

## In esclusiva/In exclusive

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### The meaning of “the common good”<sup>1</sup>

#### 1. The “common good”: a value that is no longer obvious

It would be completely unrealistic to think that the mere recourse to the category of “common good” could serve as a reference point for the building of social life today. One might think of the fact that this theoretical category is characteristic of a “substantive ethics”, a kind of ethics that conveys, therefore, a certain conception of the human good. Substantive ethics cannot form the base of pluralistic societies such as the current ones.

In fact, the meaning of the category “common good” is extremely problematic in today’s pluralistic social context, which, following Maritain’s example, we could call *babélisme*: “The voice that each person spouts is nothing but pure noise for his traveling companions”<sup>2</sup>. In this sense, we could say that we are experiencing a crisis of communication. We are unable to reach a universal conception of man to use as a guideline for communal understanding. In the absence of this code, plurality becomes a problem, so much so that the rise and acceleration of migration flows (the process of the *mestizaje* of civilizations) have definitively changed the framework of the world. We “different” people find ourselves – like it or not – having to plan our cohabitation, no longer able to rely on the great stories of the past, on those powerful narratives that immediately suggested the coordinates of the common good.

It seems that, today, it is no longer possible credibly to tell the truth about the human experience. We are now living in the, more or less explicit, belief that human reason is a weak tool, unable to complete the task of understanding reality and unable to establish values that everyone can share.

Given this atmosphere surrounding us, we can understand how difficult communication has become between people and their associated entities with such diverse and conflicting conceptions of the world. It is no coincidence that democracies today are largely in crisis.

1 The essay is the first English version of the *lectio magistralis*: “Strategie e strumenti per diffondere il concetto di *bene comune*”, Fondazione Cariplo – Fondazione pubblicità e progresso, Milan, April 26, 2012. English translation by Maria Bond.

2 J. Maritain, *La voie de la paix*, in Id., *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. IX (1947-1951), Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, Editions Saint Paul, Paris 1990, pp. 143-164.

Must we resign ourselves to this state of affairs or could it be possible to find ways of recovering the real value of the “common good” for the building of a society that makes the “good life” possible?

The difficulty in communicating at this essential level of civilian life must be considered a serious symptom, not to be underestimated if we wish to defend the political space of democratic cohabitation. Habermas has always been particularly attentive to this symptom, using it as a gauge: “[...] the health of a democracy can be gauged from the pulse of its public political arena”<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. The common good and communication<sup>4</sup>

For such a recovery, it is essential to start from what we might call elementary, integral experience, common to men of all eras<sup>5</sup>. This experience speaks a language that is like a perennial spring. Nothing and no one can extinguish it. Through the large and universal words of life and death, love, justice and peace, the underground river of the *unasked question* suddenly resurfaces: “And what am I?”<sup>6</sup>; “In the end, who will assure me?”<sup>7</sup>. Thus, the *self* and the *other* return to the fore, in the unequalled dual unity of the individual and the community, which characterizes man as a creature.

At the level of interpersonal relationships, which have an important place in human society, communication recognizes the uniqueness of each individual man and, in the majority of men, succeeds in asserting the personal and transcendent factor that jealously guards his absolute dignity<sup>8</sup>. However, it is not possible to stop at this level of the problem. In fact, a *third party* always appears, and it is necessary to establish an order (institutions, politics, government) among the three (society),

3 J. Habermas, *Zwischen Naturalism und Religion*, Suhrkam Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 2005; English translation by C. Cronin, *Between naturalism and religion. Philosophical essays*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2008, p. 22.

4 On the “comon good”, cf.: M. Simone, *Il bene comune oggi. Un impegno che viene da lontano. Atti della 45° Settimana Sociale dei Cattolici Italiani*, EDB, Bologna 2008; G. Quinzi – U. Montisci – M. Toso, *Alla ricerca del bene comune. Prospettive teoretiche e implicazioni pedagogiche per una nuova solidarietà*, LAS, Roma 2008; Comitato Scientifico e Organizzatore delle Settimane Sociali dei Cattolici Italiani, *Bene comune e dottrina sociale della Chiesa. Dal Vaticano II a Benedetto XII*, EDB, Bologna 2007.

5 A. Scola, *L'esperienza elementare. La vena profonda del magistero di Giovanni Paolo II*, Marietti 1820, Genova 2003.

6 G. Leopardi, *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia*, line 89; original Italian version: “Ed io che sono?”.

