

The Common Good in St. Thomas and John Paul II

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WHEN ONE COMPARES St. Thomas and John Paul II on communion and community, one sees that “common good” plays a central architectonic role for St. Thomas, but apparently not for John Paul II. “Gift of self” plays a central architectonic role for John Paul II, but apparently not for St. Thomas. In addition, St. Thomas hardly ever draws on Trinitarian theology to illumine communion among creatures, because his account of the Trinity focuses on processions within one knowing and loving subject. John Paul II, by contrast, speaks about the Trinity primarily in interpersonal terms and draws on this understanding frequently and systematically in his account of communion among human beings. I have been struggling with these differences for quite a while because I am writing a book on *Common Good and Gift of Self: The Communion of Persons in St. Thomas and John Paul II*. It was a sharp delight to run into John Paul II’s *Letter to Families*, §10 and 11 because they weave the common good and gift of self into a very suggestive unity. There are many connections to think through.

Let me start with some introductory remarks on “common good.” A common good is a good in which many persons can share at the same time without in any way lessening or splitting it. When I drink wine, it becomes exclusively my own personal or private good. If I drink it, you cannot. We might have a cask of wine, and in some real sense the wine can then be common. Yet it is only imperfectly common, common only in the sense of being sufficient to provide for the personal or private good of more than one person. Conversely, it is not the whole cask that is my personal good, but only a part of it.

By contrast, the Pythagorean theorem is a common good in the strict and full sense. If I understand it well, I do not in any way deprive you of

understanding. Conversely, I do not take only part of the theorem to myself to be my private possession. The more I personally understand it, the more it becomes mine in its totality.

The peace of a state or a family is also a common good in the strict sense, provided that it is a genuine peace of the whole, from which no one is excluded. When I share in this peace, I do not lessen your share in it. In fact, without my share, your share in it would decrease, since peace can exist in the full sense only if each and every person shares in it.

The Common Good of Marriage and Family

John Paul II's point of departure in §10 of his *Letter to Families* is the marriage vow. "The words of consent define the common good of the couple and of the family. First, the common good of the spouses: love, fidelity, honor, the permanence of their union until death." John Paul II adds a general point about the common good. "The common good, by its very nature, both unites individual persons and ensures the true good of each." One of the most common errors about the common good is that it is an alien good, not really the good of the persons to whom it is supposed to be common, and therefore not really a common good. When the state collects income tax from me to put it into the common pot, it is true that my money is gone and someone else has it. My money has become an alien good. The state, of course, should use the money for purposes that eventually flow back to me and others in the state, but money is by its very nature a private good. It can only be imperfectly common. The common good of the spouses, by contrast, is truly common. It unites them and is the good of each. This is, in fact, what it means for a good to be truly and fully common.

As part of their vow, the spouses promise to accept children. The children become part of "the genealogy of the person"¹ which begins with the generation of the Son from the Father, continues in the creation of persons and is reaches its highpoint in the vision of God. In this genealogy, the Trinity is the first exemplar of communion. Communion of creatures is made in the image of that exemplar.

When children are born, the common good of husband and wife extends itself. "Through the genealogy of persons, conjugal communion becomes a communion of generations. *Per ipsam personarum originem conjugalis communicio fit generationum communicio*" (§10).

¹ The "genealogy of the person" and its Trinitarian origin is the subject of *Letter to Families*, §9.

Some Connections between Common Good and Gift of Self

John Paul II concludes §10 as follows.

Families today have too little “human” life. There is a shortage of people with whom to create and share the common good; and yet that good, by its nature, demands to be created and shared with others: “*Bonum est diffusivum sui*” [good pours itself out]. The more common the good, the more properly one’s own it will also be: mine, yours, ours. This is the logic behind living according to the good, living in truth and charity. If man is able to accept and follow this logic, his life truly becomes a “sincere gift.”

This text functions as the bracket between §10, which deals with the common good, and §11, which deals with the gift of self. The connecting thread which John Paul II uses is the axiom so dear to St. Thomas, *bonum est diffusivum sui*. In this axiom one finds both of these concepts: the good, which means preeminently the common good, and self-communication or, in the realm of persons, self-gift.

