Article

A Blessed Rage for the Common Good*

Patrick Riordan, SJ
Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life, London

Abstract
Recent crises provoke appeals to the common good. Can the structures and procedures of liberal democracies belong among *Gaudium et Spes*'s conditions for human fulfilment? And are they to be respected even when they lead to undesirable outcomes? How can we integrate the notion of conflict as central to democratic politics, that is, a conflict which is not simply due to moral fault, or the inordinate pursuit of particular interests? The common good is not available as an already known quantity to determine correct solutions in conflict situations. Its core idea is heuristic, naming that which is being sought, but which is not yet known, although enough about it is known to be able to specify the programme for its discovery. Its two operative criteria are succinctly expressed in the themes of *Populorum Progressio* and *Caritas in Veritate*, concern for the development of every person and of the whole person.

Introduction

German Chancellor Angela Merkel addressed the Catholic Academy in Bavaria in Munich in July 2009 with a very challenging message. The challenge lay, not so much in her endorsement of a Christian understanding of the human, but in her reflection on the difficulties of living out her Christian mission in the world of politics. She quoted Pope Benedict XVI from his encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* where he stresses the

Corresponding author:
Patrick Riordan, SJ, Heythrop College, University of London, Kensington Square, London W8 5HN, England.
[email: p.riordan@heythrop.ac.uk]

dignity of the human person and the importance of this reality for politics.[1] Merkel professed commitment to this teaching and claimed that this Christian vision motivates her engagement in politics. As leader of a coalition of 'Christian' parties, she professed herself aware of the implications of this for the stances taken on controversial and divisive legislative issues such as late abortions, assisted suicide, and euthanasia. Even though some outcomes might have been unsatisfactory, she maintained they were better than they would otherwise have been without the efforts of the German 'Christian' parties. Nevertheless, these political parties receive far more criticism from Christians and from the Churches than do the liberal and socialist parties. As she told Archbishop Marx of Munich and other Bavarian Bishops at the meeting, 'You are more severe on your friends than on your enemies.' The difficulty facing any political party in a democratic system is that it must achieve majority support for its proposals. The challenge is to gather and build a majority, and if it is not possible to achieve a majority for the ideal, the best position imaginable, then one must find a majority for the best position possible. The constraint faced by democratic politicians of having to achieve a majority in the legislature is real. Using the example of Germany's constitution, the Basic Law, *Grundgesetz*, whose sixtieth anniversary was celebrated in 2009, she pointed out:

> We are not in a position to derive concrete policies from the Christian understanding of the human person with any certainty, but we are obliged to refer again and again to our guiding vision and form our politics in light of it. The Preamble of the Basic Law makes the point precisely: 'Conscious of their responsibility before God and Humanity…' These days, especially around the 23rd May, I have often reflected what a wisdom and deep humility guided the authors of the Basic Law as they formulated it like this. If we had to formulate a Basic Law today, I could not be confident that we would get a majority for such a formula: 'Conscious of their responsibility before God and Humanity.'[2]

This Christian politician's reflection on her experience of living out her faith in the world of politics exemplifies the questions addressed in this article: What is the common good of a liberal democratic polity, and can the Catholic Church incorporate the political common good within its overall vision of the common good? Considering the notion of common good as mentioned in *Gaudium et Spes* (the set of conditions which enables each one and every community to achieve his/her and its fulfilment),[3] we can ask whether the structures and procedures of liberal democratic regimes within pluralist societies belong among those conditions which are the common good. And are those structures and procedures to be valued and respected even when they lead to outcomes which

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1 'I would like to remind everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world's economic and social assets, that the *primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity*: "Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life."' Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* 25, emphasis original; quotation from *Gaudium et Spes* 63.

2 http://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/nn_700276/Content/DE/Rede/2009/07/2009-07-22-merkel-katholische-akademie.html (accessed 8 January 2010, my translation).

3 Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* 26.

evidently are not for the common good? What are the relevant common goods? What is the relationship between the good pursued in the secular domain and the good pursued by the Church? Can the Catholic Church's social teaching especially on the common good make a helpful contribution to those engaged in the political system as currently operated?

The Problem in Practice: Our Ignorance

Two contemporary crises highlight ignorance and misunderstandings regarding the common good in different ways: the clerical sexual abuse scandals in Ireland, and the national and international financial crises. Both crises provoke rage: in the former case because of the horrific crimes against children and young people and the failure of the Church authorities to respond appropriately and in time; in the latter case, because so many people lost out while others so evidently benefited and continue to do so. The rage is understandable, persistent, and implacable. With hindsight, so many things are clearer, so much seems obvious.

Those who abused children in their care harmed their victims, and their crimes were heinous and horrendous.[4] But the harm done extends beyond the immediate victims of their abuse. The consequences of their wrongdoing include the destruction of spontaneous trust in certain relationships and the institutionalization of suspicion in the encounter between adults and young people. This is harm to the common good, being the shared social space, and set of meanings and expectations, within which we live our lives.

