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THE COMMON GOOD AND/OR THE HUMAN RIGHTS:
ANALYSIS OF SOME PAPAL SOCIAL ENCYCLICALS AND THEIR
CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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Abstract: It is notable how some papal social encyclicals have interchangeably used the terms 'common good' and 'human rights.' This article analyzes the papal common good teaching and its contemporary shift to include human rights. I also explore the differential nuances between the common good and the human rights. Human rights as advocated by civil societies are understood as arising from a conception of the nature of the human person. The common good has been expressed in practical ways through human rights, especially the right to work and receive a just wage. The papal social encyclicals are viewed here as relevant to our contemporary world where extreme capitalism and unrestrained consumerism have led to the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few people.

Key Words: common good, human rights, papal encyclicals, social teachings, Catholic Church, person, work

The words “common good” somehow summarizes the Roman Catholic social teaching. Under the terms “common good” are grouped together issues such as workers’ rights, peace and disarmament, solidarity of the rich nations with the poor ones, and the responsibility of governments to promote social welfare. The church teachings on the common good have continually developed since the nineteenth century and are especially disseminated through papal social encyclicals and national bishops’ conferences. From the encyclicals, a good society is one which caters for the integral wellbeing of all people.

Issues referred to as essential components of the common good apply to anyone who wishes a good life for themselves and others in their society. The inclusivity of the common good is pivotal in showing how all human beings relate, and most of all, the church using these two words (common good) helps show the relevance of the gospel in addressing human concerns. Through reasoning, people formulate what constitutes common good needed for human flourishing. By common good is referred the possibility of shared ideas and practices required for human living.

The common good tradition continued in the contemporary teaching in the Roman Catholic Church applies the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas. In its turn, Aquinas’ theology and philosophy is heavily influenced by the ethics of Aristotle.¹ This is evident in Aquinas’ work especially the *Summa Theologiae* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*. Aristotle views human beings as possessing an ultimate end discoverable through reason. In Aristotelian thinking, the mind conceives the common good as the *terminus* or end of a tendency, purpose, aim, or intention. Politics itself is seen as having a purpose of the good life (*eu zen*). The goal of every just society is the achievement of the common good.² In Chapter II of the Third Book of *The Summa Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas argues every agent acts for an end and that the ultimate end of all beings includes intermediate (temporal) ends.³ In a practically logical way, Aquinas maintains in Chapter III of the Third Book that every agent acts for a good, and in Chapter XVII he has argued that that which is the supreme good is supremely the end of all. There is one supreme good for all human persons and this Aquinas calls God.⁴

In addition, Aquinas argues the particular good is directed to the common good as its end.⁵ Jacques Maritain, a Thomistic scholar, notes human persons “...before they are related to the immanent common good of the universe, they are related to an infinitely greater good—the separated common Good, the divine transcendent Whole.”⁶ And further, “The soul is filled with God. It is in society with God. With Him, it possesses a common good, the divine Good itself.”⁷ The common good perspective has foundation not only in the Greek philosophy but also in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. From a biblical perspective, all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1: 26-27), and from this dimension is drawn the idea that all people share their common end which is God. Michael Novak argues that in Christianity the personal good

and the communal good are one. He states, “God is the universal common good not only of humans but of all created things.”⁸ And therefore, “communion is perfect insight and love—union with God, immediate and penetrating—is both the common good of humankind and the personal good of each.”⁹ The preceding affirms the Christian belief in God as the creator of the heavens and the earth. If God is the creator, then the good in creation originates or somehow mirrors the goodness of God. Therefore, the common good of all creation is arguably seen to reside in the goodness of their creator God. The human person being in the image of God carries what Novak refers to as “the unalienable responsibility of each person, *per se subsistens*; and also the final destination of each in the full insight and love of communion with God.”¹⁰

In the use of the concept ‘the common good,’ the church has resorted, however, to the work of Aquinas. It is important, to trace the development of the papal advocacy of the common good. The popes in the modern and the contemporary times have referred to the common good as their communication tool to articulate the church’s perspective on socio-economic and political issues. In the contemporary church, Novak notes, “...appeals to the common good are becoming more prominent in Catholic writing.”¹¹ Common good refers to the wellbeing, participation and contribution of all people in society. “The free person is ordered to the building up of the common good; the common good is ordered to the fulfillment of free persons.”¹² From the common good are developed the principles of participation and subsidiarity in Catholic theology. These principles highlight the necessity of sharing and contributing resources by all people according to their means in any given society. The papal teachings have over the years reiterated time and again on the various ways people participate and contribute to the common good. A renewal in the social teaching is therefore relevant in our contemporary world where capitalism and unrestrained consumerism have led to the accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of a few people.