In *De potentia*, question 2, article 1, St. Thomas asks whether generative power belongs to God. He responds:

It is the nature of any act that it communicates itself as much as possible. For this reason every agent acts inasmuch as it is in act. Now, acting is nothing else than communicating as much as possible that by which the agent is in act. But the divine nature is most of all and most purely act. Therefore it itself communicates itself as much as possible. It communicates itself by mere likeness to creatures, which is clear to all, because any creature is a being according to its likeness to that [divine nature] itself. The Catholic faith posits also another mode of communication, namely, as [the divine nature] itself is communicated by a natural communication, as it were, so that just as the one to whom human nature is communicated is human, so the one to whom divinity is communicated is not only similar to God, but is truly God.²

St. Thomas usually formulates the principle of self-communication or self-diffusion in these very general terms: Actuality as such communicates itself, the good as such diffuses itself, pours itself out. If one applies the principle to persons in particular, one can express it in personal terms as *someone giving* something belonging to himself or giving *himself*. An example of this way of speaking is found in St. Thomas’s *Pange Lingua*: At the last supper Jesus “gives himself with his own hands, *se dat suis*

² St. Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia*, 2.1 c.

manibus.”³ Such self-communication, he argues, belongs to the very nature of the love of friendship.

Love is twofold, namely, love of friendship and love of concupiscence, but they differ. In the love of concupiscence we draw to ourselves what is outside of us when by that very love we love things other than ourselves inasmuch as they are useful or delightful to us. In the love of friendship, on the other hand, it is the other way around, because we draw ourselves to what is outside. For, to those whom we love in that love we are related as to ourselves, communicating ourselves to them in some way.⁴

All love of friendship, according to this text, involves a self-communication. Following the Gospel of John, St. Thomas uses this way of speaking also in his Trinitarian theology.

To be given can belong both to the divine essence, as we say that the Father gives his essence to the Son, and it can belong to the Father, so that the Father is said to give himself, and similarly to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. . . . And thus we concede simply that the person gives himself and is given by himself.⁵

One can see this specifically personal way of speaking very clearly in John Paul II’s Trinitarian theology, for example, in §10 of *Dominum et Vivificantem*:

In his intimate life, God “is love,” the essential love shared by the three divine Persons: personal love is the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Therefore he “searches even the depths of God,” as *uncreated Love-Gift*. It can be said that in the Holy Spirit the intimate life of the Triune God becomes totally gift, an exchange of mutual love between the divine Persons and that through the Holy Spirit God exists in the mode of gift. It is the Holy Spirit who is *the personal expression* of this self-giving, of this being—love. He is Person-Love. He is Person-Gift. Here we have an inexhaustible treasure of the reality and an inexpressible deepening of the concept of person in God, which only divine Revelation makes known to us. At the same time, the Holy Spirit, being consubstantial with the Father and the Son in divinity, is love and uncreated gift from which derives as from its *[living] source all giving of gifts vis-à-vis creatures* (created gift): the gift of existence to all things through

³ “In supremae nocte coenae recumbens cum fratribus, observata lege plene cibis in legalibus, cibum turbae duodenae se dat suis manibus.” St. Thomas Aquinas, *Officium for the Feast of Corpus Christi*.

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Ioannem*, cap. 15, lect. 4, Marietti §2036.

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sent.* 1.15.3.1 c.

creation; the gift of grace to human beings through the whole economy of salvation. As the Apostle Paul writes: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."⁶

According to St. Thomas, the divine nature, inasmuch as it is perfect, communicates itself. More exactly, the Father, who is identical with the divine nature, begets the Son, giving to him the entire divine nature, and the Spirit proceeds from both in virtue of the same divine communicative power, which always involves both person and nature.⁷ According to John Paul II a life of giving takes place in the Trinity and is concentrated in the person of the Holy Spirit. St. Thomas only speaks of the Holy Spirit's name "gift" in relation to human beings who receive this gift. John Paul II speaks about it also as a properly Trinitarian name belonging to the Holy Spirit in his procession from the Father and the Son. I do not think they contradict each other, but the perspectives are complementary.

St. Thomas invokes the principle of the self-communication of a perfect nature also at the very beginning of the *Tertia pars* when he addresses the question whether the Incarnation was fitting.

I answer that what is fitting to every thing is that which belongs to it according to the account of its own nature. Thus it is fitting for man to reason because this belongs to him inasmuch as he is rational in his nature. Now, the nature of God is goodness, as Denys says in *Divine Names* 1. Therefore, whatever belongs to the account of the good is fitting to God. It belongs to the account of the good that it communicates itself to others as Denys says in *Divine Names* 4. Therefore it belongs to the nature of the highest good that it communicates itself in the highest way to creatures. This comes about most of all by this, that he joins a created nature to himself in such a way that there is one person from these three, the Word, the soul and the flesh, as Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 13. Therefore it is clear that it was fitting to God to become incarnate.⁸

According to St. Thomas, one and the same principle can be seen in the generation of persons in the Trinity, in creation and in the incarnation. It belongs to the very account of actuality and goodness to communicate itself.

The same principle lies also at the root of the commonness of the common good. According to De Koninck, "The common good differs

⁶ John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, §10.

