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THE COMMON GOOD IN CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT

HONORABLE JOAN B. CAREY†

I must say it has been a while since I looked at Aristotle or St. Thomas and certainly Reverend Coughlin can tell me how many, many, many years ago that was. But as I reviewed their concepts of the human person, I realized that St. Thomas breathed wonderful life into Aristotle's concept. Aristotle felt the well being of the individual, the happiness of the individual, and human flourishing could be obtained by doing virtuous works.¹ Human flourishing is not being acknowledged as taking care of someone else but rather, it is being the agent of that good work.

To St. Thomas, the end product of good works was not human flourishing, happiness or well being but, rather, the knowledge that one day you would meet your Creator.² To do this, you had to live in accordance with the Eternal Law; that is within the intellect of the Almighty. St. Thomas deviated from the Greek thinkers who came before him and many of the thinkers of his time.

If you asked me to define the common good, I would respond as Justice Brennan did when he was asked to define pornography:³ I cannot define it; I cannot put it into words but I know it when I see it.

The common good is not something the individual can create, establish or attain alone. Despite this, the virtuous works we perform do immure to the community. It is beneficial to all. I do not think it is the sum of individual goods or what the individual wants to think is good. It is the sum of what is good to the community.

The preservation of human rights is good for the whole

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¹ See ARISTOTLE, *NICOMACHEAN ETHICS* 3-32 (Martin Ostwald trans., 1962).

² See AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGICA*, Pt. I-II, Q. 90-97 (Fathers of the English Dominican Province trans., 1947).

³ See *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184, 197 (1963).

community. It causes us to unite and to live in the community. We live in community with others because we expect something to be given to us, from you, from the State, from the sovereign, from the community, and from the religious organization, the church. As a group we all desire something and that desirability is what unites us; what binds us together; what causes us to live in the community.

We do that for the preservation of our human rights. We do that so that we are ensured that we live in an atmosphere of peace and comfort and political accord; we do that so that the things that are important for our own human existence, health, food, shelter, clothing, and education, will be received.

According to St. Thomas, in order for us to be able to move toward the common good, we should be giving people their rights; the things that are important. In doing this, we help them progress toward the ultimate end, God.

The role of the State in society is to orchestrate activities that allow us to develop our persona so that we may reach our Creator. We now wonder whether that is the true role of the State or whether the State's role is consistent with our goals.

The greatest tragedy of the latter part of the 20th Century is the sense we have of alienation, egocentrism, and self-fixation. We are only concerned with what is good for me. There are great walls of separation. The mortar and pestle of those walls are feelings of prejudice, discrimination, poverty, class inequality, and disempowerment. The buttresses of those walls are the lack of social caring, a sense of self-gratification, and a slavish pursuit of our own desires.

Very often those of us who have never lived below the poverty level or have never been discriminated against are part of the problem because we are moving others toward the common good, placing them on the road to their Creator.

When I walk through the subway in Manhattan, I see people eating out of garbage cans. How can they think about what it is going to be like in the afterlife if they cannot live in this life? Their focus is certainly not going to be what is going to happen after he or she dies.

The common good is the protection of human liberties and aids in the development of life so that people can progress. In Catholic social thought the common good is living in conformance with Eternal Law so that we may meet our Creator.