

Liberalism, The Common Good, and Virtues

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Abstract

The object of politics is the pursuit of the common good understood as the conditions necessary for individuals and communities to flourish and fully develop their potentialities. Liberal democracies have greatly advanced the welfare of their citizens and have become the preeminent model for political organization today. However, they fall short in fostering the conditions required for the pursuit of the common good, such as a conception of human life as purposeful and the promotion of deliberative political decision-making processes by communities pursuing common goods. The Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) and the promotion of virtues can address the obstacles to the pursuit of the common good that arise when an excessive reliance on the liberal model of politics and on the state fail to bring individuals and communities closer to fulfilling their aspirations to a full realization of their potentialities and a transcendental sense of human happiness. This essay defines the common good, warns about internal dynamics of liberalism working against the common good, like its excessive individualism and statism, and proposes the application of political virtues and the SDC concepts of subsidiarity and solidarity to define a proper role for the state in facilitating institutional structures supporting the pursuit of the common good.

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Introduction

The pursuit of the common good requires individuals practicing virtues and their participation in the political decision-making of their communities. The pursuit of the common good in today's world also requires defining the role of the state in cooperating with communities to attain these goods. Christians, and Catholics in particular, should be engaged pursuing the common good and contribute to define the role of state institutions in this pursuit, drawing from the teachings of the Church Magisterium, particularly the Social Doctrine of the Church. In doing so, we need not attempt to establish relatively isolated enclaves standing in opposition to the prevailing institutions of liberal democracies. The legitimate opposition to many aspects of the modern liberal state can take other forms, like resisting its overreach and mitigating its negative consequences by applying political virtues and specific principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church (SDC) to the decision-making processes in communities, and distinguishing between the different roles that community and the state play with respect to the pursuit of the common good. We must acquire the intellectual and political tools to appeal to Catholics and non-Catholics alike in the construction of relationships, networks, and institutional frameworks for all, presenting a view of the common good that is attractive to people of all faiths or no faith. These are intellectual tools that draw from philosophy, political theory, economics, and a transcendental conception of the human person and his or her inherent dignity.

At the outset, I must clarify that I am using the term "liberal democracies" and will be using related terms such as "political liberalism" or "advanced modern states" not to designate states with progressive (vs. conservative) governments, but states governed by the rule of law, periodic elections, and free-market economies. Societies and states whose members and citizens place a high value on specific conceptions of liberty, regardless of whether they have governments viewed as being on the right or the left of the political spectrum.

Standing in a tense relationship with the pursuit of the common good is the rise of the contemporary liberal democratic state as the model of reference for progress. This may seem paradoxical, given the high quality of life that liberal democracies provide to its citizens relative to other still coexisting models, like communism and periodic nationalisms and populisms of an

authoritarian character. It may be argued that it is not liberalism itself but only some of its excesses that pose a problem. Whether the excesses of liberal democracies are intrinsic to the model, or may be corrected, is debatable.

In this essay I agree with the diagnosis of authors that have exposed the moral crisis of contemporary liberal democracies (Deneen 2018; Ratzinger 1993) and suggest that virtues, as analyzed and presented by MacIntyre (2007, 2010), can be applied to guide societies away from liberalism's negative effects on communities' pursuit of the common good. Facilitating communities' pursuit of the common good by cultivating and practicing virtues that are particularly important to politics, such as justice, charity, and truth, can help mitigate the negative consequences for individuals and societies of the flaws of liberalism. This is the case because virtues serve to reassert the necessity of ethical and properly ordered political behavior on the part of individuals and communities, in contrast with a professed moral neutrality of the liberal order. The discussion on the relationship between the common good and virtues will draw mainly from MacIntyre's work. I should point out, however, that I am not trying to explain or summarize MacIntyre's vast and influential work on virtues. Rather, I am borrowing from his analysis to propose that the roles that virtues, communities, and state institutions play in the pursuit of the common good can be overall complementary if each role is understood appropriately and if the excesses of liberalism can be kept in check. The virtues address the political formation of the human person and help them and the communities they are a part of to attain the common good or specific common goods. The state institutions provide sets of rules and procedures (as all political institutions do) that can support communities pursue the common good. However, state institutions should not be charged with the definition of the common good or with leading the execution of the common good, through institutions designed by the state itself. For both of these tasks, the state is particularly ill-equipped because of the fragmentation and confusion about morality in modernity, which has permeated the liberal democratic model of politics prevailing today.

I point to the magisterium of the Catholic Church for a definition of the common good for individuals and communities, and to the SDC concepts of subsidiarity and solidarity for discerning an appropriate role for the state in support of communities' and individuals' pursuit of the common good. To limit the scope of what is undoubtedly a very vast field of philosophical

speculation and political theory, I will present definitions of the common good and discuss its teleological assumptions and theological foundations, and then address how liberalism hinders the pursuit of the common good. Among the obstacles that liberalism places to the pursuit of the common good are its failure to provide more permanent content to the goals of the exercise of freedom, and the severance of individuals from the living traditions of the communities into which they are born. These severing of ties with traditions and a constant change and multiplicity in the objects of the exercise of freedom feed liberalism's excessive individualism and overreliance in the state as the putative provider of individuals' every need and whim. I will then present to the role that virtues and the SDC can play in the pursuit of the common good despite liberalism obstacles.

Definition and Features of the Common Good

Two definitions of what constitutes the common good are useful for the purposes of this essay, one by Harvard Law Professor Adrian Vermeule (2022), and another from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). Vermeule provides a definition geared towards law practitioners which is nevertheless useful as an approach to secular conceptions of the common good. By secular, I do not mean that they stand in opposition to religious conceptions of the common good, or that they are not influenced (or even based) on them. I just mean that they do not refer specifically to religious worldviews, and that they are concerned with its temporal rather than its transcendental aspects, which I address later. According to Vermeule:

The temporal common good can then be described this way...: (1) the structural, political, economic, and social conditions that allow communities to live in accordance with the precepts of legal justice, combined with (2) the injunction that all official action should be ordered to the community's attainment of those precepts, subject to the understanding that (3) the common good is not the sum of individual goods, but the indivisible good of a community ordered to justice, belonging jointly to all and severally to each (chapter 1, *The Common Good in Law*, para. 3).

Vermeule (para. 4-6) then asks what those conditions are and provides several historical examples of definitions of the common good as comprising "justice, peace and abundance" in

the writings of Giovanni Botero's *The Reason of State* (1589); "peace, order and good governance" in treaties and constitutional instruments in British Commonwealth countries; and "the general welfare" in the US Constitution.

