved in this enterprise, and she hopes for its ultimate success... This is what is demanded by the present moment and above all by the very dignity of the human person, the indestructible image of God the Creator, which is identical in each one of us.” (SRS 47).

These elements are present in all JP2’s works because of his own philosophical outlook and his own experience of life under communist rule. He gave great importance to a proper description of the dignity of the human person because it is dignity that provides the uniqueness of a person and his/her immense value. Dignity comes from the intimate relationship between the human individual and God and all attempts or actions that aim to destroy or diminish this dignity are evil, a true sin (SRS 36).

“Man receives from God his essential dignity and with it the capacity to transcend every social order so as to move towards truth and goodness. But he is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth. The decisions which create a human environment can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realisation of those who are in any way oppressed by them. To destroy such structures and replace them with more authentic

forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience” (CA 38).¹

Society can be considered “just” only when it is based on the respect of the transcendent dignity of the human person. Totalitarianism and materialism are two ideologies that do not respect human beings, because of their destructive attitudes towards the transcendent dimension of each person (Cf. Vaclav Havel). This dimension is the backbone of human dignity.

“Thus, the root of modern totalitarianism is to be found in the denial of the transcendent dignity of the human person who, as the visible image of the invisible God, is therefore by his very nature the subject of rights which no one may violate — no individual, group, class, nation or State. Not even the majority of a social body may violate these rights, by going against the minority, by isolating, oppressing, or exploiting it, or by attempting to annihilate it” (CA 44).

The dignity of the human person has many aspects. JP2 emphasised the dignity of the human body, which should never be considered a commodity. It follows that human trafficking, prostitution, drug abuse and, of course, torture, violence and wars are contrary to this aspect of human dignity, as are hunger and poverty too. Human life is a gift of God and an inviolable right (CA 44); it is not to be downgraded to the level of a commodity traded on the market (human life is a critical point, the absolute limit, to the extension of the market). Sexuality and the giving of life (CA 47) are also an integral part of this dignity. These are some of the mysteries of a human being’s dignity that need to be protected.

No one is entitled to attack the dignity of others. It is the duty of the state to protect this human dignity (in this respect, the Pope objects to the death penalty²) and to ensure freedom to help him to achieve his dignity, because freedom is also a gift of God to each human person (CA 25). The state should be expected to protect these values via laws, police regulations, justice, education, and so on.

Human dignity is also a founding principle for human rights. JP2 often discussed this issue. In his view, in keeping with the Christian

Tradition, human rights cannot justify individual autonomy leading to morally inappropriate behaviour. These rights derive from the nature of the human person created in God's image. They do not therefore exist because they are recognized by the state through public legislation. To the contrary, these rights are universal and allow each human being to become more fully human. A society which respects human rights, considered as indivisible and universal, will be a society in which true development of the human person is encouraged.

In *Redemptor hominis*, his first encyclical, JP2 stressed the importance of upholding human rights as the basis for peace and the matrix of the development of all human beings. Among these human rights is religious freedom (CA 47). It is a central human right and indeed the basic human right (RH 17). The Pope expressed appreciation for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) (SRS 33) as a first step for a worldwide improvement in respect for human dignity. He also approved of the UN, where he gave one of his best speeches on the idea and responsibility of nations (1995) and of the International Criminal Court. However, he stressed that it is every human being's responsibility to fight locally and personally for this culture of human rights.

“We cannot fail to recall at this point, with esteem and profound hope for the future, the magnificent effort made to give life to the United Nations Organization, an effort conducive to the definition and establishment of human beings' objective and inviolable rights, with the member States obliging each other to observe them rigorously. This commitment has been accepted and ratified by almost all present-day States, and this should constitute a guarantee that human rights will become throughout the world a fundamental principle of work for human welfare. There is no need for the Church to confirm how closely this problem is linked with her mission in the modern world.” (RH 17)

Only if human rights are respected can the human being begin to achieve self-fulfilment. The right to education implies that every human being has innate abilities to be developed. The right

to work (SRS 33) and to earn a living is also important. The dignity of the worker (CA 43) is an important theme for JP2, along with the recognition of a right to organize and join workers' unions (CA 35). In the economic field, human dignity requires the protection of the right to initiative and the right to start businesses (CA 31; LE). JP2, following the traditional teachings of the Church, recognizes the right to private property and to profits, as one aspect of human dignity.

This teaching also recognizes the legitimacy of workers' efforts to obtain full respect and to gain access to broader areas of participation in the life of industrial enterprises so that, while cooperating with others and under the direction of others, they can in a certain sense 'work for themselves' through the exercise of their intelligence and free will.