7 J.-L. Marion, *Le phénomène érotique*, Grasset, Paris 2003, pp. 37-48.

8 E. Lévinas alluding to the rabbinic tradition, says: «God is absolutely extraordinary. To mint money, states resort to a stamp. With a single stamp, they make many coins that all look alike. God succeeds, imposing His image with a stamp, in creating a multiplicity of dissimilarities: selves, unique in their genus». *Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other*, English translation by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Columbia University Press, New York 1998, pp. 205-206.

to prevent the possibility that absolute gratuity in the I-You relationship could become injustice with respect to the third party: “The *I*, precisely as responsible for the other and the third, cannot remain indifferent to their interactions, and in the charity for the one, cannot withdraw its love from the other. (...) This is the hour of inevitable justice – required, however, by charity itself”<sup>9</sup>.

It is therefore important to emphasize that the appearance of the *third* is a constitutive element of human experience. It is enough to think of a child’s relationship with his father in relation to his relationship with his mother. The father is the first to raise the issue of the *third*. The freedom of the child, who comes into contact with his identity first in the relationship with his mother, is painfully conducted, by the father’s presence, to that healthy exchange with reality that leads him to avoid autistic closure. Even at this elementary level, the presence of the *third* introduces, so to speak, the principle of reality. The relationships in the family (father, mother, child) is, in a nutshell, the event of *communitas*, that is, of society, and, in this way, allows us to become aware of the *original* social nature of man.

At this point, it is possible, starting from the consideration of this experience common to every man, to affirm that a relationship is a shared good that, if taken on consciously, can be recognized as the common good, *the good of being together* inside of today’s pluralistic societies. In fact, human identity documents that a person is essentially a *self-in-relation*. The primary *social good* of *being together*, which is expressed in relationships and, therefore, in *communication*, must be chosen by all those who live in civil society as a *political good*<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. For a reformulation of “the common good”

An additional step must be proposed here. Which concrete expressions possess this practical common good of *being together*? Important expressions are tied to “supportive practices”. In fact, for it to make sense to speak of supportive practices – volunteering, non-profit organizations – we must recognize the primal common social good of being together. Practicing *solidarity* expresses the sharing both of goods and of social burdens. On the other hand, in order to enjoy this common good in a manner that is not detrimental to human dignity, we cannot mortify (paternalistically) the activities of social actors. *Subsidiarity* serves precisely this purpose: to express initiative (whether single or collective), which is equally important and not reducible to whole of society itself.

9 Ibid., p. 219.

10 F. Botturi, *La ricchezza del bene comune*, Quaderno n. 29, Associazione per lo Sviluppo degli Studi di Banca e Borsa – Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano 2008, pp. 15-33, here p. 15. Also, one can see useful ideas on the history of the concept of the “common good” in the contributions of José Luis Brey Blanco, Henri Hude and Alain Mattheeuws in: G. Richi Alberti, *Ripensare il bene comune*, Uomo Polis Economia 5, Marcianum Press, Venezia 2009.

To express this complex picture, Benedict XVI referred to what we could call a real architectural sketch of social life. In fact, the Pope says: «We can initially sketch the interconnections between these four principles [human dignity, common good, solidarity and subsidiarity] by placing the dignity of the person at the intersection of two axes: one horizontal, representing “solidarity” and “subsidiarity”, and one vertical, representing the “common good”»<sup>11</sup>.

In this “sketch”, therefore, there are two key elements that we need to discuss more fully if we wish to rethink carefully the meaning of the common good and the practices of solidarity that express it:

(a) On the horizontal axis, it is not possible to respect human dignity without supportive care to those in need, but authentic solidarity is not possible without guaranteeing people a basic freedom of initiative. In this way, if subsidiarity corresponds to the dimensions of the irreducible singularity of the person as a protagonist, and not as an object of society, solidarity corresponds to the dimensions of social belonging, a double dimension, the expression and respect of which is essential for a society that upholds the dignity of every human person.

(b) On the vertical axis, the common good is the good shared in the same section of society, which, as a human good is not automatically implemented but must be wished for and practically pursued (society is *maxime opus rationis*). It is the foundation of society, as a human good whose value gives substance to and then exceeds the common good. For this reason, the common good, when fully understood, does not end with the history of society, but is open to the common good of people as such. In this sense, it is not possible to fully respect human dignity without hinting at the *eschatological* fulfillment of the person and of all people.