Those in the Church with a particular responsibility for the common good, the ecclesiastical authorities, have also harmed the common good. Tragically, they have done so because of their mistaken understanding of what the common good required of them. Publicity, scandal, the shaming of abusers, this was all to be avoided in the vain hope of protecting the Church's reputation and position of respect in society. In the event, the attempts to keep things quiet have backfired disastrously.

There is 'a blessed rage' for the common good in the context of the economic crisis too.[5] We know that the absence of adequate supervision allowed irresponsible behaviour by investment banks and mortgage sellers to succeed in the short term; those who lost out realize that their particular good had not been taken into consideration in the design and implementation of the relevant system. Those who lost their homes, those left holding negative equity, those unable to get a mortgage in order to buy a home and perhaps start a family, small businesses unable to get credit, taxpayers whose money is used to bail out defaulting banks, can all look now at those who did benefit with enormous fees and record profits and continuing bonuses, and they see quite clearly that in a breakdown of winners and losers, they are the losers.[6] Where there is unmistakably a division into

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4 See what have become popularly known as the Ryan and Murphy Reports.
5 As examples of the burgeoning literature now documenting the crisis, see Charles R. Morris, *The Trillion Dollar Meltdown. Easy Money, High Rollers and the Great Credit Crash* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008); George Soros, *The New Paradigm for Financial Markets. The Credit Crisis of 2008 and What it Means* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).
6 We should not exaggerate, of course. Many people were happy to ride the roller-coaster of booming property prices and prosperity—it is silly to blame it all on the greed of a few bankers.

winners and losers, we seem forced to the conclusion that our system did not pursue a common good, but the good of those holding the levers in the financial system, at the expense of those dependent on their services. So is it naïve to think that there could be a common good in such a competitive environment as the economy?

One lesson which might be learnt from both crises is that we often have different meanings of the 'common good.' The Church stresses the concept of the common good in its social teaching but we delude ourselves and others if we present ourselves as knowing what the common good is in any particular situation and what it requires of us. Our inability to serve the common good is not merely a problem in practice: it is also a theoretical problem.

The Problem in Theory

Throughout Alasdair MacIntyre's writings since *After Virtue* he consistently denies that a liberal democracy with a market economy can serve the common good.[7] This conclusion, if true, would raise serious questions about the possibility of seeking the common good through the politics of a liberal state. But first, before determining whether MacIntyre is correct, we have to establish what he means. His assertion is built upon two pieces of argument. The first is to explore the claims the liberal state makes for itself, and to expose these as hollow or fraudulent. The second is to reconstruct the meaning of the common good as part of his project of recovery of moral terms. The common good, as reconstructed, is found to be beyond the ambit of the liberal state and market economies as these understand themselves.

MacIntyre points out how liberal political theory, denying the existence of an ontologically grounded common good or highest good, attempts to generate justifications of political legitimacy and obligation by appealing to the interests of rational agents. Liberal states are supposed to warrant the compliance of their citizens because of what they make available to them in terms of security, protection of rights, and safeguarding of liberty. MacIntyre is vitriolic in exposing this claim to obedience, arguing that it cannot ground the still recognized virtue of patriotism and the requirement that officers of the law and others put their lives at risk for the sake of the liberal state. In his words, 'it is like being asked to die for the telephone company.'[8]

I discuss this at greater length in Patrick Riordan, 'Condemning Greed? Catholic Perspectives,' in Alexis Brassey and Stephen Barber, eds., *Greed* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 123–142.

7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1984); Alasdair MacIntyre, 'A Partial Response to My Critics,' in *After MacIntyre*, eds. John P. Horton and Susan Mendus (Oxford: Polity, 1994), 283–304; Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Politics, Philosophy and the Common Good,' *Studi Perugini* 3 (1997): 9–30, reprinted in *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. Kelvin Knight (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 235–252; Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Intractable Moral Disagreements,' in *Intractable Disputes About the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2009), 1–52.

8 MacIntyre, 'A Partial Response to My Critics,' 283–304.

In the second move, in his reconstruction of moral terms, MacIntyre relies on a notion of practices which enables him to distinguish between internal and external goods. Those who engage in practices must learn to value the internal goods involved, and allow their own performance to be judged according to standards which safeguard those internal goods (excellence of product, of activity, and of a life). On the other hand, there are external goods of wealth, power and prestige, the pursuit of which can undermine the practices with their internal goods. For instance, the practices of medical care can be sustained in institutions which allocate prestige, power, and income to those holding positions. The institutions ideally should sustain the practices of health care, with a focus on the well-being of the people cared for, attained through excellence in the exercise of the relevant skill and knowledge. Unfortunately, it can happen that practitioners are distracted by the external goods and competition for them, and so neglect the internal goods of care.[9]

In reconstructing the notion of common good of cooperation MacIntyre locates it in the internal goods for the sake of which people collaborate in practices. But liberal states do not claim to have any such internal good; and furthermore, their market economies are explicitly about the efficient production and distribution of external goods. So it is impossible for a liberal society with a market economy to have a common good in MacIntyre's sense.[10]

