

## **Extended Book Review: 'Together for the Common Good' edited by Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail.**

*A society that wishes and intends to remain at the service*

*of the human being at every level*

*is a society that has the common good –*

*the good of all people and of the whole person –*

*as its primary goal.*

*The human person cannot find fulfilment in himself,*

*that is, apart from the fact that he exists*

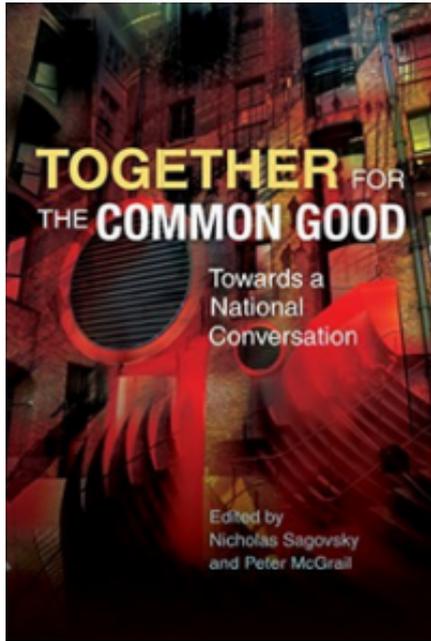
*“with” others and “for” others.*

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church, §165*[\[1\]](#)

### **Crossing Borders Towards an Inclusive and Contextual Conversation**

An extended book review of *Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation* edited by Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail (London: SCM Press, 2015).

The vision of a ‘good life’ for all, or the principle of ‘the common good’ remains both the cornerstone and the holy grail of the Catholic Church. It is one of the most discussed, complex, disputed and appreciated developments of the catholic social discourse. There is a wide variety of interpretations, even disagreements, about the meaning(s) of Catholic social teaching and particularly about how to apply it in a given situation. Furthermore, the doctrine on social issues is in ongoing development as seen, for instance, in the writings of various pontiffs, from Pope Leo XIII’s charter of Catholic social thought *Rerum Novarum* (1891), through Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* (1963), Pope John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (1991), the second part of Pope Benedict XVI’s *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) to the most recent post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016) by Pope Francis. While being firmly based in these and other statements by the official church representatives, Catholic social discourse continues to be developed by clerical and lay theologians. There is an ongoing need to ensure it is applicable in a wide variety of social and ecclesial cultures, both within the Catholic Church and beyond.



One of the most recent contributions on this topic is a volume comprising thirteen essays entitled *Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation* edited by two Liverpool Hope University associated theology scholars, an Anglican priest Nicholas Sagovsky and a Roman Catholic priest Peter McGrail. The contribution is a part of the wider project in the UK called '[Together for the Common Good](#)' (T4CG) and was inspired by a 2013 conference, which aimed to assess the legacy of the mid-1970's role-model partnership of two great Liverpool figures, the Anglican bishop David Sheppard and the Roman Catholic archbishop Derek Worlock on the understanding of the common good in contemporary society. A product of discussions, meetings, action and prayer, this book seeks to encourage people to work together towards change for the common good by overcoming differences, growing in respect for each other, as well as by learning from different cultural and religious traditions.

The book is organised into three parts, 'The Language of the Common Good,' 'Traditions of the Common Good,' and 'The Market and the Common Good.' The two contributions of the first part explore a basic question of our humanity: are we autonomous beings seeking to unfold our own potential and realize our goals, with little if any responsibility for our impact on our society and culture? Or are we, as part of one family of humanity, closely interdependent within the natural and social environment, interconnected with local, national and global life, responsible for the development of society and social transformation? What kind of society could effectively foster the common good principle? The vision of the organised society appears as the extension of a human community, which in its turn is the manifestation of the integration of each person. The integration of the common good – creative relationships between persons and the improvement of social structures – is not a fate that happens *to* persons. These changes are brought about in the conscious freedom of the individual and the community, with an acute awareness of the real possibilities.

The second part of the volume offers a close look into the common good from a variety of traditions and perspectives. The seven contributors to this chapter bring together their Catholic, Evangelical, Anglican, non-denominational and Muslim voices to explore in detail the effects the

common good has on contemporary society and religious communities. They dwell upon the political (theological), on the economic in its broadest sense, on the business, scriptural and pastoral dimensions of the principle, to demonstrate one of the core formative elements of the Christian life: i.e. the good of each human person is intimately related to the good of the whole community. As such, the authors make serious efforts to move the interpretation of the Christian message of charity and responsibility beyond a juridical and exclusively individualistic approach. As human beings are socially constituted, the manifestation of their inner selves and growth in their authenticity is exercised through their interrelationship with others. Each individual life project is strongly influenced by the cultural directions, norms and laws, which concrete society dictates. Personal growth and transformation therefore must be embodied in a genuine commitment to react against the injustices of the concrete social order.

