

The Common Good As A Social Debt And Patrimony Of The Person: Reading From Thomas Aquinas

Aristotle's statement that the individual human being is a social or a political animal can be misleading if we understand it as meaning that relationships between the individual and society are natural and obvious. An Individual's dream of autonomy and ruthless struggle for access to scarce resources on one hand and competitive societies where there is no room for "lame ducks" on the other hand can make relationships between the person and the society conflicting. The consequences can be marginalization from the social order or rebellion against it. How can we strive to make person-society relationships more integrative and fecund? In other words, what skills, does social ethics as a field of Christian theology and Catholic tradition provide for the social integration of the person and the awakening of her social responsibility? This paper would like to suggest and defend the concept of the common good as a common ground for the person and the society's mutual flourishing. Thomas Aquinas apprehends the common good as a dynamic interaction between the person and the society and makes it the cement of what he calls "civil communion" without prejudice of the individual's self-realization.

1. What Is The Common Good?

The notion of the common good occupies an important place in the Church Social Teaching and unsurprisingly has become one of its pillars. Throughout different approaches of the Magisterium, the concept of the common good is given two very special features. It is first a good for the group and the individual; second and correlatively it is a bundle of rights and duties. The ethics of the Angelic Doctor made these constants deeper and clearer.

Mater et Magistra defines the common good as “those social conditions which favor the full development of human personality.”¹ Further developments of the same Encyclical Letter stress on the common good as the good of social entities like a “particular country and the whole human family.”² But Pope John XXIII extends the notion to the protection of some vulnerable groups like the farmers and calls for their contribution to the common good³. The Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* integrates the legacy of *Mater et Magistra* and defines the common good as “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.”⁴ Apprehended as such, the common good generates rights and duties regarding groups’ needs and human persons’ dignity.⁵ In his recent encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, where the expression “common good” occurs 29 times, Pope Francis endorses the definition of *Gaudium et Spes*⁶ but insists on the responsibility to safeguard the common good:

In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes, logically and inevitably, a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters.⁷

¹ John XXIII, Encyclical Letter on Christianity and Social Progress *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961) § 65 (New York, N. Y.: Paulist Press, 1961), 21.

² *Mater et Magistra*, § 78.

³ *Mater et Magistra*, § 147.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of today *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), § 26 in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume II (Trent-Vatican II), ed. Norman P. Tanner, SJ (Washington D.C.: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 1084.

⁵ “Food, clothing, housing, the right freely to choose their state of life and set up a family, the right to education, work, to their good name, to respect, to proper knowledge, the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard their privacy, and rightful freedom, including freedom of religion.” *Gaudium et Spes*, § 26.

⁶ Francis, Encyclical Letter on Care For Our Common Home *Laudato Si* (24 May 2015), § 156 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 76.

⁷ *Laudato Si*, § 158.

Pope Francis, emphasizing “the debt side” of the common good, proposes a new definition of the common good centered on his concern for the future generations. The common good, he suggests, is the “integral and sustainable human development.”⁸

Though Thomas Aquinas does not have a specific question or a particular article on the common good, he provides along with other considerations some glimpses of his understanding of the issue. His definition of the Angelic Doctor is a three-level integrated approach to outlining the common good.

At the first level, the common good is “the last end of human life, the bliss or the happiness.”⁹ The last end is nothing but God because God alone can fully actualize the human mind’s potency for joy.¹⁰ This longing cannot be complete before the full enjoyment of God in heaven. As the ultimate last end, God is the common good *par excellence*.¹¹

Secondly, common good means social well-being. Through Thomas Aquinas’ description, the common good is conditions of human flourishing; persons’ nursing mother in other words their *Mater Alma*. The common good is synonym of common weal¹² but it is distinct from the individual good not only materially but also formally.¹³ By that token, the common good has its

⁸ *Laudato Si*, § 18

⁹ ST, I-II, q. 90, a. 2.

¹⁰ ST, I-II, q. 28, a. 3. To Charles De Koninck “When St. Thomas asserts that God is a common good, he means a good which is numerically one, yet which can be the end of many.” Charles De Koninck, “In Defense of Saint Thomas,” *Laval Theologique et Philosophique* 2 (1945): 42

¹¹ ST I-II, q. 90, a. 2, ad 3.

¹² ST, I-II, q. 96. a. 6.

¹³ To Thomas “the common good of the realm and the particular good of the individual differ not only in respect of the many and the few, but also under a formal aspect. For the aspect of the ‘common’ good differs from the aspect of the ‘individual’ good, even as the aspect of the whole differs from that of its part.” ST, II-II, q. 58, a. 7, ad. 2.

own autonomy and requires the subordination of the individual good.¹⁴ One can think of the defense of the national territory as an example of placing common good over individual good.

The third meaning Thomas Aquinas gives to the common good is more specific. He refers to material or spiritual goods that the community¹⁵ distributes to individuals proportionally on account of distributive justice. In this approach, the common good is detailed in common goods.¹⁶ In short, the common good is an engagement of “giving and receiving” contracted by the individuals and their groups both journeying to God and longing for God. The terms of this bilateral contract need clarification.

2. The Common Good as the Person’s Patrimony

Thomas Aquinas provides grounds to understand the common good as a patrimony of the person, a right the person can enjoy. The Angelic Doctor’s legal theory and his considerations on distributive justice substantiate this position. Thomas reminds the lawgiver that the common good is the end of the law and as such the law should secure the good of all by taking into account the diversity of its subjects.