William Cavanaugh offers a summary of MacIntyre's views:

> According to MacIntyre, the nation-state is an arena of bargaining among different group interests. In the absence of any generally agreed rational standard to adjudicate among such interests, decisions on the distribution of goods are made on the basis of power, which is most often directly related to access to capital. The sheer size of the nation-state precludes genuine rational deliberation; deliberation is carried out by a political elite of lawyers, lobbyists, and other professionals.[11]

William Cavanaugh has taken MacIntyre's hint about dying for the telephone company and adapted it in an even more radical polemic against the modern nation state. Cavanaugh challenges the modern liberal state's justification as the rational forum for handling conflict, conflict which is often presented as having religious sources. Rather than being a solution to violence, the modern state has been the greatest purveyor of violence, which he documents extensively. It has asked its adherents to make war in its name, 'killing for the telephone company,' as he puts it, with a play on MacIntyre's comment. Cavanaugh argues that the modern state has its origins in violence, that its history has been a violent one, and that it persists in pursuing its objectives by relying on violence. Accordingly, he concludes, the Church is mistaken if it regards the state as the caretaker of the common good. Elsewhere I take issue with Cavanaugh for misrepresenting the Church's position,

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9   MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Chapters 14 and 15.
10 MacIntyre, 'Intractable Moral Disagreements,' 47–50.
11 William T. Cavanaugh, 'Killing for the Telephone Company. Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good,' in *In Search of the Common Good*, eds. Patrick D. Miller and Dennis P. McCann (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 301–332, at 325f.

and also for misrepresenting Charles Curran's presentation of it.[12] Responsibility for the common good is not due to the moral goodness of the power holder, or the legitimacy of the power held. It derives from being in power, in the position of being able to order affairs for the common good.

Liberal Democratic Regimes and the Common Good

Both practical experience of recent crises and the theoretical contributions by MacIntyre and Cavanaugh provoke the question of how we can talk meaningfully of the common good in our present contexts within liberal democratic regimes. I suggest a way out of the impasse in the following steps: First, I suggest some reasons why we suffer from the illusion that we know what we are talking about. Second, I outline the requirements for a meaning of the common good appropriate to the democratic reality of conflict and debate. And third, I suggest that appreciating the common good as a heuristic concept enables us to recover the wisdom of the Catholic intellectual heritage and apply it in new circumstances.

Ignorance of the Common Good

Thomas Aquinas defines law as 'a certain ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated.'[13] The one who has care of the community has responsibility for the common good, and in Thomas's world this was the prince, or king, or in one case, the emperor. This phrase typically identifies the ruler in terms of his/her central responsibility, namely, to care for the common good of the community. Function, not structure or constitution, is the key to understanding political authority. Whatever form the constitution of the political community may take, principality, kingdom, empire, city state, republic, those with authority in the community have responsibility to care for the common good. Inevitably the predominance of monarchy or principality meant that the imagery for political authority was mostly of individuals exercising power.

Thomas Aquinas's influence on the development of Catholic thought resulted in an adoption of the same approach, even up to the twentieth century's social teaching of the Church. State, governments, and political authorities, all are reviewed in terms, not of legitimacy as conceived in the liberal tradition, or effectiveness, or constitution, but relative to the common good. This is not to be seen as an essential definition, but it specifies a function, the obligation of which is not dependent on the moral goodness or legitimacy of the incumbent.[14]

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12 Patrick Riordan, *A Grammar of the Common Good: Speaking of Globalization* (London: Continuum, 2008), 110–116.

13 STh I-II 90.4.

14 See, for instance, *Gaudium et Spes*: 'The political community, then, exists for the common good: this is its full justification and meaning and the source of its specific and basic right to exist. The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and effective fulfilment.

It is plausible to think that Plato's ideal of the philosopher king shaped Catholic notions of the responsibility of the prince in a culture in which the ruler was expected to know the good of his or her kingdom and pursue it. The prince, king, or emperor is assumed to know what is needed for the common good, and so can make and promulgate reasonable directives for the common good.

The great advantage of this functional understanding of political authority is that it is applicable across a range of constitutions. As a result, revolutionary changes of regime did not require the Church to rethink her teaching. The new regime was as obliged as the older one it had replaced to serve the common good. Law should be reasonable and be directed to the common good, whether made by a monarch, or a triumvirate, or a parliament. The form of state or constitution was irrelevant; the function of political authority remained the same. But perhaps there was a hidden trap here? If something significantly different was emerging in the process of historical change in the emergence of new democratic institutions predicated on liberty, then reliance on the assumption of continuity of function could blind the Church teachers to the nature of what they addressed, and so frustrate the communication.