This work argues for the relevance of the social teaching of the church to issues in our world today. It calls for a renewal in the application of the common good in the analysis and development of a good society. By the common good are included all issues of human flourishing in society: the political and socio-economic well-being. The common good in the social teachings of the church is viewed here as concerned with human rights. Human rights are presented as practical expression of the common good. Hence, the common good refers to the right to work, just wage, good working conditions, among others.

The Inclusive Nature of the Common Good in the Social Encyclicals

Since the issuance of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, many popes have issued encyclicals and documents advocating the common

good for all people in the world. Some of these social encyclicals includes *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991). Other church documents dealing with social issues, especially of the common good, include the 1971 Synod of Bishops' *Justice in the World* and the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). Notable is the recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) by Pope Benedict XVI. These encyclicals and documents have all continued the tradition of the common good. I consider here some pertinent ideas in the encyclicals mentioned above though not in a chronological order.

The Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the requirement of participation and contribution to the common good by all people:

The whole human race is consequently involved with regard to the rights and obligations which result [from the common good]. Every group must take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of every other group, and still more of the human family as a whole.¹³

By working for the common good, the church has acquired a forum to reach out to people who are not believers. This provides the church and the people not in the church with an opportunity to work together for a just society. It is a way of overcoming sectarianism and affirming a deeper understanding of interconnectedness of humanity regardless of religious affiliation. The application of the common good doctrine includes all people within and outside an immediate society. Further, the concern for the common good eliminates boundaries not only between the Christian believer and the non-believer but also between nations. For example, the thinking on the common good has led to the concept of solidarity which has been adopted in theological inquiry to highlight the just requirement of rich nations to assist poor ones. This concern for solidarity has also found advocacy in the church in the modern world. Pope Paul VI notes, "There can be no progress toward the complete development of man without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity."¹⁴ Solidarity supports the view that the common good extends beyond the borders of any given nation. Recently, Pope Benedict XVI described solidarity as "first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot be merely delegated to the State."¹⁵

The common good is the foundation of solidarity with people all over the world. It consists of the process of developing the social, economic, and political aspects necessary for human wellbeing in a global context. A well rounded society makes it possible for its citizens to achieve these

ends. In the common good are also included issues of equality of people in society as well as sustainable interdependence with nature. In 1971, Paul VI addressed issues concerning women, workers and unemployment, immigrants, and the environment. Notable is his statement on environmental abuse: “Man is suddenly becoming aware that by an ill-considered exploitation of nature he risks destroying it and becoming in his turn the victim of this degradation.”¹⁶ According to Paul VI, “political power, which is the natural and necessary link for ensuring the cohesion of the social body, must have as its aim the achievement of the common good.”¹⁷

The common good is therefore understood as incorporating all aspects of good life in society. The papal teachings in the encyclicals indicate the common good is within the concern of the church. Through the common good teaching, the popes present all people as interrelated, and hence the integral wellbeing of all people is viewed as central to the church teaching. In a special way, then, the common good teaching is based on the understanding of the nature of the human person.

The Common Good and the Nature of the Human Person

The church views human persons as coming forth from God and also as returning forth to God who is the beatific vision of all people. The human person is the subject of the common good (or rights). In papal teachings, the common good hinges on the idea of people having the same destiny which is God. Human nature is understood as possessing some dignity imbued by the creator. Human existence in the common good is also viewed as inherently social. Being human, all people are related.¹⁸ The Christian idea of all creation as the work of the one Creator puts humanity in an intimate form of existence.

The development of the thought on the common good is based on the concerns of the wellbeing of the human person in changing historical circumstances. Maritain presents the concept of the common good as based upon the “...correlation between this notion of person as social unit and the notion of the common good as the end of the social whole.”¹⁹ Hence, he argues “the common good is common because it is received in persons, each one of whom is as a mirror of the whole.”²⁰ To emphasize the personal nature of the common good, Maritain states: “Among the bees, there is a public good, namely, the good functioning of the hive, but not a common good, that is, a good received and communicated.”²¹

The papal social encyclicals are generally written historically to respond to an existing historical problem or issue affecting humanity all over the world. They usually give a diagnosis of a social problem and how it affects all people including the Christian faithful and the solutions drawn mostly from the Pontiff’s reflection on the sacred scripture and the church tradition. Social encyclicals are basically documents transmitting

papal teachings on particular issues. They give the official church position on a given social issue. For example, the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* addressed issues of labor, just wages, private property ownership, and most of all it demonstrated the religious dimension of social issues in opposition to communism and socialism. Pope Leo XIII observes, “To remedy these evils the socialists, working on the poor man’s envy of the rich, endeavor to destroy private property, and maintain that individual possessions should become the property of all, to be administered by the State or municipal bodies.”²² To counter the socialists, Leo surprisingly advocates some form of class structure in society: “There naturally exist among mankind innumerable differences of the most important kind; people differ in capability, in diligence, in health, and in strength; and unequal fortune is a necessary result of inequality in condition.”²³