Another definition of the common good that also looks at conditions for its attainment is provided by the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Quoting from the Second Vatican Council Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, it refers to 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" (CCC, 1993, para. 1905-1906).

The above definitions presuppose that there is finality in human actions. The definitions refer to conditions allowing people "to reach their fulfillment" (CCC, 1993, para. 1906) and communities "ordered to justice" (Vermeule 2022, Chapter 1, "The Common Good in Law," para. 3). The assumption is that there is such a thing as "flourishing", i.e., the development of a person's and a community's "potential". It would not make sense to speak about the common good if we reject the notion that we have identities, and not just memories of whom we were in our near past that are then extended by a sort of inertia to the present, or if we reject the notion that our lives constitute "whole lives" and not just an accumulation and succession of experiences with no particular guiding principles or vision.

The magisterium of the Catholic Church offers content to the meaning of life, that is, a goal for living. That goal is happiness, but a supernatural happiness which cannot be achieved without divine assistance and that will only reach its plenitude in the afterlife. Saint Thomas Aquinas offered a vision of what this happiness entails. McNerny (2018) notes that Aquinas distinguishes between two types of happiness for human beings: one achievable in this life through human powers and proportionate to human nature; and beatitude or blessedness, the intellectual vision of God, not to be found perfectly in this life, but only in the next:

While the kind of contemplation of God the philosophers aspire to in this life consists in knowing God through His effects and the ways in which they represent Him as cause, this *beatitudo* of the next life Thomas describes as a participation in the life of divinity itself as the essence of God Himself is united by the "light of glory" to the intellect of the

human being, a union with God that results in the experience of ultimate and final joy or delight of the will. However, even though this *beatitudo* is brought about supernaturally by the power of God, it is not utterly foreign to human nature. In effect, the supernatural power of God elevates or expands the powers of intellect and will to a kind of completion beyond themselves and yet not foreign to them. So this distinction of a “twofold happiness” should not be thought of as involving two fundamentally distinct goals or ends of human life. The second supernatural happiness is seen as a kind of surpassing perfection of the first. (Section 12.1, Virtue)

This definition of the goal of human life conceives life as supernatural life—a life with transcendental meaning, with hope for an afterlife and engaged in the application of human powers in this life to reach the fulfillment of absolute joy in the next. Powers that yield on earth a happiness proportionate to human nature. It is a definition that further supports the concept of the common good as that which promotes the flourishing of potentialities in individuals and happiness. And individuals being social beings, it also supports the notion of the flourishing of the communities where these potentialities are nourished and applied, to the extent that the communities (a majority of its members or the prevailing voices in them) recognize the existence of the common good for the community and concurrently for the members that comprise it, and vice versa: “The common good is better for each of the particulars that participate in it insofar as it is communicable to the other particulars: communicability is the very essence of its perfection” (De Koninck 2009, *The Primacy of the Common Good against the Personalists*, para. 6). Even if the happiness of an individual does not depend on its actual communication to many, “it nonetheless does depend on its essential communicability to many. The reason for this is the superabundance of the good that is beatitude and its incommensurability with the singular good of the person” (Objections and Replies, 4).

The common good is thus a set of conditions that allow individuals and the communities to which they belong to flourish, and to develop their own potentialities. The notion of flourishing and fulfillment assumes that individuals seek their own perfection, and that the pursuit of it is something good and “a good” in itself. The aspect of commonality of the good speaks to the fact that humans are social beings and that the realization of potentialities, and of

their own perfection, presupposes interactions with other human beings and interdependence. This is true even for the individual pursuit of beatitude as the transcendental objective of life. The common good is shared and to be shared. Its pursuit is about its enjoyment in community and its communicability, not its appropriation (De Koninck 2009).

The specific content of the common good, or more precisely, of the common goods for specific communities and individuals, can take different forms: an educational system that forms productive citizens, social safety nets to mitigate the consequences of natural disasters, etc. In terms of conditions for the flourishing of communities and individuals in general, it is appropriate to speak of the common good in singular. However, in terms of the output that such conditions produce or strive to produce, and that also contribute, at a lower or specific order, to the development and well-being of the community and its members, it is possible to talk about common goods, in plural.

It is important not to confuse common goods with public goods. Common goods are not merely public goods (MacIntyre 2017) like a highway or a new airport, because producing these public goods can have winners and losers. Common goods cannot be a good for just a majority. They must be a good for all, collectively and individually, like justice and peace. A common good which enjoyment precludes others from the possibility of also enjoying it without obstacles or detriment, would lack communicability and would turn interdependence into purely transactional relationships instead of a reason for collaboration. It is possible for independent rational individuals to organize their communities and society on the basis of eminently transactional relationships (at least temporarily). These relationships would represent a concession to the reality of interdependence for the achievement of particular goals, but would be of a different character than collaborative relations that are good in themselves, in addition to being good for the fruits they produce. Purely transactional relationships are useful, but they need not be virtuous or transcendental.

An adequate understanding of the common good is one that does not see its pursuit as standing apart from individuals' pursuit of their own flourishing and fulfillment of potentialities. To the contrary, it makes it possible, in a symbiotic relationship that (as I shall explain later in this essay) is one of the characteristics of relations guided by virtue. If we think of justice and

peace as common goods, their application is beneficial to every member of a community, including those that commit crimes or engage in wars of aggression, because justice and peace restore the order that the criminal and the warmonger have broken with their actions and allow the possibility of reconciliation with that order by making them accountable for their transgressions. For example, it would be a mistake to think that the application of justice on a criminal sentenced to jail does not benefit the criminal and thus contradict the notion of common goods benefitting all members of a community. It is only if there is a miscarriage of justice, for example disproportionate sentencing guidelines, that the application of justice stops being a common good. The criminal needs fairness, including his serving time in jail if found guilty, to allow him the possibility of redeeming his guilt and facilitating his social reintegration. The criminal may think that his good consists in getting away with the crime committed, but what is truly good for him is to be forced to confront the consequences of his crime, and how his criminal actions undermine the well-being of the community and also prevents his development as a person. And even the criminal found guilty of, say, robbery, needs justice as protection from the possibility of the police or the judge committing crimes against him, through abuses of power or corruption.

