

WORKING FOR THE COMMON GOOD: WHERE PRACTICE MEETS THEORY

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The ideal of the common good inspires many people of goodwill to undertake action in their communities and in public debates to improve social wellbeing. In Catholic Social Teaching, working for the common good calls each person to work for the good of each person and of all people. However, in public discussion and debate, the understanding of the common good found in Catholic Social Teaching is often confused with similar sounding but quite different concepts of the greater good, public good and public interest.

This article is based on a joint presentation with Bishop Philip Richardson given at the "Recovering the Common Good" Conference.¹ It presents the perspective of practitioners working for the common good, and particularly of those working for Caritas, rather than an academic appreciation of all the different contested understandings of the common good.

I INTRODUCTION

My understanding of the common good comes from personal experience applying Catholic Social Teaching in the context of New Zealand political and policy debates of recent decades. Through discussions about the principles and ethics that should guide government decision-making in the "public square" of Select Committee processes and other forms of government engagement, I have grown in appreciation of the richness of the Catholic understanding of this term. The common good seeks to address and balance both personal and communal rights and responsibilities, against a backdrop of an international ideological battle between extremes of individualism and collectivism.²

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1 Bishop Richardson is Bishop of Taranaki in the Anglican Diocese of Waikato and Taranaki, recently appointed Archbishop.

2 See also Bradstock's article in this issue.

This article shares some reflections on the distinctive contribution a Catholic understanding of the common good brings to public policy debates, particularly from the perspective of Caritas's engagement with parliamentary select committees.³

II 1993 CHURCH LEADERS STATEMENT

to serve the common good, that is, to secure and protect the dignity of every citizen

In recent years in New Zealand, the concept of the common good has been particularly identified with churches. Many New Zealanders first seriously studied the concept through the 1993 New Zealand Church Leaders *Social Justice Statement* and associated *Making Choices* discussion programme.

The statement was issued by the leaders of ten church denominations 20 years ago, in very similar circumstances to those we are facing at present. In the aftermath of the 1987 stock market crash – similar political and economic circumstances to that of the 2008 global financial crisis – and inspired by neo-liberal economic thinking, the New Zealand government had cut benefits, increased state house rentals, changed labour laws, "deinstitutionalised" long term psychiatric patients, sold state assets and undertaken other major changes in public and social policy.

The long-term effects of that can now easily be seen – from the mid 1980s to the late 1990s New Zealand experienced the greatest growth in inequality in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁴ Child abuse notifications doubled between 1990 and 1992,⁵ and many other social wellbeing indicators worsened, such as an increase in overcrowding and preventable diseases.⁶ In 1993 this was not yet apparent from the statistics. However, churches and community groups were immediately aware of need in its most basic forms – demand for food parcels, requests for help with household budgets that could not be balanced and other forms of visible financial hardship.

Against this backdrop, the leaders of ten church denominations issued their *Social Justice Statement*, which laid out principles for assessing the values of public policies, while avoiding a

3 Caritas is mandated by the New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference to undertake aid and development work in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and advocacy and education for social justice in Aotearoa New Zealand. The advocacy work of Caritas includes making submissions to Parliamentary select committees.

4 OECD "Society at a glance 2011 – OECD Social Indicators" (April 2011) <www.oecd.org/els/social/indicators/SAG>.

5 A Blaiklock and others *When the invisible hand rocks the cradle: New Zealand children in a time of change* (UNICEF, Innocenti Research Paper 93, Florence, 2002) at 50.

6 S St John and D Wynd (eds) *Left behind: How social and income inequalities damage New Zealand children* (Child Poverty Action Group, Auckland, 2008) at 73–89.

detailed discussion of the specific policies under question.⁷ Anglican, Apostolic, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian and Catholic Church Leaders, together with those of the Salvation Army, Society of Friends and Associated Churches of Christ shared from different but similar theological traditions in commenting on the impact of economic policies on the poor and vulnerable.

A core theme was the common good:⁸

For us, the purpose of government is to serve the common good, that is, to secure and protect the dignity of every citizen. Therefore government is to provide conditions where each is enabled to respect the rights of others, and where each can enjoy freedom and fulfillment in the economic, political and cultural life of the nation.

