

DIFFUSION MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

COLMAN JERMAN, O.P.

I. SOCIETY

It is obvious that without *diffusion* the idea of a community is unthinkable.

—Msgr. G. Philips*



HESTERTON once remarked that it is exactly when we do regard man as an animal, that we know he is not an animal. With equal truth, we may say that it is exactly when we do regard man as an individual, that we know he is not an individual. He is not a self-enclosed, self-sufficient world to himself. Human nature is such that the individual cannot provide by himself those means—material, cognitional and moral—without which he cannot attain the perfection to which he is by his very nature ordained. His nature gives him the fundamental capacity for a degree of perfection which he cannot realize by himself. But his nature is a principle of happiness, not of frustration: what the individual cannot do by himself, his nature inclines him to do socially. Man needs help, and “of all the things that are helpful to him, the most helpful of all are other men.”¹

Thus, all the help needed by the individual is summed up in, and intimately connected with, his need for society. Self-development, in other words, eventually reaches a point beyond which it cannot proceed as long as it remains purely “self-ish.” The individual has the capacity and rudimentary means to attain the goal of perfection that is *natural* to man. But he needs the assistance of society for the very important, and no less demanding, task that has still to be performed. *Potentially*, perfection is his; society will help him to become *actually* what he already is potentially.

ACCENT ON ACTION

St. Thomas defines a society as “a union of men instituted for the prosecution of communal activity.”² The three elements of this definition lay bare the essence of a society. It is (1) an association of men, (2) for the sake of *doing* something, (3) in common. A

* *The Role of the Laity in the Church* (Fides Publ., 1956), p. 158.

¹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Contra Gent.*, III, 128.

² *Contra Impug. Dei Cult. et Relig.*, c. 3.

society is more dynamic than static. People do not form or join societies in order to *be* something, so much as to *do* something. Furthermore, the doing has a communal, or common, aspect to it. A man does not have to join a club in order to smoke his pipe, or make an entry in his diary, or take a walk around the block. But he does have to enter into dynamic, operational association with other men in order to build a skyscraper, or publish a book, or play a game of checkers. So, although we tend to equate the word *society* with *civil society*, St. Thomas' definition is applicable to the family, to an army, a labor union, a business partnership, a baseball team, a bridge club, or two persons riding a tandem. All these groups or combinations of individuals are formed for the sake of common activity, or cooperation. Any such association is rightly thought of as a society.

FIRST OF ALL, THE END

Before a society is productive of any communal effort, there must be in the first place a common objective: the end. In all things of a practical or operational nature, the end is the beginning. The purpose, or intention, which the individuals had in mind in deciding to form the society was really its beginning, its principle. Doctors, for example, want to keep abreast of current investigation and experimentation in the field of medicine: but the average practitioner would have more than a full time task trying to do this on his own. So an association is formed, in which the work involved in gathering information, editing and printing a magazine, is divided among many collaborators. Long before the initial purpose is finally realized, before the first issue is published, the end they have had in mind was making its presence felt. It stimulates and prescribes all the preliminary activity.

The end is the beginning or principle of a society, not merely as a point of inception, but as a constant source of societal activity. It is like a spring, which is not only the place where the stream begins, but is the lasting source of the stream. It is a perpetual beginning. The end of a society will influence everything that comes after it: the size of the society, the qualifications for membership, the kinds of activity undertaken, the duration of the society, and everything else about it.

Whether or not a society is *good* is also determined by its end, and not vice versa. A society is good if its end is good, and its end is good if it is conducive, directly or indirectly, to the true Ultimate End of its members. In the case of a *natural* society, i.e., the family

and the State, there can be no doubt that its end is so conducive. The end to which these societies are ordained is predetermined by the very nature of man, or, more fundamentally, by the Maker of man. In the case of a man-made or "artificial" society, its end is determined by the members prior to its actual inauguration. In such a society, the objective set by fallible man may be a false goal, an apparent good, which would lead its members away from their true Ultimate End. In a contest of "social monsters," this sort of thing would take first prize.

COMPACTION

The project undertaken by any society demands for its realization an expenditure of effort characterized by complexity *and* concord. It calls for unified diversity. First of all, it must be a complex, or multiple, or complicated affair, or else one man could do it alone, and there would be little or no need for a society. But the individual activities, the dynamic components, must be harmonized, must be in concord. The different members of a baseball team, for example, each have a distinctly different role to play, distinctly different actions to perform; yet all these different actions must be interrelated, so that the team functions as a unit, performing activity that no single member could produce by himself. It is the end in view which initiates and prescribes, step by step, this process of compaction or organization. The individual members are assigned different functions, enabling the corporate body to exercise activity which was formerly impossible or at least much more difficult. One man could not act as an entire baseball team; it takes nine different men, each one with his own particular role to play. When the members are thus interrelated one to another, and therefore to the collective whole, they achieve a new, a societal, mode of being. They are members of a social unit.