With the memories of communism still fresh in people’s minds, there has been an attempt to counterbalance the emphasis on the common good with an insistence on the dignity of the human person. In the historical context of the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, Pope John Paul II notes,

It is by responding to the call of God contained in the being of things that man becomes aware of his transcendent dignity...The denial of God deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to a reorganization of the social order without reference to the person’s dignity and responsibility.²⁴

Catholic social teaching takes as its foundation the view that human beings have an inherent dignity given by their creator, God. For example, Pope John XXIII states:

Any human society, if it is to be well-ordered and productive, must lay down as a foundation this principle, namely, that every human being is a person, that is, his nature is endowed with intelligence and free will. Indeed, precisely because he is a person he has rights and obligations flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature. And as these rights and obligations are universal and inviolable, so they cannot in any way be surrendered.²⁵

Additionally, Pope John Paul II repeatedly emphasized the dignity of the human person and the moral implications drawn from it. He states,

...the Church considers it her task always to call attention to the dignity and rights of those who work, to condemn situations in which that dignity

and those rights are violated, and to help to guide the above-mentioned changes so as to ensure authentic progress by man and society.²⁶

Central to the church teachings is the view of the human person as possessing an eternal and transcendent destiny.²⁷ By appealing to reason, the social teachings categorically present also an inclusive view of humanity, and therefore its analyses of basic requirements of human well-being are arguably understandable and applicable to all people. Pope Leo XIII made his arguments by appealing to the authority of reason. He argued that the mind or reason is what makes people human beings and distinguishes them essentially and completely from the brute.²⁸ The pope argued that private property is required by reason:

With reason, therefore, the common opinions of mankind, little affected by the few dissentients who have maintained the opposite view, has found in the study of nature, and in the law of nature herself, the foundations of the division of property, and has consecrated by the practice of all ages the principle of private ownership, as being preeminently in conformity with human nature, and as conducing in the most unmistakable manner to the peace and tranquility of human life. The same principle is confirmed and enforced by the civil laws—laws which, as long as they are just, derive their binding force from the law of nature. The authority of the divine law adds its sanction, forbidding us in the gravest terms even to covet that which is another's: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife; nor his house, nor his field, nor his man-servant, nor his maid-servant nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything which is his."²⁹

Other than the reference to Deut. 5:21, Leo also espouses Thomas Aquinas' teaching on natural law. Aquinas describes the natural law as the participation of the human rational nature in the eternal law.³⁰ The popes do also refer to the dignity of the human person as understood in the fullest way in the light of divinely revealed truth. Through the blood of Jesus Christ and the grace of God, the human person is understood as offered the gift of redemption.³¹

It is necessary, then, to emphasize that issues concerning human living in society are in the domain of reason. Through reason people solve problems affecting their quality of life. In addition, the involvement of all people in tackling social problems is imperative. According to Leo XIII, the problems of his time were solvable by the Church. He argued:

It is the Church that proclaims from the Gospel those teachings by which the conflict can be brought to an end, or at least made far less bitter; the Church uses its efforts not only to enlighten the mind, but to direct by its precepts the life and conduct of men; the Church improves and ameliorates the condition of the workingman by numerous useful organizations...³²

However, to create a just society in the contemporary world, the church magisterium has also come to see the need for involving people of other Christian denominations, world religions, and secular institutions. For example, the 1975 postconciliar document on ecumenism calls local churches to join people of other religions and secular societies to work for common goals of social justice and "...to set up joint organizations to study and promote understanding of true human rights."³³ There is a realization that the church is also part of the bigger society which is inclusive of people of other religions and those who have no religion at all. Hence, the church gradually became an avid advocate of the dignity of the human person. The dignity of the human person is most clear when the human person is free to pursue her/his destiny in life. Freedom is an essential aspect of human nature. However, the church view of freedom is a holistic one. It is holistic in the sense that the human person is understood to have material and spiritual dimensions that includes a divine (eternal) perspective. Paul VI saw human liberation as a concern in the mission of the church:

As the kernel and center of his Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God and being known by him, of seeing him, and of being given over to him.³⁴

Hence, the common good is understood as shared concerns for the wellbeing of the human person by church and society. In the church teachings, there is a move to reconcile the tension in Christian teachings on the issue of involvement in temporal day to day human concerns and the conception of the eschatological goal of human life. For example, Pope John Paul II observed, "The kingdom of God, being in the world without being of the world, throws light on the order of human society, while the power of grace penetrates that order and gives it life."³⁵ The concern is to show the relation between the eternal dimension of human existence and the temporal concerns of daily life. John XXIII also expressed the role of the Church in the world. In the encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, the pope addressed the concern for peace in the world. This encyclical came at a critical historical period when arms race and the cold war had overtaken

the world. The pope views, “Peace on earth, which all men of every era have most eagerly yearned for, can be firmly established only if the order laid down by God be dutifully observed.”³⁶ He understands the world as ordered by God and therefore it is only in taking recourse to God that worldly order can be restored. Part of the world order created by God is human nature and its temporal concerns. The use of the language of human rights in the social teaching of the church indicates the partnership of the church mission with all societies in the world.