⁷ "Generative power signifies simultaneously the essence and (personal) notion. *potentia generandi simul essentiam et notionem significat.*" *De potentia*, 2.2 c.

⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 1, a. 1.

from the singular good by this very universality. It has the character of superabundance and it is eminently diffusive of itself insofar as it is more communicable: it reaches the singular more than the singular good: it is the greater good of the singular.”⁹ The *Letter to Families* says the same thing in §10, “The more common the good, the more properly one’s own it will also be: mine, yours, ours.” I can have and treasure the Pythagorean theorem or the peace of my family in a more intimate sense than wine. Wine *does* become mine when I drink it, but it remains in a certain way external to me even when it enters into my stomach. When the wine is assimilated into my body, it is no longer wine. By contrast, the Pythagorean Theorem does not remain external to me. It is deeply drawn into my mind, but remains itself in this diffusion of itself. The case of peace is similar. It remains itself and is shared by many as a whole. The greater communicability of more perfect being is the reason for its commonness as a common good.

Again, when the perfection of being is understood specifically as personal being, the self-diffusion of the good is the self-gift of the person. There is thus a deep connection between these two doctrines: the common good and the gift of self.

Gift of Self

In §11, John Paul II uses the concept “gift of self” in tandem with “common good” and brings out some of the light they throw on each other.

He begins by quoting *Gaudium et Spes* §24, which is perhaps the most important leitmotif running through his pontificate.¹⁰

Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father, “that all may be one . . . as we are one” [John 17:21–22] opened up vistas closed to human reason, for he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God’s sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.¹¹ (cf. Lk 17:33)

According to this text, the Trinity is the first exemplar of unity among persons. The text closely connects two statements: First, the unity of the divine persons is reflected in the unity of god’s sons in truth and charity. Second, this relation between exemplar and its image shows that man can

⁹ Charles De Koninck, “On the Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists,” *Aquinas Review* 4 (1997): 1–71, here 16.

¹⁰ See Pascal Ide, “Une théologie du don: Les occurrences de *Gaudium et spes*, n. 24, §3 chez Jean-Paul II,” *Anthropotes* 17 (2001): 149–78, 313–44.

¹¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, §24.

only find himself in a sincere gift of himself. One can conclude from these two statements that the original paradigm, not only of unity, but also of giving must lie in the Trinity. An analysis of the word “give” in the Gospel of John and the Revelation to John would be able to show the deep biblical roots of this truth.

John Paul II comments:

After affirming that man is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, the council immediately goes on to say that he cannot “fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.” This might appear to be contradiction, but in fact it is not. Instead it is the magnificent paradox of human existence: an existence called to serve the truth in love. Love causes man to find fulfillment through the sincere gift of self. To love means to give and to receive something which can be neither bought nor sold, but only given freely and mutually. (§11)

In §11 John Paul II returns to the marriage vow and explains it through the logic of the gift of self. In their gift of themselves to each other, the spouses participate in the gift that Christ makes of himself by shedding his blood. Marriage is rooted in the Eucharist.

As in §10, John Paul II passes from the vow and its common good to the transmission of life (§11). The transmission of life is part of “the logic [or as the Latin text has it, the consistent proposal] of the sincere gift.” The child is a gift of the creator to the spouses. John Paul II draws the conclusion that the child is the common good of its parents and of the family. St. Thomas says likewise, “offspring is the common good of husband and wife.”¹²

An important distinction St. Thomas makes is that between intrinsic and extrinsic common good. The example he usually uses to illustrate this distinction, following Aristotle, *Metaphysics Lambda*, is an army. The intrinsic common good of an army, which is its internal order and unity, is ordered to victory, which is the army’s extrinsic common good. A universal principle can be seen here. “Whenever we see a multitude ordered to each other, it must be ordered to some external principle.”¹³ This principle applies also to marriage. The intrinsic common good of marriage, which is the unity of love between husband and wife on the basis of the marriage vow, is ordered to the child, which is the extrinsic common good of marriage.

In §11 John Paul II defends the truth of the statement that the child is the common good of the family. He concludes with a rather dense and difficult passage.

¹² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Sent.* IV.33.2.1 c.

¹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, 5.3 c.

The common good of the whole of society dwells in man; he is, as we recalled, “the way of the Church.” Man is first of all the “glory of God”: “*Gloria Dei vivens homo,*” in the celebrated words of St. Irenaeus, which might also be translated: “The glory of God is for man to be alive.” It could be said that here we encounter the loftiest definition of man: The glory of God is the common good of all that exists; the common good of the human race.

