

What is the Common Good?

In his recent encyclical 'Fratelli Tutti', Pope Francis stresses the importance of striving to bring about the "common good."

What is the meaning of the "common good," and how can we help further it in the world around us?

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"Let us look to the example of the Good Samaritan. Jesus' parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective

nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond. This summons is ever new, yet it is grounded in a fundamental law of our being: we are called to direct society to the pursuit of the common good and, with this purpose in mind, to persevere in consolidating its political and social order, its fabric of relations, its human goals." (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 66)

Summary

1. What is the common good?
 2. Who participates in the common good?
 3. What role does the political community play?
 4. What is the universal destination of goods?
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1. What is the common good?

The common good is "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 26).

"The principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.'

"The common good does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains

'common,' because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future. Just as the moral actions of an individual are accomplished in doing what is good, so too the actions of a society attain their full stature when they bring about the common good. The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 164).

"The common good is always oriented towards the progress of persons: 'The order of things must be subordinate to the order of persons, and not the other way around.' This order is founded on truth, built up in justice, and animated by love" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1912).

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- A man or a society that does not react to suffering and injustice and makes no effort to alleviate them is still distant from the love of Christ's heart. While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind. Otherwise their Christianity will not be the word and life of Jesus; it will be a fraud, a deception of God and man. (*Christ is Passing By*, 167)
- Your task as a Christian citizen is to help see Christ's love and freedom preside over all aspects of modern life: culture and the economy, work and rest, family life and social relations. (*Furrow*, 302)

- A university must educate its students to have a sense of service to society, promoting the common good with their professional work and their activity. University people should be responsible citizens with a healthy concern for the problems of other people and a generous spirit which brings them to face these problems and to resolve them in the best possible way. It is the task of universities to foster these attitudes in their students.
(Conversations, 74)
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2. Who participates in the common good?

"'Participation' is the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange. It is necessary

that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person.

"Participation is achieved first of all by taking charge of the areas for which one assumes *personal responsibility*: by the care taken for the education of his family, by conscientious work, and so forth, man participates in the good of others and of society.

"As far as possible citizens should take an active part in *public life*. The manner of this participation may vary from one country or culture to another. 'One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom'" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1913-1915).

The human person cannot find fulfilment in himself, that is, apart from the fact that he exists “with” others and “for” others. This truth does not simply require that he live with others at various levels of social life, but that he seek unceasingly — in actual practice and not merely at the level of ideas — the good, that is, the meaning and truth, found in existing forms of social life. No expression of social life — from the family to intermediate social groups, associations, enterprises of an economic nature, cities, regions, States, up to the community of peoples and nations — can escape the issue of its own common good, in that this is a constitutive element of its significance and the authentic reason for its very existence" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 165).

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- As a Christian you have a duty to act and not stand aloof, making your contribution to serve the common good loyally and with personal freedom. (*The Forge*, 714)
- You, being a Christian, cannot turn your back on any concern or need of other men, your brothers. (*The Forge*, 453)
- Carry out all your duties as a citizen. Do not try to get out of any of your obligations. Exercise all your rights, too, for the good of society, without making any rash exceptions.— You must give Christian witness in that also. (*The Forge*, 697)
- We children of God, who are citizens with the same standing as any others, have to take part fearlessly in all honest human activities and organizations, so that Christ may be present in

them. Our Lord will ask a strict account of each one of us if through neglect or love of comfort we do not freely strive to play a part in the human developments and decisions on which the present and future of society depend. (*The Forge*, 715)

- Freely, according to your own interests and talents, you have to take an active, effective part in the wholesome public or private associations of your country, in a way that is full of the Christian spirit. Such organizations never fail to make some difference to people's temporal or eternal good. (*The Forge*, 717)
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3. What role does the political community play?

"The responsibility for attaining the common good, besides falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason that the political authority exists. The individual person, the family or intermediate groups are not able to achieve their full development by themselves for living a truly human life. Hence the necessity of political institutions, the purpose of which is to make available to persons the necessary material, cultural, moral and spiritual goods" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 168).

"To ensure the common good, the government of each country has the specific duty to harmonize the different sectoral interests with the requirements of justice. The proper reconciling of the particular goods of groups and those of individuals is, in fact, one of the most delicate tasks of

public authority" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 169).

"The common good requires prudence on the part of each, and even more so on the part of those who exercise authority. It involves three essential elements:

1. First, the common good presupposes respect for the person as such. In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person. Society should permit each of its members to fulfill his vocation. In particular, the common good resides in the conditions for the exercise of the natural freedoms indispensable for the development of the human vocation, such as "the right to act according to a sound norm

of conscience and to safeguard . . . privacy, and rightful freedom also in matters of religion."

2. Second, the common good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.
3. Finally, the common good requires peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. It presupposes that authority should ensure by

morally acceptable means the security of society and its members. It is the basis of the right to legitimate personal and collective defense" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1906-1909).

Authority is legitimately exercised if it is applied to the pursuit of the common good of society. To achieve this, it must employ morally acceptable means.

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- Interpret, then, my words as what they are: a call to exercise your rights every day, and not merely in time of emergency. A call to fulfil honourably your commitments as citizens, in all fields — in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job — accepting with courage all the consequences of your free

decisions and the personal independence which corresponds to each one of you. A Christian 'lay outlook' of this sort will enable you to flee from all intolerance, from all fanaticism. To put it in a positive way, it will help you to live in peace with all your fellow citizens, and to promote this understanding and harmony in all spheres of social life. (*Conversations*, 117)

4. What is the universal destination of goods?

"Among the numerous implications of the common good, immediate significance is taken on by the principle of the universal destination of goods: 'God destined the earth and all it contains for all men and all

peoples so that all created things would be shared fairly by all mankind under the guidance of justice tempered by charity.' God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone.

"This is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods. The earth, by reason of its fruitfulness and its capacity to satisfy human needs, is God's first gift for the sustenance of human life" (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 171).

"The universal right to use the goods of the earth is based on the principle of the universal destination of goods. Each person must have access to the level of well-being necessary for his full development" (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 172).

"The principle of the universal destination of goods is an invitation to develop an economic vision inspired by moral values that permit people not to lose sight of the origin or purpose of these goods, so as to bring about a world of fairness and solidarity, in which the creation of wealth can take on a positive function. Wealth, in effect, presents this possibility in the many different forms in which it can find expression as the result of a process of production that works with the available technological and economic resources, both natural and derived. This result is guided by resourcefulness, planning and labour, and used as a means for promoting the well-being of all men and all peoples and for preventing their exclusion and exploitation" (*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 174).

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- It is easy to understand the impatience, anxiety and uneasiness of people whose naturally christian soul stimulates them to fight the personal and social injustice which the human heart can create. So many centuries of men living side by side and still so much hate, so much destruction, so much fanaticism stored up in eyes that do not want to see and in hearts that do not want to love! The good things of the earth, monopolized by a handful of people; the culture of the world, confined to cliques. And, on the outside, hunger for bread and education. Human lives — holy, because they come from God — treated as mere things, as statistics. I understand and share this impatience. It stirs

me to look at Christ, who is continually inviting us to put his new commandment of love into practice. (*Christ is Passing By*, 111)

- In order to act in this way always, the way good mothers do, we need to forget about ourselves and aspire to no other honour than that of serving others, in the same way as Jesus Christ, who preached that 'the Son of man has not come to be served but to serve'. This requires the integrity of being able to submit our own wills to that of our divine model, working for all men, and fighting for their eternal happiness and well-being. I know of no better way to be just than that of a life of self-surrender and service. (*Friends of God*, 173)

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