# The Common Good and the Modern State

*V. Bradley Lewis* [1]

The Eleventh Edward Cardinal Egan Lecture

Union League Club
New York City,
April 5, 2025

Imagine a presidential candidate who ran on this platform: "Elect me and I will work to achieve my own good and that of my friends." Of course, no one running for office says that (even if it is their intention!). They run, so they say, to promote the public good or the common good. That very durable phrase, the common good, has served as a way to describe the end of political institutions and practices since the seventh century before Christ. It has become especially prominent in American political rhetoric over the last decade or so: there have been proposals for "Common Good Capitalism," "Common Good Conservatism," and "Common Good Constitutionalism." If there is anything new here it is perhaps the adoption of the phrase by the political right, since historically it featured in more liberal rhetoric. But there is a constant: the meaning and implications of the phrase "common good" are often quite vague, so much so that many consider it an empty slogan. Again, is anyone really *against* the common good? Well, not against, but sometimes skeptical: there are those who have thought it uncomfortably close to a kind of un-American collectivism. And there are other worries beside these: one of my professors in graduate school used to say, "the common good is always someone's bad," and the German legal philosopher Carl Schmitt once told the great Catholic philosopher Joseph Pieper that "anyone who speaks of the *bonum commune* is bent on deception."

Nevertheless, the idea of the common good, *bonum commune* in Latin, has a hallowed place in Catholic political thought and, more specifically, Catholic Social Doctrine. Indeed, the Roman Catholic magisterium has employed a rather more specific characterization of the common good since at least the 1940s, but quite prominently since the Second Vatican Council. There the common good is characterized as "the sum total of conditions by means of which both individuals and groups can more fully and easily achieve their perfection." But even this formulation has been a subject of controversy. Some scholars have argued that it is a largely instrumental conception of the common good and thus inconsistent with the classical Aristotelian-Thomistic understanding of the common good as a final cause, that is, as an end that justifies and orients political life. They have also worried that it is relativistic and smacks of individualism. Others, however, have criticized its reference to perfection as impossible and inappropriate in modern pluralistic democracies.

My remarks will concern this problem, and I really want to discuss two aspects of it. First, I want to examine what I will call the Vatican II characterization of the common good in light of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition that undergirds Catholic Social Doctrine. Second, I want to treat this problem as an example of a more general issue in political philosophy, that of how concepts that emerge in one time period change when applied to very different historical and social contexts. My basic argument is that the Vatican II account of the common good is in fact a reasonable and defensible development of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition of political thought, one adapted to modern circumstances. A concept that has its origins in the world of the classical Greek *polis* cannot but find application in importantly different ways in the context of the modern state. One of the excellent features of the Cardinal Egan Lectures is the choice of a work of art to accompany the lecture, and so I want to start by talking just a bit about the work that I have chosen, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government*, which is both surprisingly provocative and relevant.

## I

The Palazzo Pubblico, built between 1297 and 1344 was a symbol of the independence of the Sienese Republic or *commune* as the Italian city-states called themselves. That independence lasted some four hundred years from its establishment of a strictly civil

1 Dean, School of Philosophy
The Catholic University of America

government to the city's absorption by the Duchy of Florence in 1555, but by then its freedom had already been badly compromised by two centuries of instability, civil war, and finally, outright tyranny. It was late in the Golden Age of Sienese republicanism (1260–1355) that Lorenzetti was commissioned to decorate the Palazzo's Sala de' Nove (between 1337 and 1340), where the nine magistrates who constituted the city's executive met. So concerned to fend off tyranny were the Sienese that the term of office of these officials was a mere two months each—and there were nine of them! Standing with one's back to the windows of that august room one looked straight at Lorenzetti's fresco *Buon Governo*. On the right wall was a fresco illustrating the effects of good government and on the left wall was *Mal Governo* and its effects. Bad government was symbolized by a luciferic figure with fangs and horns. Over his head are personifications of the vices of avarice, pride, and vainglory; on either side of him are cruelty, treason, fraud, fury, discord, and war. Beneath him justice is bound in chains as a captive. Surrounding them are scenes of a city and countryside devastated by crime and war. Lest there be any doubt about the meaning, an inscription beneath the fresco reads in part, "For wanting his own good in this land, he submitted justice to tyranny."

