

## Politics, Church and the Common Good

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In an article published in the UK religious newspaper *Church Times* in 2015, the British academic and political thinker, Maurice Glasman, reflected upon the global financial crash of 2008. Suggesting that both ‘liberal economists’ and ‘state socialists’ could only understand the crisis as being ‘fundamentally about money’, with the solution being either to spend more or less of it, Glasman noted how the churches had sought to make a deeper analysis. While the ‘prevailing paradigms’ that governed our thinking about economics and politics had no capacity for recognising ‘sin’ as a contributing factor to the crisis, church leaders such as the Pope and Archbishop of Canterbury had ‘tried to insert the concept of the “good” into economic calculation’ – and in so doing had retrieved ‘some forgotten ideas, carried within the Church but rejected by secular ideologies, which turn out to have a great deal more rational force than invisible hands and spending targets.’<sup>1</sup>

By ‘forgotten ideas’ Glasman meant the core principles of Catholic Social Thought (CST), a collection of papal encyclicals spanning the last 125 years which constitute the authoritative voice of the Catholic Church on social issues. Drawing upon CST had enabled the pontiff and archbishop not only to challenge the narratives of the political Left and Right, to endorse neither state centralisation nor the centralisation of capital, but rather to highlight values such as human dignity, interdependence and care of creation. Importantly they had drawn attention to the need for markets to promote the wellbeing of all, the ‘common good’.

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Glasman, ‘After the bad and the ugly – good economics’, *Church Times*, 6 February 2015, 14.

The common good has enjoyed something of a revival in the wake of the financial crisis as commentators, both within the Church and beyond, have called for moral as well as economic reform to the banks and city institutions. Its potential to provoke a fresh conversation about the purpose of economic activity, and about how cynicism might be replaced by hope as a response to the crisis, was raised in a number of books, articles and conferences. Promoting the common good enabled the Church to do some good public theology, to bring to the public square not finely-honed theological principles or prescriptive, authoritative pronouncements, but a new model for doing politics and economics, a framework for engagement with others of goodwill to discern how markets might function for the benefit of all rather than the few. The Church rediscovered itself – as one of the pioneers of public theology, Duncan Forrester, argued in the 1980s that it should – ‘as a forum for moral discourse’, the ‘day of pre-packaged answers and “moral instruction” [being] long past.’<sup>2</sup>

For Lord Glasman, writing from a Jewish perspective, the Church’s commitment to the common good enabled it to make ‘its most significant political intervention for a hundred years’,<sup>3</sup> an opinion echoed by other observers of the Church. Commenting on Pope Benedict XVI’s 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, which explored the causes of the global collapse, *Guardian* columnist Jonathan Freedland noted that, while politicians had ‘been left looking flummoxed by the financial crisis’ it had ‘been left to the Pope to offer the most comprehensive critique of our devastated economic landscape’. Freedland also observed how the ‘lead voices’ seeking to change the conversation about economics in the wake of the crisis were religious ones, noting how one campaign group had delivered to a bailed-out bank the holy texts of Islam, Judaism and Christianity with a message that the banking system

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<sup>2</sup> Duncan B. Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Glasman, ‘After the bad and the ugly’, 14.

needed to pay attention to the wisdom contained in these ‘if it was once again to serve the common good’.<sup>4</sup>

## Origins

While the Catholic Church has done more than most Christian – and indeed religious – traditions to promote and nurture the common good, the concept did not originate with recent popes. Its evolution has been long and complex, drawing upon such diverse sources as Plato and Aristotle and the writings of early Christian leaders including John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo. The question whether the ‘good life’ is ‘social’ is answered strongly in the affirmative in Augustine’s *City of God*,<sup>5</sup> and in his writings John Chrysostom affirms, ‘This is the rule of most perfect Christianity, its most exact definition, its highest point, namely, the seeking of the common good... for nothing can so make a person an imitator of Christ as caring for his neighbours.’<sup>6</sup>

It was Thomas Aquinas, writing in the thirteenth century, who first gave the common good the shape it has today, with a succession of papal encyclicals from the late nineteenth century refining it further and giving it contemporary application. In synthesising the writings of Augustine and Aristotle, Aquinas considered how the good life might be attained, not merely by the *individual* in the pursuit of goals such as health, education and the necessities to sustain life, but in a *collective* sense, as all seek the attainment of such ends. For Aquinas it is the responsibility of the virtuous ruler to ensure that society *as a whole* enjoys such benefits, and that all are able to live together peaceably and in a spirit of mutual assistance. As Anna

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Angus Ritchie, ‘Journeying Out Together for the Common Good: Community Organising Across Denominations and Faiths’, *Crucible*, July-September 2014, 34-41 at 38-9.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Book XIX, chapter 5.