The Promotion of the Common Good includes Human Rights

In the social teachings of the church, the common good has come to include reference to the human rights. Both the common good and the human rights refer to basic human needs and personal moral goods. Basic needs include material goods needed for life sustenance such as food, shelter, and other human requirements. Personal moral goods relate to the transcendent human powers related to the faculties of intellect and free will. To live a fully human life, human persons require knowledge and freedom. Moral action, as well as a majority of human rights, is only possible where a human person has a capacity for self-determination.

The church pronouncements on the common good are similar to the majority of issues referred to as human rights.³⁷ Both the church common good teaching and the human rights declarations refer to the human person as possessing inalienable attributes attached to her/his rational nature. However, the church also connects its teachings to reason and distinctively justifies them through divine revelation as witnessed in the sacred scriptures. Further, human rights are specifically enforceable by international and civil law while the church common good needs further development into public policies by the relevant civil authorities. In either case, human rights are part and parcel of the common good. It makes sense to argue that in every common good there is a private good. And therefore the common good and human rights are not opposed to each other. Even Aquinas’ view of God as the common good, which is also employed in the church social teaching, does not contradict the human rights teachings.

The preceding presents the possibility of using the terms common good and human rights interchangeably. For example, in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* issued on the fortieth anniversary of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1931, Pope Pius XI reaffirmed the concern for justice and rights of workers. He categorically argued that the “...requisite freedom of action must be left to individual citizens and families; but this should be with due regard for the common good and with no injury to anyone. It is the duty of rulers to protect the community and its various parts, but in protecting the rights of individuals they must have special regard for the infirm and the needy.”³⁸ More recently, John XXIII

reiterated the personal rights especially in the economic and social life in the provisions of human needs. He specifically referred to “minimum necessities of human life, to health services, to the broadening and deepening of elementary education, to more fitting training in skills, to housing, to labor, to suitable leisure and recreation.”³⁹

John XXIII also emphasized that through the natural law the human person has basic rights: “...the right to respect for his person, to his good reputation; the right to freedom in searching for truth and in expressing and communicating his opinions, and in pursuit of art, within the limits laid down by the moral order and the common good; and he has the right to be informed truthfully about public events.”⁴⁰ Additionally, John Paul II also states:

An important, even decisive, contribution was made by the church’s commitment to defend and promote human rights. In situations strongly influenced by ideology, in which polarization obscured the awareness of a human dignity common to all, the church affirmed clearly and forcefully that every individual—whatever his or her personal convictions—bears the image of God and therefore deserves respect.⁴¹

Notable in the preceding statement is John Paul II’s substitution of the terms “common good” with the more secular terms “human rights.” The language of the common good can be said to make it possible for the church to communicate to a bigger audience than the Catholic faithful. It is my view that the common good and human rights terminologies are all addressing the same issues albeit in different words.

Common good and human rights both advocate the welfare of individual persons in their collective societies. However, as mentioned previously, the church presents the common good and human rights as having their source in God, the ultimate source of all things. Common good teaching emphasizes the welfare of all people in a society or community. From their historical development, human rights are meant to focus on individual and group protections. Human rights are a basis for the protection of individual persons from governments and organized religion. There are situations where the common good can conflict with human rights. Can an individual person be sacrificed for the good of the majority? The words of Caiaphas, the high priest at the trial of Jesus come to mind: “It was Caiaphas who had counseled...that it was better that one man should die rather than the people” (Jn. 18: 14). Human rights would not allow one man to die for the nation but the common good would counsel individual voluntary sacrifice. Human rights view a human person as an end and never a means.

A more contemporary case example would be when private property is required for the common good. Questions abound whether the state can take individual property for the sake of the common good where the individual would not voluntarily relinquish what one rightly owns. In cases of eminent domain, cities and municipalities seize private property for the good of the whole society. Individual rights and privileges are coupled with responsibility and community or society has responsibilities and demands to and from the individual respectively. Social mortgage of individual property, as indicated by John Paul II, assumes a deliberate scenario where a person willingly shares their own private property for the wellbeing of others.

Further, the common good and human rights are to be conceived in an integral view of human living. Essentially, they do not exclude each other. A society that provides the common good also respects and promotes the human rights of its citizens. The common good, in its inclusive nature, promotes an understanding of interdependence between human beings, society, and nature. The common good opens the scope of human existence as related to all other life forms. The Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation is expressed in the common good teaching and it is not opposed to human rights which also advocate the inherent or inalienable dignity in every human person. Human rights generally concern themselves with individual persons' prosperity. Figure 1.0 below shows human rights as part of the common good and the common good as encompassing more than the human rights.