Our painting, *Buon Governo*, usually called the *Allegory of Good Government*, on the central wall is dominated by two figures. To the left, a woman clearly meant to symbolize justice gazes up at an angelic being labeled "wisdom," who holds a balance, each side of which touches one of Lady Justice's hands: on the left she metes out punishments and on the right rewards. There is a cord attached to each side of the scale that goes down and into the hands of a figure beneath justice labeled "concord." The cords become a single rope that is then passed to a row of figures, probably representing the citizens and officials of Siena. At the end of that row of figures the rope ascends into the hand of the other dominant figure, larger in fact than justice, a bearded old man who looks like a ruler since he wears a sort of crown and holds a scepter and an orb or circular shield. Over his head are three angelic figures representing the theological virtues and around him are female figures representing the temporal virtues of peace, fortitude, prudence, magnanimity, and temperance. On the whole of the right wall are depictions of the effects of good government: the scenes are rich and various, featuring farming and herding in the countryside and urban scenes of production, commerce, building, education, and family life.

The precise identity of the old man has always been a subject of uncertainty and disagreement. He certainly looks regal, but as the great renaissance historian Nicolai Rubinstein pointed out, this would be odd since Siena was at the time a proud republic. He quite reasonably points to the inscription below this fresco as indicative of the figure's identity: "This holy virtue, wherever it reigns, induces many souls to unite, and these having gathered together a common good becomes their lord." Thus, Rubinstein concluded that the figure represents the common good itself, but he went even further, arguing that it was the common good as derived explicitly from Aristotelian-Thomistic political thought. The subordination of justice to divine wisdom and its directedness to the common good all point to this. Indeed, one could interpret the painting as symbolizing something beyond the merely temporal sphere, the Christian recontextualization of Aristotle's conception of civic life in the order of divine providence. The temporal common good looks to the transcendent common good that is God himself.

Aristotle held that man is both a rational and a political animal. The *polis*, which provided law and justice, was essential for those fitted for it to live the best sort of human life, that devoted to philosophical contemplation. The laws of the city aimed to inculcate virtue among the citizens. For Saint Thomas, the chief social virtue was what he called legal justice, which explicitly aimed at the common good. That justice looks to wisdom indicates Thomas' Aristotelian view of human nature as both political and rational; indeed, in his account of the natural law Thomas famously holds that the most distinctively human natural inclinations are to know the truth about God and to live in society. That temporal order, as depicted by Lorenzetti, an order of justice and peace, leads citizens to their common good, a flourishing life lived together, consisting in both virtuous action and prosperity that itself reflects and looks to the supernatural common good indicated by the theological virtues. Aristotle's vision of civic life is set into the context of a cosmic order infused with grace.

The opposition of the common good to tyranny as depicted in the *Mal Governa* was clearly intended as a warning and spur to the Sienese magistrates to remember the necessity of virtue in a well-governed society, while the city's central function seems to be the maintenance of justice and peace, and that the opposite of the common good in tyranny or civil war was a terrible but permanent possibility. Sadly, it was one Siena would witness firsthand just a generation later and for the next century and a half.

Lorenzetti's *Allegory* was chosen by the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace to adorn the cover of the 2004 *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church*, and it is to the account of the common good given in the *Compendium* that I now turn.

**II**

The common good is treated in the *Compendium* as one of the four basic principles of Catholic Social Doctrine, along with human dignity, subsidiarity, and solidarity (no. 160). It is characterized there in this way: "the sum total of conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their perfection more fully and more easily" (no. 164). That formulation is taken from the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes* (arts. 26, 74) and repeated authoritatively in the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1906). This now canonical formulation certainly made its way into the Council document because it was already prominently stated in Saint John XXIII's 1961 encyclical *Mater et magistra* (no. 65). And it was probably embraced by Pope John because it had already been used more than once by his predecessor, Pius XII, albeit only in speeches. I want to come back to the origins of that account of the common good. As I noted earlier, it has been a subject of controversy among students of Catholic Social Doctrine and Catholic moral theology and political theory more generally. Addressing these problems requires us to look a bit more closely at four features of the formulation.