<sup>6</sup> Homily 25 on I Corinthians 11:1, cited in Jim Wallis, *On God’s Side: What Religion Forgets and Politics Hasn’t Learned About Serving the Common Good* (Oxford: Lion, 2013), p. 3.

Rowlands has commented, ‘In the Catholic social vision... [t]he beginning and end of politics... is the common good’,<sup>7</sup> a point echoed in official Catholic documents: ‘the common good is the reason that... political authority exists... To ensure [it], the government of each country has the specific duty to harmonize the different sectoral interests with the requirement of justice.’<sup>8</sup>

While the common good is widely considered a Christian doctrine, its roots in ancient Greek philosophy make clear that it does not necessarily require a ‘religious underpinning’ and will be actively promoted by secular writers and networks.<sup>9</sup>

### **Towards an understanding of the common good**

The common good, then, is not the greatest happiness of the greatest number, nor is it a concrete vision of some future ideal state, a ‘utopia’ toward which the committed strive to direct history: rather it is a way or mode of ‘doing politics’ that moves beyond the promotion of sectional, partisan concerns in the interest of securing the wellbeing of all. While it may be the duty of rulers to pursue the common good, as CST asserts, it is not a pre-conceived political programme or ideological vision to be imposed from above. Rather, pursuit of the common good involves the application of certain core principles in the search for political solutions – solutions which, by definition, will be unanticipated and outside of ideological categorization. Principles at the heart of the common good include human dignity, equality, interdependence, community, solidarity, participation, subsidiarity, reciprocity, care for creation and the

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<sup>7</sup> Anna Rowlands, ‘The Language of the Common Good’ in Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail, eds, *Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation* (London: SCM, 2015), pp. 3-15 at p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), #168-9, pp. 95-6.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jon E. Wilson, ‘The Common Good after the Death of God’ in Sagovsky and McGrail, eds, *Together for the Common Good*, pp. 79-90.

preferential option for the poor – many of which, like the common good itself, find particular expression within CST.

Indeed, it is to this corpus that one may usefully look for a working definition of the common good. Embracing some twenty encyclicals, statements and letters issued from the Vatican since Leo XIII's *Rerum novarum* in 1891, CST has been influential in shaping, not only Catholic and Christian thinking on social, economic and political issues, but, in the form of the principle of 'subsidiarity', the working of the European Union.<sup>10</sup> And at its heart is the common good, a principle which, as Catholic commentator Clifford Longley argues, should not be seen as one alongside the others, nor even the first in order of priority, but 'the overarching principle... which permeates all of them' and in the light of which the others 'have always to be read'.<sup>11</sup>

A succinct description of the common good is to be found in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Gaudium et spes*, issued at the close of the Second Vatican Council in December 1965. The common good, this document suggests, may be understood as 'the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.'<sup>12</sup> Thirty years later the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales observed, in a document issued prior to the UK General Election in 1997, that the concept implies 'that every individual, no matter how high or low, has a duty to share in promoting the welfare of the community as well as a right to benefit from that welfare.' Suggesting a close identity between the terms 'common' and 'all-inclusive', the bishops affirmed that

the common good cannot exclude or exempt any section of the population. If any section of the population is in fact excluded from participation in the life of the

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<sup>10</sup> Article 5 of the Treaty of Maastricht, signed 7 February 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Clifford Longley, 'Government and the common good' in Nick Spencer and Jonathan Chaplin, eds, *God and Government* (London: SPCK, 2009), pp. 108-33 at p. 160.

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, *Gaudium et spes*, 1965, #26.

community, even at a minimal level, then that is a contradiction of the concept of the common good and calls for rectification.<sup>13</sup>

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004, sheds further light on the concept: the common good, it states,

does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains ‘common’, because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness, with regard also to the future.<sup>14</sup>

References to the common good are not to be found exclusively in Catholic documents. The Church of England Prayer Book, for example, exhorts its users to beseech the Almighty to ‘give wisdom to all in authority; and direct this and every nation in the ways of justice and of peace; that we may honour one another, and seek the common good’, and a letter issued by the House of Bishops of the Church of England in 2015 spoke of the need for ‘a new kind of politics’ based on the ‘Christian obligation’ of ‘pursuing the common good’.<sup>15</sup> Statements issued by leaders of the mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches in New Zealand in 1993 and 2005 called for the common good to inform public policy and ‘the type of society we want to live in’.<sup>16</sup> Within Islam are found concepts which either equate with the common good or