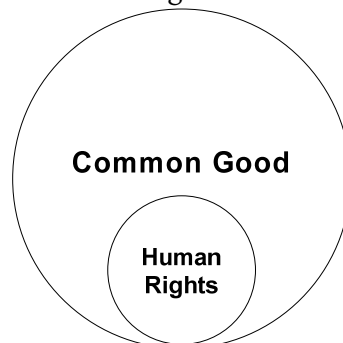


Figure 1.0

My view here is that the common good includes human rights. The common good embraces individuals in society and for this reason has a broader perspective. For example, Pope Benedict XVI, in his address to the members of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on April 18th, 2008, marking the sixtieth anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, referred to human rights as fundamental part of the common good.⁴² Individual rights are ensured in the common good. In pursuing individual rights, a society achieves the common good. It is as Ernest Fortin notes, "Properly managed, private vices could lead to public

benefits...The entrepreneur who is out to enrich himself and himself alone benefits the whole society by creating lucrative jobs for the rest of its members.”⁴³

Thomas Aquinas also distinguished between the common good from the private good. He argued that all the objects of the virtues can be referred to the private good of some individual or to the Common Good of the community. He gives an example of the virtue of courage to either preserve the state or uphold the right of a friend. He maintains the law as “...ordered to the Common Good, and, therefore, there is no virtue whose acts the law cannot command. But human law does not command all the acts of all the virtues but only those which can be ordered to the Common Good...”⁴⁴ In the preceding, Aquinas distinguishes the demands of the common good as stipulated in law from those of the private good. However, Aquinas’ view of the law as ordered towards the common good includes also the private good. The common good is what benefits all people in a society, and conversely the collectivity of the private goods constitutes the common good.

Appealing to the language of human rights and the common good provides the church with a forum that avoids sectarianism. There are abuses of human rights in the world today. Some of these abuses also affect the ministers of the church and their respective communities. The church collaboration with international community can help create a just world with a just peace.

The Church Praxis in the Common Good and Human Rights

The concern for the common good expresses the church’s involvement in matters that affect people every day. The common good is also about human rights and this in a special way is argued by the papal social encyclicals as part of the mission of the church. John XXIII understands the Church as having a role to play to bring about the wellbeing of all people. “The Catholic Church has been established by Jesus Christ as Mother and Teacher of nations, so that all who in the course of centuries come to her loving embrace, may find salvation as well as the fullness of a more excellent life.”⁴⁵ Further, he argues for the responsibility of public authorities in providing basic human needs which requires a correct understanding of the common good. He describes the common good as “the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection.”⁴⁶ John’s description of the common good is similar to that enunciated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It is John XXIII who convened the Second Vatican Council. The conciliar documents also describe the Church view of the common good as follows:

Because of the closer bonds of human interdependence and their spread over the whole

world, we are today witnessing a widening of the role of the common good which 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.⁴⁷

The main concern in the emphasis on the common good is the achievement of the good life for every human person. Common good, viewed today as the achievement of optimal human development, has come to incorporate not only the basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter but also the intellectual and the spiritual needs of a human person. The socio-political progress of a society concerns creating an environment suitable for human development. Human personality, as previously argued, is expressed through cognitively informed free activity. Through creativity in arts, mass media, the study of humanities, natural and social sciences, people express their nature as persons. Unlike other animals, humans require more than the basic needs.

Practically, the common good incorporates basic human rights. Rights themselves refer to elements of human personality such as knowledge and free or deliberate human action. Since the common good for human beings includes knowledge and the possibility of achieving that which enhances human development, there is need for education; the pursuit of knowledge which provides an avenue through which people study how to improve their lives and their natural world. A wholesome education helps the human persons understand their rights and obligations. Further, education helps one understand the social nature of human existence. Human persons flourish and seek what makes them happy. This is the exercise of freedom and self-determination. The power of free will is an irreplaceable capacity in the nature of the human person. A free person responsibly chooses how to live and what goals to pursue in life. A choice of career and training for it is an expression of human freedom. Enemies of human freedom arise from undue external influences or coercion by state, religions, and other persons in society. Human rights themselves arise from an understanding of the necessity of knowledge and freedom in human living and the need to protect individuals from undue interference from external forces.

As a matter of fact, workers are human persons with inalienable rights. The church sees herself in pontifical teachings as an advocate for all workers and their rights as human persons. The Christian faithful are workers too. Pius XI held the view that the government is for the purpose of the common good.⁴⁸ Additionally, John XXIII also advocated for the right to good working conditions.⁴⁹ Since the nineteenth century, Catholic social teachings have also focused on the rights of workers through insistence on the necessity and value of unionization, good working conditions, and just wage.

