

## Video 2: The Common Good and Inherent Dignity

The common good refers to the shared good we can only achieve by working together as a group. Now, generally speaking, people do understand that it's important to work together. But it's not always easy, so we have to explore deeper to understand how the common good works. In this video, I want to explain why it is necessary to care about the basic dignity of every individual, because when we don't, we take a disastrously mistaken shortcut on the way to the common good.

Now, what is that shortcut? Put simply, one way a group might think about achieving their common good is by excluding some people from it, or demeaning them in ways that send a message, they are not full and equal members of the group. Think about the example of a party. Maybe it will be a good party for everyone, but only if you make sure not to invite the "wrong" people, or invite those "wrong" people and score points by making fun of them. A team may think it can win simply by dropping the weakest players.

Now, it's important to recognize that simple exclusion isn't always a problem. For example, we all want doctors who are smart and really good at what they do, and so not everyone can get into medical school or graduate once they are there. It's not a problem to have famous sports teams or famous musical groups that perform at the very highest level, and these groups have to be selective.

But what if everything in the world was like that? What if only good students could go to school? What if families operated this way - fixing their problems by banishing the worst problem child? What if kids' sports ruthlessly excluded the weakest players? We can all see that this would be a problem. Now, a famous philosopher defined the good as achieving "the greatest good for the greatest number." But this philosopher failed to see that you might achieve the good of society for the best 70% of society by enslaving or kicking out the weakest 30%. And so most people would agree that that would be contrary to the common good, because the common good is concerned with the flourishing of all people.

So the common good must respect the inherent dignity or basic rights of each person in the group. When the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution says that the government should "provide for the general welfare," it means something like the common good. But the Constitution also includes a "Bill of Rights" - statements about basic attributes of individuals that cannot be violated, even in pursuing the general welfare.

## TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

Some politicians, for example, might like it if the government controlled the press, so that it could only publish articles supportive of current government policy. It would make it easier to get everyone acting towards the same goals. But this kind of silencing would violate the basic rights of individuals, and in so doing, would actually hinder the common good. After all, we have plenty of examples of the free press being exactly what puts pressure on governments to do the right thing for the common good. (Unintelligible - lost audio) ... things that governments might be tempted to do for the common good, but that would violate the basic dignity rights of a citizen.

But, you may be thinking, don't individual rights sometimes conflict with what seems to be the common good? Yes and no. For now, it is important to recognize that not everything any individual wants is a "right", or basic to their dignity. There's no right to do whatever I want in the Bill of Rights. There are specific rights. Let's use the example of a baseball team. A particular player might want to play third base or hit at the top of the batting order, but the manager might decide that the team needs him to play a different position or even sit out of games against left-handed pitchers. This isn't what the player wants, but it's not a violation of his dignity. Indeed, even if the coach punishes him for some rule infraction, say by benching him for a few games, it isn't a violation of his dignity. But what if the coach were to subject him to humiliation in front of his teammates or to engage in verbally abusive language? What if the coach used racial or ethnic slurs to criticize him? Most of us would say that crosses a line. And here's the key point: where to draw that line isn't always easy to see, but everyone can see that there is such a line. A big reason why these sorts of punishments would be violations is because they harm the common good of the team - notice how they tend to pit players and managers against one another, rather than working together to help each other. But another reason is that, as previously mentioned, that regardless of whether a person is on my team or another team, we are all still members of the "human" team, and we use the term "dignity" to recognize that basic oneness and equality. In the Catholic tradition, dignity refers to a person's worth, as being made in the image and likeness of God and being intended for eternal life with God and the communion of saints (our other teammates!)

There is a rich, complex history of reflection on the Biblical idea that humans are created in the image of God. For our work, most helpful is that we image God in our unique ability to be in personal relationship with one another. To reach out to another, and give love and support to a particular person, and to receive those same gifts. Respecting human dignity means respecting the need and capacity of all others for those relationships. Ultimately, for the un-ending love of God and neighbor enjoyed by the saints in heaven.

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Societies large and small - from families to countries - have ongoing debates about the actions and choices that violate a person's dignity. For example, Americans today disagree on gun rights, and abortion rights. But these differences and debates shouldn't lead us to reject the idea or to conclude that there are no real answers about human dignity. Quite the contrary: our shared sense of human dignity is an absolute foundation for any kind of societal morality, and it's important to recognize that, while there are differences, there are also generally large areas of agreement - for example, about slavery or about equal opportunities for women and men. The important lesson for the common good is that respecting individual dignity is a part of what makes the common good "common" to everyone in any group, and so we can't achieve the group common good simply by downgrading or even eliminating others. While we also keep in mind that respect for individual dignity never means that everyone simply gets to do whatever they want.