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## Providence College and the Common Good

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## REFLECTIONS

### *Providence College and the Common Good*

Fr. Gabriel Pivarnik, O.P.

*Director of the Center for Catholic and Dominican Studies*

Every year in the last semester of the Development of Western Civilization course, inevitably one question surfaces: what is the common good? The impetus for such a question can be as varied as the hundred or more students packed into the lecture hall in Moore. For some it may arise as students are forced to deal with their first papal encyclical, Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. For others, it might stem from a reaction to a line in Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* when he refers to anything that is *common* as having little to no value. For still others, the identification of the *common* good might come from an analysis of the mad dash across Africa and Asia for natural resources, from the growing women's movement in Europe and in the States at the end of the nineteenth century, or from an intense inner reaction to the reality of war in the twentieth century. Yet whatever the impetus or the perspective brought to bear, a debate seems to emerge and the question always surfaces. What is the common good?

In some ways, the answer demands a careful Dominican distinction—not everyone means the same thing when they use the phrase, *the common good*. The temptation is to relegate the notion of the common good to a “least common denominator” scenario so that what is good for the greatest number of people becomes what is least in value. This is precisely Nietzsche's lament. If the common good is defined only by what can be held at this moment by the vast majority of peoples, then it has been consigned to nothing more than polling data. Or, in other circles, the concept can be construed as what is good for society as a whole—that what is good for the corporate entity is more significant than any individual concern. This approach fueled a communist regime's rise and eventual fall.

But when the Catholic understanding of the common good is brought to the table we realize that neither of these approaches suffices. For believers the common good is

marked by both its willingness to improve society and its determination to protect individual fulfillment in the process. Such a stance is predicated on the dignity, unity, and equality of all human persons. It is *common* because it recognizes that both its goal and its demands belong to all people, both collectively and individually. When a community or group seeks to fulfill the common good then they are at the service of humanity. In this sense, the common good is only a means to an end—the means by which and through which human persons are brought closer to their fulfillment in God.

While the promotion of the common good is certainly a proper end in any institution of higher learning, it is especially the case at Providence College. Rooted in our Catholic and Dominican tradition, we stand in a unique position to transform not only the lives of our individual students, but also the lives of our community as a whole. Moreover, on this campus we know that individual disciplines do not exist in a self-imposed sacral vessel of impenetrability. Rather, we are profoundly aware that we can sit in one classroom and ask probing questions on the interrelatedness of our knowledge and our lives that we may have learned in another classroom.

A senior biology student engages a debate in her seminar on Conservation Biology with Dr. Ewanchuk and begins to piece together the connectedness between limited resources and the needs of all people from information she garnered in Environmental Sociology. A freshman walks into his second semester of Western Civ and knows that the deeper questions surrounding what it means to be human are not alien to the discussions of his class on the Renaissance. A junior political science student can analyze the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights with Dr. Cesarini and have enough self-awareness to realize that such a declaration was written not only for the people of present day Somalia, Bosnia, and Kyrgyzstan, but also for the homeless who huddle together on the streets of downtown Providence, and even the men and women sitting across the table from him.

To be Catholic is to reach into all disciplines across the campus—to be Dominican is to seek out the truth in each of those disciplines individually, but also collectively. The promotion of the common good reminds us that higher education is not simply about the improvement of one individual life by a singular piece of parchment called a diploma—but that an institution of higher learning also calls us to engage the other in a lifelong process of learning and change. No one is left behind, no one is left out, and no one is deprived of the common good that is served by learning and education.

This year, the Center for Catholic and Dominican Studies will initiate a campus wide discussion on the common good and its myriad relationships with the various disciplines of knowledge. A deeper investigation into this topic will yield profound results. As a campus community, we can look at the women of Haiti as they danced and sang in the streets in the aftermath of an earthquake and learn how that impacts our understanding of the common good. We can look at the increased globalization of the world and reevaluate how and why we purchase food, clothing, and energy when other peoples across the globe go without them. Hopefully such a campus wide discussion will lead us to a shared definition of the common good. With that, a simple, probing question will become part of everyday routine and vocabulary: here and now, for the wider community of Providence College, what is the common good?

### ***Outreach and Evangelization at Providence College***

Fr. James M. Cuddy, O. P.

*Chaplain and Director of Campus Ministry*

In the Gospel of St. Luke, Jesus begins his public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth with the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (4:18-19). And from that day until his saving Passion, he did just

that. By day he preached and by night he prayed, that all might be saved.

This message of salvation was directed to everyone, and not just a chosen few. It went beyond the scribes and scholars of the law. It included them, to be sure, but extended even to those on the margins of society. In an unprecedented way, people from all walks of life were invited to share in the good news of Our Lord.

Just as Jesus used these words as a starting point for his own earthly ministry, it's crucial that any reflection on ministry at Providence College begins in the same way. The gospel is for every member of the college community. It's not simply for those who come to us from strong religious backgrounds and strive to let their faith inform every area of their lives. It is also for those who are seekers, those who are asking questions about the plausibility of the faith and all of its claims in a world that seems to have forgotten God. The invitation of the gospel is also for those who are disengaged from things of religion and who might not give much (if any) thought to the spiritual life. Simply put, if our attempts to serve the students are to be authentically Christian, they must be universal in their scope.

This universality of the gospel presents a particular challenge to those of us who work in Campus Ministry. Can our evangelization and outreach possibly extend to every corner of the campus? Again, our community—comprised of the devout, the seekers, and the disengaged—reflects a great diversity of religious experience. Further, beyond these broad categories, each individual student has been formed by particular experiences that have shaped his or her own relationship with God. No two students are the same. This being the case, can we realistically hope to appeal to each member of the campus community? Are we trying to cast too broad a net?

The answer to this problem requires that we temper our recognition of diversity among our students with thoughts of unity. No matter where our students may fall on the

