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The Universal Common Good

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A sermon delivered by His Eminence, Cardinal Felin, Archbishop of Paris, at the Mass on the occasion of the Convening of the Parliamentary and Municipal Assemblies, November 14, 1956.

THE UNIVERSAL COMMON GOOD*

LAST YEAR AT THIS TIME, when according to your custom you would have assembled in this church, the anticipated and announced dissolution of Parliament did not permit the holding of this Mass which has now become traditional. Today, at the suggestion of some of you, to whom I extend my thanks, we resume this custom. Your primary intention in establishing this ceremony is to express clearly as Christians the memory which you cherish of the members of your assemblies who have passed away during the year. This thought of the deceased remains the basis of the Mass in the month of November; however, it by no means exhausts the significance and the extent of your act.

Christian members of these assemblies, your coming brings an offering of your efforts and your labors. They will be offered in union with the Sacrifice of Christ, the only One from Whom salvation comes to souls. In return, every one of you will gain the strength and generosity required by the tasks that have been confided to you by the nation.

In order to be better prepared for this offering and more disposed for the reception of these graces, you have again this year asked that the Archbishop of Paris detain you a few moments and cause you to reflect upon an aspect of your mission. He wishes to respond very simply to your request.

All of you, although in varying degrees, are delegates and representatives of a particular community, of a certain district, of a certain county or even of the nation. Essentially you are charged with a public trust. You are carrying responsibilities that affect the life of all of France. I would even say of the entire world. It is for this reason that I would like to submit to you certain reflections on this common good with which you are charged.

This task is not always easy. It encounters obstacles stemming from

* Reprinted, with permission, from the French language periodical *La Semaine Religieuse de Paris*, Nov. 24, 1956, p. 1192. Translation by Edward D. Re, Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law.

your personal liberty, from your obligations toward the political party to which you belong and even from the needs of the nation, its prosperity and its future.

"Civil authority must never serve the interests of one person or of a few," said Leo XIII in his Encyclical, *The Christian Constitution of States*, "since it is established for the common good of all."

In other words, the political philosophy that you represent does not have as its objective the particular welfare of the individual but the common good of the entire society. It must not consider the people on an individual basis but rather on a universal basis. It is not an individualistic analysis but rather a social synthesis. The laws and the decisions on which it is your mission to vote or decide must be suited to the common good because the law is not a despotic or capricious edict. In conformity with its Greek etymology, *logos*, it is order, a synonym of reason. The pleasure of the sovereign is insufficient to establish law regardless of what might have been the view of those jurists who promoted the formula inherited from juridical heathenism: "Quod principi placuit legis habet vigorem."

No, it is reason which has the force of law, and if law is an order of reason it is directed essentially to the common good of society. It tends to have harmony reign among all the members of the social body. If the legislative power had not been reserved to qualified representatives of the common good, if every one could set up his own will to be the law, it would no longer be the expression of social reason. To the extent that the elected officials consciously transcend their own individual point of view and particular interests, it is to the same extent that they are motivated by a social sense; that they may claim a

democratic execution of the laws.

"Laws that do not serve the common good are but violences disguised as law," said St. Thomas. Just let me give an example. A divorce law which may be in accord with the particular good of an unhappy couple and may spare them from suffering is contrary in our eyes to the common good of the family because it undermines the stability of the family and even the common good of the state which is interested in the stability of all families.

Similarly, some laws of inheritance are of this type, which eliminate more and more the distinction between illegitimate issue and the legitimate family. Laws which are contrary to the common good are cancers of the social organism. They develop individualism to the detriment of society as a whole.

You have your own convictions on most of the questions which are submitted to your authority. You have the heart to defend them with all loyalty. This is your right and your duty. But in such defense how important it is not to forget the good of the community that you represent! Individual sacrifices may therefore be required which must be made with courage and generosity, even at the price of some election risks or loss of prestige. The problem which must be resolved may be very delicate in certain difficult cases. You must then make a loyal appeal to your Christian conscience in order to overcome certain selfish aspects for the benefit of the common good.

I will say the same applies to the party to which you belong. It may validly expect of its members a certain discipline for the realization of a particular program. It is again necessary that the interests of the party be not adverse to the interests of the national community, and that blind obedience not affect the common good that you

must strive to know and always to serve.

To narrow one's view of the common good to the welfare of the party would be to limit one's mission and to diminish one's role. The policy of your party may be a guide which enlightens your judgment and orients your decisions, but it cannot have the force of law since the latter can have no basis other than the welfare of society which you must serve.

And this individual freedom, which I have just exhorted you to moderate in certain cases in order to better serve the common good, finds its worth and necessity in resisting the exaggerated pressure of a party.

The furthering of this common good by your laws and your decisions is not limited to the welfare of the nation of which you are the representatives, because a nation is but a part of a whole that is called the world. In our time, when international relations multiply, when no one can enclose himself in the restricted circle of his own nationality, it is important to consider the common good and to search for nobler and higher perspectives.

You cannot deny that an intense nationalism may injure those international relations which are the basis for the peace so ardently desired by all peoples and which is in fact the common good of mankind.

Under this international aspect the common good exists at once in the maintenance of order, so that each State may enjoy its rights and accomplish peacefully its social functions, and in the progress of civilization exchange goods so that each State may achieve its own goal and furnish its subjects with their share of the common good of mankind. Hence it requires, under certain grave circumstances, a subordination of the particular interests of a nation to those of the world community. It requires

on the part of those who have authority that they protect the rights of each people, on the one hand, and on the other build by appropriate institutions an international order capable of maintaining peace.

Pius XII has recently said, "Those into whose hands are placed the destiny of the people should remember that no lasting benefit can be born of war. It is not with arms, massacres and ruins that the problems that face mankind are resolved, but with reason, law, wisdom and equity."

"In order that durable and harmonious contacts and fruitful relations may exist," the Pope also said, "it is indispensable that the people recognize and observe the principles of natural international law which regulate their development and their normal function."

This is the reason why, here again, certain self-denials in the national order that are not contrary to legitimate vested rights must be considered in your deliberations, in order to maintain or facilitate the development of communities which go beyond the national framework.

This task is delicate, gentlemen. This self-privation, in certain cases, for a national or international good, presupposes a special strength. Selfishness, on the one hand, and the certainty that one is right, on the other, place obstacles on broad perspectives, and oppose the revision of one's judgment which should always act in the light of wise reason, and, for Christians such as you, in the light of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church.

But the Lord refuses neither light nor strength to those who seek it, especially to those such as you who carry grave responsibilities. For this reason . . . we shall ask God that He may always give you the grace happily to seek the common good.