That, historically, some communities and particularly its leaders might have pursued peace as a common good may be viewed with skepticism, given the prevalence of war throughout the ages. The leaders of war mongering states may be seen as not valuing peace, but generally they go to war not to seek war for its own sake, but as a means to obtain more power, territory, or some other bounty. Deceptive or megalomaniac leaders may present the outcome of breaking the peace as a necessity to attain a good, which they may call a good for the community they belong to. This may be a private or even a public good for the aggressor state and the communities that conform it (for example a particular conception of state security, or direct or indirect control over resources in the annexed territory, etc.) but it will not be a common good for the communities and its members affected by the leader's decisions, citizens asked to sacrifice their own lives and that of loved ones, often in the execution of decisions in which deliberations they had not participated.

Obstacles to the Pursuit of the Common Good in Modern Liberal States: Individualism and Statism

The radical individualism that often characterizes citizens' behavior in modern liberal societies works against the sought-after flourishing of purpose and meaning in communities and for individuals because it fails to grasp what goodness entails. All too often, citizens in liberal democracies operate as if there is no such thing as the common good—with politics conceived as a zero-sum competition for power and resources through the democratic ballot box and the capitalist marketplace—or confusing the common good with public goods or private goods for which attainment they turn to the state rather than to communities or intermediary bodies that allow for significant participation in decision making.

The excessive individualism of modern liberalism, and the links between liberal individualism and statism (an overwhelming influence of the state over society), reduce what is good to what is apparently and immediately pleasant, convenient, or otherwise desirable, without a proper assessment or realization of what is truly good, in the sense of citizens' and communities' progressive development and fulfillment. A flawed or missing understanding of individual fulfillment draws a veil over truly common goods. As Deneen (2018) notes regarding individualism and political liberalism,

At the heart of liberal theory is the supposition that the individual is the basic unit of human existence, the only natural human entity that exists. Liberal practice then seeks to expand the conditions for this individual's realization. The individual is to be liberated from all the partial and limiting affiliations that preceded the liberal state. (Chapter two, para. 14)

As noted earlier, the obstacles that political liberalism lays on the path to the pursuit of the common good, are not an exclusive feature of either side of a conservative/progressive political spectrum. Conservatives arguing for only minimal regulation of business activities in a free-market economy—in the name of entrepreneurship, for example—and progressives advocating for the state to guarantee unconstrained moral autonomy in personal decision-making—in the name of “free choice”—both sustain the above concept of realization of the

individual as liberation from affiliations. “This deeper continuity between the right and left derives from...both classical and progressive liberal traditions arguing ultimately for the central role of the state in the creation and expansion of individualism” (Deneen 2018, chapter two, para. 8). Conceived as liberation from all previous affiliations,

Individualism generates liberalism’s self-reinforcing circle wherein the increasingly disembedded individual ends up strengthening the state that is its own author. From the perspective of liberalism, it is a virtuous circle, but from the standpoint of human flourishing, it is one of the deepest sources of liberal pathology. (para. 28).

Pope Benedict (2010) has reflected on the need to make citizens in modern liberal societies understand that freedom involves more than individual freedoms:

A freedom that consisted solely of being able to satisfy one’s needs would not be a human freedom; it would remain in the animal realm. Deprived of its content, individual freedom abolishes itself, because the individual’s freedom can exist only in an order of freedoms. (chapter VI, section 1b).

Two observations are worth making regarding the tension between the pursuit of the common good and of an ever expanding and deepening liberal statism. First, the individual that the liberal state elevates is handicapped in the pursuit of the development of his or her full potential, having been deprived—in the name of liberation from any constraints—of points of references to assess his or her potential. Secondly, the state that is both the creator and the creation of these radically autonomous individuals is very different from the kind of communities that can assume and give content to the notion of social flourishing, i.e., the flourishing of the community itself and of the individuals comprising it. To the extent that hyper-individualism and statism are outcomes of the development and current stage of liberalism, we can see why liberalism poses obstacles to the pursuit of the common good. The gradual sense of personal and communal fulfillment that the attainment of common goods and the pursuit of the common good entails is intrinsically different from the zero-sum competition for private goods and the exercise of political power to impose public goods which liberalism presents as its offer for a content-less freedom and an efficient social and economic order. An efficiency that is

defined in materialistic and quantitative terms that are not easily reconcilable with qualitative assessments of the lives of communities and a metaphysical vision of life for the individuals that conform them.

The mistake that the citizen of the modern liberal state makes is to believe that life has no particular meaning, or that its meaning can be discerned autonomously, without reference to a living tradition connecting past, present and future. MacIntyre (2007, chapter 15, para. 59) provides a definition of a living tradition as “an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.” The rise of modern (i.e., contemporary) liberal democracies takes place within a living tradition, that of Western philosophy in modernity—understood as post-medieval philosophy and later influenced in particular by the Enlightenment period and its efforts to construct a morality based only on reason. MacIntyre (2007) observes that a consequence of modernity is that the language of morality today is in a state of great disorder:

What we possess...are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, part which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. (chapter 1, para. 5)

Kantian norms, Nietzsche’s superman, or different forms of utilitarianism, fail to provide a convincing theory of morality, because they all fall in internal contradictions that undermine their own claims. Furthermore, they are, in many ways, incommensurable, i.e., they cannot be compared with each other or against a standard, as there are no common points of reference to measure them, leaving modern men and women in a state of confusion (MacIntyre 2007).

As mentioned earlier, flourishing presupposes a teleological meaning to life, an existence with a purpose towards a goal or fulfillment. That goal can be conceived as the “truth” of a person’s life. The pursuit of the common good is the pursuit of what is truly good for the individual and for the community he or she is a part of. The citizens of modern states often understand “realization” as freedom from what they perceive as constraints, but often fall short

of conceiving fulfillment as a kind of freedom for the achievement of greater freedoms in an order of freedoms in which individuals are recognized as members of communities, born into a set of pre-established (even if they need not be permanent) set of conditions. These conditions, like a particular cultural context, a family, a community, may at times constrain fulfillment (communities can be good or bad, they are not good in themselves) but they also enable formation and socialization, and provide moral and other standards to assess life as a narrative of met and unmet expectations. They provide reference points for what to keep and what to change in a living tradition. By looking at the state for life's realization, true liberty (liberty for) is sacrificed in the name of liberation (liberty from).

State institutions are sets of rules and procedures, and as such they are impersonal and seek efficiency by homogenizing responses to citizens' demands. Often bureaucratic efficiency hides what are exercises of power by bureaucrats over those expected to follow the rules, but other times bureaucrats actually believe that their decision-making and their management of rules and procedures are guided by efficiency (MacIntyre 2007, chapter 3) and this claim is used to justify the power of the state in —and over— society. It is a claim that must be approached with skepticism because the realm of operations, the context of action, of bureaucratic expertise is that of the social sciences, a field particularly weak in its predictive power (MacIntyre 2007, chapter 8). The individual who turns to the state institutions to attain goods may or may not attain private and public goods, but he or she will rarely obtain from these institutions common goods.