“The integral development of the human person through work does not impede but rather promotes the greater productivity and efficiency of work itself, even though it may weaken consolidated power structures. A business cannot be considered only as a "society of capital goods"; it is also a "society of persons" in which people participate in different ways and with specific responsibilities, whether they supply the necessary capital for the company's activities or take part in such activities through their labour. To achieve these goals there is still need for a broad associated workers' movement, directed towards the liberation and promotion of the whole person. The foundation of the right to private initiative and ownership is to be found in this activity.” (CA 43)

JP2 had a dynamic vision of dignity. He finds human rights indispensable to authentic development (SRS 33) and speaks of “integral human development” (influenced in this field by Jacques Maritain) which includes the economic dimension (jobs and income) as one among many others. Spiritual, cultural and relational dimensions are of a great importance as well; JP2 mentions a right to self fulfilment in order to make a synthesis of these dimensions and introduces the notion of “culture of human rights”. In this respect, development is personal insofar as it involves the development of human dignity, and it is social in that it provides the framework for the progress of

human dignity for all. Human beings must be involved in this global process (SRS 30) even if it is difficult and sometimes disappointed.

“Nor would a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights - personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples - be really worthy of man. Today, perhaps more than in the past, the intrinsic contradiction of a development limited only to its economic element is seen more clearly. Such development easily subjects the human person and his deepest needs to the demands of economic planning and selfish profit. The intrinsic connection between authentic development and respect for human rights once again reveals the moral character of development: the true elevation of man, in conformity with the natural and historical vocation of each individual, is not attained only by exploiting the abundance of goods and services, or by having available perfect infrastructures” (SRS 33).

The development of each nation must take human dignity into account and really put it at the centre of their agendas. Human rights and the promotion of human dignity have to be a part of political strategies and are an essential measure when evaluating true development.

“On the internal level of every nation, respect for all rights takes on great importance, especially: the right to life at every stage of its existence; the rights of the family, as the basic social community, or "cell of society"; justice in employment relationships; the rights inherent in the life of the political community as such; the rights based on the transcendent vocation of the human being, beginning with the right of freedom to profess and practice one's own religious belief” (SRS 33).

If all these issues have been tackled in the different encyclicals and papal documents, JP2 has been criticized for insufficiently addressing women's issues, and their rights as human beings. *Mulieris dignitatem* (15.08.1988) did not appear to be sufficient for a full recognition of women's dignity and rights. Questions could also be raised on the universality of human rights as stated by the Pope's teachings (there are other approaches in the Islamic world, in Africa...). So, are they connected

with human dignity itself, in an ontological way, or are they culturally dependent?

If all human beings have equal dignity and rights, they build together a human community. This community is neither a grouping of individuals nor an anonymous collective workforce. Human beings are not solitary beings but social beings (in this JP2 follows Aristotle). This is connected to the mystery of the Trinity. The relationship between the persons of the Trinity is love; the human community is also made by and for mutual love. (Questions could be raised: is this not too simplistic? What about conflicts?). Each human person has a right to be included in this community and to benefit from the love of others especially when weak, old or handicapped ... It is a right for all human beings, deriving from their human dignity.

It is a right. But it is also an obligation that each of us has towards the community as no one can claim that he is not responsible for the future of his human brother (CA 51). JP2 calls this a right to participate (SRS 33) in the life of the community (*Message for the World Day of Peace* 1999,6), which includes democracy (CA 46), civic attitudes, and so on.

From these mutual relations, with rights and obligations inside the human community, arises the common good. The common good had already been mentioned in *Gaudium et Spes* n° 26. It was described as the result of social conditions that allow people, either as groups or individuals, to achieve fulfilment more fully and more easily. Some aspects of the common good can be traced back to the Acts of Apostles (2,44) and to the Epistle of Barnabas (70-131 AD). “We are bound to one another by an obligation of solidarity and have a duty to one another, especially to the poor”. Human beings are bound to each other and are not islands centred on themselves.

The common good is not the sum of individual interests but requires these interests to be evaluated and monitored in such a way that they really protect and promote human dignity (CA 47). The common good is not opposed to the individual's dignity and rights. On the contrary, it is the condition for real fulfilment of human dignity. Each individual's true humanity emerges from a

life lived in relation to others, and not through an individualistic life.