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<sup>13</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching* (London, 1996) #70, p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium*, #164, p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> The House of Bishops, *Who is my neighbour?* (Church of England, 2015) #4,5, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Boston and Alan Cameron, eds, *Voices for Justice: Church, Law and State in New Zealand* (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1994), p. 15; ‘Towards a robust society: a statement from national church leaders’ (2005): [www.presbyterian.org.nz/speaking-out/resources-for-speaking-out/discussion-papers/towards-a-robust-society-a-statement-from-](http://www.presbyterian.org.nz/speaking-out/resources-for-speaking-out/discussion-papers/towards-a-robust-society-a-statement-from-) [accessed 20 February 2013].

suggest strategies for pursuing it, such as *maslaha*. ‘Most Muslims’, assert Salvatore and Eickelman, ‘share inherited conceptions of ideas of the common good’.<sup>17</sup>

A common good perspective views the relationship between the individual and society differently from the way it is understood within liberalism. If within a liberal framework society exists primarily to maximise the opportunity for each individual to realise his or her potential, the common good prevails when, in any given situation, the good of the individual is subordinated to the good of the wider community. The common good specifically challenges notions of well-being rooted in the *individual* maximisation of freedom and happiness, in suggestions that the good life can be enjoyed by a person irrespective of whether their neighbour does too. While liberalism equates liberty with the freedom of private citizens to do as they please so long as they do not violate the freedom of others, the common good is premised upon an understanding that human flourishing is not complete without the ‘social dimension’.

The common good is rooted in an assumption that we are essentially ‘interdependent’; its response to Cain’s rhetorical exclamation, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ (Gen. 4.9), would be a resounding ‘yes’, we do have a responsibility for each other. Within the Christian tradition the common good might be understood as an expression of the commandment ‘to love God with all one’s heart and one’s neighbour as oneself’, described by Jesus as the greatest and upon which ‘hang all the law and the prophets’ (Matt. 22.36-40; Mark 12:28-31; cf. Rom. 13.8-10). As Longley comments, ‘principles do not come any higher than that’, which is why one may find in Catholic teaching ‘striking statements that equate the common good with nothing less than God’s will on earth, for which Christians pray in the Lord’s Prayer.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman, eds, *Public Islam and the Common Good* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2004), p. xix; cited in Tehmina Kazi, ‘Social Action that Crosses Boundaries and Overcomes Barriers: A Muslim Perspective on the Common Good’ in Sagovsky and McGrail, eds, *Together for the Common Good*, pp. 107-119 at p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> Longley, ‘Government and the common good’, p. 160.

### **The Bible and the common good**

Support for a commitment to the common good may readily be found in Scripture. In some translations of the Bible the term itself appears – for example, the English Standard Version renders I Cor. 12:7, in which St Paul calls for public utterances inspired by the Spirit to be used for the benefit of all: ‘To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good’. St Paul’s employment of the human body in this chapter as a metaphor for a properly-functioning community encapsulates the essence of the common good: since each limb and organ has their particular function, with none able to claim superiority over the others, it is clear that ‘God has so composed the body...that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another’ (vv. 24-25, ESV). Elsewhere St Paul exhorts the community in Galatia to ‘work for the good of all’ (Gal 6:10, NRSV), a sentiment echoed in I Thess 5:15 where he writes ‘always seek to do good to one another and to all’ (NRSV). The writer of I Peter urges his readers to ‘serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received’ (4:10, NRSV). The account of the Jerusalem church in Acts 4:32-5 suggests that they prevented their members experiencing poverty by sharing their wealth according to need.

The teaching of Jesus himself also echoes themes we would recognise as consistent with the ‘common good’. In the parable of the workers in the vineyard – in which each takes home the same wage regardless of the number of hours worked – the concern of the employer appears to be that each person receives sufficient to provide the basic necessities for themselves and their families (Mt. 20:1-16); and the point about the parable of the farmer who proposed to pull down his barns to build bigger ones, so plentiful had been his harvest, is that he had lost sight

of the fact that he was producing ‘goods’, something of potential use and benefit to others (Lk 12:13-21).<sup>19</sup>

While some of the Pauline injunctions may be read as applying only to the ‘household of faith’, they do suggest that what we would today identify as ‘common good principles’ informed the practice of the earliest Christian communities. A concern for the good of the whole community is also evident in the covenantal laws and prophetic writings of the Old Testament, again if we acknowledge that references to ‘common’ in this context must be limited to that which was shared among the chosen people of God, the Israelites.

