Caring for Our Common Good

Minding Our Own Business

*In our current context of conflicts around deepening inequality, social need & global divides, where are our common interests?*

With Dr Patrick Riordan SJ, Heythrop College

Part of a developing series for local leaders, community partners and action networks offering space for sincere conversation and deep reflection on how we live together...

We will be looking at topical economic, political and cultural issues in the light of principles and values from Catholic social teaching that can be shared by people of faith or no faith.

For example, how might *human dignity* and *respect for the worth of a person’s work* be markers of how we run a food bank or campaign on living wages? How might *subsidiarity* relate to social care, or *property rights* apply to the shortage of affordable housing in our city?

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The common good is always partially realized – otherwise there could be no communal life. The common goods of any community includes the shared meanings and values, the social capital which sustains it.

Dr Patrick Riordan SJ, currently teaching at Heythrop College, London, spoke to a diverse group at the Hurtado Jesuit Centre, Wapping on the topic of the Common Good. He suggested that our language concerning shared projects is full of hidden assumptions that sometimes turn out to be false. He went on to discuss three areas of common life that turn out to be more fragile than we thought, and which now need careful attention.

The ‘we’ implied in ‘our’ can refer to different sets of people, with different common concerns and identities. It can mean the ‘we’ of everyone, or it can mean the ‘we’ of a smaller insider group. Because of this, we can often find that when it comes to ‘our business’ there is a conflict of ‘we’s. It is a society’s framework of rules for managing conflict that create our common ground for ‘our business’.

Thus in economics we try to protect the market efficiency of competition for the sake of consumers but we also try to be fair to smaller competitors who could be unfairly destroyed by larger ones.

However sometimes we take our ‘common framework’ for granted. Sometimes we can realize too late that something has gone awry and then we scramble trying to deal with it, often by passing legislation. Legislation, however, can be a clumsy tool, prey to the law of unintended consequences, as people adapt their behaviour within the letter of the law to avoid punitive measures. For instance the case of the NHS accident and emergency target waiting times: these did not reduce the real time waited by patients, but led to ambulances queuing up until triage was ready to process the people they were carrying.

Better than law, can be the development of a collective moral response. Rather than ‘this is the regulation you have to comply with or else…’, ‘this is what we (all of us) ought to do’.

In a fundamental way this is about a person’s dignity. Dignity is a matter of status. To be on the same step of the ladder as everyone else; in other words, in terms of human dignity, there is no ladder anymore.
This is a matter of shared meaning, an important dimension of our common space, and so a common good, something we together have an interest in preserving.

Dr Riordan looked at three examples of areas of our common framework whose fragility has recently been exposed.

Freedom of Speech
The first was the issue of freedom of speech over against the issue of hate speech, in the light of the Charlie Hebdo cartoons. It was not just that a minority group in society could be upset and hurt by the speech of others, important though that was. Hate speech damaged a common public space shared and needed by all. This public space precisely protected the status and dignity of all vulnerable groups, guaranteeing a space of equals irrespective of ethnic, social, religious affiliation. For this reason careful attention was needed to the boundaries between legitimate freedom of speech and hate speech, and the result should not necessarily be legislation, but a renewed moral consensus of disapproval towards speech acts that in someway affronted the dignity of individuals in society or excluded them from the common space.

International Relations
A second key area was in international relations. Here the common framework was the post war consensus through the UN that problems in international relations should be solved by negotiation rather than war. Yet Russia, a significant player in the post war consensus was no longer acting according to that consensus. Once again there was a problem of different ‘we's with different assumptions about what consensus ‘we’ had actually consented to. Perhaps the old western bloc was guilty of complacency and more work needed to be done to achieve a new and deeper consensus.

Migration
A third issue was migration. Here again there was a conflict between the Human Rights regime widely accepted in the post war era and the drive of European states to control the flow of migrants across their borders. In compassion ‘we' identify with the victims of human trafficking or callous neglect, but in shame, ‘we' recognize our role as members of a society keeping other people out at all costs.

Dr Riordan highlighted here the reduction of ‘we' to a single interest group, over against the universal good in the catch-phrase ‘what is best for Britain...’ Who exactly is the implied ‘us' that ‘it' is best for? We cannot so easily privilege our personal survival above the common human requirements to protect one another.