First, the common good is characterized as an ensemble of conditions, and this has led some to contest it as inconsistent with the common good as a final cause. Some have argued that a set of conditions can be no more than an instrumental good. But consider a second feature: the conditions are conditions of perfection (*perfectio*). That perfection would be a final cause, but here the formulation has been criticized from the opposite standpoint from the first, as aiming too high since disagreement about perfection is a definitive element of our pluralistic democratic society. However, I think this is an important feature of the Vatican II formulation: it assumes pluralism. One set of conditions can serve the pursuit of more than one notion of perfection, especially if we have in mind the conditions maintained by political societies. There are limits to this, of course, and, therefore, disagreement even about conditions, but the focus on conditions does serve to mitigate the obvious dilemmas caused by pluralism. Third, the perfection aimed at is said to be the perfection not only of individuals, but also of groups. This defeats any attempt to see the formulation as individualistic. Some critics have also suggested that the "sum total" language suggests a sort of utilitarianism. But the sum total is of conditions, not individual gratification, a point made clear by both John Paul II (*Centesimus annus*, no. 47) and the Compendium (no. 164). To say that the common good is a set of conditions is not to say what those conditions are. *Gaudium et spes* is not terribly specific here, although it does mention juridical institutions, the protection of basic rights, and the establishment and maintenance of socio-economic conditions appropriate to human flourishing. The 1993 *Catechism* includes the protection of fundamental rights, peace and security, and the development of society itself (nos. 1907-1909). One could conclude from this that the conditions are narrowly material and this, again, suggests the prioritizing of a kind of instrumentality. Here it is important to notice a fourth feature of the formulation given in *Gaudium et spes*, art. 74, but not elsewhere in the Council documents: the common good "embraces" or "includes" (*complector*) the sum total of conditions, but the formulation does not make these conditions exhaustive of it. This suggests a point first made, but rarely noted thereafter, by Oswald von Nell-Breuning in his commentary on *Gaudium et spes*. He argued that the formulation of the common good there should be understood as indicating a lower level of the common good, but not a statement about the common good as such or in its completeness. He thought this "partial" content was aimed at explaining specifically political society, but that the

common good in the fullest sense transcended this.

The focus on conditions in the Council's account does seem in some key respects like a retreat from a more fulsome understanding of the common good such as we find in Aristotle or Aquinas. And I certainly think this is true relative to Aristotle. Aristotle clearly thought that the laws of a city should aim to make its citizens good. He says this again and again in the *Nicomachean Ethics and Politics*. He could not have meant that laws have the power in some clear and straightforward way to make people good. Virtue is a function of one's deliberate choices and so cannot be forced. It can be encouraged more or less forcefully, and the Council's conception of the common good seems to concede a lesser degree of this encouragement, a lesser estimation of just what the political community can accomplish in the way of moral formation. Why would Catholic Social Doctrine, as it were, aim lower, especially given its inspiration and in-formation by Aristotelian-Thomistic thought? I have an answer to this, but first it is important to look at just what Saint Thomas himself said about the common good.

## III

As I noted earlier, prominent among the critics of both liberal politics and the Vatican II formulation of the common good have been those who see both as at odds with a more classical view, especially that of Saint Thomas Aquinas. However, with Aquinas matters are a bit more complicated than often thought, and this in three ways. First, Thomas nowhere gives a straightforward and comprehensive characterization of the common good. There is only one article in the *Summa theologiae* concerned explicitly with the common good (out of over three thousand!). The subject is mostly treated in an *en passant* and elliptical manner. Second, while the Latin phrase that can be literally translated as "common good," *bonum commune*, is Thomas' way of referring to the final cause of political authority, institutions, and practice, it is not the only such phrase used for those things. He also speaks of the *utilitas communis, bonum publicum, bonum civitatis*, and *bonum multitudinis*, and these phrases seem to be used interchangeably. This defeats a technical or strictly definitional route to understanding the term's meaning. Third, the common good is treated by Thomas sometimes in a primarily speculative way and sometimes in an explicitly practical way, but nowhere is it made really clear how those two usages relate to one another. So sometimes he discusses the common good as the separate final end of everything, and this is clearly God; and sometimes he speaks of it as an internal end, for example, the order of the created universe. But he also uses the phrase in discussing the justification for private property or the circumstances in which intentional killing may be permissible. Politics is certainly a practical thing, so that is where we should look first for the meaning of "common good" in Aquinas. I want to briefly look at the one text that treats the common good focally and in a practical context.