Two imperatives which inform many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures concern the need to prevent extreme inequality developing within communities, and the requirement that a community protect those of its members considered especially vulnerable, such as the ‘orphan, the widow and the alien’. Particularly noteworthy are the Jubilee or Sabbatical laws, with their concern to ensure that no member of a community is condemned permanently to a life of dependency on the goodwill of others: this is to be achieved through the institution of measures to enable, at regular intervals, the release of slaves, cancellation of debts, and return of land sold cheaply in a time of crisis to its original owner. Laws requiring harvesters to leave crops and fruit to be gleaned by ‘the poor and the alien’ were also expected to be obeyed (e.g. Lev. 19:9-10), and prophets such as Elijah, Nathan and Amos are found speaking out against rulers who take from the poor or pervert justice to benefit themselves at the expense of the weak (II Sam. 11-12; I Kgs 21; Amos 5).

The Old Testament also contains images of societies where common good principles appear to be operating, where all citizens enjoy the good life – building houses and inhabiting them, planting vineyards and eating their fruit, sitting under their own fig trees none making them

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<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of this parable see Esther D. Reed, ‘Wealth and the Common Good’ in Sagovsky and McGrail, eds, *Together for the Common Good*, pp. 49-64 at p. 53f.

afraid, beating their swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks (see for example Isa. 11, 25, 35, 49, 58, 61, 65; Mic. 4; Zech. 14). The eschatological nature of these visions encourages their reading in an inclusive light, while a concern to pursue the common good specifically in the interests of those beyond the ‘chosen people’ of God may be found in Jeremiah’s injunction to the captive community in Babylon to ‘seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare’ (Jer. 29:7).

### **The common good and contemporary politics**

If to pursue the common good is to seek the welfare of the city, the wellbeing of all members of a community, then conflictual and sectionally-based models of political action – where the concerns and interests of one faction prevail over those of others – will be inappropriate. Pat Logan has highlighted the potential of the common good to reinvent the nature of political discourse within democratic societies, observing that it ‘gives us a language which can take us beyond the notion of politics as simple *bargaining*, where one group’s rights and interests are played off against another’s, to mature political *argument*, where communication and a common search for good can be pursued.’<sup>20</sup> Michael Sandel has also written of the potential for the common good to renew political discourse towards ‘a politics of moral engagement’, noting that this requires a reorientation among citizens away from purely individual concerns towards a commitment to building a common life together. ‘If a society requires a strong sense of community’, Sandel writes,

it must find a way to cultivate in citizens a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good. It can’t be indifferent to the attitudes and dispositions, the ‘habits of the

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<sup>20</sup> Pat Logan, *A World Transformed: When Hopes Collapse and Faiths Collide* (London: CTBI, 2007), p. 125.

heart', that citizens bring to public life. It must find a way to lean against purely privatized notions of the good life, and cultivate civic virtue.<sup>21</sup>

In observing how contemporary political life is characterised by 'a culture of the individual with no larger loyalties than personal choice and provisional contracts', Jonathan Sacks identifies the necessity of a transformation or reorientation within citizens and communities, away from a focus on the attainment of individual goals towards a sense of shared responsibility for all.<sup>22</sup> Longley refers to the involvement of the conscience in embracing the common good and the need for 'conversion' or a 'moment of *metanoia* when the truth really strikes home that "we are all responsible for all"'.<sup>23</sup>

What this *metanoia* might involve, as Pope John Paul II implied in his 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, is a shift, when confronting social issues, from harbouring feelings of pity or a concern to make a practical response, to a recognition of our 'solidarity' and 'interdependence' one with another. The response to social problems, says John Paul, should not 'a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress' at others' misfortunes but rather 'a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all.'<sup>24</sup>

This need to move away from a conflictual model of politics harks back to Glasman's point about the common good taking us 'beyond Left and Right'. Yet while it urges us to think beyond our traditional understanding of democracy, characterised by periodic elections involving parties promoting sectional interests, the common good also challenges assumptions that either greater power for the state or greater freedom for the market will alone be the key to improving human

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Sandel, *Justice: What's the right thing to do?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), pp. 269, 263-4.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Paul Vallely, 'Epilogue: Towards a New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching in a Pluralist Society' in Vallely, ed, *The New Politics: Catholic Social Teaching for the Twenty-First Century* (London: SCM, 1998), pp. 148-75 at p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> Longley, 'Government and the common good', p. 163.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, #38.4

wellbeing. Instead it will prompt reflection upon the *raison d'être* of both the market and the state, asking how both can work together to promote the wellbeing of all, and upon the need to renew and reinvigorate civil society and encourage activism at the grassroots.