An example of the application of Catholic social teaching is the Catholic Worker Movement in the United States of America which was founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. This movement was involved in advocacy for the rights of workers. The Catholic Workers picketed with the seamen and demonstrated before the ships. They declared “Unionization is favored by the Pope!” and “The Church backs a living wage!” and withstood police action that broke up picket line and sometimes by even clubbing demonstrators. The Movement in turn was supported by workers who felt it stood for the working men and women.⁵⁰

The Catholic Worker Movement also negotiated with company management concerning labor disputes. Neil Betten gives an example of New York City department store chain which had laid-off a number of non-unionized saleswomen without severance pay. He says that the women had been employed there from twelve to twenty years and that the Catholic Worker Movement offered to join the women in picketing the company’s store, met with company officials threatening them with public attacks both in the *Catholic Worker* and from the lecture platform. The action by the Catholic Worker led to the firm agreeing to provide severance pay for some workers and to take back the rest.⁵¹

In the contemporary times, the common good has been formulated in terms of human rights. It is worthwhile to note here that Thomas Aquinas views a ‘right’ [*ius*] as the object of justice.⁵² Furthermore, the common good relates to what is fair or just. In the church social teaching, the common good has been stated as the right to work, just wage, and the equitable sharing of wealth. These rights are viewed as expressing and protecting the common good.

The common good as the right to work

The right to work is clearly understandable in terms of human action. Human persons are presumed free to express themselves and this self-expression comprises not only free speech but also free human action. Part of human action is the capacity to work or do a job through which one earns a living. To deny a person the right to work is to deny that person not only a free expression through their actions but also a life.

Through work people earn a living for themselves and their family. Contained in the papal social encyclicals from the beginning is a concern for the rights of workers. The rights of workers also include the right to join the work force for the unemployed. All people of a mature age have a right to work. The emphasis on the workers’ right is especially evident in Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891) which was a response to the effects of Industrial Revolution occasioned by the rise of factories and deplorable working conditions. Other popes have used the common good argument to advocate justice and freedom in the workplace. For example, John XXIII states:

Consequently, if the organization and structure of economic life be such that the human dignity of workers is compromised, or their sense of responsibility is weakened, or their freedom of action is removed, then we judge such an economic order to be unjust, even though it produces a vast amount of goods whose distribution conforms to the norms of justice and equity.⁵³

Free performance of work is a human right. It is an exercise of human nature. Through creativity involved in work, people affirm their personal identity and also contribute to the common good.

The common good as the right to share wealth (resources)

The right to work is connected to the right to share in the fruits of one's labor. Work and its results is part of the common good. The principle of the common good presumes a state where wealth or resources are shared equitably. Ownership presumes a natural right to possess and use goods. There is interdependence between national wealth and private wealth. Wealth, including privately owned, has a social component. Pope John Paul II categorically stated "Private property, in fact, is under a "social mortgage," which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods."⁵⁴

God, the creator, is viewed as the source of all goods and therefore the works of creation are the commonwealth of all people. John Paul II views wealth and property as having not only a social dimension but also a religious perspective. For example, he states:

...development cannot consist only in the use, dominion over and *indiscriminate* possession of created things and the products of human industry, but rather in *subordinating* the possession, dominion, and use to man's divine likeness and to his vocation to immortality. This is the transcendent reality of the human being, a reality which is seen to be shared from the beginning by a couple, a man and a woman (cf. Gen. 1:27), and is therefore fundamentally social.⁵⁵

Categorically, from the papal teachings, wealth is created for the purpose of sharing and this way helps humanity move towards its eschatological destiny in God. Helen Alford analyzes the social component of wealth in the social teaching of the church as follows:

Some goods are more susceptible to being shared, or held in common, than are others. Examples of “naturally” shareable (or common) goods would be knowledge, justice, and clean air. Others are more “naturally” private, and we have to organize equitable structures of distribution for these to be fairly dispersed among members of the human community. The classic “particular” goods, as we could call these, are money and land, though we should not forget the tradition of “common land.” In the promotion of the common good, both common and particular goods have their role, but the latter, such as property and other assets, need to be directed toward the common good, first, through equitable distribution, and second, through proper use.⁵⁶

It is necessary to note that an over-emphasis on the common good seems somehow to endanger the right to private ownership as in communism. However, papal encyclicals uphold the right to private property as concomitant with the right to the common good. John XXIII affirms the right to private property.⁵⁷ Elsewhere he states “...the common good touches the whole man, the needs both of his body and of his soul,”⁵⁸ and further that “Individual citizens and intermediate groups are obliged to make their specific contributions to the common welfare.”⁵⁹ Private property enables individual persons to contribute to the common good.

