

In order that a Christian view of human flourishing become widely accepted, as Hollenbach rightly observes, the common good “must take on a more universal definition”¹. I examine the development of this position and the challenges it presents.

1. Expanding the common good

From the first Catholic social teaching document the common good is concerned with the “interests of all in general” while upholding “individual interests”². By 1963 the “general” is defined as universal within the Church’s context in that the common good is “intimately bound up with human nature” and, therefore, it “can never exist fully and completely unless the human person is taken into account at all times”³.

In *Centesimus Annus*, however, there is a shift in emphasis in the recognition that the fulfilment of the common good is dependent upon a normative, but not uniform, vision. As it was no longer sufficient to wait for conversion to the Catholic social principle, attention moved towards possible overlaps, affinities, and collaboration. Specifically, Pope Saint John Paul II refers to a process of alignment in “orienting them [lifestyles and models of production and consumption] according to an adequate notion of the common good in relation to the whole human family”⁴. The key word is “adequate”.

Adequacy in relation to the common good, while undefined, is a commitment to shared dialogue and practice. This position is developed by Pope Benedict XVI as he affirms that the common good and “the effort to obtain it cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family”⁵. Using the image of the city, itself a cognate for plurality, the mutual use of space and resources shapes the “earthly city”⁶ in preparation for the heavenly city. By extension, with an openness to the truth “from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church’s social doctrine receives it, assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found, and mediates it within the constantly changing life-patterns of the society of peoples and nations”⁷. Such assemblage of “adequate” parts into a comprehensive whole is the craft work of the earthly city to which the Church is committed along with multiple stakeholders.

Stretching the Common Good

Ryan Service

2. Challenges with a global common good

Merely positing the common good as universal and acknowledging the need for a collective effort is not the same as engaging with the challenges this position entails. This section addresses two tensions that arise with a globalised common good. First, the association between a universal common good and globalisation. Second, the importance of national interest within a global vision of the common good.

Associating the common good with globalisation is a direct response to the negative consequences of globalisation to which Pope Francis makes repeated reference. For instance, Pope Francis observes a “globalisation of indifference”⁸ that has evidenced the exacerbation of social and economic inequalities on the one hand and a process of de-sensitisation towards this steeped inequality on the other. Globalisation is problematic especially “in the developing world...[where it] is often simply identified with unjust exclusion of poor countries from influence on powerful economic forces”⁹. Distance is not only determined economically because “globalisation is experienced in subjective terms”¹⁰ too whereby people experience a gulf between institutions that operate further from the local area and daily concerns experienced therein. This is a significant lesson. Articulations of the global common good must not lose sight of the subjective dimension and localised concerns otherwise it will be perceived as part of the problem and not the solution.

With a universal reach, the common good creates global citizens. A risk is that this posits the common good as a force against national self-interest and patriotism in the search of a “universalism or generic internationalism that neglects the identity of individual peoples”¹¹. Narratives about the common good must show how national self-interest is not denied but is certainly relativized since “national interest as understood in traditional realism does not correspond to the way the threats of environmental degradation, disease transmission, and weapons proliferation cut across national boundaries”¹². Terrorism and security should be

added to this list as well.

3. Reflection points

To end on a practical note, the following questions are proposed:

- In one sentence how would you describe what is meant by the common good?
- Is there a single concrete act you can complete today that promotes and contributes to the common good?
- How do you envision the common good in relation to your personal good?
- How do you envision your personal good in relation to the national good?
- How do you envision the national in relation to an international good?

NOTES

¹ D. Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002, page 212.

² Leo XIII, Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (15 May 1891), § 51.

³ John XXIII, Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (11 April 1963), §55.

⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (1 May 1991), §58.

⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (29 June 2009), §7.

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *Caritas in Veritate*, 9

⁸ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), §54.

⁹ Hollenbach, 215.

¹⁰ A. Rowlands, “An uprooted nation? Brexit and a Christian Vision of the Common Good”, 9 December 2009,

<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/uprooted-nation-brexit-and-a-christian-vision-of-common-good/11776698>. Accessed 02.07.20.

¹¹ C. Mares, “Pope Francis: ‘The common good has become global’”, Catholic News Agency, 2 May 2019,

<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-the-common-good-has-become-global-93364>. Accessed 01.07.20.

¹² Hollenbach, 216-17.