There is much debate on this issue between scholars focusing on the human person from a libertarian position and those focusing on the common good from a communitarian perspective. For the former, the common good approach leads to state and government intervention, which they dislike because this may put constraint on private initiative. The latter stress the necessity to overcome private interests for the benefit of the whole society. Michael Novak seeks to find his own way (*Free Persons and the Common Good*, Madison Book, 233 pp), stating that the common good is a pre-modern concept that must be revised. He suggests thinking of the common good as an achievement of the communitarian individual, in his various associations, searching for his own self-interest. For Novak, the common good is not provided through state intervention but through society at large. These conceptions are not those developed by JP2.

For JP2, a human person is always considered in the context of relationships. Thus, the common good and human dignity can and must be pursued at the same time (CA 25). The full realisation of human dignity is always considered in the context of community and cannot be achieved through individualism: "In keeping with the social nature of man, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which in turn can be defined only in reference to the human person" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n° 1905). If the common good and the human person's development are separated, this will lead to violence and instability (*Message*, 1999,11). This way of considering the deep connection between the fulfilment of each individual and the goal of the common good is an optimistic perspective on both society and the human person. Indeed, it presupposes that conflicts of interests can be overcome and that dynamic changes in our society can occur.

In nos. 1907-1912 of the *Catechism*, approved by JP2, the Church affirms that the common good has three main aspects: the respect of the person as such (n° 1907), the social well-being of the group itself (n° 1908) and peace (that is,

security and stability), n° 1909. The common good always aims towards the greater development of individuals, and not on restraining individual development.

The common good and human dignity are not opposed, but at the same time, the common good is clearly antithetical to the exclusive search for self-interest (or, *self love* in Adam Smith's semantic). Seeking the common good requires an approach broader than one focused exclusively on one's private interests. It must also look beyond an approach in which the market is meant to satisfy all individual needs. Therefore, free market forces do not always offer the most appropriate regulations in our modern economic order. JP2 wrote that the free market is not always conducive to the common good because the poor are excluded from the market, especially in our globalized world. "The rapid advance towards the globalization of economic and financial systems also illustrates the urgent need to establish who is responsible for guaranteeing the global common good and the exercise of economic and social rights. The free market by itself cannot do this, because in fact there are many human needs which have no place in the market. Even prior to the logic of a fair exchange of goods and the forms of justice appropriate to it, there exists something which is due to man because he is man, by reason of his lofty dignity." (*Message*, 1999, 9). This statement clearly tells us not to rely on private interest alone to reach the common good. It means that the common good is not equal to optimized Pareto efficiency.

Profit is one among many good criterions for economic performance but it cannot be the only objective (CA 35) for society as a whole. State and social forces have to regulate the market to make basic goods and rights available to all human beings, both those of this present generation and of those in the future (CA 35). "People lose sight of the fact that life in society has neither the market nor the State as its final purpose, since life itself has a unique value which the State and the market must serve. Man remains above all a being who seeks the truth and strives to live in that truth, deepening his understanding of it through a dialogue which involves past and future generations" (CA 49). This is what today we would call sustainable development.

Achieving the common good requires a normative approach. The common good is neither the sum of the goods of each individual (as utilitarians state), nor the Paretian equilibrium of these utilities, nor a general agreement in a society of what is the right way of governing. It cannot be the general interest, as in JJ Rousseau's opinion; it does not derive from a majority expressing its interest (without taking into account the minority). Rather, it is a given norm. The common good is beyond procedural logic (as proposed by J. Habermas in his ethics of communication). The common good comes from the Gospel and the traditional teachings of the Church, translated into society as a project for each and all. The common good is not a static point to be discovered but a horizon for each political community and social agent and a never-ending social hermeneutic of the values we could find in the Gospel.

John Paul II was fully aware of the diversity of viewpoints in our highly individualistic society about what is good and the right interpretation of the Gospel's message. But he stresses a number of critical areas – such as the exclusion of people or the disrespect of their rights and dignity, or the distortion of the equality in dignity of each person, or the neglect of justice – which should be considered boundaries not to be overstepped.

John Paul II favoured a regulated approach to society and to the real improvement of humankind through the development of each individual and of the whole human community. Because the common good is by definition beneficial for all, and especially for the more vulnerable members of society, the state must be involved in this regulation process. However, this regulation is not to be provided by the state alone. The only truly ethical way towards real common good involves the whole society: the state and other social institutions must take collective responsibility for effective and fair management of progress toward social goals for all, especially the least efficient.

