

The Common Good

From the beginning of Genesis, the Bible makes it clear that humans are social beings. God has made us in His image, as Genesis 1 states so clearly. To be made in the image of God means that like the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we too reflect the fulness of our identity when we understand how we are to relate to one another in community. For in the Trinity, we see that the distinct identity between the Blessed Three is lived out in perfect communion. In our reading from Genesis 2 community is the central theme of our text. What is striking about the beginning of the Book of Genesis is the refrain: “And God saw that it was good”. Then at the climax of chapter one the Sacred Author declares:

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good”.

As we come to the reading for today’s Mass, for the first time in the Bible, we hear that something is not good - at Genesis 2:18:

“It is not good that the man should be alone.

Notice what then happens. Every animal is formed out of the ground, and it is brought to the man for him to name the animals. Again, the Sacred Author writes:

and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. ²⁰ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field.

I like to say that in Genesis 1 we have the story of God calling the world into being and here in Genesis 2 the man calls the world into meaning. To be human is to locate ourselves within the world, to understand how we fit into the larger framework of creation. The Man, Adam is, so to speak, the first scientist, because this is what he is doing, cataloging the animals by species, and thereby using his intelligence to interact with the intelligible world in which he is living. But still, he is incomplete. Now he falls into a deep sleep and from his side the woman is formed. Here the first couple forms the most fundamental unit of society – marriage. We know this is a marriage because of what Jesus says in today’s Gospel in interpreting Genesis 1 and 2.

But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ⁷ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife.

What we discover in Genesis 2 is that God has ordered our lives in such a way that we are to live seeking the good of those who are part of the most basic unit of society, that is marriage and the family; but we are also to be engaged in seeking the good of the larger community in which we live; as is expressed by the man being entrusted with naming the creatures that are brought to him.

Within the social teaching of the Catholic Church, the kind of community I am describing is called the ***Common Good***. The Church teaches us that the good of the family as the basic unit of society is always to be supported and preserved. As well, we are to also take our place in promoting the common good of the larger society in which we live.

I want to now expand this teaching on the Common Good by referring to the Catechism of the Catholic Church. It begins by expressing how we are to all participate in the common life of our society. In paragraph 1897 we read these words:

Human society can be neither well-ordered nor prosperous unless it has some people invested with legitimate authority to preserve its institutions and to devote themselves as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all.” (2234)

Here the Catechism is affirming that government is required to work for the good of all. This is not just in reference to those who are elected officials but extends to all those institutions that enhance the common good. And how does the Catechism define the Common Good?

By common good is to be understood “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”

Notice that in thinking about the common good we are considering the sum total of social conditions that allow for our institutions to devote themselves to work of the good of all.

Think about this with me now in relation to COVID19. Those who are elected to public office are to seek in ensure that our institutions – in this case Alberta Health Services – can devote themselves to the care of those in need of medical assistance. That is:

“to work and care for the good of all.”

At present the system is so stressed because of the number of people who have come into the hospital because they are diagnosed with COVID19 that elective surgeries are being cancelled and so many who are in need to medical care unrelated to COVID cannot be treated. This is because of the concentrated effort required to care for COVID patients.

In addressing the interrelationship between the Common Good and COVID19 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the CDF released a statement in December expressing that it is morally acceptable for Catholics to be vaccinated to participate in the promoting of the Common Good. This is in part what they wrote on December 21st, 2020:

From the ethical point of view, the morality of vaccination depends not only on the duty to protect one's own health, but also on the duty to pursue the common good. In the absence of other means to stop or even prevent the pandemic, the common good may recommend vaccination, especially to protect the weakest and most exposed.

On September 22nd Bishop McGrattan in his letter explaining why religious exemption would not be given for those who choose not to be vaccinated reiterated the teaching of the CDF:

As stated by my brother Bishops and in communion with the Holy Father, it is morally permissible to receive a vaccine approved for use in Canada against COVID-19, and while there are many possible reasons for one to struggle in their conscience with such a vaccine being mandatory; and while the Diocese respects the freedom of a person's individual conscience as the Church teaches, the Church and her ministers cannot objectively attest to or endorse a person's process of discernment in coming to their decision of conscience. Therefore, the Diocese and the parishes will not be issuing any letters of exemption from vaccination.

What this means is that each person must work through this for him or herself; but the Diocese cannot write letters supporting the decision an individual makes to choose or not to choose vaccination. Bishop McGrattan goes on to write:

If vaccination will be mandated, there must also be on the part of legitimate authorities, the necessary provisions of reasonable accommodation which respects and promotes the dignity of the individual conscience and the decision of conscientious objection. However, those who choose not to be vaccinated for whatever reason must do their utmost to ensure that they take all precautionary measures possible to avoid places and circumstances where they and others would be most vulnerable. They must also follow the health and safety measures not only to prevent contracting the virus for themselves but also preventing others from becoming sick. This is everyone's moral responsibility.

So, as we continue to consider the impact of COVID19 on our city and province and discern how we should respond as Catholic Christians, this teaching on the Common Good that finds implicit expression biblically in Genesis 2 and explicit expression in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the recent statements of the CDF and our bishop is to help inform our conscience. If a person does decide to exercise conscientious objection to vaccination this needs to be respected. At the same time, I would invite any who are struggling with the vaccine to reach out to me. I would be honoured to talk about this with you.

The COVID19 crisis accentuates the importance for us to affirm that it is not good for us to be alone. As those made in the image of God may we seek to promote the Common Good so that in relation to this pandemic we will devote ourselves “as far as is necessary to work and care for the good of all.”