There is a public space we all share, even though we are many, with different cultures, faiths and even nationalities. It is in our shared interest that the common space be such that each one may take her place in it on the same terms as everyone else, that each one’s rights be respected regardless of her particular circumstances.
Responses

In the responses, there was some discussion of the importance of satire as an agent of change, as well as the moral imperative not to hurt other people by one's words. There were also questions about whether verbal attack was pedagogically the most effective way of changing consciousnesses and the quality of compassion or cruelty in different forms of satire.

Another area of discussion was the ambiguity of the term ‘common good’ itself. People simply meant different things by it. Dr Riordan compared the term to ‘peace’ and ‘justice’, people will use the language to seek approval for their position or policy, but their arguments justifying that position will necessarily need to go deeper than these general labels. Nevertheless we still share a common commitment to the (political/legal) framework for managing the conflict.

The suggestion that common good might have a positive sense of ‘common things we share’ prompted questions about fragmentation and disagreements about the meaning of human dignity, including the need to create a space where real, robust argument could take place without fear of judgment. ‘How can we not be offensive to one another and how can we not be over-offended by each other.’

There was a further suggestion that ‘common good’ simply had no resonance for a significant number of people. There were just individual consumers. Perhaps there is not such a consensus about the dignity of all individuals as ‘we’ imagine. Here is a spur to engage in ethos-shaping debate. The language of the common good is nevertheless universal as we all need a common space. The content just stretches very thin in some places.

The problem of social homogeneity came up. The great mix in modern cultures made the idea of a nation state much harder to maintain as a common project. There were specific problems in Tower Hamlets, but also specific areas of shared concern and action. Some terms were less accessible and so less useful in developing a new consensus (common good, British values), while others ‘unconditional love’ ‘respecting my neighbour’. There was a need to develop a new shared vocabulary to articulate common concerns.

The discussion concluded with a short presentation by Dr Riordan on elements of Catholic social teaching as the foundations for such a new, consensual language.
Resources

From Catholic Social Teaching

**Vatican Council II** (1965) *Gaudium et spes* 74: ‘The political community exists for the common good: this is its full justification and meaning and the source of its specific and basic right to exist. The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and effective fulfilment.’

**Pope Benedict XVI** (2009) *Caritas in veritate* 21: ‘Paul VI understood development to indicate the goal of rescuing peoples from hunger, deprivation, endemic diseases and illiteracy; from the economic point of view, this meant their active participation, on equal terms, in the international economic process; from the social point of view, it meant their evolution into educated societies marked by solidarity; from the political point of view it meant the consolidation of democratic regimes capable of ensuring freedom and peace’

**Pope Francis** (2014) *Evangelii Gaudium*: Promote full human development and pursue common good: dialogue with states; dialogue with society – cultures and sciences; dialogue with other believers (EG 238); build agreement seeking a just, responsive, inclusive society; we do not need plans drawn up by a few for the few, or an enlightened minority claiming to speak for everyone; the Church does not have solutions for every issue (EG 241)

Listen again...

Dr Patrick Riordan SJ’s presentation is available at: https://soundcloud.com/jesuitsinbritain/the-common-good-dr-patrick-riordan-sj

Principles for the Common Good (CAFOD Come & See)

- Dignity of the Human Person
- We are called to live as family and community
- Rights and responsibilities
- Stewardship of the environment and resources
- An option for the poor and vulnerable
- The rights and dignity of workers
- Solidarity
- Promotion of peace

Dr Patrick Riordan SJ is lecturer in political philosophy at Heythrop College, London.

His areas of interest include the philosophy of justice, religion and politics, the justification of punishment, and the common good. He has published on these topics, most recently with books: ‘

The Grammar of the Common Good (Continuum 2008)

‘Global Ethics and Global Common Goods’ (Bloomsbury 2015)
Reflections

Questions to take away...
What one idea or insight did you gain from this Caring for our Common Good digest?

Is there particular concern in the context of Wapping, East London or your own community or work, where the concept of "our Common Good" might usefully be applied?

Please let us know any suggestions for future topics for a similar conversation.

Following on from an initial foundational session, we will start with our lived experience and the wisdom of people working on specific issues in local contexts.

We will offer space for informed debate and honest listening, trusting that the discussions and time together will provide fresh perspectives and new insights.

Our hope is for ways into renewed personal responses, practical community ideas and advocacy efforts.

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