What Maritain had already indicated in 1947 becomes comprehensible. There is a common good – as Saint Thomas taught – that is worth more than the good of the individual subsidiaries, but this common good, which Maritain calls “the immanent common good”, is worth less (it is in fact “infravalent”) than that good towards which the human community is ultimately ordered and which, according to Maritain (like Thomas) is the “uncreated Common Good of the three divine Persons”<sup>12</sup>. In this way, we understand why Benedict XVI affirms that true solidarity fulfills itself when it becomes charity, and that true subsidiarity fulfills itself when it leaves room for love. This is where, in charity and love, God “happens” as an unprecedented response to the promise inscribed in the immanent common good<sup>13</sup>.

This architectural sketch becomes an essential reference point for all those contemporary dynamics that point to humanly sustainable hypotheses of a

11 Benedict XVI, Speech at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, May 3, 2008, in M. S. Archer – P. Donati (eds.), *Pursuing the common good: how solidarity and subsidiarity can work together*, The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, Vatican City 2008, p. 16.

12 J. Maritain, *La personne et le bien commun*, in Id., *OEuvres complètes*, vol. IX (1947-1951), Editions Universitaires Fribour Suisse, Editions Saint Paul, Paris 1990, pp. 167-237; here: p. 178.

13 Archer – Donati, p. 16.

good life. In particular, the two coordinates (horizontal and vertical) outline a framework that seems to become indispensable for interpreting social space in a truly democratic manner:

(a) The horizontal axis (subsidiarity - solidarity) is indeed compatible only with a proper evaluation of the typical protagonists in *civil society*. The most acute contemporary sociological interpretations are moving toward the idea that there is a capital of solidarity that only actors in the civil society are able to generate and that no democratic state can do without. Hence the emphasis placed firmly on institutional arrangements capable of ensuring, through the principle of subsidiarity, freedom and the civil forms of being together<sup>14</sup>;

b) The vertical axis (immanent common good – uncreated common good) requires, instead, that liberty that is increasingly, and by more and more people, recognized as an indispensable: *religious freedom*<sup>15</sup>. In fact, many have come to recognize that the socio-political dimension cannot be the only side of the human person<sup>16</sup>.

This question comes to the forefront once again: how might one propose this emerging architectural sketch from Catholic social teaching in a pluralistic society?

#### 4. A “common practical thought” in favor of “the common good”

To answer, I refer to a clever proposal by Maritain, in his speech to UNESCO, 1947 (*La voie de la paix*).

On that occasion, Maritain said that, given the irreducible plurality of social actors, the political sphere must aim to converge towards a “practical common thought”, that is, a “set of beliefs aimed toward action”<sup>17</sup>. This implies accepting the inevitable divergence of world views, while betting on the possibility of concretely being understood. This does not mean giving up the plan of theoretical justification for the practical, which would be a nihilist choice. Instead, it means recognizing that the political realm does not need a total consensus (which is

14 P. Donati – M. Archer (dir.), *Riflessività, modernizzazione e società civile*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2010; J.-L. Laville – P. Glemain (dir.), *L'économie sociale aux prises avec la gestion*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 2010; J. Braun – G.S. Mccall (dir.), *Dilemmas in nation-building*, Blackwell for UNESCO, Oxford 2009; C. Ruzza – V. Della Sala (dir.), *Governance and civil society in the European Union*, vol. 1. *Normative perspectives*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK; New York, NY (Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave) 2007; M. Magatti, *Il potere istituzionale della società civile*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2005.

15 B. Duarte, *Manifestar sa religión, direitos et limites*, Harmattan, Paris 2011; J.A. Araña, *Libertà religiosa e reciprocità*, Giuffrè, Milano 2009.

16 As John Paul II eloquently stated, the recognition of religious freedom is fundamentally important because “it is an implicit recognition of the existence of an order which transcends the political dimension of existence” (*Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, 1989). See also, The Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity. The Case of Religious Freedom*, XVII Plenary Session, 29 April-3 May 2011, Vatican City 2011.

17 J. Maritain, *La voie de la paix*, p. 158.

very unlikely) on a substantive vision of life in order to be healthy. Accepting this limitation, one can achieve the essential common good that Maritain indicated, when he spoke of human society as “*corps de communications sociales*”. As was said earlier, the common good, according to the Christian vision, embraces the whole life of man, and not only the historical part, but at the level of civil cohabitation, this does not have to be fully shared by other parties. Instead, the breadth of this vision supports the commitment to contributing to the practical good of being together by formulating proposals on all the anthropological, social and economic aspects of social life.