The political reaction to the statement was found in extensive media coverage, including editorials in major daily newspapers. Although politically non-partisan, the statement was understood as a criticism of government policy, and debated vigorously as such in the public arena.

Not perhaps so well known or covered at the time, there was also some lively debate in following years in church and theological circles about the approach taken by the Church Leaders in their statement. Jonathan Boston questioned whether the Church Leaders should have avoided technical discussion of policy, instead taking only the "middle axiom" ground of outlining principles alone.⁹ Alan Cameron critiqued the statement from the perspective of an ecumenical statement being overly dominated by a Catholic perspective of the common good and the role of the state.¹⁰

However, these debates were academic arguments to some groups studying and using the statement, including a group of beneficiaries at the Feilding Unemployed Support Centre, just after both freezing works had closed and as Lake Alice hospital was discharging long-term patients into the community. The group met weekly to study the Church Leaders statement and associated *Making Choices* discussion programme, as benefits cuts were starting to bite, state house rents were increasing and the impacts of employment contract law starting to be felt.

The group at the Feilding Unemployed Support Centre devoured the *Social Justice Statement*. The Feilding benefit advocates used the principles in advocacy with Work and Income staff – and the

7 New Zealand Church Leaders (1993) *Social Justice Statement* (Church Leaders' Social Justice Initiative/Presbyterian Church, Wellington, 1993).

8 At [26].

9 Jonathan Boston "Christianity in the Public Square: The Churches and Social Justice" in J Boston and A Cameron (eds) *Voices for Justice: Church, Law and State in New Zealand* (Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1994) 11 at 26.

10 Alan Cameron "Law, Justice and the State" in "Christianity in the Public Square: The Churches and Social Justice" in J Boston and A Cameron (eds) *Voices for Justice: Church, Law and State in New Zealand* (Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1994) 37 at 38.

principles were associated with the churches to the point that one Feilding Income Support Service case manager responded to a common good argument that was tried out on her, "Don't bring religion into this".

Ultimately, the *Social Justice Statement* contributed to a growing feeling of concern and discontent among Churches and the wider community, fed by the experiences of seeing people in need. Its conception of the common good, alongside other ideals of human dignity, protection for the poor and our identity as social beings contributed to a growth in awareness that eventually found public expression in the 1998 Hīkoi of Hope.¹¹ Led by churches, thousands marched to Parliament seeking more humane social policy which took account of the needs of the poorest.

So that is my starting-point to introduce the concept of the common good as many New Zealand Christians experiencing poverty or concerned about poverty first experienced it – as a motivator, as something that inspired people to take action to improve their lives and the lives of their neighbours. It is not a theoretical academic concept. It is not a dusty ideal confined to tomes of theology and philosophical theory. It is a living concept which motivates people to take action. So what does it mean?

III CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING ON THE COMMON GOOD

the sum total of social conditions which allow people ... to reach their fulfilment...

The Catholic understanding of the common good is one of the threads which arose from Aristotle's thinking about the common good or the common interest. It was developed through the thinking of the saints and theologians of the Church. The Catholic Catechism quotes the early Christian St Barnabas as saying, "Do not live entirely isolated, having retreated into yourselves, as if you were already justified, but gather instead to seek the common good together."¹²

Arising from this shared background, the concept of the common good can be encountered in many theological traditions. As one example of many: church leaders, theologians, economists, ethicists and development practitioners from evangelical traditions joined together in 1990 to issue *The Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics*.¹³ The statement includes a reference to

11 The Hīkoi of Hope was a march to Parliament in September 1998, initiated by the Anglican Church in its General Synod in May 1998 and supported by other mainstream Churches. "Hīkoi" is a Te Reo Māori word for a long walk, often now associated with a protest march taking place over a long distance and lasting several days or weeks. Groups began walking on 1 September 1998 from Cape Reinga at the top of the North Island and Stewart Island at the bottom of the South Island, culminating in a service and rally at Parliament attended by around 20,000 people on 1 October 1998.

12 Catholic Church *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1997) at [1905].

13 Kim Hawtrey "The Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics" (1990) 7 Transformation 1.

the common good being the purpose of human work, as God gives talents to individuals for the benefit of the whole community.¹⁴

While there are many potential threads of discussion on the development of theological concepts of the common good, Catholic Social Teaching provides a useful and possibly unique insight. The past 120 years of doctrinal explanations of the common good and other key principles are available through the written record of Papal encyclicals, pastoral letters and other formal forms of communication from Catholic leaders.