Questionable expertise is not the only reason to avoid vesting on the state a central role in the pursuit of the common good. In addition to bureaucracies, the establishment of rules and procedures for the institutions of the state is directed by decision-making elites (the elected representatives) operating in the realm of politics, and the realm of politics is opinions. As Hannah Arendt (2005) noted in her essay on *Truth and Politics*,

However that may be [traditionally the relatively low concern and penalties for lying as compared to ignorance or having the courage to tell inconvenient truths], historically the conflict between truth and politics arose out of two diametrically opposed ways of life—the life of the philosopher...and the way of the citizen. To the citizens' ever-changing

opinions about human affairs, which themselves were in a state of constant flux, the philosopher opposed the truth about those things which in their very nature were everlasting and from which, therefore, principles could be derived to stabilize human affairs. Hence the opposite to truth was mere opinion, which was equated with illusion, and it was this degrading of opinion that gave the conflict its political poignancy; for opinion, and not truth, belongs among the indispensable prerequisites of all power. (Chapter 19, section II)

Citizens who turn to the state to guarantee them everchanging rights are likely to get a favorable response, in the form of a favorable opinion about their demands, from politicians wishing to please them, provided that the rights in questions are not presented as absolute truths: “every claim in the sphere of human affairs to an absolute truth, whose validity needs no support from the side of opinion, strikes at the very roots of all politics and all governments” (Arendt 2005, chapter 19, section II).

The centrality of human rights in liberal states, as those codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human rights covenants, and the proliferation of rights whose advocates aspire to see elevated to human rights or quasi human rights, may appear to contradict the assertion that absolute truths are inimical to politics, but it does not. The universality of human rights is a contested issue, which belongs more to the realm of opinions than to the realm of facts, and thus clearly to the realm of politics more than to the realm of philosophy. MacIntyre (2010, chapter 6, para. 20-26) refers to the universality of human rights as a fiction “with highly specific properties” (to serve as part of “the social invention of the autonomous moral agent”). He is not alone in questioning the validity of the concept of universal human rights. Michel Villey (1979, para. 92) calls human rights—as far as actual, universal, legal rights are concerned—a mirage. There are certainly authors on the opposite side of the universality of human rights debate, with solid justifications for their position. It is beyond the scope of this paper to try to present the merits of the arguments from each side. The point, rather, is that the diversity of opinions and justifications on the issue confirm that the debate on the universality of human rights belongs to the realm of politics and opinions. The discussion of human rights belongs to politics because the existence of universal human rights is not a

philosophical truth or an established fact—and this can be maintained without questioning the very positive impact on respect for human dignity that a universal commitment to observe human rights yields. The modern liberal state is very much at home in the midst of debates about human rights, precisely because these are debates on opinions about human rights.

Given how politics deal with truths, also in liberal democracies, citizens turning to the state for the fulfillment of truly fundamental rights, are not going to receive in return anything resembling the truth, that is, anything resembling what may truly make them free and able to develop their own potential. While Arendt's essay dates back to 1967, what she wrote about the conflict between truth and politics is still applicable today, and has a negative impact on the common good if citizens turn to the state as the main or exclusive vehicle for its pursuit: "While probably no former time tolerated so many diverse opinions on religious or philosophical matters, factual truth, if it happens to oppose a given group's profit or pleasure, is greeted today with greater hostility than ever before" (Arendt 2005, section II).

A sense of purpose for life, which is part of what constitutes the common good, shares some of the same characteristics of factual truths because it is not a matter of opinion, but a transcendental truth about flourishing and the development of the individual and the communities they are part of. Individuals are unlikely to consider as mere opinions their conception of a meaning of life and the conditions required for flourishing as human persons, and the development of their potentialities. The truthfulness of the common good is a fact, with the same "stubbornness" that Arendt (2003) attributes to facts:

Facts assert themselves by being stubborn, and their fragility is oddly combined with great resiliency....In their stubbornness, facts are superior to power; they are less transitory than power formations, which arise when men get together for a purpose but disappear as soon as the purpose is either achieved or lost. (Section IV)

The relationship between truth and politics discussed by Arendt, thus, calls for caution in trusting state institutions, which are created by political elites focused on opinions and hostile to facts, and managed by impersonal bureaucracies. This concern is also raised by MacIntyre (2010), who warns in stark terms about trusting the state with the pursuit of the common good,

something that can happen as an extension of the state providing a fundamental service, that of public security. As provided by modern states, security is a shared public good and not a common good of a genuine nationwide community.

The obstacles that the liberal state presents to the pursuit of the common good that I have listed so far are the failure of the modern man to identify and construct a narrative to his own life that can provide it with content like personal goals of a transcendental character, a failure provoked by modernity's moral confusion and its break with living traditions that had provided pre-modern societies with guiding principles giving meaning to live; the related misconception of liberty as freedom from tradition but not freedom for unselfish or virtuous goals, their place taken by materialistic and everchanging objects of subjective choices that the state is supposed to guarantee; and the conflict between philosophical facts and political opinions, a conflict older than the rise of the modern liberal state but acquiring in contemporary liberal societies its poignant political contours—an embracement of tolerance for political, religious and philosophical worldviews provided that it does not upset entrenched power and benefits.

We can add another obstacle that, once again, is not exclusive to modern liberal states, but that acquires specific characteristics in liberal societies: the size of the community and in particular the political community, i.e., that engaged in political deliberation and decision making. MacIntyre (2010) adds that it is not possible for the citizens of the modern, large-scale nation-state to constitute “a Volk, a type of collectivity whose bonds are simultaneously to extend to the entire body of citizens and yet to be as binding as the ties of kingship and locality” (chapter 11, para. 7). The challenge by the size of a given political community was already a concern for the inhabitant of the Greek polis. In Aristotle's view (Bess 2016), there was a relation between the moral order of a city (and the pursuit of the common good is a moral pursuit that requires a moral order) and its demographic order: “law is order, and good law is good order; but a very great multitude cannot be orderly” [Aristotle, *Politics*, VII.4].

