

GOVERNMENT AND "THE COMMON GOOD"

by David Rippe

An oft repeated theme in papal encyclicals, bishops' statements and prayer intentions offered at Mass is the hope that governments will see to "the common good." Objectively put, "the common good" refers to what is best for everyone overall - social class, race, culture and economic condition notwithstanding. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' website defines the common good as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups, and their individual members, relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment."

Obviously, such a vague concept is open to a lot of wiggle room in characterization and is often used to promote special interests rather than those of the whole. But usually, the suggestion implied in references to the common good is that special emphasis be given to the material poor. For some, providing for the common good might summon such images as a benevolent federal agency passing out food in a town square. High-rise housing developments, mass transportation or public recreation centers may symbolize the common good for others, along with infrastructure projects like highways, parks, bridges and dams.

Generally, the concept of common good brings to mind mild, peaceful, uncontroversial works that make life more pleasant for all, especially those who have the least. Who could argue about taking care of the common good?

Yet, if it is to truly serve the common good, a government - our constitutional government, specifically - must perform certain basic functions that are neither always easy nor nonviolent, and also often contentious. Among the most vital of these is to protect human life and freedom within the homeland from dangerous enemies both inside and outside our borders. In serving the common good, our government must maintain an adequate police and military presence, trained, equipped and ready. And since our enemies continually seek new ways to destroy us, rich and poor alike, our government must protect our sovereign borders from illegal foreign incursion. Despite objections from dissenters, our government must also maintain an arsenal of state-of-the-art weaponry and strategic defense mechanisms sufficient to deter all aggressors and reinforced with the clear and unwavering resolve to use them, if necessary.

Serving the common good requires that government respect and legally protect the institution of marriage between a man and a woman as the procreative, nurturing and formational building block of civilization. Government actions that weaken or

attempt to redefine marriage and the traditional family harm the common good - and the poor suffer most. Neither is the common good served when a government allows innocent lives to be terminated, whether in the womb, the hospital or the nursing home.

In providing for the common good, our government must minister within the rule of law, dispensing fair but appropriate retributive justice to lawbreakers and protecting the rights of their victims. This includes retaining the "death penalty" option, which the Church allows for in cases of extreme gravity, because ... "Preserving the common good of society requires rendering the aggressor unable to inflict harm." (CCC 2266, edition #1)

To provide for the common good, our government must guard and defend the rights of private property owners. It must allow for a marketplace where people can freely exchange goods and services and the fruits of their labors, and where wealth can be generated rather than merely redistributed. Protecting and expanding individual freedoms promotes the common good.

For the common good to be served, the citizens of a country must be unified in a most basic way. Nothing brings people together more effectively than a shared language. Government does the common good a disservice by supporting a polyglot Babel, balkanizing peoples through political correctness and multilingual cultural pandering. For people to come together under a flag, a system and a culture, a common language is essential. English, the language of our founding documents, contains the terms and ideas specific to the formation of our country. Its common usage, in the long run, benefits all who immigrate to America by inserting them into the mainstream of society, unifying them with native citizens to form associations, and reducing misunderstanding and distrust.

Finally, insofar as a quest for religious freedom helped lay the foundation for America and its fundamental laws, the common good cannot be served unless our government respects the role of Judeo-Christian faith. To serve the common good, government must never overstep its bounds and intrude on the beliefs and faith practices that serve as the basis of our constitution and laws. In respecting faith, government must be a supporter of charity but not the source of charity. A multigenerational welfare state overseen by an intrusive and paternalistic government makes people into dependent wards, robbing them of their initiative and wasting their unique gifts and skills.

In other words, if it is to serve the common good, and especially the poor, our government must not impose the common good; it must enable it. The government must not stifle the citizenry, punish initiative or promote fear and dependence

among the people, but instead, provide them with an environment where they can become fully human and free to use their God-given talents to bring out the best in each other.

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