Sources of Confusion in the Language of the Common Good

Communication between the Church and political authorities in the modern period was fraught by sources of confusion on both sides. On the Catholic side, the analogous nature of talk of the common good was one source of complexity. Several possible equivocations were concealed in this position which could lead to confusion at least or illusion at worst. The medieval scholastics were aware of the range of meanings for the term.[15] For instance, a favourite image in the medieval literature is that of an army as an organized social body. Among its common goods are the good of order, the command structure, and discipline which enables the army to function coherently. But victory is also its common good, since that is the purpose for which the discipline and good order are maintained. But victory in turn is not the ultimate good, since it is merely a prerequisite for the defended city to thrive and pursue its good.

Another source of complexity is the tension between the use of common good to name a known and describable objective of cooperative action, and the use of the term in a programmatic way, to identify a possible ultimate goal which is not yet known. For instance, the family of a deceased property owner might collaborate in pursuing a legal path to obtain their legacy. Their inheritance then is the common good of their cooperation, but in another context they might well say that they are pursuing justice. Justice as a common good of cooperation is less amenable to description than the contents of a specific legacy.

The people who go to make up the political community are many and varied; quite rightly, then, they may have widely differing points of view. Therefore, lest the political community be jeopardized because all individuals follow their own opinion, an authority is needed to guide the energies of all towards the common good' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 74).

15　See Matthew S. Kempshall, *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999).

Aristotle had asserted that the good of the most comprehensive community was the highest common good. The Christian Church, and subsequently, the modern state, abandoned the assumption that it was the business of politics to pursue the highest good as a common good. Of course, the Church continues to hold that there is a universal call to holiness, and that in the words of Saint Paul, to see the glory of God on the face of Christ is the fulfilment of human life (see 2 Cor 4:6). So that is still a valid meaning of the common good as *summum bonum*. The emphasis on integral human development in both *Populorum Progressio* and *Caritas in Veritate* echoes this abiding concern with the ultimate common good.[16] In political and social contexts, the Church speaks of the set of conditions which enable individuals and groups to achieve their fulfilment, leaving open the possibility that there is no agreement on that fulfilment. This is the emphasis of Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* and in the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*. Both elements remain in Catholic speech, the highest good, and the conditions which enable individuals and groups to achieve their ultimate good, and this tension between ends and means is a further complexity contributing to confusion in the minds of contemporary listeners and readers. People know that the Church wants to proclaim a highest good of humanity, a *summum bonum*, an ultimate destiny for all humankind, which is the communion of the blessed with God in heaven. Hence, this highest common good is what people think of when Church authorities speak of the common good; they do not immediately think of the instrumental common goods, the institutions and processes of political and social order even if that is what the Church teachers say they mean by the term.[17]

A further danger for misunderstanding is the confusion between the goods which are the deliberately chosen and intended objectives of cooperation, and the goods which are necessary and presupposed in any cooperation. Charles Taylor gives the examples of language, culture, and relationships of a certain quality as among the presuppositions of human action and cooperation. These are genuinely irreducible social goods, although seldom adverted to and made the ends of action.[18] But they also can be the referent of 'common good.'

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16 See, for instance, Pope Benedict's commentary on *Populorum Progressio* in *Caritas in Veritate*: 'To regard *development as a vocation* is to recognise, on the one hand, that it derives from a transcendent call, and on the other hand that it is incapable, on its own, of supplying its ultimate meaning. Not without reason the word "vocation" is also found in another passage of the Encyclical, where we read: "There is no true humanism but that which is open to the Absolute, and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning" (PP §42). This vision of development is at the heart of *Populorum progressio*, and it lies behind all Paul VI's reflections on freedom, on truth and on charity in development' (*Caritas in Veritate* 16, emphasis original).

17 The question identified above finds its location in this tension between the ultimate and the instrumental common goods. Are liberal democratic institutions in a pluralist society to be affirmed as belonging to the genuine conditions for human fulfilment? Can we endorse such institutions and their functioning as deserving of respect because they are part of the common good of humanity?

18 Charles Taylor, 'Irreducibly Social Goods,' in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1995), 127–145.

With all these sources of confusion it is difficult for Church teachers to communicate something meaningful to people engaged in political life, for instance, in the heated debate about the correct policy measures to cope with the financial crisis. Repeating that the economy should serve the common good does not contribute much to the detailed debate.

Sources of Misunderstanding in Modern Perspectives

The causes of confusion are not all located on one side. Various facets of modernity mean that the rich and complex notion of common good could find very little understanding. I summarize these without discussing them in detail.