### **The Common Good and the Market**

As the Church leaders' responses to the global financial crisis made clear, to view market activity through a common good lens is to ask questions about the purpose of that activity and how it can serve the interests of the many rather than the few. If a common good perspective will recognise that the market will need maximum freedom if it is to enable people 'to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily', it will also ask how far it is meaningful to talk of people having the 'freedom' to pursue their conception of 'the good' if they lack the basic necessities to be able to do it.

A particular concern within CST is that a clear distinction be maintained between the market as a *means* – to satisfy individual and collective needs – and an *end in itself*. As the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales noted in their 1996 document, 'market forces, when properly regulated in the name of the common good, can be an efficient mechanism for matching resources to needs in a developed society'. No other system is superior when it comes to encouraging wealth creation, advancing prosperity and enabling poverty to be relieved. But when the economy itself becomes the end rather than the means, when the distinction between the market as a 'technical economic method' and 'a total ideology or world view' is blurred, individual rather than common interest may prevail. As the bishops put it,

an economic creed that insists the greater good of society is best served by each individual pursuing his or her own self-interest is likely to find itself encouraging individual selfishness,

for the sake of the economy... A wealthy society, if it is a greedy society, is not a good society.<sup>25</sup>

Other commentators on the common good have also observed how, within certain models of capitalism, the ‘end’ of promoting individual and collective wellbeing can become confused with the ‘means’ of making a profit.<sup>26</sup> For Longley it is in so far as it identifies a distinction between the market as a tool and as an ideology that CST ‘has an important contribution to make to current thinking on how to make contemporary capitalism a gentler beast.’<sup>27</sup>

The extent to which economic inequality is inimical to the advancement of the common good has also exercised commentators. Sandel maintains that deepening inequality results in rich and poor living ever more separate lives, with the former withdrawing from public places and services and becoming unwilling to support them through their taxes; and this leads not only to the deterioration of their quality but to what were once public spaces ceasing to be places where citizens from different walks of life encounter one another. ‘The hollowing out of the public realm’, Sandel concludes, ‘makes it difficult to cultivate the solidarity and sense of community on which democratic community depends.’<sup>28</sup>

### **The Common Good and the State**

According to CST, while all members of society have a role in attaining and developing the common good, the state has the *responsibility* for attaining it ‘since the common good is the reason that the political authority exists’.<sup>29</sup> CST also challenges the notion that ‘the right ordering of economic life’

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<sup>25</sup> Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, *The Common Good*, #78-80, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Nicholas Townsend, ‘Government and social infrastructure’ in Spencer & Chaplin, eds, *God and Government*, pp. 108-33 at p. 126; John Gray, *After Social Democracy* (London: Demos, 1997), pp. 19, 35, cited in Valley, ‘Epilogue’, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> Clifford Longley, ‘Structures of Sin and the Free Market: John Paul II on Capitalism’, in Valley, ed., *The New Politics*, pp. 97-113 at p. 107.

<sup>28</sup> Sandel, *Justice*, pp. 266-7.

<sup>29</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium*, #167-8, pp. 94-5.

can 'be left to a free competition of forces.'<sup>30</sup> Thus CST poses a challenge to neo-liberal economic theories which argue that, left to its own operations, the market can meet the needs and wants of individuals and society.

In a document issued following the demise of Communism in 1989, Pope John Paul II warned against embracing a free-market capitalism 'not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality'. For the Pope, neither unrestricted capitalism nor 'the socialist system' was compatible with a 'society of free work, of enterprise and of participation'; for while such a society would not be 'directed against the market', it would demand 'that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied.'<sup>31</sup>

A 'common good' perspective will ask certain questions in relation to 'the market'. It will wonder, for example, whether policy decisions should always be considered primarily in terms of their economic implications or whether there might be occasions when a course of action should be determined because it is for the good of all before agreement is reached on how it will be realised. It will ask whether Gross Domestic Product is necessarily the best indicator of a nation's collective health and wellbeing, or whether other factors may be involved. It will challenge society to consider its responsibility to those beyond its immediate community, including those not yet born, in the light of what is known about climate change and the imperative to adopt more sustainable lifestyles and business practices. It will prompt reflection upon the marketization of 'public services' and ask whether the good of all is better served by some continuing to be funded from the public purse. And it will challenge the fundamental liberal assumption that a person's motive for engaging in market activity is primarily to acquire personal wealth and comfort, that individuals do not also have the capacity to be concerned for 'the other' and the well-being of wider society.