The pursuit of the common good requires participation in defining more specifically what the common goods for that community are at a given time, and communities, such as nations in modern liberal states, are just too big to allow that kind of participation. Rarely do modern states contemplate significant participation of the citizenry in decisions impacting common goods,

beyond the election of representatives with the delegated responsibility to make decisions regarding institutional frameworks. At the same time, there is no turning back on the need for the fairly large and often complex institutional frameworks required to implement the kinds of policies that may be necessary to support communities in pursuit of the common good.

Does the modern nation state provide these institutional frameworks? A categorical rejection of any role for the state in providing—or itself constituting—such framework appears unjustified and untenable. The issue at hand is one of complete and incomplete communities: complete communities are self-sufficient and capable of making and enforcing laws, while incomplete communities are those whose leaders lack coercive power of law enforcement (Osborne 2008). A community too small to enforce laws is thus not a complete community. Osborne turns to St. Thomas for guidance on the relationship between complete communities and the common good:

Following Aristotle...he [Thomas Aquinas] thinks that the political unit is a complete community with a common good which is greater than that of its members.... Aristotle and Thomas contrast these complete communities with local communities which are not self-sufficient, such as households and villages. This self-sufficiency helps to create a political community which is concerned...with the good life as a whole. (pp. 78-79)

Aquinas attributes two characteristics to the political or “complete” community: lawmaking and legitimate use of deadly force (Osborne 2008). The local communities that MacIntyre sets in contrast to the nation state—like workplaces, schools, and parishes—“cannot deliver the political common good because they do not order the lesser common goods to producing a greater common good and cannot justify the coercion that is necessary in the political arena” (Osborne 2008, p. 81).

Part of the tension between state, community and common good may be overcome by distinguishing between communities and institutional frameworks supporting—but not defining the content—of the common good. In other words, communities and institutions are not the same. Institutions (sets of rules and procedures) exist to support communities and individuals but are not the same as those communities and individuals. The state role in the pursuit of the

common good should be limited and specific to maintaining institutional frameworks supporting citizens' and communities' pursuit of the common good. The characteristics of that institutional framework are to be established by individuals and communities coming together. It is for individuals and communities, defined as associations where can interact and collaborate in decision-making (professional groups and associations, clubs, civil society, etc.) or where they are together by virtue of geography (neighborhoods, villagers) or affective bonds (families, extended families, church parishes) to define the common good and the institutional framework required to support it. The tension between the liberal state and communities derives from the state overreach into the culture of the community, with a demand that the community and its individuals conform to a predetermined economic and political framework—the free market and the rule of law, understood as ever-expanding individual “rights” guaranteed by an equally ever-expanding state. In this way, capitalism and statism converge in a vicious circle masquerading as a virtuous circle.

Examples of communities that can engage in good governance (decision-making directed towards the attainment of common goods) include neighborhood councils, associations of parents in school districts, church groups, labor unions and political parties. They are not, strictly speaking, complete communities, lacking strong enforcement powers. But they are political communities because they allow for participation of members in decision making, including over common goods and freedoms that can be ordered for the attainment of even greater common goods and freedoms. A clean and safe neighborhood, a school district that produces well-educated children in schools, church groups that engage in charitable work, labor unions that prevent exploitation in the workplace, and political parties attuned to the political demands and aspirations of voters, all contribute to define common goods. Government (state) institutions, that local communities should help to design, should work with these very communities and the nation as a whole in the pursuit of the common good, but the state should not define for political and other communities the content of common goods, or operate as if there was not such a thing as common goods and the common good.

MacIntyre (2016) offers two examples of communities whose members organized themselves to pursuit or maintain common goods through deliberative decision-making processes tolerated but not contemplated originally by the state: fishermen in Denmark who

established a cooperative to make catch quotas introduced in the European Union in 2002 compatible with a way of life that had existed without them; and an association of residents of a poor slum in São Paulo that since the 1980s has successfully organized politically to obtain water, sanitation and other quality of life improvements. These communities prized participation of stakeholders in decisions shaping the way of life that they wanted to preserve or the quality of life they wanted to improve, and successfully obtained the common goods they were pursuing — such as preserving valued traditions and human dignity, that go beyond the material goods they also obtained—against the power and influence of large fishing companies in the case of Denmark and corrupt or inefficient public policies in Brazil. These communities did not try to run away from the socioeconomic structures enveloping them. Instead, they applied courage and prudence in the pursuit of common goods to overcome a bias on the liberal order favoring big corporations as pre-eminent actors in the free market, and against abuses of power by corrupt or inefficient public policies. In *obtaining* public and common goods (like economic and physical security) they *attained* the common good of conditions to maintain a lifestyle they had or aspired to have, through participatory and collaborative decision-making conducive to the development of their potentialities.

The successful efforts of the Danish fishermen and the Brazilian dwellers of favelas in establishing specific alternative socioeconomic and political arrangements at the local level — while operating within the liberal order— stands in contrast to the so-called “The Benedict Option” (Dreher 2017), a call to withdraw, as much as possible, from the prevailing liberal socioeconomic order and seek alternatives to it inspired by Christian principles. The term refers to a line in MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* (2007) seminal work that praised the revolutionary impact of Benedictine monasteries on the social structures of the Middle Ages. However, MacIntyre does not call for a withdrawal. In a keynote address in 2017 during a conference on “The Common Good as Common Project,” MacIntyre responds to a question from the audience on this issue:

So this [what the Benedictine monasteries achieve in the Middle Ages] is not a withdrawal from society into isolation...this is actually the creation of a new set of social institutions which then proceed to evolve, a very interesting set of social institutions

too....So, when I said we need a new St. Benedict, I was suggesting we need a new kind of engagement with the social order, not any kind of withdrawal from it.

The inspiration to draw from Benedictine monks, Danish fishermen and the dwellers of Brazilian favelas derives from their example as communities that challenged the existing social order from within it, and established new social institutions. It is not withdrawal but critical engagement with the liberal order that could bring about modern societies' reform and rehabilitation. If reform and rehabilitation are impossible, strategic engagement in the form of speaking against predominant but flawed conceptions of human happiness could qualify as the kind of courageous, prudent, fair and temperate resistance that MacIntyre (2007) recommends against the social, economic and political order of advanced modernity, with the hope that it eventually leads to a radical—but yet to be discovered—alternative to that order.