First, modernity denies that political community has a single common good, in the Aristotelian sense of the highest good.[19] Instead, political community is made up of many competing interests and incompatible goods and their adherents. Second, modernity denies that political community requires or presupposes agreement on the good, the just, and the lawful. Instead, conflict, and not consensus, characterizes politics.[20] Third, modernity asserts that anything claimed to be a common good might only be such if it is deliberately chosen and intended by partners in cooperation, and only for so long as they so choose and intend. Ontological claims are examples of the conflict mentioned above, one more interest group asserting its claims.[21] Fourth, modernity asserts further that any such chosen or intended good is to be considered such precisely because it is chosen and intended by the relevant people within the constraints of not infringing on the rights of others. Again, ontological claims, e.g. as to what human nature requires, are assertions of interests.[22]

Given these emphases in modern culture, it is hardly surprising if the Church's teaching on the common good fails to persuade. There is a mismatch between communicator and audience. MacIntyre's analysis lets us down at this point. It reassures us that the problem lies on the side of modernity, which has abandoned the agreed *telos*. This does not offer a way forward. For a proper dialogue, the Church has to recognize that there is much to learn from its dialogue partners. Specifically, the Church needs to learn from humanity's learning process in developing a distinctive way of managing conflict.

Learning from Politics and Developing a New Sense of Common Good

Plato used the metaphor of the ship to contrast democracy with good order, to the detriment of democracy. On the one hand he described the situation of the ship guided by a captain who knew his port of destination and mastered the relevant navigation skills in

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19 For example, Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*.
20 See Patrick Riordan, 'Conflict and Consensus in Politics,' *Milltown Studies* 21 (1988): 28–39; see also Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Harmondsworth: Pelican), 1982.
21 John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).
22 See Martha Nussbaum, 'Aristotelian Social Democracy,' in *Liberalism and the Good*, eds. R. Bruce Douglass, Gerald M. Mara and Henry S. Richardson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 203–252.

order to reach it. On the other hand, there is the image of a motley crew in which there is no single voice commanding obedience, but each one has his own view of where the ship should go and how it should be brought there.

In the face of this polemic it is difficult to make a case for a form of rule which is not based on an appeal to the ruler's unique knowledge, skill, or competence. But that is precisely what is required if we are to see the point of liberal democracy. There are plenty of persons or groups competing for power, claiming to have the relevant knowledge and competence. But there is no agreed criterion to decide which views are correct and who is entitled to rule. MacIntyre is correct in his analysis to this extent: the disintegration of a shared worldview and agreement regarding a hierarchy of goods made it impossible for someone to be recognized as entitled to rule due to superior knowledge.

Contrary to the position taken by MacIntyre and Cavanaugh, I want to argue that there is something truly valuable in the achievement of modern liberal politics. It represents the institutionalization of a distinctive way of managing social conflict. It is by no means the only way, and it may not even appear to be the most effective way of dealing with conflict. Conflict arises because the goals pursued by different groups or classes or parties are mutually frustrating or incompatible. History provides us with countless examples of where one party succeeded in imposing its will on the other groups, either through the actual use of or the threat of violence. While this is indeed one way of managing conflict, experience also shows that this is not an enduring or stable way to do so.[23]

The management of conflict is political when it renounces such primary reliance on coercion or domination, and when it attempts to achieve conciliation through negotiation, argument and persuasion. The political management of conflict will usually involve compromise. Not every party to a conflict can achieve the realization of all its goals— otherwise there would not have been a conflict to resolve. Only where there is a willingness on all sides to forego some of their objectives can political agreement be reached. This is not an argument in favour of liberal democracy based on any claim that democracy provides a way of reaching better, more rational, or more grounded decisions. Nor is it an argument in favour of democracy as such. It is simply a claim that the regimes with a commitment to handle conflict by talking mark a major step forward in human ordering of social life. These are political forms of rule, and the distinction allows us to remark that many nominally democratic regimes fail to be political insofar as they institutionalize the domination by the majority.

Although conflict usually entails disagreement, not every disagreement leads to conflict. Disagreement occurs when parties in conversation are committed to incompatible propositions. There are different opinions and points of view. By contrast, conflict arises when people want things which for one reason or another they cannot all have. Circumstances of scarcity, or incompatibility, or interdependence mean that some fail to get what they want if others succeed. *Gaudium et Spes* has many references to disagreement: see §74 in note 14 above which locates the need for political authority in the co-existence of 'widely differing points of view' and the chaos to be avoided should everyone 'follow their own opinion.' Also in §75 Christians are encouraged to 'recognize the legitimacy of differing points of view' and to respect those 'who defend their opinions by

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23   James A. Schellenberg, *The Science of Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982).

legitimate means.' Conflict as distinct from disagreement is also mentioned, but in such a way that the centrality of conflict to liberal democratic politics is overlooked. There are cases of conflict of interests, incompatible goals, when rulers place their own interests ahead of the common good (GS 73), and when citizens pursue their own interests at the expense of the common good (GS 75). In these cases it is assumed that there is an identifiable common good being jeopardized by pursuit of special interests. The normal case in liberal democratic politics is not considered, namely, where the challenge is to work out some way of managing the conflict between warranted interests and interest groups, where there is no way of knowing in advance which interests are more justified than others. These are the cases of conflict in which good people pursuing worthwhile objectives prevent each other from succeeding. The cabinet negotiations of any well-functioning liberal democracy will involve competing demands for resources, for health care, education, security, job creation, social welfare, defence, pensions, etc. Conflict is at the heart of democratic politics, that is, a conflict which is not simply due to moral fault or flaw, the inordinate pursuit of particular interests, and the common good is not available as an already known quantity to determine correct solutions.

