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'Effective love' and 'practical charity' secure the common good

by Fred Kammer



(Margaret Scott)

VIEWPOINT

Four years ago, a friend told me that he was voting for candidate so-and-so for president because it would be best for the business in which he worked. My friend is a good man, but in this case he had it wrong. The measure of a candidate can't be my business, my taxes, my state, or even my family. The ultimate measure for a voter is not any personal interest, but the ancient standard of the common good. Born out of Greek and Roman philosophy, the common good described the goal of political life, the good of the city (the *pólis*), and the task entrusted to civic leaders.

After centuries of Christian scholarship and debate, we arrive at the definition in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, taken from Vatican II, and ultimately from Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (1961):

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 fulfillment more fully and more easily."

The catechism notes three essential elements of the common good: respect for the individual, the social well-being and development of the group, and peace that results from the stability of a just society. Candidates then must be evaluated in terms of government's primary responsibility -- the common good.

To better understand the common good, it might help then to look at the most recent authoritative church statement on the subject -- from Pope Benedict XVI in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. He begins with the bare concept:

Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of "all of us," made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it.

Here Benedict makes the essential link between individuals, groups and the larger society that lies at the heart of the common good. As Pope John Paul II had explained in discussing solidarity, "We are all really responsible for all." Benedict emphasized, "To desire the *common good* and strive towards it is *a requirement of justice and charity*" (emphasis in original). These two foundational virtues lead us to desire the good of each person in the context of the good of all.

Grappling with the real common good plunges us into what Benedict calls "that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally, making it the *pólis*, or "city." This means, as the U.S. Catholic bishops indicated in their 2011 pastoral "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," that we have to assess our candidates in terms of a variety of complex issues with priorities focused on protecting human life, promoting marriage and family, reforming immigration, overcoming poverty, providing health care, opposing bigotry, protecting the environment and pursuing peace.

But issues are not enough. Benedict is concerned about "effective love" and "practical charity" to secure the common good:

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The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*.

The discerning voter, then, has to assess whether candidates not only say the right thing, but have the capacity and the commitment to "walk the walk" of the common good. As the bishops put it, we are to measure "a candidate's commitments, character, integrity, and ability to influence a given issue." This is all the more important in a decades-old political context where one party has repeatedly opposed abortion, but done too little about it, and the other pledges help to the poor and needy in the midst of continuing and escalating economic inequality.

For voters of faith who wonder why they should take seriously their responsibility for the common good as citizens in an election year, Benedict connects that responsibility to the most fundamental Christian obligation -- our love of neighbor:

This is the institutional path -- we might also call it the political path -- of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*.

Lastly, while politicians debate the U.S. role in a world society, Benedict reminds us that our duty to the common good cannot fail to assume the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations.?

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