Present-day New Zealand Catholic comments on matters such as Bills before the New Zealand Parliament, and other legislative and policy proposals, start with study of, and reflection on, this body of writing.

Modern Catholic Social Teaching is regarded as having started with Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. In this and other encyclicals of modern Catholic Social Teaching, the common good is argued for rather than defined. For example Pope Leo XIII argued that the State has a responsibility to promote the interests of the poor "since it is the province of the commonwealth to serve the common good".¹⁵

His explanation introduces the balancing of collective and individual rights which is a feature of the Catholic understanding of the common good, "civil society exists for the common good, and hence is concerned with the interests of all in general, albeit with individual interests also in their due place and degree."¹⁶

This is also understood within the context of the main messages of the encyclical which recognise both the urgent need to address the dreadful working and living conditions of the poor of the Industrial Revolution, while also affirming individual property rights.

It was not, however, until the 1960s that the explanation of the common good was given which would be most widely recognised in the Catholic world. The Vatican II pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* describes the common good as: "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily".¹⁷

Pope John XXIII expanded in his encyclicals *Mater et Magistra*¹⁸ and *Pacem in Terris*¹⁹ on some of the many potential applications of that thought. Adopting the then recently adopted human

14 Oxford Conference *The Oxford Declaration on Christian Faith and Economics* at [22].

15 Leo XIII Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum: On rights and duties of capital and labour* (1891) at [32].

16 At [51].

17 Second Vatican Council "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World – *Gaudium et Spes*" (7 December 1965) at [26].

18 Pope John XXIII *Mater et Magistra: On Christianity and social progress* (Encyclical Letter, 1961).

rights framework as a common language for people seeking to improve the quality of life, his explanations included matters such as the right to the essentials of living, through to the need for structures at the international level which could provide peace.

The most recent explanation is that given by Pope Benedict XVI:²⁰

To love someone is to desire that person's good and to take effective steps to secure it. Beside the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of "all of us", made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity.

In his writing, Pope Benedict XVI reflected the long-established Catholic heritage of understanding the common good as encompassing the good of both the individual parts of society (individuals and groups) and the whole community.

Pope John Paul II's explanation of the common good as "the good of all and of each individual" is probably the most succinct of the explanations which explain this point.²¹ In addition, Catholic Social Teaching cannot be understood in its entirety through any single principle or concept. The communal nature of the concept of the common good serves as a balancing point against adopting too individualistic an understanding of human rights and human dignity.

In a similar way, solidarity - another core principle of Catholic Social Teaching - calls us to reach out to all members of the human community as our brothers and sisters. But as a check against this overriding the special identity and character of smaller groups such as families and particular communities, lies the principle of subsidiarity, which recognises the importance of making decisions at the appropriate level.

At its heart, the Catholic ideal of the common good is almost exactly the opposite of the underpinning idea of neo-liberal economics, which argues that each person acting in their own self-interest produces ideal collective outcomes. Catholic Social Teaching rather argues that each person working for the good of their neighbour produces a collective outcome, which benefits them personally.

19 Pope John XXIII *Pacem in Terris: On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity and Liberty* (Encyclical Letter, 1963).

20 Pope Benedict XVI *Caritas in Veritate: In Charity and Truth* (Encyclical Letter, 2009) at [7]

21 Pope John Paul II Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concerns* (Encyclical Letter, 1987) at [38].

IV SIMILAR BUT DIFFERENT CONCEPTS

A Catholic understanding of the common good is by no means the only use of the term. As discussed above, similar but not necessarily identical threads of thought arise out of different Christian theological traditions, particularly those more oriented towards a communal or relational theology. However, Christian denominations more focused on a person's individual relationship with God are less likely to focus as much as Catholic Social Teaching does on communal implications of the call to love our neighbour.

Outside religious contexts, some commentators equate the common good with utilitarianism, which aims to find a formula which produces the greatest good (utility) for the greatest number of people.

Utilitarianism is incompatible with a Catholic understanding of the common good, because it argues that what works best for the majority is the best way of organising things. However, Catholic Social Teaching always considers the outcome on behalf of the most poor and vulnerable, the minorities who may be overlooked in what is best for the majority.