Vulnerable to Critique

Liberal democratic systems of government in pluralist societies are vulnerable to the kind of polemic evident in Plato, the disorganized mob attempting to sail a ship. Democratic societies are not only burdened by limited knowledge. They also have to cope with conflict. There are individuals and groups mobilizing sources of power and influence, and politics is the struggle to find some conciliation between competing interests. That involves compromise, and more often than not compromise outcomes fail to be rationally coherent. They seldom reflect an integrated set of goods sustained by a single vision of the good life. And so the muddling through of liberal democratic societies is also the achievement of a *modus vivendi*, a way of getting on together somehow. Seldom can it be said in such systems that conflicts have been resolved. Typically, the conflicts of interest persist, and the processes of negotiation and bargaining have to be continued. Inverting von Clausewitz's famous remark, we can say that politics is war carried on by other means; parliaments often translate the competing parties from the violent battles of a civil war to the contests of a debating chamber. Just as Plato's polemic was telling against the ignorance of a democratic electorate, so too MacIntyre's polemic scores many hits against the conflict management of liberal democracies. His arguments are well taken: there is no comprehensive vision of the good which embraces in a coherent unity all the particular goods pursued by groups within the society, solutions are not generated by rational deliberation but by bargaining, and that inevitably means that the currency of problem solving is not reason but power.

The development of international institutions on a democratic basis reflects the same problem. On this level too the criticisms of muddling through and *modus vivendi* between parties representing power bases of one kind or another (military, economic, populist) will apply, perhaps even more so, since there is not a comparable protection at the international level as is secured at national level by constitutions and bills of rights.

Where is the Common Good?

In this situation there is a real temptation for Christians and the Church to follow the line taken by MacIntyre and Cavanaugh, and retreat into a kind of nostalgia for a 'once upon a time' world of small communities enjoying internal goods. The challenge for Christians and the Church is to find the common good within the reality of contemporary existence. That entails being able to read the development and emergence of systems of liberal democracy within pluralist societies in a positive light. It means seeing the genuine human good in the ways we have developed of managing conflict without violence and without domination. But we will be unable to see such good if our operative rationality is one which expects clarity and coherence of ideals in practical matters. If we are trapped in the kind of enlightenment thinking exemplified by Jürgen Habermas, which distinguishes between the life-world in which reasoned argument between equal partners prevails, and the world of strategic reason, relying on money and force rather than the better argument, then our assessment of actual democratic politics is determined in advance.[24] Whether Platonic or Enlightenment in origin, a requirement of rational coherence can be a betrayal of the common good; it can be another instance of where the best might be enemy of the good. We do well to recall Augustine's discussion of the dilemma facing a good citizen, who realizes that participation in the human courts of justice will inevitably make him complicit in injustice. Augustine advises such a citizen that it would be a failure in love for the neighbour to refuse to bear one's share of the burden of responsibility for achieving social and political order.[25]

If we accept that the whole citizen body now has charge of the common good in a democratic polity along with the representatives and officers elected or appointed for particular functions, we must acknowledge that the common good which they seek is not and cannot be a prescribed set of policies derived from a notion of the best or highest good. This is John Rawls's challenge that we accept the fact of reasonable pluralism as setting the context for politics.[26] We must also accept that working out the actual set of projects which will constitute the society's common good will rarely if ever be conducted as a philosophy seminar relying exclusively on reasoned argument, attempting to overcome disagreement, but will be the more or less satisfactory outcome of a contest of conflicting interests and a struggle for influence. Of course, Pope John Paul II is absolutely correct in insisting that democratic politics is not a way of determining what is true, or right.[27] But it is a way for parties in conflict to find some way of living together. This is the big difference between the political sense of conciliation and reconciliation in the theological sense.

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24 Jürgen Habermas, *Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*, translated and introduced by T. McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1979); see also Frederick A. Olafson, 'Habermas as a Philosopher,' *Ethics* 100 (1990): 641–657.

25 See Augustine, *The City of God*. In Book XIX, Chapter 6, he considers the case of the human judge faced with the horror of being complicit in doing injustice even while trying to bring about justice.

26 See John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University, 1996).

27 John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 89.

Admitting our ignorance of what particular policies in what areas of common life in what places and times would serve the common good, we can nonetheless as Christians and as Church make a positive contribution to the process. Proposing the common good as a heuristic concept, articulating its criteria, can help direct the process in a positive way.

Excursus: Abortion

There are notorious issues which exhibit the weaknesses of democracy and which remain unresolved. The legalization of abortion is one of them. I may be convinced that the democratically supported policy in Great Britain is morally wrong, and that it undermines fundamentally democratic or liberal values. Finding myself in a minority on this issue, what am I to do? Unlikely to be able to achieve a reversal in the short term by building a majority, am I to resort to revolution, or civil disobedience, or withdrawal from public life? The question is sharpened when it asks about the stance of a whole faith community.

