

A Dec. 7 panel sponsored by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life addressed the role of the common good in democracy. Participants, clockwise from top left, were John Carr (moderator), Tricia Bruce, Vincent Rougeau, U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur and Matthew Dowd. (Screengrab/Georgetown University)

by Melissa Cedillo

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Defining the common good is crucial to saving America's democracy, said speakers at a Dec. 7 panel sponsored by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life.

"I believe our democracy is at real risk, but it's also at a pivot point," Vincent Rougeau, the first lay and Black president of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts said at the online event "Whatever Happened to the Common Good? Divided by Covid, Torn Apart by Politics, Fractured by Faith."

"And part of this is a reassessment of who we are and if we're going to talk about the common good, we're going to have to honestly assess why we're having this moment in our history where there is so much division and deception," he said.

Rougeau and the other panelists argued that to find the common good, the common good must first be defined. For Catholics, this includes noting how power and inequality are at play in a society.

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"Sharpening our understanding of what is common and what is good promises a more radical and honest inclusivity that can actually move us closer to the laudable goals to which both religion and politics aspire," said Tricia Bruce, a sociologist and author of the forthcoming *Our Lives: What Americans Really Think About Abortion.*

Bruce also emphasized that Catholics are not immune to the country's political division.

"Organizationally, we see how parishes can exacerbate some of the divisions that already exist among Catholics and neighborhoods. We know that our neighborhoods are still very segregated in terms of race, and economics," she said.

"People can be less likely to want to date or marry someone from another political party than they are to date and marry someone from their own religion," she said, referring to a 2014 Pew Research Center poll.

The panelists also alluded to what they believe has contributed to the current polarization in the United States.

U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur, a Democrat from Ohio and the longest-serving woman in Congress, said she believes that corporations are to blame, in part, for the breakdown of a shared common ground.

"In prior generations, companies assumed the burden of both pensions and health care benefits," Kaptur said.

"We have lived through a very rapacious period. I call it false gods, where in fact, companies dumped their workers and the government of the United States has had to pick up the casualties and we still are," she said.

"So there's reform due on the corporate front, in my opinion," she added.

In addition to corporate money, structural issues such as racism and individualism were mentioned as contributing to a lack of concern for the common good.

Panelists agreed that fighting against individualism and leaning into practicing sacrifice are key.

"The public receives messages from many leaders, economically, financially and politically, that they can have everything without a sacrifice," said Matthew Dowd, a chief strategist for the 2004 Bush campaign and an ABC News political analyst.

Dowd believes that a public conversation about sacrifice, including from politicians, would benefit the common good.

"One of the truths to power is telling people they can't have things without a sacrifice," Dowd added.

In response to audience questions about how to build the common good, Rougeau of Holy Cross replied with more questions.

"Well, I think we have to begin with a basic question: Do we want to live together in a democracy that is healthy and thriving, and that values all of its members?" he asked.

"Do we value what has been handed down to us? With lots of stress and struggle?" he continued.

Moderator John Carr, co-director of Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social and Public Life, began the panel by recalling Pope Francis' recent trip to Athens, Greece.

"Four days ago in Athens, literally the birthplace of democracy, Pope Francis warned we are witnessing a retreat from democracy, a skepticism about democracy," Carr said.

"The remedy is good politics. For politics is and ought to be in practice a good thing. The art of the common good. So that the good can be truly shared," he said, echoing Francis' words.