



## Catholic Social Thought (CST) and the Common Good

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**“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...”**

Critical to Catholic thinking is the fundamental concept of *the common good*. The Catechism, following Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* and Vatican II, defines the common good as: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”<sup>1</sup> The common good applies to each human community, but its most complete realization occurs in the political community where the state’s role is “to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.”<sup>2</sup>

### Three Essential Elements

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* which results from the stability of a just society. The common good’s conceptual roots lie in Greek and Roman philosophy as the goal of political life, the good of the city (*pólis*), and the task entrusted to civic leaders.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the first essential of individual respect, the Catechism notes that all “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.”<sup>4</sup> This means far more than the utilitarian “greatest good for the greatest number,” but insists that majorities respect individual rights.

The common good’s second element—the group’s social well-being and development—maintains that authority’s proper function is to arbitrate between various particular interests in

society. Essential to this is ensuring the accessibility to each person of “what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.”<sup>5</sup>

The third element of peace and stability of a just social order presupposes that “authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the *security* of society and its members.”

### Whose Responsibility?

First of all, everyone has responsibility for the common good as an embodiment of charity and justice. In Pope Benedict’s words, “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*.”<sup>6</sup> The pontiff indicates that this is the “institutional path” of charity—addressing juridical, civil, political, and cultural institutions. When animated by true charity, this path has greater worth than a merely secular and political stand.

The state shares responsibility for the common good since “*the common good is the reason that the political authority exists*.”<sup>7</sup> The State must ensure the coherency, unity, and organization of civil society “in order that the common good may be attained with the contribution of every citizen.”<sup>8</sup>

### A Global Duty

Common good responsibility is not just about “my country.” The Church speaks of a *universal common good* resulting from the increasing human interdependence of globalization.<sup>8</sup> According to Pope Benedict, this common good and the effort to achieve it must assume “the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the *earthly city* in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided *city of God*.”<sup>9</sup>

### ENDNOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1906, citing Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, no. 65 and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 26.
- 2 *Catechism*, no. 1910.
- 3 Rev. Charles E. Bouchard, OP, STD, *Catholic Healthcare and the Common Good*, *Health Progress*, May-June 1999, pp. 34-40, at 34.
- 4 *Catechism*, no. 1907.
- 5 *Ibid.*, no. 1908.
- 6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), no. 7.
- 7 *Catechism*, no. 168.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, no. 1911.
- 10 Pope Benedict, op. cit., no. 7, emphasis in original.