In at least two areas, in my opinion, this vision can be implemented with great benefit for civil society. I limit myself to a few comments.

The first refers to what I have elsewhere called *new secularism*<sup>18</sup>. The vision that we have briefly sketched here asks us to abandon secularist and merely oppositional meanings of *secularism*. If the objective of politics is to achieve a common practical thought, religious citizens must also be able to have their say. This means that the political sphere has to be the area where all the “different people” have an opportunity to contribute responsibly to the common good of the relationship-communication, attempting to explain what they think is valuable in a language that is accessible to all. One might then be rightly puzzled by the alleged secularity of political choices that aim to eliminate any reference to religion in the public space. What is achieved here, in fact, is not a common practical thought, but a lowest common denominator, according to which cultural diversity undergoes a de facto privatization that makes it abstract<sup>19</sup>. The only truly public, and therefore healthily secular, space is the one that bets on the freedom of citizens, both believers and non-believers, allowing them to get involved through a “mutual narration”, understood as a communal work to tell the meaning of their experience, according to a logic – as taught by Ricoeur – of mutual, albeit tiring, recognition<sup>20</sup>. This leads us to understanding another important element: taking up the commitment to *translate* one’s vision of the world into a language understood even by those who do not agree should not be a task solely for religious citizens, but must be understood – as Habermas rightly points out – as “a [common] collaborative effort”<sup>21</sup>.

The second theme refers, in some respects, to the title of today’s conference. The events of the Third Sector, in the current juncture of the economic and financial

18 A. Scola, *Una nuova laicità. Temi per una società plurale*, Marsilio, Venezia 2007.

19 F. Botturi, *Secolarizzazione e laicità*, in P. Donati, *Laicità: la ricerca dell’universale nelle differenze*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2008, pp. 295-337; cf. il *Rapporto sulla laicità. Il testo della Commissione Stasi*, preface by S. Romano and afterward by E. Bianchi, Scheiwiller, Milano 2004, on which the French law of public religious behaviour is modeled. Cfr. also M. Gauchet, *La religion dans la démocratie, Parcours de la laïcité*, Gallimard, Paris 1998 and M. Troper, *French Secularism or Laïcité*, «Cardoso Law Review», 21 (2000), pp. 1267-1284.

20 P. Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance*, Editions Stock, collections “Les Essais”, Paris 2004.

21 See J. Habermas, *Between naturalism and religion. Philosophical essays*, cit.

crisis, clearly reveal for how long only pragmatic adjustments have been adopted, and the core of the legal system, along with the myopia that characterizes it, have not yet been touched.

To confine ourselves to the present time, we must recognize that an impoverished society cannot long function as a lightning rod for a poor and inefficient government. If a pervasive statist response is not feasible for financial reasons, in addition to not being especially attractive in itself, the return to a minimalist liberalism, in which the government is simply stripped of its duties because it is not able to pursue them on its own, would not open up space for civil society<sup>22</sup>. This liberalism would simply widen the gap between those who are in need and those who succeed in coping with the crisis on their own.

It should also be considered that a serious economic and employment crisis, if not governed, has very serious social implications for societies like ours. Let us make an example. The crisis in the labor market should theoretically require immigrants to return, in the arc of a few months, to their homelands. However, the situations from which many of them have escaped – I am thinking mainly of African countries – are plagued with endemic political instability, if not civil wars or extreme famines. All of this makes it more likely that immigrants will decide to stay in their host country illegally, with the problems that this causes.

## 5. Good relations and the common good

The brief notations that I have proposed about the common good, showing the need for an articulated rethinking of this necessary category, can be found in the *communication* and practical character that encourages the growth rate of good relationships. These relationships are the basis for forming an *ethos*, an essential factor for the overall reorganization of our society in this troubled phase of transition.

22 What has happened in some Italian regions, whose administrations have decreased – sometimes dramatically – funding to private schools, is significant. By doing this, the weight of education lies more heavily on families. If the latter, pressed by the crisis, must refrain from enrolling their children in private schools and prefer state schools, this produces an increase in the financial burden for public authorities. The cuts to private schools do not become burdens on the state only as long as families are able to provide their children a private education. Basically, in these cases, public bodies take advantage of the propensity of households to make sacrifices to ensure the best possible education for their children in order to decrease the funding for private schools.