Now the common good comprises many things. Wherefore law should take account of many things, as to persons, as to matters, and as to times. Because the community of the state is composed of many persons; and its good is procured by many actions; nor is it established to endure for only a short time, but to last for all time by the citizens succeeding one another.¹⁷

¹⁴ ST, II-II, q. 47, a.10.

¹⁵ ST, II-II, q. 61, a.1.

¹⁶ “First, there are bodily goods such as food and clothing the resources for which must be present in order for the community to flourish (SCG, III, 85; *De Regno* 1, 15). There are higher goods such as peace, tranquility (ST I-II, 98, 1) and the security of the community (ST I-II, 96, 3). There are goods of the soul such as love and delight (ST II-II, 114, 2 ad. 1), truth and the sacraments of the church (De Perf. Vitae Spirit. 14).” Michael Sherwin, OP., “St Thomas and the Common Good: The theological Perspective: an Invitation to Dialogue,” *Angelicum* 70 (1993): 312.

¹⁷ ST, I-II, q. 96, a. 1.

Aquinas does not specify the nature of this diversity. Nevertheless, we know that the twelfth century in Europe was a time of “melting pot” of people and that authorities shaped political structures to contain the flow and manage the newness of the phenomenon. Cities and universities were born at that time. In the following century, Thomas Aquinas could see such diversity and plead that, for example, racial and religious differences should be taken into account when it comes to making law. Doing otherwise, the law may miss its end, that is to say, the good of all, the common good. At this stage, the issue is not related to the benefits that the law offers. It is rather a reminder that the political community encompasses a variety of people and of the correlative necessity to adjust laws to this sociological diversity because each one has the right to enjoy the living space and the living conditions of the state.

Distributive justice as a mechanism of distribution of the common good makes it arguable that the common good is the person’s patrimony. The distribution is made proportionally but the nature of the proportion is not arbitrary. Rather, it varies following the political regime,¹⁸ that is to say the societal project of each group. The *raison d’être* of this mode of distribution is the survival of the political community and its continuity.

A close examination of the nature of the goods distributed makes it clear that distributive justice is ultimately the concern of the group for individuals. In fact, what is distributed is a wide range of goods through which individuals flourish: besides material goods there are also values

¹⁸ ST, II-II, q. 61, a. 2.

and spiritual references¹⁹ because the first of all the goods is God. If the person is the sharer of the common good, the person is also its provider.

3. The Common Good as the Person's Debt

In two ways, at least, Thomas Aquinas establishes the person as a debtor of the common good. The legal theory of the Angelic Doctor and his concept of piety make this argument.

Aquinas considers people as “guardians of the common weal.”²⁰ In others words, he recognizes that the members of the political community can and should participate in the constitution and the defense of the common good. In the making of the legal process, this means that people can be a legislator body²¹ even if they should be first virtuous and responsible.²² This potentiality underlines a link between the common good and the individuals because each person is accountable for the flourishing of the society. The consequence of this individual responsibility is to protest against oppressive law and rebel against it as an anti-law²³, a subversion of the common good. To Aquinas the person is not unequipped to diagnose these perversions of laws; inclination to live in society comes with a sense of political prudence.

Piety also spawns a debt. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of piety. The first one

¹⁹ “Man is helped by a multitude of which he is a part, toward acquiring the perfect fullness of life: namely, that he may not only live but also live well, having all the things which are necessary for the perfection of living. For this reason man is helped by the civil multitude of which he is a part. This assistance concerns not only man’s corporal needs...but also his moral needs.” Com. Ethics. 1, 1, 4.

²⁰ ST, I-II, q. 97, a. 1.

²¹ ST, I-II, q. 90, a. 3.

²² Thomas quotes Augustine (De Lib. Arb. i, 6): “If the people have a sense of moderation and responsibility, and are most careful guardians of the common weal, it is right to enact a law allowing such a people to choose their own magistrates for the government of the commonwealth.” ST, II-II, q. 97, a. 1.

²³ ST, I-II, q. 92, a. 1, ad. 4. Many found here a foundation for civil disobedience. For a nuanced analyze see Keith D. Wyma, “When and How Should We Respond to Unjust Laws? A Thomistic Analysis of Civil Disobedience,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 43.2 (2014): 165.

is a virtue and its object is veneration of parents and the country but also ultimately of God²⁴.

The second one is a gift and aims at worshipping God²⁵. As a virtue, piety compels people to give back. Individuals become debtors from what they have received from their family and their country. In its nature, debt makes a bond between the debtor and the creditor. This bond at the social level prompts citizens' loyalty towards their country. When this bond does not exist, patriotism vanishes. Aquinas underlines also that piety towards the country extends to the fellow citizens and becomes source of "civil communion."²⁶

Conclusion

Even if it remains a flexible concept, I would define the common good as a concern of the group for the person and the concern of the person for the group - both mindful of their origin and destination in God. Because we have downplayed this mutual commitment, it becomes urgent to undertake what Walter Brueggemann calls the "Journey to the Common Good."²⁷ Thomas Aquinas would have not said otherwise and Pope Francis does not say anything different when he summons us to take care of our common home.

²⁴ ST, II-II, q. 101, a. 1.

²⁵ ST, II-II, q. 121, a. 1, ad 1.

²⁶ ST, II-II, q. 23, a. 5.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 1.