The Common Good: What does it Mean?

So why should we care about the Common Good?

Well, I'd say it's because over at least the last forty years we've seen forms of individualism driving a wedge between human beings, undermining social trust, leading to an over centralisation of the power of capital and of the state, eroding the institutions of civil society. We have outsourced too many of the responsibilities we used to carry and we've become more dependent on products and services rather than on each other. We've seen symptoms like higher levels of loneliness among not only the old but the young, rising levels of mental health problems, suicide, depression, mistrust and suspicion, a breakdown of trust in institutions and people we disagree with and so on. We see this individualism manifested on the right where the interests of the corporate world become too dominant, and on the left in the 'me' culture, the identity politics, where the state ends up becoming more powerful to mediate between the battle of rights.

So, all of this has been accelerated in the pandemic and it's led to a loss of agency at ground level, where people feel they have less influence on the world around them - although during Covid in the first lockdown we had a taste of what a less individualistic approach could be like, and people liked it. But, overwhelmingly, there is a longing for love and belonging. We are at a pivotal moment, everyone can see that. Some think this may be a Kairos moment when something good may come of the crisis.

So what are the basic assumptions of the Common Good?

Well, it starts on the recognition of what it means to be a human person. We are social beings, we are created for relationship; we are not designed to be isolated, reduced to group identities, instrumentalised or subordinated. Human beings are beautiful as they are, with all their flaws, each unique and of equal value, worthy of love and affection.

So how do we define the Common Good?

At Together for the Common Good, we describe it as the shared life of a society in which everyone can flourish - as we act together in different ways that all contribute towards that goal, enabled by social conditions that mean every single person can participate. We create these conditions and pursue that goal working together across our differences, each of us taking responsibility according to our calling and ability.

So the common good recognises the reality of people's lives - what matters to people – it's about upholding that human space where we have agency. It's about balancing people's interests without excluding anybody, and it's about the recognition of that settled pluralism of identities and interests.

It's important to be clear that the purpose of the common good is to uphold the dignity of the human person so we need to be clear about what the common good is not.

The common good is not a utopian ideal, it is actually something we build together. Utopian thinking always sounds good, but it tends to involve coercion - the common good by definition cannot be imposed. It's not a system that is administered from above - it emphasises the importance of human relationships versus a technocratic and managerial type of culture. The

common good is messier and more beautifully human than any utopian ideal could be.

The common good can't come about if you have the dominance of one group over another. So in the current febrile environment it's vital that we uphold diversity of opinion. The common good does not see people through the lens of identity groups, but as unique human persons.

When people don't know each other we can't have a common good and a complex society like ours can descend into a battle of rights, an estrangement between people from different backgrounds and experiences.

So how does the Common Good come about?

So whilst government and policy change is vital, the common good actually requires responsibility being taken at all levels of society. It's fundamentally relational - relationship between people and with place - so it requires getting to know our neighbours, fellow citizens. Listening, building relationships is at the heart of the common good and it requires each of us contributing freely according to our vocational responsibility, and this sense of subsidiarity - decisions being taken closer to those they affect - so it requires this multiple layering; so we're building bottom up as well as top down.

So at government and policy level, yes, we want to create conditions in which capital and administrative power is distributed not centralised: so that might mean regional banking and regional energy providers for example. And we want to see a balance of interests between, say, for example, protecting the environment and retaining jobs, in order to sustain families and communities.

We want to see a common good between capital and labour so, for example, in a business are working people fairly remunerated by capital for their labour? Does the CEO, and do the cleaners, know each other by name? is there a mutually respectful relationship?

And at regional level we want to see collaboration, such as higher education institutions, technology colleges, large employers, dioceses, regional associations, chambers of commerce – all collaborating towards the economic renewal of their region.

And at the more local level, we want to see local institutions - like clubs, businesses, associations, charities, religious bodies, employers, families, working alongside each other as neighbours towards a renewal of our social fabric. A kind of community welfare building, if you like, to overcome the negative narrative of a broken society.

And finally at the personal level - actually, in some ways the most important - we can each play our part through the ethical decisions we make, through our virtue, through putting common good principles into practice in our everyday lives and by building relationships. So actually, fundamentally, the building block that starts all of this is conversation. The relationship between each of us reaching out to people that perhaps we don't know. So, that's a starting point.