The social dimension of wealth is evident in the sacred scriptures which are the foundations of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Robert Kennedy traces the history and understanding of wealth creation in the history of Christianity. He explores how sacred scriptures, Old and New Testament, were used and understood in the work of the church fathers. The church fathers viewed wealth as a gift from God: “Since God loves and desires the salvation of all men, and since the goods that He has given to mankind are unevenly distributed, it follows that His will is that His gifts should be shared by individuals so that no one lacks the basic material requirements for a decent human life.”⁶⁰ In addition, “Early Christian bishops frequently exhorted their congregation in the strongest terms to remedy that situation by sharing what they had.”⁶¹ Examples of these are Clement of Alexandria who argued whatever one owns, owns it for the sake of his brothers. John Chrysostom maintained that “the possession of great wealth was not only founded upon robbery but also consisted in robbery if the wealthy did not share their abundance with the poor.”⁶² The patristic argument is based on the view that all the goods of the earth belong to all people but not to a select few. Hence, wealth is created for the common good. It is to be produced and shared by all people.

Furthermore, the globalization of the world economy in our contemporary society creates innumerable challenges especially in equitable distribution of wealth. This was recently noted by Pope Benedict XVI in the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. The pope noted that local governments have the responsibility to ensure all participate in sharing wealth. However, he notes this is complicated by the economy being global and not under the purview of the local government.⁶³ Whether in national or global economy, wealth creation is coupled with the right to a just wage.

The common good as the right to a just wage

The achievement of the common good presumes the possibility of an equitable distribution of wealth. Without excluding anyone, wealth distribution also goes with merit where people have a right to the fruit of their labor. The history of the Catholic social teaching is filled with questions of how to ensure equitable distribution of wealth as well as ensuring the protection and proper use of private property.

The very purpose of wealth creation is its distribution and this requires efficient and just systems in any society. One of the best ways to ensure wealth distribution is through just wages and ownership.⁶⁴ The basic right of workers is to share in the produce of their labor and this generally takes place through a just living wage and other benefits such as those catering for healthcare and retirement. On worker compensation through wages, Pius XI argued it should be made in such a way that common good is protected: “To lower or raise wages unduly, with a view to private profit, and with no consideration for the common good, is contrary to social justice.”⁶⁵

Further, free market in a society provides a possibility for extensive wealth distribution. However, as it is in some societies today, free markets can also ensure wealth concentration in the hands of a few people. On wealth distribution, Alford notes,

Widely spread and equitable distribution of wealth can promote competition and participation, tending to increase levels of economic activity, and this can lead, if the activity in question respects the environment and its output is used properly, to greater possibilities for human flourishing.⁶⁶

A just wage can be described as equal pay for equal work.⁶⁷ A wage seems also to call for a proper valuation of work. It is imperative for the workers’ wages to include a consideration of the cost of daily living which ensures good living standards. A just wage implies one is not underpaid or overpaid. In contemporary economic systems, rights and justice are also to be tempered by charity.

Conclusion

The concept of the common good is an inclusive way the church applies the gospel to issues affecting all people in various historical and social circumstances. Through the promotion of the common good, the church speaks to all people. It is important to reiterate the inclusion of human rights in the social encyclicals' advocacy for the common good. The church reference to human rights and the common good provides avenues to overcome sectarianism. People of all backgrounds, religious or not, join hands in working for human flourishing and making our world a better place. The concern for the common good or human rights provides the church with a way of being in a polycentric world. An acknowledgement of the other as a human person helps in the realization of shared goods and rights.

Notes:

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University, 1998).

² Michael Novak, *Free Persons and the Common Good* (New York: Madison Books, 1989), 22. Cf. David Bostock, *Aristotle's Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8-15; Also see Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica: The Moral Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, Revised Edition (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 12-34.

³ St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Contra Gentiles," in *An Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: The Modern Library College Editions, 1948), Chapter II.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, Chapter XVII.

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, Chapter XVII.

⁶ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1946), 17-18.

⁷ Jacques Maritain, 22. For further elaboration on Thomas Aquinas' understanding of the human person, see Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 119-126.

⁸ Novak, 30.

⁹ Novak, 31.

¹⁰ Novak, 31.

¹¹ Novak, 11.

¹² Novak, 12.

¹³ "Gaudium et Spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (GS), in *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Austin P. Flannery, O.P. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1975), no. 26.

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, "Populorum Progressio: On the Development of Peoples," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, ed. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), no. 43.

¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Rome, 2009), no. 38.

¹⁶ Pope Paul VI, "Octogesima Adveniens: A Call to Action on the Eightieth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 21.

¹⁷ Pope Paul VI, no. 46.

¹⁸ Cf. Patrick Loobuyck, "Intrinsic and Equal Human Worth in a Secular Worldview. Fictionalism in Human Rights Discourse," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 3 Issue 9 (Winter 2004), http://www.jsri.ro/old/html%20version/index/no_9/patrickloobuyck-articol.htm.

¹⁹ Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1946), 49.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, 49.

²¹ Jacques Maritain, 49.