*Summa theologiae*, 1a2ae, q. 90, a. 2 is Saint Thomas's famous discussion of the nature of law. There he takes the common good to be the final cause of law. Here is an excerpt from the body of the article:

> As stated above (Article 1), the law belongs to that which is a **principle of human acts**, because it is their rule and measure. Now as reason is a principle of human acts, so in reason itself there is something which is the principle in respect of all the rest: wherefore to this principle chiefly and mainly law must needs be referred. Now the first principle in practical matters, which are the object of the practical reason, is the last end: and the last end of human life is happiness or blessedness, as stated above (1a2ae, 2.7; 1a2ae, 3.1). Consequently the law must needs regard principally the relationship to blessedness. **Moreover, since every part is ordained to the whole**, as imperfect to perfect; and since one man is a part of the perfect community, the law must needs regard properly the relationship to communal happiness. Wherefore the Philosopher, in the above definition of legal matters, mentions both happiness and the body politic: for he says *(Nic. Ethics* 5, 1) that we call those legal matters "just, which are adapted to produce and preserve happiness and its parts for the body politic": since the city is a perfect community, as he says in *Politics* 1.1.

The passage has two parts, and it is important to keep in mind that the overall context is Thomas' definition of law. The first part identifies the common good in

a very simple and straightforward sense as the good common to all human beings. That good is happiness or blessedness (*felicitas vel beatitudo*). So there is some sense in which the law aims at the happiness of persons. The second part adds the communal dimension: since law is an element of the life of community it aims not just at happiness, but at the happiness of a multitude of persons who make up a community. The basic thrust of the discussion, then, is that in aiming at the common good the law aims at the happiness of human persons as members of a community. But the community Thomas mentions here is not community in a merely generic sense: he actually writes, citing Aristotle, "political community" (*communio politica*) which he also describes, again following Aristotle, as a "perfect community" (*communitas perfecta*). By "perfect" community Thomas doesn't mean "the best community ever," but rather something more like "complete." The political community is complete insofar as it contains within it all that is necessary for human persons to flourish. This is what is distinctive about political community as compared to the family. The difference between the political community (*civitas*) [and the family] is not simply a matter of the number of people, but is a formal difference. The political community is a distinct kind of whole, and the distinction is to be found in its completeness. So the common good understood as happiness must also be seen not simply as happiness, but the happiness of a civic multitude, a notion of happiness or flourishing appropriate to that kind of multitude.

The difference between these two parts is important. Thomas distinguishes elsewhere between perfect happiness and imperfect happiness (*S.Th.*, 1a2ae, 3.2 ad4). Perfect happiness is the happiness of the blessed who enjoy communion with God in heaven. Here he distinguishes also between the ultimate good for human beings understood objectively in itself (*finis cujus*) as God and subjectively in the human enjoyment of the good (*finis quo*) as blessedness (*S.Th.*, 1a2ae, 1.8c). God is, therefore, the common good in an objective sense and blessedness, from the side of the creature, is the common good in a subjective sense. But neither of these things can be achieved by the political community. Perfect happiness is supernatural and requires God's grace. The political community is concerned with the temporal common good. Thomas also describes what he calls imperfect happiness, which is essentially the sort of happiness that a human being can achieve via the natural human powers, that is, what Aristotle meant by happiness. This happiness is largely a function of the development of natural acquired virtues, the highest of which are the intellectual virtues. So perfect human happiness is the life of philosophical contemplation. Again, the political community cannot bring this about. The moral virtues, which are connected to political life, are for Aristotle lower than the intellectual virtues. Here one can still ask whether the happiness to be found in the exercise of the acquired moral virtues is something that can be produced by law and government. The political community and its various instrumentalities (like law) cannot make a person good. Virtuous action is a function of one's own free deliberate choices (as are the acts of true religion). For these reasons I do not think we should characterize the specifically political common good as virtue, even though virtuous living is a common good and even a common good that benefits political communities (this is a theme of Lorenzetti's frescos). It behooves political communities to want citizens to be virtuous and to do what can be done to promote virtuous living, but there are limits on the extent to which law can do this. Saint Thomas is very clear on this point. Law can remove obstacles to virtue, can help an individual develop virtue over time, but law cannot simply effect virtuous action, and laws that aim to stamp out all vice can, Saint Thomas says, do more harm than good (*S.Th.*, 1a2ae, 96.2). What, then, can the political community do with respect to the happiness of its citizens?

