

FALSE NOTIONS OF THE COMMON GOOD

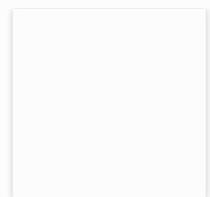
by C. C. Pecknold

4 . 23 . 20

As the Second World War ravaged Europe, several Catholic intellectuals had a fascinating debate about the person and the common good. It may seem odd that a theoretical dispute would emerge amid world war, but it's precisely in times of crisis that people find urgent incentives to re-examine first principles. This debate is now largely forgotten, but we should revisit it, for it sheds light on our own political debates.

On one side of the dispute were well-known personalists such as Jacques Maritain, who argued in *Scholasticism and Politics* that the human person was the fundamental unit of society. “The primacy of the person” provided both a standard for the pursuit of the common good and a powerful check against totalitarian forms of nationalism wreaking havoc on the world. Personalists like Maritain seemed to balance two pillars of Catholic social teaching at once—the dignity of the person and the common good—and won widespread approval.

One might expect the other side of the debate to advocate nationalism, or



SUPPORT FIRST THINGS

a rugged individualism. But debates don't always work on simple Manichaeic frames of good and evil. The opposing view came from a brilliant Thomist philosopher named Charles De Koninck, dean of philosophy at Quebec's University of Laval. Though he originally wrote on the philosophy of science, he had become interested in St. Thomas Aquinas's view of the common good.

In 1943, De Koninck wrote a powerful essay, "[On the Primacy of the Common Good, Against the Personalists](#)," which sent shock waves through the Catholic world. Though De Koninck did not name thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, or Konrad Adenauer, titling the essay "against the personalists" was rhetorically effective. He argued their "false notion of the common good" neither provided a check against totalitarianism, nor a proper defense of the good of the human person. In De Koninck's view, the personalists were fundamentally "in accord with those whose errors they suppose they are fighting."

What concerned De Koninck most was that personalists refuted modern individualism with nothing more than the primacy of the person, "as if the common good were not the very first principle for which persons must act." He maintained that this approach doesn't really combat modern individualism, but rather reinforces it, and makes the common good into something alien to the person. The personalists opposed totalitarianism by positing that the person is the substantial whole, yet in doing so they adopted a version of "the totalitarian notion of the State" they claimed to thwart. Why? Because totalitarian regimes are nothing other than "a more powerful singular to singulars which are purely and simply subjected." The primacy of the person makes the common good something alien to the person, and simultaneously requires that the people be held together by "a more powerful singular." For this reason De Koninck tended to call his unnamed targets "Marxist personalists," although he refused to use this phrase to identify Maritain or Mounier or any other French personalist.

The "false notion" of the common good remains ubiquitous in our own time. The consequence of this false notion could describe the sorry state of American politics today: A society constituted by persons who love their private good above the common good, or who identify the common good with the private good, is a society not of free men, but of tyrants—"and thus the entire people becomes like one tyrant"—who lead each other by force, in which the ultimate head is no one other than the most clever and strong among the tyrants, the subjects being merely frustrated tyrants. This refusal of the common good proceeds, at root, from mistrust and contempt of persons.

Today, we struggle to have serious discussions about the common good—whether a common good conservatism, or constitutionalism, or the worker economy. This difficulty is rooted in the false notion of the



common good under which we still labor. Those captured by this “false notion” ultimately regard the common good as something foreign to the particular good of persons. The common good is thus always viewed as something that must be dominated or overcome, rather than something rooted in our natural desire for that which could perfect and elevate us.

To have a better dispute today about the common good, we must heed De Koninck’s counsel. The common good is not something alien, but rather something natural to us as intellectual creatures made to know and to love. The virtuous citizen loves the commonweal precisely for the goodness that it communicates to himself and to his many neighbors—it is a commonweal so great that he is willing to expose himself to danger in order to conserve and defend it.

De Koninck began his 1943 essay with a simple Aristotelian alternative: “The good is what all things desire insofar as they desire their perfection.” The “primacy” should be given not to the person as such but to the good that all persons desire, since this good is what is really good for the person. You and I might love this or that particular good—a smartphone or a car—but these don’t perfect us the way our love for our family, our city, our nation, our church, or even our love for the universe can perfect us. And that’s as it should be. God made the world good—and very good. His goodness is diffused throughout the whole of creation. So the greater the common good, the more goodness it communicates, and the greater our love should be for that good—up the scale of goodness to God himself, who is the uncaused cause of all goodness.

We have to presuppose that the goods we desire as persons depend on the primacy of the common good of the family, the city, the universe. De Koninck writes, “this conception will certainly be rejected if one thinks of the singular person and his singular good as the primary root, as an ultimate intrinsic end, and consequently as the measure of all intrinsic good in the universe.” But if we reject the primacy of the common good, if we refuse the commonness of the common good, and if we refuse the goodness of the common good, we are like those fallen angels who wanted to be the source of their own light, only to be plunged into the outer darkness.

The common good elevates us. While it is good for us to love particular goods, the common good of the family, the political community, or the church calls us to a much greater love of the good than the love we have for particular goods. We cannot invent the common good. It is something which we constitute, which in turn constitutes us. As De Koninck writes, “the common good is essentially one which is able to be participated in by many. Therefore, before this good every rational creature stands as a part. Free action must be ordered by the agent himself, towards a participated good.”

As Augustine writes in *The City of God*, the common good (commonweal)

has weight according to the common objects of love. The more common the object of love, the more loveable it is—and since God is the most common object of love, the one whose goodness is diffused through every particular and common good, God is the most loveable common good of all. This is why De Koninck insists that “the negation of the very notion of the common good and of its primacy is a negation of God. In denying the universality of the end to which man is ordered, one denies the dignity which man receives from this ordination.”

Thus De Koninck’s most powerful claim is that human dignity can only be truly defended by embracing the primacy of the common good “expressly ordered to God.” Without an “explicit and public ordination” to God, our debates about the common will devolve into mere debates between tyrants, and “society degenerates into a state which is frozen and closed in upon itself.”

The dispute between Maritain and De Koninck did not advance after the war. The speculative questions gave way to the urgent practical demands of rebuilding a new Europe. Today, the pandemic has revealed to us a whole world that is “frozen and closed in upon itself.” But it has also opened up opportunities to speak about first principles again, to argue about true and false notions of the common good, and to insist that human dignity depends on God. We need to have that dispute again. The good news is that it seems we are, in fact, having it.

C. C. Pecknold is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at The Catholic University of America.