Criticism of the liberal model of the state, economics and society has existed as long as the liberal order itself. Scientific evidence that human beings contribute to climate change and its negative effects renders new urgency to these concerns: by placing too much emphasis on consumerism, economic growth and financial profits, the free market approach to economics has become heavily dependent on energy produced by fossil fuel burning, which generates high levels of heat-trapping greenhouse gasses which are driving a rapid increase in Earth's average surface temperature and accelerating climate change and its dangerous consequences (NASA 2022). With respect to the pursuit of the common good, the issue is not if there are immediately identifiable, alternative models of social structures that can turn the page on liberalism, but to continue to insist that socioeconomic structures exist to support human beings true happiness, and not the other way around. In other words, men and women should not be deceived into embracing environmentally unsustainable models of consumerism, materialism and statism, and avoid reliance on the state to fulfil the demand of ever-changing subjective desires sometimes portrayed as fundamental freedoms and entitlements.

Recognizing the barriers that the liberal state places to the pursuit of the common good should not result in failing to acknowledge and appreciate the service to the cause of freedom achieved by liberal democracies, particularly in the 20th century against totalitarianisms such as fascism and communism. It is the excesses of liberalism (in the form of an unhealthy linkage of

exacerbated individualism and statism) that operate against a deeper conception of freedom and the pursuit of the common good. Optimism in the late 1980s and 1990s, following the victory of liberal democracies over communism, led political analysts to declare the rise and victory of Western-style democracy as the end of history, “that is, the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama 1989, p.4). From a perspective informed by this assessment, it could be argued that “justice, peace and abundance,” which Vermeule (2022) extracts from Botero (1589) as candidates for components of the common good, are achievable and to a great extent have actually been achieved in modern liberal democracies. Yet the content and characteristics of the justice, peace and abundance achieved under liberalism would need to be more closely examined to see if they correspond to the flourishing of individuals and the communities they belong to, and to true happiness.

Liberal democracies guarantee rights in ways that totalitarian states do not, but when a political community can no longer provide content to what it understands justice to be, it may be seemingly fair in its procedures but not in its decisions. When King Salomon (1 Kings 3:16-28) suggested cutting a baby in half to settle a dispute between two women about whose child it was, he was procedurally fair in suggesting the idea but would have committed an atrocity if carried out. Something similar is happening with pronouncements from the supreme and constitutional courts of many liberal democracies, which sadly are carried out, with dramatic consequences. These courts are making decisions as putative arbiters between competing interests rather than trying to reach really just outcomes. For example, decisions granting the level of a constitutional right to having an abortion are taken irrespective of the fact that biology confirms that human life begins at fertilization (Charlotte 2022), or irrespective of the equally significant fact—particularly to the open debate on the legal personhood of the unborn baby—that, thanks to medical advances, unborn children can be patients in intrauterine surgery that thus involves two patients, mother and child, undergoing surgical procedures simultaneously (Saadai et al, 2022). If an unborn child is a patient, it would be incoherent that he or she be denied legal personhood. It took nearly 50 years to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* in the Supreme Court of the United States and deprive abortion in the US of federal protection. The trend in other countries runs counter to protecting the life of the unborn: in Colombia, that country’s Constitutional Court legalized

abortion in the first 24 weeks of gestation in February 2022. Mexico's Supreme Court legalized abortion in September of 2021.

Peace and abundance are relatively more likely to be enjoyed in liberal democracies than in totalitarian states, but are far from guaranteed. The hyper-individualistic, maximalist application of the constitutional right to bear arms in the United States has had tragic consequences to citizens' right to life and peace in communities across the nation, with 45,222 gun-related deaths in the US in 2020—54% of them suicides (Gramlich 2022). If “abundance” is interpreted as wealth, liberalism creates wealth but does not distribute it broadly, even if advanced liberal societies fare well in wealth distribution comparisons across countries (World Population Review, 2022). Both income and wealth inequality have grown in the United States between 1989 and 2016 (Hernández Kent et al., 2019). In 1989, the bottom 50% of income earners accounted for 15% of total household income, and the top 10% of income earners accounted for 42%. In 2016, the bottom 50% accounted for just 13% of household income, while the top 10% accounted for 50% of household income. In terms of wealth (assets minus debts), the contrast was starker: In 1989, the richest 10% of Americans owned 67% of the country's wealth, while the bottom 50% owned 3% of the wealth (Hernandez Kent, A. et al., 2019).

Abortion, mass murders, suicide, and gross inequalities are unappealing end states for the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. The capacity of the universal homogenous state to resolve all societal contradictions (Fukuyama 1989) has fallen short of the optimistic expectations of its supporters.

The Role of Virtues in Framing the Contribution of the State to the Common Good

Giovanni Botero's (1589) “justice, peace and abundance” are objectives for sovereigns whose powers and responsibilities are forerunners of those of governments in modern (contemporary) states. Politicians running for office in democratic states may use terms like equality and progress or growth instead of justice and abundance, but an overall notion of the pursuit of goals that are good for society as a whole and for its members, and that are not a mere sum of the goals of individual citizens, has often been present in most forms of social organizations since the beginning of history. Law and economic rationality provide a necessary but not sufficient basis for the stability and prosperity of postindustrial societies, which also

require respect and application of notions of reciprocity, moral obligation, duty toward community, and trust (Fukuyama 1996). Culture, values and the exercise of virtues influence and help define the goods to be pursued and also how to pursue them, establishing norms based in habit rather than rational calculation.

A virtue is a habit, but not just any habit. It is a habit informed by a worldview with moral values that allow the virtuous person to transcend self-interested calculation of costs and benefits. The concept of a virtue “is the concept of something that makes its possessor good: a virtuous person is a morally good, excellent or admirable person who acts and feels as she should” (Hursthouse 2018). The virtuous person is informed by a practical wisdom, a situational appreciation that allows its possessor the knowledge and understanding “to do the right thing”. The practically wise “understand what is truly worthwhile, truly important, and thereby truly advantageous in life, who know, in short, how to live well” (Hursthouse 2018).

MacIntyre (2007) provides an account of virtues in groups that underscores their key role in the pursuit of common goods. He presents three historical understandings of what constitutes a virtue, before proposing his own definition. In the heroic narratives of ancient Greece, like Homer’s, a virtue is “a quality which enables an individual to discharge his or her social role.” For Aristotle, in the New Testament, and for Aquinas, a virtue is “a quality which enables an individual to move towards the achievement of the specifically human telos, whether natural or supernatural” and in modernity, a virtue is often just “a quality which has utility in achieving earthly and heavenly success” (chapter 14, para. 15). MacIntyre proposes and presents instead “a unitary core concept of the virtues” from a moral tradition which stands in opposition to modernity’s amoral confusion. Its application requires “the acceptance of some prior account of certain features of social and moral life in terms of which it has to be defined and explained” (para.18). MacIntyre proceeds to formulate what he calls an initial and tentative definition of a virtue as “an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods” (para. 29). He specifies what he means by a “practice”:

By a “practice” I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of

activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conception of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended....Bricklaying is not a practice; architecture is. Planting turnips is not a practice; farming is. (chapter 14, para. 21)

MacIntyre (2007) also explains what are “goods internal to a practice”: They are goods that are specific to the practice in question and can only be identified and recognized by the experience of participating in the practice in question. They are the outcome of competition to excel, but their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the process (chapter 14, para. 23).