The relational pattern or collocation of the members established in the course of this processing, fulfills the definition of *order*: the positional arrangement, or disposition, of principal things in relation to their principle. The principle here is the *end*; the "principal things" are the members. The "positional arrangement" must be understood here in a dynamic sense: the members are arranged or disposed according to an *operational* pattern, through which they realize a new mode of being. What they could not do individually, they now can do collectively, following an orderly procedure. They are well *ordered* to the end. From the former incoherence and impotence of mere unrelated numerosity, order has been

drawn; confusion and operational nullity have given way to distinctness and new potentialities. It is thanks to order that multiplied unities can become a unified multiple.

How important to society is order? So important that without it society cannot exist. Without order there may be present the *material* element of a society, i.e., a plurality of subjects, but no society. Introduce order into a mere aggregation of operationally unrelated individuals however, and a society takes its first breath. For order is the *form*, the *formal* element, of a society: that which essentially makes it the type of thing it is.³ Order is the *soul* of society: the form which animates the new unity emerging from multiplicity.

ONENESS

By reason of society then, *many are one*. This may sound strange, if not contradictory. How can anything be at the same time "one" and "many?" Actually, we are not unacquainted with such paradoxes. The human being, for instance, has many parts—eyes, ears, arms and legs—yet he is *one*; he is a human being. All his parts, that is, add up to "1." This is true of every *per se* or "independent" entity; every *substance*, as the philosopher would say. A part of such an entity has no existence or act or meaning, except in conjunction with the whole. A severed human hand, for example, is not really a human hand, nor can it do the practically infinite number of things a human hand can do.

The individual member of a society, unlike the human hand or foot, *does* have separate existence apart from the corporate body, and he can act "on his own," independently of the group. Society does not have the integral or substantial unity of a substance.⁴ Considered within the order of a society, its members are in some way, i.e., ordinally, *one*; outside that order, they are simply diverse. Participating in societal order, they are unified; deprived of that order, they are diversified.

The existence and unity of a thing are derived from the same principle, for being and unity are convertible. Therefore, since a thing has existence from its form, it also has unity from its form.⁵

Since the form of a society is its order, it has entity or exist-

³ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, I, 39, 3; XII *Meta.*, lect. 12, n. 2627.

⁴ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, I-II, 17, 4; II *Pol.*, lect. 1, n. 179.

⁵ *Contra Gent.*, II, 58

ence according to this order; it has what we may call an "ordinal existence." So too its unity is an ordinal unity.⁶ The form, or formal cause, of a society (its order) is something that can be realized only in and among its members, not outside them. *They*—arranged or disposed according to a definite operational plan—are the society. Thus, operationally ordered individuals constitute a society. In short, *society is its members*.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEING IN THE WHOLE

When a man enters a society, he walks into a new condition of things. Considered strictly in his own individuality or "isolation," he is not a part of something else, but a "whole." Considered as a member of some society, he is no longer a whole; he does not constitute the total ensemble, he is but a part. The whole has become a part. And yet nothing has been lost. On the contrary, something has been gained, something new has been added. His membership, added over and above his original condition, necessarily presupposes that he will continue to be the individual man he was before, but capable now of communal activity.

Important consequences follow from a whole-part relationship, wherever it obtains. A part, as such, owes its entire character to the whole.⁷ Whatever it is or has, precisely as a part, it has received from the whole, and retains it only while it continues to be integrated to the whole. To the extent to which a part acts in opposition to the whole, to that extent it is working out its own destruction. Complete success in this enterprise will mean complete failure. The part is using all its energy to deprive itself of all its energy.

The application to human societies is easily made. In all societal activity, the individual member may have either the society or himself chiefly in mind. If his personal motive and the end of the society perfectly coincide, there will be no confusion or conflict. But if he acts for himself, contrary to what would be best for the collectivity, he is really at odds with himself. Acting as a member of the society, yet contrary to its nature, he is acting contrary to his own nature, as a part of that society. He thus stands opposed to his own best interests; he is bent on self-destruction. On the other hand, if he puts misconstrued personal interests aside, and acts principally for the group, even at some apparent cost to himself, he will find that he himself benefits from such activity *consequently*, i.e., as a direct

⁶ Cf. I *Eth.*, lect. 1, n. 5.