That a policy receives majority support does not ensure its moral validity, its justification, or liberal credentials. Within the relevant institutions and constraints, however, majority support does entail that the policy will be implemented. How are members of affected minorities to deal with this situation? Theocrats within secular states, republicans within constitutional monarchies, opponents of abortion within pro-abortion regimes, pacifists within militarily powerful states, all are faced with the difficulty of living with their commitments and convictions within a social political context which is not hospitable to them. How can they endorse and acknowledge as deserving of respect a political order which violates one of their central commitments? These examples illustrate the problem without any implication that they are of the same kind or all equally urgent or painful. From the standpoint of the minority in each case, the majority stance is morally indefensible, and so it is not simply a matter of a choice between equally moral but competing policies, such as nationalization versus privatization.

Rejecting violence as a method for managing conflict, accepting and valuing political handling of conflict, entails that one has to live with uncomfortable situations. I can have a vision of the common good of our society, I can be convinced that elements of our common life are inimical to that common good as I envisage it, I can be faced with the practical impossibility of doing anything about it, and still want to endorse our political system as the best one available to us for determining and pursuing our common good. The difficult member of this set of propositions is the final one: 'that our political system is the best one available to us for determining and pursuing our common good.'

This is not intended as a profession of faith in the entire system in all its details. On the contrary, our history reveals to us many deficiencies which we have been slow to identify and correct, and so we can reasonably assume that there are still many points on which improvement is possible. But whatever system we put in place, it will be found to have deficiencies. The claim of 'best one available to us' is that we have done our best to eliminate defects, but have discovered others which remain to be repaired. This is the way we have of managing conflict. If we are committed to it, if we value it, we will end up in the dilemmas and tendencies as spelt out above.

Truly Liberal Debate: The Human as Progressive Being

There is something extremely valuable in the Catholic intellectual heritage and its persistent evocation of the common good throughout recent centuries during which the public philosophy of most liberal states was that there is no common good in the sense of an ultimate good, *summum bonum*. Those states could acknowledge two possible meanings for common good: one identifying the set of institutions and arrangements which are required as means to security, public health and welfare, education, justice, and other social policy objectives; and a second considered as the amalgamation or summation of the personal ambitions of citizens.[28] The former of these sees the common good as an instrumental good, a means to arrangements, which in turn are means to the goals and interests of discrete individuals; the latter is at the level of goals, but only in a secondary sense, being the summation of goals set by individuals for their own lives, without any guarantee that the sum can be coherent. Neither of these nor both together exhaust the meaning of common good in the Catholic tradition, although as noted, Vatican Council II's *Gaudium et Spes* took a step in the direction of contemporary social concern by stressing the conditions for human fulfilment.

   The Church continually recalls humanity to address the question whether there is a human solidarity rooted in our common nature to which corresponds a shared destiny, an ultimate fulfilment. This entails the related question whether human fulfilment must always be more than the fulfilment of individuals so that the appropriate completion of human community must be investigated. In raising these questions the Church reminds liberals, for instance, that Mill's defence of liberty was not for the sake of liberty as such, but for the sake of exploring and discovering the fulfilment of humans as progressive beings.[29]

Common Good as Heuristic

The fourth chapter of *Gaudium et Spes* deals with the political community and regularly cites the common good, but in one particular text there is a curious qualification. The term 'common good' is to be 'understood in the dynamic sense of the term.'[30] Little is offered to explain this or to clarify what might be the other sense or senses used in other passages: static rather than dynamic, or substantive as distinct from procedural? I suggest that this qualification is an admission about all the usages of the term in the context of the political community. It is an acknowledgment that the search for the common good is ongoing. In other words, it admits that the core idea of the common good is heuristic,

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28 For a very useful discussion and critique of these meanings for common goods, see Iseult Honohan, *Civic Republicanism* (London: Routledge, 2002), 151–152.

29 See, for instance, Mill's declaration: 'It is proper to state that I forego any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being' (John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, edited by H. B. Acton [London: Dent, 1972], 79).

30 *Gaudium et Spes*, 74.

naming that which is being sought, but which is not yet known, although enough about it is known to be able to specify the programme for its discovery. The specification of the common good as heuristic does not compromise the ontological commitments of the Catholic position. Acceptance of the projects of construction does not entail abandonment of realism. The programme of construction can be at the same time a process of discovery. Enough is known about the common good to allow the application of criteria, exhibiting shortcomings in what is already achieved, or inadequacy in proposed candidates. The criteria can be formulated as follows: first, no individuals or groups may be excluded from participation in enjoyment of the goods we pursue together, and second, no aspect of the human good may be excluded from the common good.[31] These criteria find expression in many of the Church's advocacy stances, as for instance in making the option for the poor (first criterion), and in protecting the religious dimension in educational policies (second criterion). Together they are succinctly expressed in the theme of *Populorum Progressio* and *Caritas in Veritate*, concern for the development of every person (first criterion) and of the whole person (second).[32]

A Socratic Church?