MacIntyre (2007) identifies three virtues as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence: justice, courage, and honesty (chapter 14, para. 30). However, the virtues are not only about being goods internal to a practice. The context for their application requires and presupposes that they be qualities contributing to the good of a whole life, and that they be related “to the pursuit of a good for human beings the conception of which can only be elaborated and possessed within an ongoing social tradition.” He underscores that the notions of the good of a whole human life and of an ongoing tradition are intrinsic for an adequate conception of virtue in terms of practices, and not merely notions enriching that conception (Postscript to the Second Edition, section 2).

MacIntyre (2010), however, does not try to imbue the states with virtuous behavior. The emphasis is the quality —participatory— character of the decision-making process:

There are numerous crucial needs of local communities that can only be met by making use of state resources and invoking the interventions of state agencies. But it is the quality of the politics of local communities that will be crucial in defining those needs adequately and in seeing that they are met.

It is therefore a mistake, the communitarian mistake, to attempt to infuse the politics of the state with the values and modes of participation in local community. It is

also a mistake to suppose that there is anything good about local community as such.
(Chapter 11, para. 24-25)

Once again, a distinction can be made between institutions (administrative structures and institutional frameworks, sets of rules and procedures) on the one hand, and communities and individuals providing content for specific goals and common goods. Institutional frameworks may be prominent in facilitating the obtaining public goods, like security and economic growth, but they do not generate specific common goods leading to the flourishing of individuals and communities. The state (if guided by communities that have deliberated about the role of the state) can provide institutional frameworks to help the community's pursuit of common goods, but by itself it cannot provide content to the common good and should not shape its own structures to define the common good, lest it fatally absorbs the very communities it should be supporting.

The state thus has positive and negative obligations in the pursuit of the common good, as it must actively promote and defend it, and abstain from overreaching in ways that prevent the appropriate level of community organization to pursue it first. Recapitulating some of the themes mentioned previously, it is worth underscoring that communities and the members that comprise them must engage in deliberative decision-making process to pursue the common good, and they can do so by practicing virtues, particularly those more closely related to political organization. Catholic tradition and the Social Doctrine of the Church have always maintained an active concern with the pursuit of the common good as that which allows the flourishing of individuals and communities, and happiness. Saint Thomas Aquinas (McInerny 2018) identified happiness with beatitude or blessedness, the intellectual vision of God to be found perfectly in the next life but which is not foreign to human nature and human powers in this life. The SDC provides Catholics and non-Catholics with tools to allow communities and its members develop their potentialities, offering principles for the pursuit of common goods and the common good. Modern liberal states have delivered for their citizens many private and public goods, but have also placed obstacles to the pursuit of the common good by alienating citizens from living traditions in which to ponder about their common goods.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church (CSDC) does not preclude state intervention in the pursuit of the common good, but sets a high standard for it:

Various circumstances may make it advisable that the State step in to supply certain functions. One may think, for example, of situations in which it is necessary for the State itself to stimulate the economy because it is impossible for civil society to support initiatives on its own. One may also envision the reality of serious social imbalance or injustice where only the intervention of the public authority can create conditions of greater equality, justice and peace. (Para. 188)

The Church offers two fundamental principles to guide the scope of intervention of state institutions in the pursuit of the common good: subsidiarity and solidarity. Subsidiarity can be conceived as a form of “humility” on the part of state institutions (including state bureaucrats and elected officials) that abstain from intervening when community structures are the ones that should. Solidarity stands as the counter-image of subsidiarity, and can be seen as the application of the virtue of charity, refusing to overlook that some problems are too urgent and too large for smaller communities to tackle them.

The Catholic Church underscore the importance of intermediary bodies when expanding on the notion of the common good (CSDC, paragraphs 164-170). Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* (LS, 2015, para. 156-158) notes that the common good “...has to do with the overall welfare of society and the development of a variety of intermediate groups, applying the principle of subsidiarity.” Outstanding among those groups is the family as the basic cell of society. LS affirms that society as a whole, and the state in particular, are obliged to defend and promote the common good (LS, para. 157).

The principle of subsidiarity to which LS refers to is defined by the CSDC (para. 186) as respect and support for intermediate social entities to “properly perform the functions that fall to them without being required to hand them over unjustly to other social entities of a higher level, by which they would end up being absorbed and substituted.” Attention to the principle of subsidiarity is important because, among the assaults on the common good by the liberal state, is its lack of respect for intermediary bodies. Upholding subsidiarity requires (CSDC para. 187):

Respect and effective promotion of the human person and the family; ever greater appreciation of associations and intermediate organizations in their fundamental choices and in those that cannot be delegated to or exercised by others; the encouragement of private initiative so that every social entity remains at the service of the common good, each with its own distinctive characteristics; the presence of pluralism in society and due representation of its vital components; safeguarding human rights and the rights of minorities; bringing about bureaucratic and administrative decentralization; striking a balance between the public and private spheres, with the resulting recognition of the social function of the private sphere; appropriate methods for making citizens more responsible in actively “being a part” of the political and social reality of their country.

The SDC thus appeals to a conditional intervention of the state to defend and promote the common good. It does not call on the state to define the common good, and it avoids maximalist approaches that would exclude state intervention even when subsidiary bodies are not strong enough to defend and promote the common good. It is rightfully in the name of solidarity, as a form of charity when a community and its intermediate organizations lack the resources to address a problem or attain an essential common good, that it is not only appropriate but a moral obligation for state institutions to intervene. The CSDC defines solidarity as a social practice and a moral principle:

The new relationships of interdependence between individuals and peoples, which are de facto forms of solidarity, have to be transformed into relationships tending towards genuine ethical-social solidarity. This is a moral requirement inherent within all human relationships. Solidarity is seen therefore under two complementary aspects: that of a social principle and that of a moral virtue.