Compared to similar sounding but different concepts, the common good is very inclusive. I often think of it in terms of the parable of the lost sheep told in Luke 15:4.²²

What man among you with a hundred sheep, losing one, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the missing one till he found it.

There are many people who confuse the common good with the greater good. The greater good is often invoked when some lives are sacrificed on behalf of others, such as soldiers in times of war.

Approaching the question of the missing sheep, the greater good argues that the missing sheep could – or maybe even should – be sacrificed to ensure the safety of the 99. But the concept of the common good says the wellbeing of the flock is not ensured until 100 sheep are found and protected.

Another similar concept, which is more frequently used in public life in New Zealand than the common good, is that of the public interest. This term is often used to distinguish between private interests of individuals and groups, and the public interest which concerns the wider community.

It is different to the concept of the common good in that it more clearly distinguishes between private and public interests, and the public interest does not necessarily encompass private concerns. For example, in the recent public discussion about the release of former prisoner Stuart Murray Wilson, his wellbeing was regarded as his private interest, while the needs and desires of the wider

22 Jerusalem Bible.

community for protection were regarded as the public interest.²³ In the public debate about his fate, only a small minority might consider that Mr Wilson's wellbeing is part of the public interest, and that usually focuses on the fairly self-centred perspective that if he is adequately housed and supported, his threat to the community is reduced. In contrast, the concept of the common good encompasses both Mr Wilson's wellbeing and the wellbeing of the community. The common good is not achieved if either is entirely sacrificed to achieve the wellbeing only of the other.

Returning to the analogy of the flock with the missing sheep, in common usage, the public interest might imply that the 99 safe sheep want a say in what happens to the missing one. A more considered approach would say that the 99 safe sheep have an interest in the outcome – because even if the wellbeing of the missing sheep is a matter of its own private interest, the community of sheep has a stake in the public question of whether missing sheep should be found.

However, there is more of a tendency to weigh up the different options in terms of pitting private and public interests against each other. Leaving safe sheep alone to go searching for a missing one implies some risk for the 99 – they are all a little less safe than if the shepherd stays with them. They are asked to make some small sacrifice of safety for the wellbeing of the missing sheep.

The other concept that is often confused in public debates with the common good is that of the economic description of public goods. This means goods which everyone can benefit from, even if they do not play a part in contributing to them, such as natural resources and fresh air. These are often regarded as a particular responsibility of government, because individuals cannot alone protect them, and people cannot be prevented from accessing them – for example, an air polluter cannot be denied the right to breathe fresh air.

The concepts may overlap – for example, protecting and restoring the Earth's atmosphere to ensure the wellbeing of current and future generations is both an urgent matter of protecting a public good and protecting the common good.

However, it becomes more difficult to distinguish when one group in society claims something as a public good despite competing claims. For example, in the foreshore and seabed (takutai moana) debates of the past decade, public access to beaches and waterways was seen by some members as the public as an overriding concern, but was only one element of the common good in the same debate.²⁴ Considering the question of ownership of the foreshore and the seabed only from

23 See for example Department of Corrections "Release of offender Stewart Murrery Wilson" (press release, 29 August 2012); Sharon Lundy "'Beast of Blenheim' seeks judicial review" *The New Zealand Herald* (online ed, Wellington, 13 March 2012).

24 See for example Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand "Submission on the Foreshore and Seabed Bill 2004"; Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand "Submission on the Marine and Coastal Areas (Takutai Moana) Bill 2010".

a Pākehā perspective of beach access as a public good ignored other elements of the common good, such as Māori access to justice, and guaranteed property rights for all sections of society.

Considering the concept of public good from the perspective of our flock of sheep might lead us to conclude that the safety of sheep is a public good which requires protection by the state, as individual sheep cannot by themselves deliver sheep safety. However, there may be a plurality of views about what constitutes safety.

For some sheep, knowing that missing sheep are searched for gives them peace of mind, as they know they would be searched for if they went missing. However other sheep might give priority to the security of knowing that the shepherd stays with the flock that does come home. These sheep feel they have an equal stake in the conversation about the actions of the shepherd, and the danger is that minority opinions are overlooked – particularly the voice of the missing sheep whose bleating cannot be heard from the place of safety.