The political community can establish and maintain the conditions that allow individuals and groups to more fully and easily achieve their own perfection. The sum total of those conditions is, therefore, a perfectly Thomistic way to understand the political common good. Indeed, Thomas describes the temporal common good as consisting of "many things" and emphasizes as constitutive elements of it "justice and peace" (*S.Th.*, 1a2ae, 96.1c, and 3c). In these respects, Thomas seems to demand and expect rather less than Aristotle. Why? I think there are two reasons. First, I think it has to do with the role of the Church, a new kind of spiritual community aimed at helping persons attain their ultimate end by preaching the Gospel and communicating God's grace. For Aristotle the city was

the moral horizon of human life; after Christianity this is no longer true since above and beyond the terrestrial city is the city of God, and, consequently, the stakes of politics cannot but be lowered. Second, it matters just what kind of political community serves as the context for the pursuit of the common good. The *polis* of Aristotle's time was a small face-to-face community and far more culturally homogeneous than the larger more diffuse medieval societies, much less modern nation-states. The means at its disposal for enforcing the will of its government were far more primitive than those available now, but also more effective on a very small scale. The limitations on what the political community can accomplish in the souls of individual persons—already greater in Aquinas than Aristotle—are even more limited in the sorts of political societies we live in than in the small cities that Aristotle described in the fourth century before Christ or the medieval principalities and kingdoms that Aquinas knew in the thirteenth century. Indeed, I think the very character of the modern state is an important aspect of Catholic Social Doctrine that is rarely appreciated, and it is crucial to understanding the Vatican II characterization of the common good. How so?

**IV**

The modern line of Catholic Social Doctrine was initiated by Leo XIII, and it is not often enough noted that this project was closely related to another of Leo's concerns, the revival among Catholics of philosophy, specifically of the Aristotelian-Thomistic approach to philosophy. Leo thought that a philosophical revival was necessary as a way of initiating a dialogue with the forces of modernity, and Catholic Social Doctrine, informed by Thomistic philosophy, was a way to understand and engage the political forces of the time. The political context of Europe in the mid-nineteenth century is crucial to all of this, a period the paramount informing political phenomenon of which was the confluence of the so-called "Springtime of Nations" with the increasing consolidation and capacity of the modern state crystallizing in the political form that we now habitually call the nation-state. The increasing power of the modern state was both cause and consequence (the causality is very complex) of the increasing atomization of society—here economic changes are also important, but they cannot be completely separated from the mechanics of state-formation and consolidation—and was enabled by the technical means for unifying larger geographical units through modern technology, especially the technology of transportation and communication. Nationalism provided the glue to hold these larger units together, but was often promoted as a rival to and/or replacement of religion in the wake first of the Wars of Religion and later of the French Revolution, the Revolutions of 1848, and the quasi-revolutionary projects of German and Italian unification. There are, I think, two important aspects of this for Catholic thinking about the common good and the state.

First, the anti-clericalism of many of these political movements, empowered by the authority and technical means of the state, was a grave challenge to the Church's position. For better or worse (and I tend to think it was the former) the Church's integral connection to many political societies and their ruling authorities was broken in all kinds of ways between the 16th and 19th centuries, and this forced the Church to think about new ways to carry out its apostolic mission. Leo's reconception of the papacy as mainly a teaching-pastoral ministry was one. Catholic Social Doctrine was another. It was necessary to intelligibly defend the Church and its freedom, but also to defend natural human goods like the family. The recovery of philosophy as a language of engagement was at the center of this, as was the gradual sense that evangelization had to work through the laity and on culture, and a return to a more Biblical and apostolic understanding of the Church itself, all of which culminated in the Second Vatican Council.

