

Video 3: The Common Good and Interdependence

A proper understanding of the common good includes the individual goods of each member of the group. In other words, there should not be a conflict between individual goods and the common good. We sometimes wrongly begin our discussions of the common good by assuming we need to achieve some sort of a balance between individuals and their groups, as if the two are in conflict with one another. When we begin by posing the problem in this way, we have already made a mistake about the common good, and probably also about how our individual good is always intertwined with others in all the groups in which we participate. Social interdependence is the basic truth about humans. To flourish as individual human beings, we need each other - we need the common good. The dignity of each person is in part their ability to share with others the pursuit of the common good.

All that said, it's quite understandable why we often perceive the individual and the group as against one another, because it often seems like there IS a conflict. And, in fact, this seeming conflict is real, in the sense that there are obviously fights in families, there are exclusions in groups, and there are times when it seems like we have to stand up for ourselves, rather than be dominated by the group. The point is this, whenever it seems like there is a conflict, whether on a Little League team or in the whole society, something has already gone wrong. And the first task in such a situation is not to "balance" the sides, but to figure out what has gone wrong and how things can be rectified.

What kinds of things go wrong? Now, there are many things that can go wrong, but here we will focus on three common situations of conflict. The first is when some individuals are not performing duties that are necessary for maintaining the common good of the group. Put in simplified form, the problem here is the individual ignoring the group. This conflict is easy to see and to fix, at least in theory: get the individual to see and do their duties, so the group can work. The hard part is doing this in a way that continues to include the disruptive individual in the common good, and respects their dignity. A disruptive student can make it impossible for a classroom to achieve the common good, but the challenge for the teacher is to find ways to correct the disruptive student, while not demeaning them or conveying the idea that they just need to be cut out of the common good of the classroom.

Now a second problem is formally the opposite of this: the problem is the group totally dominating the individuals. Examples can be seen in families with a tyrannical father, or in churches with an iron-fisted pastor. Now groups can't function without some authority structures, so we have to be careful: the problem is not authority.

TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

The problem is most often “self-serving authority” - that is, authority which is not actually seeking the common good of everybody in the group, but which is making everyone in the group serve the vision and intention of the leader or leaders. Individuals become mere instruments in the plan, which is about the leader, not about the flourishing of all working together. Note that this is challenging - working together does, in one sense, require that we see ourselves as instruments in a larger whole, just like players in an orchestra. But we also need to be able to look for the differences between genuine team participation and being treated as if one is just a piece of a machine. The common good must respect the inherent dignity or basic rights of each person in the group. We are all members of the human team, made in the image and likeness of God, and intended for eternal life with God and the communion of saints.

Now finally, there is a third, more subtle way in which the common good and individual goods seem to conflict: through the rules and incentive structures that shape any activity. Now different activities call for different rules and structures, of course - and so in this third case, the conflict is not a matter of correcting a disruptive student, or a tyrannical authority figure, but about carefully fixing rules and incentives to harmonize individual choices and the common good. Now let's take a familiar example from school. A grading system is an incentive structure - what is its purpose? Of course, it is the common good of learning for all. Grades are meant to help individual students understand their performance. How can a person improve if they are not made aware that they need improvement? And of course, we all recognize that it is appropriate to honor excellent performance, which encourages more of it. But see how this is challenging. Grades can, of course, incentivize bad competition, as if learning is really about beating out other students. The key questions to ask in any situation are: which incentive structures encourage the common good best, and under what circumstances? Of course, we have to name the common good correctly here: in the case of the classroom, effective learning by all. Now would that happen if everyone got the same grade? Or say everyone got an overall group grade, like one classroom winning the championship over another? Hopefully, you can see how easily these would both distort the classroom. To go another step further, would it work better if grades were publicly announced, which we do indirectly by things like Honor Rolls or Dean's Lists? Or if the grade was kept totally private between an individual student and a teacher? Why would it work better in one case, rather than the other? Hopefully you will see that parents, governments, economics, businesses - they all face this same kind of challenge in getting rules and incentive structures right, and getting it right means allowing individual good and the common good of the group to be harmonized. If the incentive structure is off, it can itself drive a perceived conflict between individual good and common good.

Here's a radical idea for the classroom: maybe students should get a boost in their grades if they help another student learn more.

TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

Now these three examples of forms of apparent conflict between individual and common good could be supplemented by others. But these three are enough to help us see the crucial underlying lesson stated at the beginning: that when individual and common goods conflict, we need to identify what has gone wrong. Are some people shirking their duties to the common good? Is the leader of the group self-serving and tyrannical, rather than seeking the good of the whole team? And are the incentive structures mis-aligned so that people have to seek their individual goods in ways that are actually bad for the common good.

The lesson is that when we encounter conflicts between individual flourishing and the common good, pay attention to adjusting the underlying problem or misunderstanding so that all can flourish, both individually and together.