It might even be possible that some of the safe sheep regard missing sheep as having a "dependency mentality", that is, that rather than taking personal responsibility for getting home safely, they depend on the safety net of a conscientious shepherd who is prepared to go looking for them. These sheep might argue that it is better for the flock that lost sheep learn to find their way home.

To summarise, given the 99 sheep, missing sheep and loving shepherd, I believe the following concepts give us these different scenarios:

- The common good – the common good of the flock is not secured until 100 sheep are found and are safe.
- The greater good – the missing sheep is sacrificed for the wellbeing of the 99.
- The public interest – the 99 sheep want a say in what happens to the missing sheep.
- Public or social goods – while there is agreement that sheep safety is important, there are many different arguments about whether this means protecting the safe 99 or the missing one.

Use of this parable as a metaphor for different understandings of the common good puts the emphasis more on the sheep than the shepherd. However, it is actually the shepherd, rather than the flock, who makes the decision to look for the missing sheep. Christ's parable indicates that the instinct to protect the flock is considered self-evident – "what man among you...would not...go after the missing one till he found it". In fact, in our society, a 99 per cent survival rate – or an outcome which is satisfactory for the majority of the flock - might be considered a very successful outcome.

Christ's identification as a shepherd is itself a message about the value of people others consider worthless. In Biblical times, shepherds were regarded as marginal figures, often thought to be

dishonest, somewhat socially unacceptable. Yet, it is the shepherd, who often used his own body as a shield at the gate of a fold, who is the model of leadership, just as it was shepherds who were the first to hear the news of Christ's birth.

Although not mentioning the concept of the common good by name, Pope Francis – newly elected and installed at the time of writing this article – used this parable of the shepherd seeking his lost sheep in this sense to describe his role and that of the Church.²⁵

Nor must we be satisfied with staying in the pen of the 99 sheep if we want to follow him and to remain with him; we too must 'go out' with him to seek the lost sheep, the one that has strayed the furthest.

The Catholic concept of the common good gives greater protection to the flock than similar sounding but different concepts. However, the use of the term "common good" in public debate will be drawing on these and many other definitions and understandings than those of the Catholic Church.

The use of phrases such as the "common good" in political debate does not necessarily mean that politicians are drawing on the same conceptual understanding of the term as the Churches and other groups in society. An appeal to the "common good" still needs to be carefully analysed and assessed according to whether it serves the interests of all, or only the majority, or perhaps even the interest only of a powerful section of society.

The Catholic concept of the common good is inherently social. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church describes it like this:²⁶

A society ... at the service of the human being ... is a society that has the common good – the good of all people and of the whole person – as its primary goal. The human person cannot find fulfilment in himself, that is, apart from the fact that he exists "with" others and "for" others.

Pope Benedict XVI described the common good as "the institutional path – we might also call it the political path – of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly".²⁷

Pope Benedict XVI's understanding of charity was as the translation of *caritas* – Christ's active, practical outflowing of love for people. It is not just a love of emotion but of actions. However, many of us in an English-speaking context are reluctant to use this term, which has often become associated with a particularly demeaning type of assistance, associated with concepts of deserving and undeserving poor which are making an unwelcome re-appearance in our current debates about

25 Pope Francis "General Audience" (First General Audience, St Peter's Square, Vatican City, 27 March 2013).

26 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 2004) at [165].

27 Pope Benedict XVI *Caritas in Veritate: In Charity and Truth* (Encyclical Letter, 2009) at [7].

poverty. However, in considering Pope Benedict XVI's legacy at the end of his papacy, there is real insight here which is useful in considering the common good.

In traditional thinking about charity and justice in the English speaking world, we might describe charity as an inadequate form of immediate assistance, addressing the symptoms of a problem rather than the cause, while we might have describe justice as addressing the causes of injustice, providing longer term solutions and providing adequately for needs. □□

In Pope Benedict XVI's thought, justice is the minimum starting-point – what a person is entitled to through their human dignity. He said we cannot give to another person what is ours unless we have first addressed what is already theirs. Then charity goes beyond justice, to give more than the minimum, more than what a person might be expected to be entitled to. In that what it becomes truly a gift of love.