The last part of this volume explores the significance of Catholic social discourse for the most challenging areas of social co-existence – the market and market economy. Four essays offer a constructive criticism of the existing economic order and help to develop a new vision of the social order – a kind of holistic social personalism, which would promote and protect people's freedom and dignity beyond the framework of mere economic success and political power. It would rather be based on shared values, ideas, ideals and commitments to the common good.

*How can an ecclesial community practically embrace the principle of the common good?*<sup>[2]</sup>

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, 'the common good consists of three essential elements: respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person; prosperity, or the development of the spiritual and temporal goods of society; the peace and security of the group and of its members.'<sup>[3]</sup> Through searching for an answer to the existing gap between theory and life, in its teaching on the common good, the Catholic church begins to take a contextual approach. It indicates a raised awareness that the tradition and the texts of the Church must be embodied in practice. This awareness of the critical gap between theory and praxis has resulted in a methodological shift from an ecclesiocentric, theological approach to a Christocentric methodology, with a strong emphasis on what I have come to call 'a positive ascending anthropology'.<sup>[4]</sup>

While drawing my inspiration from the present volume, I suggest below a few points for consideration as to how the principle of the common good can (and in my opinion should) influence the daily life of a church community. In no way is this a comprehensive or an exhaustive 'to do' list; it is rather a personal reflection about how we as Christ's body can bring forward His message of mercy, forgiveness and justice into a globalised multicultural human community.

*A challenge of incarnation*

In order to advance the principle of the common good, Christian churches need to get seriously involved in the present social context, and embrace *a challenge of incarnation*. The ecclesial community lives in the world, as part of the world, continuously expressing its interdependence with the exigencies and conditions of the life of its people. With its purposes and competences, the church is indeed different from the secular society – the 'earthly city', but is never opposed

to it. The way God has chosen to reveal divinity and to save humanity – through the incarnation – should always stand as a ‘norm’ for the Christian community. The church’s mission is not only to proclaim the good news of salvation, but also to announce it in a way that allows her to enter into a dialogue with and be understood by contemporary people. The incarnation demands that the church does not ‘privatize’ the gospel, but situates it in concrete human situations, in particular of the poor and the marginalised.

This tests the proper understanding of the Word, and the church’s ability to ‘translate’ it into the contextual terminology of today’s people. It is not through the abstract statements of theoretical expositions, but rather by its pastoral approaches to people’s concrete needs, opportunities and problems that the church will be able to effectively convey the word of God to human hearts. We need to be careful, when sometimes theological rhetoric (especially one that serves the church’s self-interest) becomes the purpose in itself.

### *Concrete action in society*

From this it is clear that the proclamation of the common good lies not only in the communication of the message or in the critical evaluation of reality, but also in making changes. There is an integral link between the prophetic word and concrete action.<sup>[5]</sup> The church that criticizes social injustice and calls for social transformation, but itself fails to practically implement what it is teaching, becomes hypocritical.

The church’s constant scrutiny of the signs of the times demands the criticism of and reaction against any form of social evil. By serving its people as a treasurer and teacher of fundamental human values, particularly by the proclamation of liberty and respect for human dignity, the ecclesial community stands for liberation from the reality of sin, both personal and more importantly, social. By confronting concrete social evil in the form of war, racism, torture, genocide and starvation, the church brings Christ much closer to human hearts than by mere proclamation of the good news. Even if it cannot propose solutions or immediate remedies to social evils, the church can testify against the use of violence and aggression, and demonstrate solidarity with those who are suffering, to advocate for religious freedom, and to help restore peace, justice and reconciliation.

### *Being a visible sign of unity*

One of the most urgent responsibilities of the church in contemporary society is to be a testimony to the one, merciful and forgiving God by being an intelligible sign of unity in the world. How more powerful would our charitable concern be, if Christian communities addressed it together? To what extent is it effective, sincere and constructive to profess Christ as the Lord of all, without making a full effort to bring our ecclesiastical communities into that unity which makes this profession visible? As *Together for the Common Good* testifies, this can only be achieved by dialogue which combines discernment and mature conviction. Through reciprocal forgiveness and cooperation some progress in multicultural and interdenominational community can be achieved. The desire to be one in Christ is an inevitable consequence of genuine conversion to God and to each other, a matter of the reintegration of all parts of Christianity into one Lord and into each other, so we all can serve each other in the name of Christ.

