

Video 1: What is the Common Good

In this video, I will introduce the idea of the common good. The first thing you should know about the common good is that it is a shared good. It's not something like a pizza. You can share a pizza, but what that means is you can divide it up into pieces, and everyone gets a piece. The common good is more like a pizza party. You can't simply divide up the party and give everyone a slice. Everyone getting some pizza would be part of the common good of a pizza party. But the full common good is a good party. The common good encourages us to think about what it takes to throw a truly good party.

We could begin by identifying three elements: we need shared conditions for the party to go well. We need to make sure that everyone at the party is having a good time. And we need to do all of this together, cooperating and interacting in the shared activity. Each person doesn't just carry out their own party. Aiming at the common good is what makes both individuals and the whole human community flourish; that is, live good, satisfying lives.

Now, it's important to see right away that the common good differs from any individual's good. It's not just a matter of adding up individual goods and bads; it's possible, of course, for a few individuals to have a good time at a bad party. But we need to go further: it's also not just a matter of whether more than 50% of individuals had a good time at the party. Now, a good party probably does mean that individual people had a good time. But, the good party is something more than just each individual's experience added up. The success of the party is something everyone participates in, sharing it together, as a whole.

Now, this is even easier to see when we think of an example, like team sports. A baseball team, for example, has a common good: to win the game or the league championship. No one player can win the championship by themselves. Like a party, the game of baseball is something people have to do together, as a group. Many players on a team might have a good game, but the team may still lose. Winning the game isn't something that can be divided into individual parts. It's something people have to do together. They share it, but not by dividing it into individual parts.

So, the first and most important lesson about the common good is this: achieving it depends on seeing that we are all interconnected; that it's something we all have to do together. My success and your success can't be divided against one another. If we are in a group together, the success of the group comes by individuals connecting well with one another. We can't just focus on ourselves. But because we truly want the common good (the championship) as our own good, too - that is, each of us truly individually truly wants to win the game - we aren't just focusing on others, either.

TEACHING HUMAN DIGNITY

My personal good and the good of the group - the shared good - are all wrapped up together. This point should help us see that human flourishing is never just a matter of “me,” or a matter of “me vs. you,” it’s a matter of “we”. I flourish when we flourish, and our shared life is an essential part of my own flourishing. In every part of our life, we should see that we have to work together and depend on one another. A child can’t raise itself. When we become elderly, we need others. Our daily work goes on within businesses and schools and workshops where we depend on others in order to do our own work. Individuals are able to specialize and become great athletes or musicians only because other people are there to produce food, and build houses, and provide protection, and even take away the trash. This list could be endless; we can only have a good, flourishing life as an individual if we participate in, and contribute to groups that are flourishing.

Now, I hope this idea leads you to think more about “teams” that you play on in your own life. Not just sports teams, but any group seeking a shared good. Who’s on your team? Are there people on a rival team? Are you seeking the common good of your own team, but not your rival’s? Now, it’s not even that simple. Even competing teams have a common good. Let’s consider the sports example: each team may have a common good, but all the teams together also have a common good, which is continuing the fair play of the league, following shared rules, supporting the things that all the teams need - like places to play and referees to call the games. So there’s a way in which all the teams in a league are on the “same team,” in that they all share a common good in which they all participate.

But how far does this go? In the Catholic vision of the common good, but also in many others, all human beings are ultimately on the same team. All human beings are meant to work together for goals that no one person can achieve alone. For example, pretty much everything in our lives is provided through markets and government organizations and other groups, and we could never do the things we do unless we made it possible to exchange ideas and products and inventions, across the country and even across the globe. Another example of a common good for all human beings is the planet. We can’t just divide it up into individual pieces - we all share a common home, common air and water, and we need those conditions in order to flourish and live good lives. Of course, in these very large examples, it may be harder to see the common good and the ways we all have to work together than it is when we focus on a sports team, or even a party. And so sometimes people don’t see what is needed to work together. But think about it: that’s true at a party or on a team or in a family, too. When people don’t see how they need to work together for the common good, things go badly for everyone. So it’s important first and foremost to recognize the very existence of something we’ve called the common good - recognize that we are in fact working together as a group, so that we can work together better, which will mean flourishing for everyone... and for each of us, too.