

The Common Good: what does it mean for the family

Few people will come out and say, “I care about *me*; I don’t care about the wellbeing of children and families.” OK, you might find a *Guardian* opinion piece that comes close to endorsing such egoism, but most people in Britain and other developed economies would claim to care a great deal about the next generation.

The claim isn’t empty. At the individual level, most children have at least one parent who is seriously committed to raising them well. Socially, all governments dedicate significant resources to the education of the young. Most of them have large bureaucracies for “child protection”.

And yet, I claim – and here I am thinking along with the Catholic Church – that we, as individuals and as a society, do relatively little to support the families in which almost all children actually live. To see why I say that, try this thought experiment.

Suppose we treated strong families as key supports of the common good, that is the shared and enduring flourishing of each of us and of all of us in a community. Suppose we thought of families as not only as the natural formers of children and their first teachers of behaviour, morals, and religion, but also as the primary repositories of social traditions, as the preferred carers for old people, and as schools of love, sacrifice, and dedication. If we thought of families in that way, how would we behave?

I think we would do things very differently if our slogans were “children first” and families first”. First consider what society would suggest to us as individuals. I think:

- We would encourage early marriages and younger mothers, so that parents would be healthier, more energetic, and less distracted by careers.
- We would encourage extended families, in which parents have support from relatives and children typically grow up with some sort cousins.
- We would teach young people that sexual love should be faithful and directed towards procreation.
- We would discourage – not take pride in – all emotional and sexual orientations and arrangements that tend to damage or simply denigrate families with children.
- We would discourage the “my child must have everything” approach to consumption. That attitude creates a spurious sense of material poverty that saps the spiritual wealth of family life.

Then think politically. We would ensure that tax codes, labour laws, and planning systems made children as economically rewarding for their families as they are beneficial for the common good. The agenda would include living wages, negative income taxes for parents, and subsidies for childcare, whether provided by the child’s own family or by outsiders. Also, we should give all children the vote – to be cast on their behalf by their parents.

At this point, I expect an interruption from a reader of the *Guardian* or the *New York Times*, complaining that I have confused two things: the faulty right-wing notion of “family first” and the very fine idea of “children first”. In this view, families are optional for promoting the good of children and the common good of society.

Such people often say that governments, in particular the many organs of modern welfare states, can ensure that children are put first. With the government serving as a backstop for the kids, we adults can have more freedom to work on our own individual fulfilment in matters of career, love, and sexuality. As a bonus, that fulfilment might lead to alternative good models for child-rearing.

I am here to tell you that those newspaper readers are wrong. They are wrong about alternative child-rearing models, as my co-panellists can demonstrate with excellent data. They are equally wrong about the proper role of government. As was discussed in the first of these roundtables, the common good is neither the good of the state nor primarily the responsibility of the state. In particular, welfare states can support but they cannot replace what children need most – the loving protection and guidance of their parents and relatives.

Governments can and should support families – I just offered some broad suggestions – but they should stay as far in the background as possible. Indeed, my newspaper-reading critics have it backwards. The more that governments try to take charge of defining and enforcing the common good, the less they can actually promote it.

The reason for that is simple. To be truly common, the common good cannot be mandated primarily by the decisions of rulers, even, or perhaps especially, by rulers who think that they are enlightened technocrats. The common good has to be found primarily by the common folk and their communities, starting with the most natural of human communities, the family.