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<sup>30</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, #88.

<sup>31</sup> John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, #35.

## **The Common Good and Subsidiarity**

If the common good asks government to be open to the possibility of acting to ensure that the market works for agreed, social ends, it does not envisage the return of big government: as noted earlier, it is the responsibility of all members of society to promote and work for the common good, not only politicians and government officials. Often spoken of in the same breath as the common good is the concept of ‘subsidiarity’, another core feature of CST, which specifically rejects the notion that governments arrogate power to themselves. Instead, stressing the importance of community initiative, mutual co-operation and de-centralization, subsidiarity asks of the state that it only undertake those activities which exceed the capacity of individuals or private groups acting independently. ‘As much freedom as possible, as much intervention as necessary’ describes the ideal relationship between government and local communities in the search for the common good.<sup>32</sup> The common good can work most effectively at the grassroots, as local communities become empowered to work together to improve their collective quality of life. It also serves to renew the body politic by inspiring people to talk about what they consider good, just and fair.<sup>33</sup>

Subsidiarity and the common good should be seen as complementary rather than standing in isolation to one another. As Longley points out, while subsidiarity requires schools, hospitals and the police to be administered as low-down the chain of decision-making as possible, it does not require such services to be privatised: ‘to insist on the withdrawal of “the state” from health, education or welfare provision, as some of the more extreme proponents of subsidiarity advocate, is not a true application of the principle because it could easily undermine, rather than promote, the common good.’<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> New Zealand Church Leaders, *Social Justice Statement*, 1993, #28: [www.justice.net.nz/justwiki/social-justice-statement-1993](http://www.justice.net.nz/justwiki/social-justice-statement-1993) (accessed 5 March, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Anna Rowlands, ‘Faith in the Common Good’, unpublished briefing paper, 9 June 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Longley, ‘Government and the common good’, pp. 167-8.

### **The common good in practice**

The common good can be most readily understood when it is seen ‘in action’. The partnership amongst the Church leaders on Merseyside in the North West of England from the 1970s to 1990s exemplifies a search for the common good in a particular context and at a particular time.

David Sheppard, the Anglican Bishop of Liverpool, Derek Worlock, the Roman Catholic Archbishop and their Free Church colleagues, notably the Reverend Dr John Newton, adopted an ecumenism of kingdom building. They wanted to bring practical improvements to people’s lives and to local neighbourhoods, and therefore set aside what might have divided them theologically and ecclesiologically to concentrate on what united them. As Worlock said in 1981,

...it was a separate approach by the government about four years ago to each religious denomination for its views of its Inner Cities Proposals which led me to say to the others ‘If we cannot agree about this, we have no right to talk about Christian Unity. Let’s send a joint reply.’<sup>35</sup>

While these leaders did not necessarily use the language of the common good, they stressed what Sheppard called a ‘bias to the poor’.<sup>36</sup> Their joint approach demonstrated that although the Church of England and Free Churches do not have a coherent set of documents to parallel CST, there are inherent similarities across traditions.

Worlock’s ‘Roman Road’<sup>37</sup> included attendance at the Second Vatican Council, the purpose of which was to equip the Church to transform the modern world. He noted that before his

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<sup>35</sup> Speech to Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, Liverpool, 1981, quoted in Clifford Longley, *The Worlock Archive* (London & New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 2000), p. 328.

<sup>36</sup> This was the title of a book by Sheppard published in 1983.

<sup>37</sup> Chapter title in David Sheppard and Derek Worlock, *Better Together: Christian partnership in a hurt City* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988).

appointment to Liverpool, ‘the priests of the Archdiocese had asked for someone to help the local Church face up to change, not only in the light of Vatican II but as a result of steadily worsening social conditions’.<sup>38</sup> Sheppard was a conventional Anglican evangelical, the product in part of the Cambridge University Christian Union though his later experience at the Mayflower Family Centre in the east end of London led to what he called a second conversion – ‘conversion to Christ in the city’.<sup>39</sup> Church life there had largely collapsed and he realised that he had to give much of his time to the life of the wider community which ‘meant being ready to listen to what was important to people whose social and economic experience of life was enormously different’ from his own.<sup>40</sup> His previous involvement as an England cricketer who refused to play in apartheid South Africa in the 1960s had taught him something about public exposure in controversial political issues.