²² Pope Leo XIII, "Rerum Novarum: The Condition of Labor," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 3.

²³ Pope Leo XIII, no. 14.

²⁴ Pope John Paul II, "Centesimus Annus: On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (1991)," *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 13.

²⁵ Pope John XXIII, "Pacem in Terris: Peace on Earth (1963)," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 9.

²⁶ Pope John Paul II, "Laborem Exercens: On Human Work (1981)," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 1.

²⁷ Pope John Paul II, no. 4.

²⁸ Pope Leo XIII, no. 5.

²⁹ Pope Leo XIII, no. 8. cf. St. Thomas Aquinas argues the right to private property is coupled with an understanding of the common ownership of all things in their use [St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae II, Question 66, Article 2," in St. Thomas Aquinas: On Law, Morality, and Politics, ed. William P. Baumgarth and Richard J. Regan, S.J. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), 177-179].

³⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa Theologiae I-II, Question 91, Article 2," in *An Introduction to St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: The Modern Library College Editions, 1948), 617-619.

³¹ Pope John XXIII, "Pacem in Terris," no. 10.

³² Pope Leo XIII, no. 13.

³³ "Ecumenical Collaboration at the Regional, National and Local Levels, 22 February, 1975," in *Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents*, Volume 2, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Bangalore, India: St. Paul Publications, 1982), 165.

³⁴ Paul VI, "Evangelii Nuntiandi: Evangelization in the Modern World (1975)," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 9.

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, "Centesimus Annus," no. 25.

³⁶ Pope John XXIII, "Pacem in Terris," no. 1.

³⁷ For example, Article 19 of the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions regardless of frontiers." See the website: <http://www.un.org/overview/rights.html#a19>.

³⁸ Pope Pius XI, "Quadragesimo Anno: After Forty Years (1931)," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 25.

³⁹ Pope John XXIII, "Mater et Magistra: Christianity and Social Progress (1961)," in *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 61.

⁴⁰ Pope John XXIII, “*Pacem in Terris*,” no. 12.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, “*Centisimus annus*,” no. 22.

⁴² Pope Benedict XVI,

http://vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spec_20080418_un-visit_en.html. Accessed June 10th, 2008.

⁴³ Ernest L. Fortin, *Human Rights, Virtue, and the Common Good: Untimely Meditations on Religion and Politics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), 23.

⁴⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, “*Summa Theologiae* I-II, Question 96, Article 3,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae: The Treatise on Law*, ed. R.J. Henle, S.J. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 320. Cf. John Finnis, “Public Good: The Specifically Political Common Good in Aquinas,” in *Thomas Aquinas*, ed. John Inglis, International Library of Essays in the History of Social and Political Thought (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006), 67.

⁴⁵ Pope John XXIII, “*Mater et Magistra*,” no. 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 65.

⁴⁷ GS, no. 26.

⁴⁸ Pope Pius XI, “*Quadragesimo Anno*,” no. 86.

⁴⁹ Pope John XXIII, “*Pacem in Terris*,” no. 19.

⁵⁰ Neil Betten, *Catholic Activism and the Industrial Worker* (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1976), 68-69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵² St. Thomas Aquinas, “*Summa Theologiae* II-II, Question 57, Article 1,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas: On Law, Morality, and Politics*, 136-138.

⁵³ Pope John XXIII, “*Mater et Magistra*,” no. 83.

⁵⁴ Pope John Paul II, “*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concern* (1987),” *Catholic Social Thought Documentary Heritage*, no. 42.

⁵⁵ Pope John Paul II, no. 29.

⁵⁶ Helen Alford, O.P., “Equitable Global Wealth Distribution: A Global Public Good and a Building Block for the Global Common Good,” in *Rediscovering Abundance: Interdisciplinary Essays on Wealth, Income, and Their Distribution in the Catholic Social Tradition*, ed. Helen Alford, O.P. et al. (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 249.

⁵⁷ See Pope John XXIII, “*Mater et Magistra*,” nos. 109-112.

⁵⁸ Pope John XXIII, “*Pacem in Terris*,” no. 57.

⁵⁹ Pope John XXIII, no. 53.

⁶⁰ Robert G. Kennedy, “Wealth Creation within the Catholic Social Tradition,” in *Rediscovering Abundance*, 65.

⁶¹ Robert G. Kennedy, 65.

⁶² Robert G. Kennedy, 66-67.

⁶³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 37.

⁶⁴ Michael J. Naughton & Robert L. Wahlstedt, “Implementing Just Wages and Ownership: A Dialogue,” in *Rediscovering Abundance*, 299.

⁶⁵ Pope Pius XI, no. 74.

⁶⁶ Alford, 237-238.

⁶⁷ For example, see the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 23 (www.un.org/overview/rights). Article 23 declares the right to work for every person and equal pay for equal work.

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