Solidarity must be seen above all in its value as a moral virtue that determines the order of institutions....is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good....Solidarity rises to the rank of fundamental social virtue since it places itself in the sphere of justice. It is a virtue directed par excellence to the common good, and is found in “a commitment to the good of one's neighbour with the readiness,

in the Gospel sense, to 'lose oneself' for the sake of the other instead of exploiting him, and to 'serve him' instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage." (Para. 193)

Both the CSDC and MacIntyre (2010) underline the need to remember that we depend on each other, and avoid the illusion of self-sufficiency. MacIntyre appeals to "a form of political society in which it is taken for granted that disability and dependence on others are something that all of us experience at certain times in our lives" (2010, chapter 11, para. 4). The CSDC also call for awareness over human beings interdependence:

The principle of solidarity requires that men and women of our day cultivate a greater awareness that they are debtors of the society of which they have become part. They are debtors because of those conditions that make human existence livable, and because of the indivisible and indispensable legacy constituted by culture, scientific and technical knowledge, material and immaterial goods and by all that the human condition has produced. A similar debt must be recognized in the various forms of social interaction, so that humanity's journey will not be interrupted but remain open to present and future generations, all of them called together to share the same gift in solidarity. (Para. 195)

Solidarity is one of the permanent principles of the Social Doctrine of the Church, together with the common good, subsidiarity and the dignity of the human person (CSDC para. 160). These principles must be appreciated in their unity, interrelatedness and articulation (para. 162). True justice and truly just societies will underscore and insist on the centrality of the human person with respect to the social order. The exercise of virtues underscores the dignity of the human person, facilitate the application of SDC principles, and protect individuals and communities from the excesses of the modern liberal state.

Conclusion

Modern liberal states and societies do not appear to offer an adequate framework, nor to sufficiently uphold the necessary value of truthfulness, to foster the application of virtues in the pursuit of the common good. Virtues may be guiding, in modern liberal states, the behavior of some citizens towards the common good. Citizens who are engaged in finances, politics, law,

sciences and other human activities. However, it appears that these individuals apply the virtues in the pursuit of the common good *despite* the current framework of the democratic liberal state and modernity in which they operate, rather than assisted by that framework.

It is a framework of rules and procedures, political representation (rather than participation) and bureaucracies somewhat more permissive to dissent and better at innovation than authoritarian regimes, despite sharing with them a tense relation between truth and politics. Thus, narratives and proposals challenging the prevailing liberal order (broadly defined, home to both conservative free-market capitalists and rights-oriented progressive egalitarians) should not be discarded, even if particular novel ideas are yet to offer convincing alternatives, because of the risks involved, impracticality, or both. This is particularly the case for proposed alternatives that could undermine some aspects of liberalism worth preserving, like democratic states' relative successes at wealth creation and distribution, and their relatively strong protection of fundamental individual rights (and not all individual rights deserve the same level of protection) and equality before the law.

Models replacing the prevailing liberal order with alternatives focused on the pursuit of the common good could rise inadvertently through a process that reclaims the transcendental character of life as consisting in the pursuit and experience of goodness itself—for a Christian, participation in the life of God itself, initiated in this life through the practice of natural virtues and the grace of the theological virtues of love, hope and faith, and to be fully enjoyed after death. The fulfillment of the experience and joy of union with God only after death is not a consolation or a mere reward for enduring a life of sacrifice on earth (an unappealing prospect for non-believers) but a goal which truthfulness irradiates into the world a call for morally virtuous behavior anticipating eternal life. A call which, if embraced, brings about individual and communities' true happiness on earth as well. Virtues, thus, help us to discern and to realize goodness. The more virtuous our behavior, the greater the concomitant experiences of true being, true goodness, and true happiness.

A deep appreciation for the role of virtues in experiencing a good life, from philosophical and theological narratives accepting that life has a purpose, are not just an outcome of pious or idealized proposals of moralists and utopians, well-intended but ultimately irrelevant to

contemporary life. It is an appreciation rooted in the works of Aristotle, Saint Thomas, and the many scholars and saints whom they inspired and continue to inspire, and whose critiques of modernity resonate with citizens in liberal states consciously or unconsciously longing for true happiness. Rediscovering and re-engaging with philosophical speculation and theological teachings about the virtues can help replace the failed attempt of modernity to find justification for morality on reason alone, an attempt that disregarded or lacked an adequate appreciation of metaphysics and the transcendental nature of being.

The actual proposals that may emerge for social structures supporting a human-centered conception of the social order and a conception of being as desiring, pursuing and experiencing the common good—and thus happiness—would need to define and give specific content to what is it that the pursuit of the common good entails in a given context, that is, what kinds of actions are required for its attainment in a given time and place. A look at how liberalism addresses the demands of citizens while at the same time it falls short in the provision of common goods calls for clearly distinguishing between the role of communities and state institutions in the pursuit of the common good. Communities should define the content of the common good and the structure of the support framework to assist them. State institutions (as they exist in modern liberal democracies) should be *relegated* to organizational support rather than *delegated* with defining the content of the common good and the structure to support it. In other words, communities that allow for meaningful participation in decision making should focus on good governance, while state institutions should be monitored to ensure that they are good governments in discharging the tasks that the political communities have assigned them.

The Catholic Church, through her Social Doctrine, can and must help individuals, communities, political leaders, and civil servants in state institutions discern how best to help organize human affairs. It is not the role of the Church (CSDC para. 68) to assume responsibility for every aspect of life in society, “nor does she propose or establish systems or models of social organization,” but it is the responsibility of the Church—both for her ecclesiastical hierarchy and for the members comprising her as a community of believers—to provide moral guidance. The religious mission of the Church “can be a source of commitment, direction and vigour to establish and consolidate the community of men according to the law of God”. In doing so, the Church as hierarchy and as community of believers collaborates in making concrete, in and with

respect to temporal affairs, the Church's other and pre-eminent reality, that of being the Mystical Body of Christ on earth, which transcends all temporal affairs.

The SDC elaboration of the concepts of human-dignity, subsidiarity, and solidarity is a powerful resource available to all Catholics, and to all people of good will, to assess the merits of proposals to address liberalism's shortcomings. They are permanent principles, that can assist the liberal state survive and redeem itself from its failures, or help in providing direction to the emergence of radical alternatives to it. It is up to properly formed Catholics and people of good will, guided and aided by the grace and the practice of virtues and by the SDC, to recommit themselves to the pursuit of the common good and the discernment of the best conceptual and organizational framework to support this pursuit. True happiness on earth and the joy of unity with God in eternity depend on it.

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