Although sectarian tension between Protestants and Catholics was already on the wane when the two Church leaders arrived in the mid-1970s, Liverpool and the wider area of Merseyside presented massive challenges: widespread poverty, high unemployment, desperately poor housing, and a shrinking population. How should the churches and church leaders respond? Over time, they became acknowledged as honest brokers when there was open hostility between the City Council and central government. More widely, they were well known as advocates for the people they served. But their integrity and effectiveness in these roles was wholly reliant upon the breadth and depth of their engagement in local life. Three examples of this involvement may be mentioned.

First, they gave support to local people striving to transform their own communities. The Eldonian Village is close to the docks about a quarter of a mile north of Liverpool city centre.

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<sup>38</sup> Sheppard and Worlock, *Better Together*, p. 18.

<sup>39</sup> Sheppard and Worlock, *Better Together*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Sheppard and Worlock, *Better Together*, pp. 25-6.

Its development was the story of a group of people who resisted pressures to break up their community through slum clearance and went on to create a pioneering housing project and award-winning Village.<sup>41</sup> Throughout the period of trying to convince the City Council to allow their co-operative to proceed, the Eldonians received considerable backing from around the city, in particular from the Church leaders. Their public support reflected their view that for inner cities to survive and prosper, it was essential that skilled residents remained. They recognised the value of Tony McGann, the Eldonians' leader, who was committed to keeping the community together. The Eldonians' motto was *Better Together*, subsequently adopted as a book title by Sheppard and Worlock.

Their reconciliation role in relation to the 1981 disorders in Liverpool 8, the home of most of the city's (largely British born) black community, is a second example. Lord Scarman's description of similar communal disturbances occurring in Brixton as 'arising from a complex political, social and economic situation'<sup>42</sup> equally applied in Liverpool. Sheppard and Worlock talked with the police and with community leaders attempting to defuse the tension. In this, as at other times, they depended considerably on the trust already gained by local priests. At this time, '[t]he word "reconciliation", with its counterpart "alienation", became a regular part of our vocabulary'.<sup>43</sup> A development that they and leaders from other churches supported was the establishment of Liverpool 8 Law Centre, which later enabled better relationships to be forged between the police and community representatives.

A third example was the way they established allies and valued their co-operation. In 1982, after the disturbances, Michael Heseltine as Minister for Merseyside took business directors from the City of London around parts of Merseyside, urging them to invest in the area. There

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<sup>41</sup> Jack McBane, *The Rebirth of Liverpool: The Eldonian Way* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> *The Brixton Disorders: Report of an Inquiry by Lord Scarman*, HMSO 1981, p. 45.

<sup>43</sup> Sheppard and Worlock, *Better Together*, p. 170.

had been little response to this challenge when Sheppard and Worlock formed the Michaelmas Group in 1984. The Group brought together senior managers from Merseyside businesses who agreed that there was a role for those on the spot to take responsibility, ‘before asking outsiders to come and rescue us’.<sup>44</sup> The Group’s importance lay in being ‘a forum where senior decision-makers in the city could meet and talk about the Merseyside agenda in trust and security’.<sup>45</sup> There was mutual learning. Sheppard and Worlock conveyed the extent and depth of poverty and its implications, but they in turn came to realise that there was more than one story to tell about the city and that an exclusive focus on the problems could undermine the efforts of those trying to turn round the local economy.

The approaches of Sheppard and Worlock are also illustrated by separate strands of their lives that resonated with their joint ministry. Sheppard was a member of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas (UPAs) which was prompted by what was happening in England’s inner cities and on outer estates and which produced the report *Faith in the City* in 1985.<sup>46</sup> In addition to gathering other sorts of evidence, the Commission spent weekends in various dioceses, holding public meetings usually in five or six scattered locations to listen to the views of residents, church people and others. ‘Our greatest debt is to the people we met in the urban priority areas, who gave us their time, hospitality and honest opinions.’<sup>47</sup> The Commission members concluded the process convinced ‘that the nation is confronted by a *grave and fundamental injustice* in the UPAs’.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> David Sheppard, *Steps Along Hope Street: My Life in Cricket, the Church and the Inner City* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), p. 225.

<sup>45</sup> John Furnival and Ann Knowles, *Archbishop Derek Worlock: His Personal Journey* (London & New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1998), p. 199.

<sup>46</sup> *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*, The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas (London: Church House Publishing, 1985).

<sup>47</sup> *Faith in the City*, p. iv.

<sup>48</sup> *Faith in the City*, p. xv (emphasis in original).