⁷ Cf. St. Thomas' pithy formula, *Pars id quod est, totius est: Summa Theol.*, I-II, 96, 4; II-II, 58, 5; 64, 5.

consequence of his having acted primarily for the common good.⁸ Paradoxically, when the individual sets his sights on the common good and acts on its behalf, even seemingly at his own expense, he himself benefits *more* than if he were acting merely for his own advantage. The "personal expense" involved is only apparent, and not real, since, by "sacrificing" the lesser, he has gained the greater. That is a bargain in any man's language, and, by definition, a bargain cannot be expensive.

II. THE GOOD CALLED COMMON

The good of the community is more godlike than the good of one man.
—Aristotle

Besides the private, individualized good of each member of a society, there is also the good that is not private, the good of the society as such: the common good. A common good means simply a good that is shared simultaneously by many subjects. Considered within the same order or class of things, a common good is always superior to a merely private good.⁹

The superiority and strength of a cause is measured by the extent of its causality. Hence the good, which has the formality of a final cause, is so much the greater according as it extends to a greater number of things.¹⁰

A common good, by being the good of many, is a greater and better thing than a merely private good, which is the good of one thing only. Many individuals, and not just one, find in it the realization of some native perfectibility. Peace, for example, is a common good: many individuals share in it and reap its benefits. The peace one man enjoys when his life is rightly ordered is a good of no small magnitude. The peace of an entire nation is a far greater thing. The peace of one man directly influences his life alone; national or international peace directly influences the lives of thousands of men.

The precise aspect of a common good, in virtue of which it has this superiority, is its communicability: it is better *because* it is common. Goodness is self-diffusive, nor is this just an accident:

⁸ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, 47, 10, 2^m.

⁹ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, 31, 3, 2^m; 42, 2; 47, 10; 141, 8; *Contra Gent.*, I, 41; III, 17, 146; *De Veritate*, 5, 3; *De Perf. Vitae Spir.*, c. 13.

¹⁰ I *Eth.*, lect. 2, n. 30.

Not without merit has it been said by some that the good, as such, is self-diffusive, because the better a thing is, to that extent is the diffusion of its goodness the more far-reaching.¹¹

In whatsoever order of being, it is the common good of that order or class which best realizes or fulfills this essential characteristic of goodness. In this way too, it is a more perfect image of the Divine Goodness, which is pre-eminently self-diffusive.

The moderate wealth, or sufficiency of material commodities, which a man needs for a full human life, is a good of great moment. The same moderate wealth on a national scale is a far greater good. As an attempt to explain or elucidate the superiority of a common good, this "example" not only limps—it needs a wheel chair. But it was presented for just that reason. The essence of a common good's superiority can better be understood by pondering the words of Maximus Valerius regarding the ancient Romans: "They preferred to be paupers in a rich nation, rather than rich men in a poor nation."¹²

It is a mistake to think of a common good as a better good *because there is more of it*. If this were the reason for a common good's superiority, it would be better only materially or quantitatively. But a common good is *formally* better; it is of a different and higher order than a merely private good; it is a different and higher type of good.¹³ A whole is not only materially or quantitatively different from its parts, but formally, essentially different. The whole man is something more than the flesh and bones. So too, the good consequent upon the whole is essentially different from the good of its parts, even taken together. Again, the whole is *better* than its parts, it is a more complete, more perfect thing. So too, the good of the whole, the common good, is a greater good than the private good of its parts. It is good for a clock to keep time. Its ability to keep time is something consequent upon the total mechanism as such, and cannot be attributed to any particular part; but when *all* the parts are in their correct order, the operation of keeping time can be performed. This good effect of the clock is an essentially different and better operation than what any particular part can do by itself.

In the case of a society, granted that the common good is a greater and better thing *in itself*, does it necessarily follow that it is likewise better *for the individual member*? A steak dinner would

¹¹ *Contra Gent.*, III, 24; Cf. *Summa Theol.*, I, 106, 4; III, 1, 1.

¹² Cf. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, 47, 10, 2^m.

¹³ Cf. *Summa Theol.*, II-II, 58, 7, 2^m; *De Potentia*, 7, 1.

probably be considered a greater good in itself than a serving of bread and milk; but if I am recuperating from a stomach operation, the bread and milk would be better for me. Might that not be the case with the common good? Might not the common good and its exigencies come into conflict with the private good of an individual, at least occasionally, so that the common good while still a better thing in itself, would not be better for some individual member?