Second, Catholic Social Teaching included as a central if not always maximally clear element a concern with the nature of the modern state as such. Political community is, of course, a natural form of human association, indeed the final/complete natural human community in classical political philosophy. But there are (and showing this is one of the great achievements of the thought of one of the most important contemporary Catholic political thinkers, Pierre Manent) a number of historical forms of polity: the city, the empire, the Church (in a sense), the nation, and the nation-state. There are, I think, three defining features of the modern state as a political

form: one concerns its structure, one its characteristic means, and a third the justification of its authority. Its structure was classically formulated by Max Weber, who characterized the modern state as a political unit holding a monopoly of the legitimate use of coercive force in a defined territory and operating mainly through a rational legal form of authority articulated in structures that we still call bureaucracy. It is opposed mainly to traditional or patrimonial forms of authority (Francis Fukuyama's two-volume treatise on political order is a rather good rearticulation of basically this view updated by modern historical and social science scholarship). The state's characteristic means are those made available through modern science; they are technical means that allow states to consolidate and increase their capacity to penetrate and regulate social life over large territories and to defend themselves against external threats. These are interrelated with the modern economy which has created the wealth necessary to support the state's activities. The most radical feature of the modern state is to be found in its self-understanding, that is, in its understanding of the justification of its authority. This justification was first articulated by Thomas Hobbes, the other great theorist of the modern state, as the will of the individuals who make it up (*Leviathan*, ch. 17). Where the ancients justified political power by reference to a notion of the common good, usually associated with a particular sort of ruling group, and Christian political theology by reference to divine authority somehow communicated to human beings (a notion still articulated by Leo and Pius), modern political philosophy has rooted political authority in the massed wills of individual human beings from Hobbes to Locke to Rousseau and right up through the most influential political philosopher of the last half-century, John Rawls. But this is also the dominant popular understanding and, as I say, the self-understanding of the modern state.

Both of these phenomena present a particular challenge to both classical political philosophy and the Church: the modern state is an extraordinarily powerful human technology, capable of things that no tyrant of antiquity could have imagined. It is capable of astonishing human accomplishments both good and bad. Only the modern state could have landed human beings on the moon; only a modern state could have perpetrated the Holocaust. The promises of peace, material prosperity, and social equality that animate the modern project are intimately connected to the modern state; but so is the unprecedented destructiveness of modern warfare and the unprecedented forms of repression visited on hundreds of millions of human beings by modern totalitarian politics. The role of the modern state, its character and the threats to human persons and communities that it poses, is a central element of the Social Doctrine of the Church.

One can see this especially in a line of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German Jesuit social thinkers, although it began with an Italian, Luigi Taparelli D'Azeglio (1793–1862), who served as rector of the Collegio Romano and encouraged his student Gioacchino Vincenzo Pecci to study the thought of Aquinas. Pecci later took the name Leo XIII, and Taparelli's influence was crucial to his initiation of the Thomistic revival and Catholic Social Doctrine: the ideas of subsidiarity and social justice were taken from Taparelli's sprawling four-volume treatise on natural law published in the 1840s. Taparelli was explicitly reacting against the French Revolution and the nationalist state consolidation of the mid-nineteenth century, which he thought threatened both the church and the family as well as other aspects of social life. His ideas were later taken up by German Jesuits who worked and wrote at the Jesuit studium at Maria Laach in the Rheinland. That community was forced out of Germany during the *Kulturkampf*, but had already devoted itself to understanding the implications of modern political institutions and practices from a Thomistic perspective. They were especially concerned with the defense of the freedom of the Church, the dignity of the human person, and the limitation of the power of the modern state. For our purposes the most consequential of these thinkers was Victor Cathrein (1845–1931), a prolific writer on moral, social, and political questions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Cathrein's treatise on moral philosophy, first published in 1893 and running to twenty-one editions–the last appearing in 1959, the second year of St. John XXIII's pontificate–is, I think, the source for the characterization of the common good in *Gaudium et spes*, finding its way there by way of John XXIII's encyclicals, but already adopted in speeches by Pius XII. Here is how Cathrein described the common good in another seminary textbook:

> The end of political society is public prosperity or an ensemble of requisite conditions that enables all members of society as much as possible to achieve their temporal happiness subordinate to their ultimate end. Among these the first place is occupied by the development of a judicial/legal order, a quality demanded by the natural structure of society; second, a sufficient supply of the goods of soul and body, by which to accomplish the work of achieving happiness, and which cannot be attained sufficiently by private activity. (*Philosophia Moralis in Usum Scholarum*, Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1893, 306)