To accept that the core concept of the common good is heuristic means that the Church will have to propose its teaching as a 'knowing ignorance,' or an 'ignorant knowing.' This entails engaging in a process of development and discovery which is largely open-ended (qualified as 'largely,' because of the minimal guidance offered by the criteria). It means taking part in the conversation of humanity in search of answers and solutions which are not known in advance but must be worked out in a situation of conflict through a political process. The dialogue is not merely an academic exercise but is central to the practical life of communities and cultures—think of the contemporary concerns about global warming, globalization, international terrorism, transnational capitalism, free movement of ideas and of people. The conflicts arising from the divergence of interests linked to each of these will have to be managed somehow, and it is preferable that they be addressed politically, that is, by talking and bargaining, rather than with the use of force.

In this process of dialogue, the Church remains 'teacher,' not by claiming to know already what the correct answers are to the dilemmas that political communities face. The other model of 'teacher' is Socratic, the midwife who facilitates the birth of another's child and another's life. This is the experience of doctoral directors who accompany the research of their students. Such teachers learn from the students through the process of discovery.

This is not a comfortable position for those holding the teaching office in the Church. To take part without being in control puts one in a vulnerable position. It involves

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31 Patrick Riordan, 'Europe's Common Good: The Contribution of the Catholic Church,' in *Religion: Problem or Promise? The Role of Religion in the Integration of Europe*, ed. Šimon Marinčák, *Orientalia et Occidentalia*, vol. 4 (Košice, Slovakia: Centrum spirituality Východ, 2009), 279–294.

32 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 8.

engaging in political processes which can be misguided and make fundamental errors. And so it is wise for the Church to manage this involvement in such a way that the Church's commitment to the Gospel and to key values is not compromised, just because partners in the dialogue of humanity do not share this commitment. One important way to manage this is to recognize the different voices with which the Church and its members may speak.

Polyphony: Many Voices

Among the many voices available to the Church, the prophetic voice is perhaps the most characteristic, being clear and unambiguous. In this voice the Church proclaims the central truths and values of Christian faith and life.

    The other important voice in the conversation of humanity is that required for collaboration, the willingness to work with and seek together just and fair solutions. There is no doubt that the Church becomes vulnerable in this context and on occasion can be outmanoeuvred by more skilful operators on the world stage. But such vulnerability can point also to the other messages which the Church must carry, of God who was 'handed over.'

    This is a dilemma faced also in the wider political world. The articulation of the code of human rights achieved in the 1948 Universal Declaration marked a proclamation of minimal standards for the behaviour of states below which no state should fall in the treatment of its citizens. Many are concerned about abuses of human rights by the Chinese state, for instance, in its treatment of Tibet and Tibetans. Hence the iconic position of the Dalai Lama. Would it be wise to make human rights a 'make or break' issue? Should the rest of the world only dialogue with China on condition that it changes its behaviour in relation to human rights? Would it be wise to exclude China from conversations about global warming, or about international trade and finance until the human rights issue is settled? That would be foolhardy in the extreme. The voice which is prophetic, which calls for protection of all human rights, is vital, and important, but it is only one relevant voice. Other voices concerned about the bigger picture of global order, whether of the shared environment, or world peace and security, or the globalized economy, must also be heard. All must have their place.

Authentic Practice

There is something comfortable about the moral high ground, being in a position to point out the faults and failings of others. But that cannot and should not be the Catholic Church's position. We must be able to engage in the human conversation; we must be able to contribute in a variety of ways to that conversation, sometimes with the clarity and starkness of prophecy, sometimes with the measured and careful wording of diplomacy, sometimes with compassion and understanding, and sometimes signalling a willingness to cooperate and work towards improvements from what is a flawed and sinful situation. Inevitably, the tensions between the different voices within the faith community will at times be strained and painful. This is the reality of conflict and so it will be important to observe how the conflict within the Church is managed. How the Church functions must be consistent with the message the Church carries about the common

good and its complexity. Chancellor Angela Merkel's experience is relevant and perhaps not untypical: as she reminded the Catholic Academy in Munich, the Church must learn to live with the range of voices within and not be more critical of friends and allies than of opponents.

Author Biography

Patrick Riordan is an Irish Jesuit priest teaching political philosophy at Heythrop College, University of London. He completed his doctorate at the University of Innsbruck. He has served as Dean and then as President of the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy, Dublin, and has contributed to debates in the Philippines, where he has been visiting professor both in Manila and Naga. His current research interests are Religion in Public Life, the Philosophy of Justice, and the Common Good. Recent publications include *A Grammar of the Common Good: Speaking of Globalization* (Continuum, 2008) and *Values in Public Life: Aspects of Common Goods* (editor) (LIT Verlag, 2007), as well as articles in various scholarly publications and periodicals such as *The Heythrop Journal*.