
CHAPTER IV

The Object of Social Justice, the Common Good

Putting Two and Two Together...

To deepen our understanding of Social Justice we must get a clearer concept of its object: the “Common Good” or “general welfare” as it is called. Let us start with two great facts: (1) An isolated individualist cannot practice Social Justice at all, he must associate himself with *groups* of various kinds and work along with them before he can practice it; and (2) *Every* human action whatever has some bearing on the Common Good, and hence must conform to Social Justice or be sinful.

...We Get...Surprised

If these two points are put together, a rather startling conclusion emerges: since every action must conform to Social Justice or be sinful, and Social Justice can be practiced only by persons associated in groups, the obvious conclusion is that every action must be done in groups to be virtuous!

Two Kinds of Groups

At first sight, this looks weird indeed; until it is remembered that man's very *nature* is social, and then it is just what one would expect. But it is not very clear how it is done. It becomes clearer when we see that there are two kinds of groups: informal or “natu-

ral” ones like farm life, city life, mining, slums, frontier life; and the formal or “planned” ones like a stock company, a board of directors, a city government, a labor union, a medical association, a university, a taxpayers association, a baseball club, a monarchy.

In the language of Catholic Action—another invention of Pope Pius XI—these two kinds of groups are called respectively “*Milieux*” and “*Institutions*.” “*Milieu*” is a French word meaning “medium” as in the sentence “water is the *natural medium* of fish, and air is the *natural medium* of birds.”

Informal or Natural Groups: “The Milieu”

Now if you will look at the examples given above of a “natural medium” of human life—farm life, city life, slums, frontier life—you will notice that they actually produce *different types of people*. The “hayseed,” the “city-slicker,” the miner, the slum dweller, the frontiersman, are different *types* of human beings that anyone can recognize at a glance, whether they occur in books or in real life. And then there is the executive, the “jitterbug” (formerly the drug-store cowboy), the clergyman, the hobo, the laborer, and so on through the whole catalogue. These great differences in *types of men* all bear witness to the fact that every concrete natural medium of life exercises upon its members a continuous and powerful influence: an influence more or less confused, but very real.

Because of this continuous and powerful influence, that natural medium of life can largely determine the human perfection *attainable* by its members. Thus Pope Pius XI could say of our modern industrial systems: “Bodily labor, which Providence decreed is to be performed for the perfection of man’s body and soul, is being everywhere changed into an instrument of perversion; for dead matter comes forth from the factory ennobled, while men are there corrupted and degraded!”

This “grip” which the natural medium of life has on human perfection is the source of the obligation to control it; and since it is made up precisely of all the actions of the people in it, every one of these actions is under that obligation. It might be pointed out that the whole theory of specialization, inquiry method, and cell technique in Catholic Action is directed towards control of each one’s own natural medium of life; and the people who engage in this work or in work similar to it are the ones who are

discharging their duty of Social Justice in their own sphere of life. All others, either deliberately or unknowingly, are failing.

Formal or Planned Groups: The Institution

But there is more to social life than these informal “natural media.” There are also the formal “institutions.” We have just seen one of these—Catholic Action—in its relation to the natural medium of life; and that relation is one of direct *control*. The natural medium of life is in itself too informal, too complex, too vast, too fluid and changing, too much subject to the will and shortcomings of thoughtless people, ever to be controlled directly by individual persons in it, for these individuals are helpless when, standing alone, they face its vast collective weight and pressure.

Pope Pius XI pointed this out clearly insofar as the natural medium of the industrial employers is concerned; and the same principle is of universal application. We have already seen on several occasions the text in which he indicates this truth: “It happens all too frequently, under the salary system that individual employers are helpless to insure justice, unless, with a view to its practice they organize institutions, *etc.*”

As was already said, the application of this principle is universal, and it applies to every level of social life: to the family, the neighborhood, the school, the professions, the parish, the state, the city, inter-state commerce, the nation, international relations, the United Nations, the World Court, the Church, the whole of human society. Every one of these things is an institution controlling some aspect of human life and made up of a whole network of subordinate institutions, each one controlling smaller aspects of human life.

Duty and Disorder

The Holy Father points out a three-fold duty to these institutions: to organize, to promote, and to support. These are specific acts of Social Justice; and anyone who would refuse to perform them at his level of the institutional hierarchy would thereby fail against Social Justice; for institutions are, as the Pope so clearly points out, “*necessary instruments, enabling men to fulfill their obligations.*” Without them the individual is “helpless to insure justice” and his natural medium of life, his level of society, is in disorder, is socially unjust. When this disorder reaches up into higher and higher levels of society, it becomes a world disorder, a true crisis of civilization, such as we are experiencing today.

The Nature of the Common Good

Every higher institution depends on all those below it for its effectiveness, and every lower institution depends on those above it for its own proper place in the Common Good. It is precisely this whole vast network of institutions which is the Common Good, on which every one of us depends for the realization of our personal perfection, of our personal good.

It is wrong to conceive of the Common Good as a sort of general bank account into which one “deposits” when, for instance he pays his taxes to the state; and “withdraws” when he is appointed public coordinator of something or other at a hundred and fifty dollars a week, or when the state builds a road past his farm and thus raises its value. It is surprising how many people think that distributive justice is the virtue that assesses taxes and Social Justice is the virtue that pays them. Both of these actions are distributive, that is, individual, justice; and become Social Justice only in a secondary way as they promote the Common Good.

Nor must we think of the Common Good as something which we can “share with another” like a candy bar or an automobile ride. Rather it is something which each of us possesses in its entirety, like light, or life itself. When the Common Good is badly organized, when society is socially unjust, then it is each individual’s own share of personal perfection which is limited, or which is withheld from him entirely.

Everyone Can Do It

When it is realized that the Common Good consists of that whole vast complex of institutions, from the simplest “natural medium” of a child’s life, to the United Nations itself, then a very comforting fact emerges: Each of these institutions from the lowest and most fleeting “natural medium” to the highest and most enduring organization of nations is the Common Good *at that particular level*. Therefore everyone, from the smallest and weakest child to the most powerful ruler in the world, can have direct care of the Common Good at his level. This is a far cry indeed from those social philosophers who before Pius XI could say with complete sincerity and conviction, “the Common Good is not something which can be *directly* attained.”