The common good encompasses: basic values (freedom, respect for the human dignity of each human being, economic improvement, etc), procedures and institutions, and a global perspective of the future of humankind as a whole.

Procedures and institutions must be focussed on the wellbeing of the person and of the society as a whole.

Working towards the common good requires finding new ways, not settling for a middle ground. Each person and all human beings must be taken into account. Only this twofold objective can allow us to manage society in such a way that we can achieve true progress. “It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (SRS 38).

Seeking to achieve and promote the common good is the fundamental purpose of politics and government, and their only ethical justification. This idea comes from Thomas Aquinas (*Contra gentiles*, book 3, q71, etc). The state is rooted in the quest for the common good, which in turn requires political and social organizations as well as fair laws in order to protect each individual and society as a whole. Each citizen must participate in building, consolidating and promoting the common good, both as a person and also as a member of “intermediary groups”, such as families, associations and NGOs, local government, and so on.

“According to *Rerum Novarum* and the whole social doctrine of the Church, the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good.” (*Centesimus annus* 13).

The active participation of all these intermediary groups and individuals in achieving the common good introduces the concept of “subsidiarity” that is inseparable from the common good. This concept is very deeply rooted in the traditional thought of the church and implies the responsibility of each level of society to work in order to reach the common good. Every social decision has to be taken at the proper level, as near as possible to the people.

“Here again the principle of subsidiary must be respected: a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good”. (CA 48).

These opinions are quite close to what is called “the good governance approach” in today’s political philosophy, where all the stakeholders are to be involved: state, civil society, intermediate bodies and social organizations.

JP2 sees the common good from a global perspective and not only from a national one, even if that is the first level of concern. The common good has an international dimension and can even be seen as relevant to our entire planet. There is a universal common good for the whole of humankind.

“Human interdependence is increasing and gradually spreading throughout the world. The unity of the human family, embracing people who enjoy equal natural dignity, implies a universal common good. This good calls for an organisation of the community of nations able to provide for the different needs of men; this will involve the sphere of social life to which belong questions of food, hygiene, education...and certain situations arising here and there, as for example... alleviating the miseries of refugees dispersed throughout the world, and assisting migrants and their families” (*Catechism* 1911).

The international dimension of the common good implies a real sense of solidarity and international organisations able to ensure efficient regulations and progress for all nations. JP2 very often emphasised progress made in worldwide solidarity in order to show the right path for human improvement, even if peace and socio-economic uplifting is still not strong enough. Worldwide solidarity that respects each partner and all of them together is a way towards the common good.

“In the context of the international community, nations and peoples have the right to share in the decisions which often profoundly

modify their way of life ... The pursuit of the national and international common good requires the effective exercise, even in the economic sphere, of the right of all people to share in the decisions which affect them” (*Message*, 1999,6). This option introduces the right to participate in the global management of the global society for all political actors, as they are either the beneficiaries or the ones who are negatively affected.

Therefore, the common good has an ecological dimension as the whole planet and creation have been given to humankind as a whole, and which as such is the beneficiary of God’s Covenant with all humanity (even with the animals, Gn 9). Our planet is a common good which belongs to us all and not only to the elite or the powerful. Sustainable development is a way to aim towards the common good: “The promotion of human dignity is linked to the right to a healthy environment, since this right highlights the dynamics of the relationship between the individual and society” (*Message*, 1999,4).

For JP2, the common good is an effective and compulsory parameter for monitoring policies and projects in order to promote the real progress of human dignity. It is a real but difficult criterion where different stakeholders have different perceptions of what is the right horizon and different ideas of the best values to be promoted. It is also a challenge for us Christian economists. We are always asked to make our analysis and proposals with a strong consideration about how the largest number of people can benefit (today and in future generations), how they can participate and express their concerns and their values, how they can be respected in their freedom and their dignity. We are also asked to propose regulations in order to help people, especially the weakest, to benefit in their dignity and to be able to show their own capacities. The common good approach sets a series of boundaries that need to be respected in order to protect society against itself: we have to consider them in every proposal.

Father Lebret, a Dominican economist of the 1960’s, spoke of the global challenge of “la montée humaine”, the “human ascent”, saying that this is really a form of mysticism, a full involvement of our intelligence and heart. He has

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written a book called the “mysticism of the common good” in order to foster this constant search for this global human ascent in every

economic plan and project. Let us grow in this mysticism.

NOTE:

¹ Nothing is said about those who are handicapped and unable to react.

² *Evangelium Vitae*, 25.03.1995 n° 56 and Catechism of the catholic church n° 2267 (2nd version)