Obviously the answer to this question is of great importance. Apparent opposition between the collectivity and the individual is at the roots of most instances of maladjustment and aversion to societal relations, be the community natural or man-made, public or private, large or small. Suppose the answer is that the common good, besides being a greater and better thing in itself, is also a greater and better thing for the individual? Suppose the common good is the *best* good of the individual? What if the apparent opposition between the two is only apparent, and not real? Would this not alter considerably our understanding of, and attitude towards, the common good of the various societies to which we belong?

If the common good is thought of as *someone else's* good, a good extraneous or "foreign" to the individual member of the collectivity, then cases of apparent conflict will easily occur. What is good for someone else may not be good for me, and vice versa.

The common good, however, is "my" good. In fact, it is more "mine" than is my strictly private good. In other words, the division of good into common and private is not a division of good extraneous to me, but of *my* good.¹⁴

$$\text{good} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{one's own (bonum suum)} \\ \text{someone else's (bonum alienum)} \end{array} \right. \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{private} \\ \text{common} \end{array} \right.$$

This is clear simply from the notion of common good. Of all the things a common good must be, it must be *common*; it must be the good of *many*. The "many" are the members of the community. If a common good were not the good of many, it would be—strictly speaking—good for nothing. But if it is the good of many, then it is *their* good, and not someone else's. The difference between a private and common good is not that the one is mine and

¹⁴ Cf. John of St. Thomas, *Curs. Phil.*, IV. q. 3, a. 1 (ed. Reiser, p. 87a32); I, q. 17, a. 1 (p. 365a9).

the other is not; but that the one is so exclusively, individually mine that it is absolutely no one else's, while the other is mine only in communion and cooperation with other individuals.

The consequences of this truth are as obvious as they are profound. The common good cannot be opposed to my best interests, any more than my best good could be bad for me. If any subordination is called for (and it is), it is that of private good to common good, and not vice versa. Of course this subordination is not bad for the private good, or the private person. By means of such subordination, he is able to have a still greater good. It is very much like paying five dollars for a ten-dollar hat; the five dollars must be "subordinated," must be "sacrificed," given away, lost. But who is complaining?

The mistaken notion that the common good is not the good of those who comprise the community derives, for the most part at least, from a mistaken notion of society. If society be conceived of as a kind of "individual" apart from its constituent members (and do we not generally think of it in this way?), then its good, the common good, will be thought of as someone else's good. And since what is good for someone else may not be good for me, instances of apparent conflict will be very much in evidence.

Society, however, is not a kind of individual standing apart from its members. It is not a sort of "super-person" who sees to the maintenance of law and order, takes care of social crises, etc., on behalf of, or even despite, its members. *They are the society.* And just as *it is they*, so its good is their good.

It is quite possible to entertain mistaken notions in this matter and find oneself in undesirable company. In the civil or political area, totalitarian theories of the State make the crucial error of conceiving of the State as a thing in its own right, apart from, and vastly superior to, the mere citizens. And so, when an apparent conflict of interests arises, it is only logical that the inferior good—the citizen, his home, his children, his health, his life—be sacrificed to the superior good—the State. It is, in fact, reasonable to prefer a superior good to an inferior one. The mistake here lies in supposing that the superior (common) good is not the good of the citizens, that society is not its members, and that the two are at odds with each other.

To see more precisely how the common good is the good of "the many," we must take a closer look at societal order. The *extrinsic* common good of a society is the end to which it is ordained. Its *intrinsic* common good is especially its constitutive order.

The immanent, intrinsic good of anything is especially repre-

sented by its *form*.¹⁵ The form of a society, as we saw above, is its order; it is this which makes individuals a society. Hence, since it is its form, it is its principal intrinsic good.

It is easy to see how this common good is *good*. The individual presumably would not have joined the society except that it offered him the opportunity of doing something that he could not do, or could not do *well*, by himself. That the society can do it, is directly the result of its order. Different members taking care of different parts of the whole work of the society, according to a definite order, enable it to accomplish what no individual member could do by himself. Thus the prevailing order is good *for the individual*.

It is easy to see how this common good is *common*. The order of a society is something in which all the members necessarily participate: they would not be ordered—they would not be a society—without order. To the same extent to which they share in the order, to that extent they share in the chief common good of the association. The order is common; the order is good; the good is common.