There is so much that could be learned from one another in open sharing and honest discussions. This can be extended to include the Christian church's willingness for an open dialogue with other religious communities on the same grounds of mutual recognition and deep respect. One of the major difficulties in this discourse, however, lies in the fact we learned to listen in order to respond, rather than to understand.

*A step further – Accepting God's gift in the other*

Globalisation has diminished the significance of geography. It has enabled the possibility of fruitful learning communities, reconciled diversity and astonishing relatedness. It also generates turbulence at the crossroads between national security and human insecurity, between (supra-)national sovereign rights and human fundamental rights, between overwhelming wealth and increasing poverty, between citizenship and discipleship. It is in this context that the principle of the common good becomes helpful. Within its own nature, this volume, *Together for the Common Good*, embodies a reconciling spirit. The age of sterile, disputatious theology is past. We are in need of a more inclusive, more complex and a more historically attuned approach to social and interfaith relations, in particularly with regard to the common good discourse.

*Together for the Common Good* makes a valuable contribution to the discourse on peace, justice, prosperity and solidarity in the context of globalization and multiculturalism. Aimed at a wide, yet well-informed audience, this book is no longer a traditional apology for Christian thinking, but clearly a conversation opener for a deeper and more contextual reflection on the common good as a core component of Christian life. Furthermore, with its timely call to bring together voices from various Christian denominations as well as other religious traditions on this theme the book succeeds in situating the message of the common good within a more inclusive, contextual and fruitful exchange.

A fear of modernism and the secular sphere has contributed greatly to the development of the church's defensive attitude towards secular society. It is unfortunate that particularly now, when the church's prophetic presence is so needed, ecclesial communities have allowed themselves to become more and more peripheral. By proposing seductively simple answers to complex political, economic, moral and pastoral issues, the church risks confirming this irrelevance and further extending the gap between its proclamation and practice of social justice.

It is rarely possible to solve new issues with old methodologies. Today we need to find new approaches that combine a better understanding of ourselves and of our foundations with a deep and profound interest in the other. We do not need to necessarily agree on all points; neither do we have to compromise our own values in order to achieve a seemingly peaceful solution. What we need, though, is to grow towards one another with respect. Only then, together, can we create an atmosphere of open dialogue, where issues can be explored and practiced with least harm to one another.

Particularly now, when faced with serious social problems such as migration, the refugee crisis and poverty, we need to learn to be a gift to the other and to accept the other as a gift; to let this be a witness against contemporary materialism. This gift is what we, as human beings most

need from each other. It is a means of rediscovering our own dignity and positive self-identity. If the incarnation – God’s ultimate gift to us – is about crossing over the divine-human divide, our role as believers should be in incarnating a crossing of human-human divisions. It is fundamentally a mission of reconciliation and building a civilization of love; not as a mere activism, but as a genuine testimony to God’s undivided, unrestricted and universal love to humankind – a passionate concern for the good of all.

[1] CSDC, Chapter IV: Principles of the Church’s Social Doctrine, Part II: The Principle of The Common Good, a: Meaning and Primary Implications §165, available at: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html)

[2] The terms ‘church’ or ‘ecclesial community’ are used here in general and the most inclusive manner, referring to any Christian community, without any specification of a concrete denominational tradition.

[3] CCC, Part II, Section One, Chapter II, §1925; available at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c2a2.htm).

[4] Positive ascending anthropology takes its starting point from the position of a vulnerable, often broken, human person in close inter-relation with others, in a particular historical and cultural context oriented toward God. It suggests a certain shift in mainstream catholic theological methodology, where it is not the abstract ideal which dictates the patterns of moral and ecclesial life but rather a realistic and serious recognition of and the most sincere concern for the genuine well-being of a person-in-communion. This becomes the focal point of the Church’s living and teaching. For a few practical applications of my concept-in-development of positive ascending anthropology see: “De migratiecrisis: een crisis in ons hart? Antropologische en ethische reflecties over migratie en multiculturele relaties in Europa,” *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven* 3 (2016) 69-79; Maryana Hnyp, “Ecclesial, Social and Historical developments from the Malines Conversations to Today: A Roman Catholic Perspective,” in *Malines Conversations Group. Papers and Discussions*, ed. M. Hnyp, T. Pott, (Leuven, 2014) 47-63; “Re-examining Second Marriage in Catholic Moral and Pastoral Theology: In Search of an Alternative Avenue through the Eastern Practice of Oikonomia,” in *INTAMS Review* 17, 1 (2011) 25-36.

[5] Cf. ‘Together for the Common Good,’ Jonathan Chaplin, 95; Malcolm Brown, 127-129; Tehmina Kazi, 109.