In the first sentence of this text, John Paul II moves from the family to society as a whole. The common good of the whole of society “dwells in man, *in homine immoratur.*” The common good he has in mind at this point is the glory of God, which is something distinct from man, although it is closely united with him because it “dwells in man, *in homine immoratur.*”

According to St. Thomas, “the whole universe with its single parts is ordered to God as to the end, inasmuch as in them through a certain imitation the divine goodness is represented to the glory of God.”¹⁴ In rational creatures, St. Thomas goes on to say in the same place, this ordination to God is present in the most eminent way, because they are not only similar to God, but can attain God by knowing and loving him. His glory is more fully revealed in this gift of himself to created persons.

Since the common good of God’s glory is so intimately tied to rational creatures and the operations of their life, Irenaeus is right to include man and the operations of human life in a quasi definition of glory. “The glory of God is for man to be alive.” John Paul II turns this definition around as a quasi-definition of man: [F]or man to be alive is to have the glory of God dwelling in him. Irenaeus himself makes a similar reversal when he writes, “This is the glory of man, to persevere and remain in the service of God.”¹⁵

What is the glory that comes to dwell in man? It is the glory of the Trinity. It is a glory inseparable from the power of self-communication that lies in the infinite goodness of the divine nature, that is, it is a glory inseparable from the gift in which “just as the Father has life in himself, so has he given to the Son to have life in himself” (John 5:26). It is the glory of the Holy Spirit as the person in whom “God exists in the mode of gift.”

John Paul II offers in §11 a statement for which I do not know any immediate parallel in St. Thomas. “Yes! Man is a common good: a common good of the family and of humanity, of individual groups and of different communities.” What sense does it make to call man, every man, a common good? One way of access lies in observing how John Paul II

¹⁴ *ST I*, q. 65, a. 2.

¹⁵ St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 4.14.1.

responds to a widespread attitude of the culture of death, namely, “the temptation not to want another birth. . . . A child comes to take up room when it seems that there is less and less room in the world” (§11). In this anti-life mentality each additional human life appears as an attack on the population or the environment or the planet. Against this mentality John Paul II insists that, just as every child is a common good for its family, so every human being is a common good for the various forms of community. He is not contradicting the important principle that the ultimate and deepest reason for loving others is their ordination to a common good that transcends individual persons.¹⁶ He clearly states that the common good par excellence is the glory of God, that is, God himself in the self-communication of his goodness. Human dignity lies in being ordered to this end and even more so in reaching it. Yet, on a more elementary level, it is a good for the whole state—and this means it is a common good—when a child is born. The state regards the child in some measure impersonally as part of a mass of children that ensure the state’s survival. In the family, the child is treasured and affirmed as a common good in more personal fashion (§11). The child becomes even more a good for entire communities when it matures and gains in goodness. John Paul II’s formulation “man is a common good” is certainly startling for a disciple of St. Thomas, but it is intelligible, particularly in the culture of death which can see each new human being only as occupying space needed for others.

In §11 John Paul II also links the paschal mystery with St. Irenaeus’s definition “*gloria dei vivens homo*” (see John 10:10). The paschal mystery communicates a more primal glory which lies in the eternal giving that takes place in the Trinity. It is made accessible in the gift of the Holy Spirit. John Paul II concludes with a dense formulation.

It is the Gospel truth concerning the gift of self, without which the person cannot “fully find himself,” which makes possible an appreciation of how profoundly this “sincere gift” is rooted in the gift of God, creator and redeemer, and in the “grace of the Holy Spirit” which the celebrant during the Rite of Marriage prays will be “poured out” on the spouses. Without such an outpouring, it would be very difficult to understand all this and to carry it out as man’s vocation. (§11)

This paragraph should be taken together with the paragraphs on the “logic” of life, or, as the Latin text of §11 has it, “the consistent proposal, *consentaneum propositum*.”

¹⁶ See De Koninck, *Primacy of the Common Good*, 16–17.

This is the logic behind living according to the good, living in truth and charity. If man is able to accept and follow this logic, his life truly becomes a “sincere gift.” (§10)

When a man and woman in marriage mutually give and receive each other in the unity of one flesh, the logic of the sincere gift of self becomes a part of their life. Without this, marriage would be empty; whereas a communion of persons, built on this logic, becomes a communion of parents. (§11)

Let me conclude. The remarkable thing about *Letter to Families* §10 and 11 is that John Paul II succeeds in showing how a number of mysteries are connected in a coherent “logic” of life, in a “consistent proposal”: the mystery of the Trinity as a mystery of giving; the paschal mystery as a mystery of giving; and human life, again as a mystery of giving. He shows how the common good is a harmoniously suited part of this overall logic. One important connecting point between St. Thomas and John Paul II is the axiom “*bonum diffusivum sui*,” which John Paul II, following St. John of the Cross, unfolds in his teaching on the gift of self, first in the Trinity, then among creatures, particularly in the relation between man and woman. NEV