INTENSIVITY

The diffusion of a common good is not only greater *extensively*, it is also greater intensively: it not only reaches out to more things, it reaches into them more profoundly, than a strictly private, particular good. Thus, while the private good of an individual is *his*, the common good is even *more his*. It touches and awakens a power closer to the essential, intrinsic constitution of the individual. *Explicit* activity for a common good requires universal or intellectual knowledge. Brute animals, limited to sense knowledge, can act only *implicitly* for a common good: they do not know they are so acting, and much less do they know why.

Since appetite (or desire, or love) follows knowledge, the more universal the knowledge is, so much the more does the appetite following it look to a common good; and the more particular the knowledge is, so much the more does the subsequent appetite look to the private good. So in us (human beings), particularized love takes its origin in sense knowledge, but love of a common and absolute good arises from intellectual knowledge.¹⁶

Sensory apparatus is on the fringe of man, his "out-side," and is thus his point of contact with external reality. But the core of man is his immaterial soul, with its intellective and volitional faculties. By

¹⁵ Cf. XII *Meta.*, lect. 12, n. 2627.

¹⁶ *De Spir. Creat.*, 8, 5^m.

seeking a common good, the awareness of which demands an intellect, man realizes a type and degree of perfection more distinctly in accord with his specific nature. Thus, a human being is more distinctly human in acting for a common good, and the common good is more distinctly, more properly *his*.

In seeking a strictly private good, we show a certain similarity to the brute animals, with whom also we share the corporeal part of our nature. In seeking a common good, we show a certain similarity to the angels, with whom also we share the incorporeal or spiritual part of our nature. Need it be asked, in which direction does true human perfection lie? Would we be more perfect by imitating what we know is less than we are? Of course this does not at all mean that we should have nothing to do with private or material goods. It is a question here of accentuation, of rational preference; of properly ordering the lesser to the higher. Man needs a roof over his head (he is a rational *animal*); but the point is, not to let his vision be limited by that roof (he is a *rational animal*).

BENEVOLENCE

A good is something to be loved, and a common good is no exception to this rule. We may distinguish two radically different ways in which the common good of a society can be loved; the one degrading, the other ennobling.

There is a concupiscent love which looks upon and seeks the common good, not for the community, but for itself alone. Inasmuch as it wants the common good exclusively for itself, it is treating it *as if it were a private good*; it refuses to admit its true nature. The mistake here may be purely speculative: the person may not understand that a common good has to be common in order to be good, or he may not understand wherein his true perfection lies, and so he looks for it in the wrong place. Or it may be a practical mistake: even with a correct speculative or theoretical understanding of common and private good, still he seeks the common good for his own. It may be that he thinks of himself as a yet superior good, in comparison with which he sees the common good of the society as a means to an end, the end being his own further aggrandizement; or he may consider the common good simply as a just tribute to a superior sort of thing—himself. Then there is the practical mistake of the one who correctly understands what is involved here, and yet does *not at all* seek the common good. At the heart of this error lies pride: he would like the common good, in so far as it is *good*; the trouble for him is that it happens to be *common*. The only way

he can "have" it is by sharing it with others, and this is too severe a jolt for his ego.

The other kind of love is benevolent love. It looks upon the common good as it really is, and acts accordingly. The common good is something that is good for many, and can remain so only as long as many share it. This type of love does not seek the common good in order to possess it, but in order to preserve, defend and augment it.

To love the good of the State in order to possess it, does not make a man a good statesman. A tyrant loves the common good in this way, that he may control it. Actually, he loves himself more than the State, for he desires this good for himself, not for the State. But to love the good of the State that it be preserved and defended, this is a true love of the State, and this makes a man a good statesman.¹⁷

Of course, even in seeking to preserve and defend the common good, the individual realizes that he too will profit from his activity: the common good is "his" good. But this is not the principal reason that motivates him. Benevolent love of the common good seeks whatever is calculated to benefit the community, without taking into consideration how it itself can profit thereby. It is not necessarily oblivious of what it stands to gain from its selfless activity, but its prime concern is for the common good, as for something that of itself merits such selflessness.

IN FINE

Society is man's natural answer to needs that cannot be met successfully by purely individual effort. Societal activity, composed of individual efforts, in turn supplies for individual inadequacies. The common good of the society is the good of its members. It is not opposed to their better interests, but is ordained to actualize and protect those interests. In seeking the common good, the members are seeking their own good. Yet this must not be a possessive seeking, but an endeavor to conserve and augment the good they themselves have found.

It is not the function of a part to convert the whole to itself; the perfection of a part lies in assimilation to the whole, where alone it can find and retain its native integrity.

¹⁷ *De Caritate*, a. 2.