Cathrein's characterization of the political common good is quoted authoritatively in Heinrich Pesch's treatise on political economy, so influential on Pius XI's 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, drafted by another Jesuit social thinker, Oswald von Nell-Breuning (1890–1991). But it made its way into the speeches of Pius XII through Pius's chief advisor on social questions, another German Jesuit, Gustav Gundlach (1892–1963), who actually penned the first draft of John XXIII's *Mater et magistra*. One could call all of these thinkers personalists who emphasized the directedness of the political common good to the good of persons. They did not view the political common good as instrumental, but they did view the state that way. They had this in common with Pius XII, who described it that way in his 1939 encyclical, *Summi pontificatus*; Jacques Maritain, who described the state as instrumental in his massively influential 1951 book *Man and the State*; and Pope Saint John Paul II, who did the same in his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus annus* (no. 11). For all of them, one might say that the state is for the common good and, therefore, for man.

**V**

For the reasons I have given, I take the Vatican II characterization of the political common good to have been an authentic development of Thomistic political thought. It was part of a larger attempt to understand the politics of the modern state from a Thomistic perspective, and, more importantly, to limit or discipline that powerful and very dangerous political form as a way of protecting the natural institution of the family, the supernatural institution of the Church, and the dignity of the individual human person, whose destiny is also supernatural and so transcends the temporal common good in any political form. The concept of the common good, one that originated in the archaic age of the Greeks, is still a signature feature of our normative political vocabulary, but I have tried to show that and how it changes in application in different historical, institutional, and, most importantly, theological contexts.

Beneath the fresco of *Good Government* in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena was a door that led into the adjoining council hall, and when that door was open one standing in the Sala de' Nove could see on the opposite wall of that adjoining room another fresco, this one painted by Simone Martini in 1315, called the *Maestà*, a somewhat smaller but intricate and stunningly beautiful painting of the Madonna and Child. The infant Christ holds in his hand a scroll bearing the words *Diligite iustitiam qui iudicatis terram,* "Love justice, you who judge earth." The men responsible for the political common good were given thereby a glimpse of eternity by which to measure their acts as statesman and in light of which to see how much greater and more beautiful was the ultimate common good in that image of the Virgin among whose titles are Mirror of Justice and Seat of Wisdom, and whose son would one day be their judge. Thank you.

**Some Sources**

Behr, Thomas C. *Social Justice & Subsidiarity: Luigi Taparelli and the Origins of Modern Catholic Social Teaching*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2019.

Cathrein, Victor. *Philosophia Moralis in Usum Scholarum*. Friburgi Brisgoviae: Herder, 1893.

Finnis, John. *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Fukuyama, Francis. *The Origins of Political Order*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

Fukuyama, Francis. *Political Order and Political Decay*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

Goerner, E.A. and Walter J. Thompson, "Politics and Coercion." *Political Theory 24* (1996): 620-52.

Hittinger, F. Russell. *On the Dignity of Society: Catholic Social Teaching and Natural Law*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2024.

Keys, Mary M. *Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Kempshall, M.S. *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999.

McCormick, William. *The Christian Structure of Politics: On the "De Regno" of Thomas Aquinas*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022.

Manent, Pierre. *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic*. Trans. Marc LePain. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

Poggi, Gianfranco. *The State: Its Nature, Development, and Prospects*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Rubinstein, Nicolai. "Political Ideas in Sienese Art: The Frescoes by Ambrogio Lorinzetti and Taddeo di Bartolo in the Palazzo Pubblico." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21 (1958): 179-207.

Stevenson, Jane. Siena: *The Life and Afterlife of a Medieval City*. London: Head of Zeus, 2022.

Taparelli D'Azeglio, Luigi. *Saggio teoretico di dritto naturale appoggiato sul fatto*, 2 vols. 8th ed. Roma: Edizioni "La Civiltà Cattolic, 1949).

Viroli, Maurizio. *From Politics to Reason of State: The Acquisition and Transformation of the Language of Politics 1250-1600*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. Edited by Hans Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.

Witte, John, Jr. and Alexander, Frank S. *The Teachings of Modern Roman Catholicism on Law, Politics, and Human Nature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.