For Sheppard, therefore, the process could not end there. Recognising the urgent need to consider the implications for his own area, he set up a group to consider how to follow up the report and seek ways in which the Liverpool diocese and its ecumenical partners could ‘own’ *Faith in the City* and ‘work to express faith in *our* city...’<sup>49</sup> Again, the methodology of the small working group mainly entailed listening, drawing on people with a diversity of experience to secure a range of views on the section of *Faith in the City* addressed to the nation. The introduction to the local report stated,

For Christians, the reality of today’s immense political and economic upheavals, and the suffering brought in their wake, is set beside another reality: that of Christian hope, and the affirmation that ‘the true nature of human life is to be discerned in the life of Jesus Christ.’ This challenges us to look for change – in ourselves and in society – and this is the basis of our faith in our city.’<sup>50</sup>

A concrete outcome of this locally-based exercise was the formation of the Merseyside Churches’ Urban Institute, an ecumenical umbrella body that aimed to encourage reflection on the churches’ own thinking and practice and develop ways in which the practical social involvement of the churches and lay Christians could be resourced and strengthened. Its dual focus on church and society was important. It took into account that the first section of *Faith in the City* was addressed to the church, drawing attention to aspects of church life that were seen as a recipe for alienation between the Church of England and people living in UPAs. Its underpinning precept echoed Forrester’s comment that ‘[o]nly when the church is serious about setting its own house in order can it call on the state to do justly and love mercy.’<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Hilary Russell, ed., *Faith in Our City: the Message of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas for Faith and Public Policy in Merseyside and Region* (Liverpool: Liverpool Diocesan Publishing Company Ltd, 1987), p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> Russell, ed., *Faith in Our City*, p. 8; cf. *Faith in the City*, p. 360.

<sup>51</sup> Forrester, *Beliefs, Values and Policies*, p. 86.

A similar observation can be made in relation to Worlock's leadership style in the Archdiocese. Kevin Kelly points out that he based his whole ministry on the vision of the church found in Vatican II:

It seems to me that his legacy to us is summed up in the challenge: do we really *want* a church according to that vision. If we do, we now have to accept our own responsibility for making that vision permeate through all dimensions of parish life in the Archdiocese... he was trying to offer us a practical example of what life in the post-Vatican II church should really be like.<sup>52</sup>

The dimensions of the church's life and mission that Kelly thought summed up Vatican II's vision for Worlock were: a church committed to furthering the coming of the Kingdom in society; a sacramental church; an inclusive church; an ecumenical church; a catholic church; a praying and worshipping church. In his article, Kelly expands on each of these and offers suggestions about how, if taken seriously, they might affect parish life.

Kelly indicates that for Worlock there was a tension between 'commitment to collaborative ministry (people power) and his natural inclination towards the most efficient way to achieve results'.<sup>53</sup> This can equally be said of Sheppard. In the case of the Eldonians, a happy balance was achieved between empowerment – support of their exercise of 'people power' – and exerting influence in the corridors of power on a few key occasions when appropriate. But it was probably also true for both men that striking this balance required a measure of self-restraint.

Sheppard and Worlock, separately and together, spoke to church and society. Theirs was a 'realised' or 'performed' theology. It was incarnational: lived in a particular time and place,

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<sup>52</sup> Kevin Kelly, 'Derek Worlock's Legacy to Liverpool', *The Month*, April 1996, pp. 129-30.

<sup>53</sup> Kelly, 'Derek Worlock's Legacy to Liverpool', p. 130.

relating to a specific context and issues. It was shaped by listening and by dialogue. It drew on social and economic analysis, but was rooted in active involvement and in an understanding of how political decisions and socio-economic trends played out in local neighbourhoods and people's lives. Their debt to the groundwork of their local clergy and their local networks and relationships has already been stressed. The presence of the churches in every community and the intelligence they received about the reality of people's lives gave credibility to what they said that few could match. They themselves identified other factors required to enable them to respond quickly and thoughtfully. One was a willingness to prioritise even if that meant dropping existing engagements. Another was the level of habitual personal contact paving the way to regular consultation and open communication. Adequate organisation and a basis of parity were important: 'We soon learnt that true ecumenical partnership is not fostered by one Church making its plans and then inviting others to join in.'<sup>54</sup>

This historical vignette illustrates some of the challenges of enacting common good principles. The concept of the common good contains the basis of a vision for the ideal ordering of society, but its principles also underline the importance of decision-making *processes*, whether at local or national level. Whilst these principles are universally applicable, realizing them in specific situations is not straightforward. The challenge will always remain of reaching difficult decisions, striking appropriate balances and reconciling diverse interests in order to marry individual fulfilment and the welfare of the whole community.

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<sup>54</sup> Sheppard and Worlock, *Better Together*, pp. 83-4.