The Compendium of Social Doctrine says the common good must be sought "unceasingly - in actual practice and not merely at the level of ideas".²⁸ It is a concept that inspires action, not simply debate.

V THE COMMON GOOD IN THE WORK OF CARITAS

In New Zealand, some of the Catholic Church's responsibility for assessing whether public policy decisions meet the demands of the common good lies with Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand, the New Zealand Catholic Bishops' agency for Justice, Peace and Development. The work includes monitoring, analysing and commenting on public policy and legislation, often through the Select Committee process. How do we seek the good of every person and of the whole person in public policy debates?

Drawing on the previously quoted parable of the shepherd and his flock, the common good of the whole flock requires particular attention to be paid to the most vulnerable sheep – the one who is missing. Of course, there may be an assumption that paying this kind of attention actually neglects and potentially even endangers the rest of the flock. There are always people seeking to increase the protection and safety of the 99, even if it means neglecting, abandoning or even sacrificing the one.

It is especially difficult when the "one" missing sheep is unattractive. The common good encompasses people who some in our society see as justifiably outcast, such as the released prisoner discussed previously. Neither the concepts of the greater good or the public interest necessarily encompass his wellbeing as well as that of the community; however, the common good must include his good as well as that of the community in which he lives.

There are many groups in society who must be taken into account when considering a public policy or legislative proposal. There is usually no question about protecting or representing the

28 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, above n 26, at [165].

interests of the 99 sheep who are where they are expected to be; however, seeking the common good is to go looking for the missing sheep.

The common good always urges us to look beyond those who are gathered in the room; asking who is missing, who has been discounted, who has been overlooked? We look beyond our own good also, to ask questions of how this will affect people that we may never meet in other parts of the planet, or future generations.

This parable gives an interesting twist to the Occupation movement cry that "we are the 99 percent". In that case, the slogan is a rallying cry to point to the accumulation of wealth and political power in the hands of a smaller and smaller elite group. But it is also the case that the 99 percent can overlook, discount and neglect the reality and the needs of the poorest.

In New Zealand society that can be easy to do. Despite our shameful child poverty figures, our growing inequality means many New Zealanders may be quite sheltered from this reality, and may never actually glimpse what poverty looks like. In fact, in our context, it is not one sheep in 100 who needs special attention – in 2012 the Children's Commissioner's Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty estimated that as many as 25 per cent of New Zealand children live in poverty.²⁹

Who are the vulnerable groups, for the lost sheep in our public policy and legislative processes, which is to say, those we consider when we speak out for the common good?

I illustrate this with one little story of a child who was both literally and spiritually my neighbour 12 years ago, a New Zealand born child to an overstayer mother who was afraid to go home to Samoa when she became pregnant. They lived over the back fence from me in the Housing New Zealand units and her mother and I used to chat while weeding and picking our silverbeet patch.

While I struggled on part-time wages spending more than 50 percent of my income on childcare costs, this child's mother survived by staying with relatives who themselves never had enough money, food or space to go around but squeezed her in anyway.

She was delighted to benefit from an immigration amnesty in 2001, which regularised her status to the extent that she was granted a visa with the proviso that her ability to apply for permanent residence in two years time would be conditional on not receiving a benefit. The period without a benefit seemed a fair price to pay for the immigration amnesty, especially if you look at it from the perspective of the overstaying adult. However, it meant that her two New Zealand born children also received no financial assistance for two years.

29 Children's Commissioner Expert Advisory Group *Solutions to Child Poverty in New Zealand: evidence for action* (Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2012) at 1.

My neighbour's daughter became sick with an earache, something that happened all the time, and her mother had absolutely no money to take her to the doctor, also a regular occurrence in our neighbourhood. Even though the appointment was free, the transport costs of getting to the doctor and the prescription costs were not.

The child's untreated ear infection resulted in permanent hearing loss, something that will limit her life for much longer than the two years of what might have been considered an appropriate level of hardship for her mother. The policy was written with the adult behaviour in mind, it was intended to shape and incentivise particular outcomes for adults. The victim of the policy was the child.

No one looking at our street from the outside would have glimpsed what life was like for us. My neighbour's family always had smiles on their faces; the children were loved and it showed. If you had driven casually down that street, you would not have seen the empty cupboards; you would not have seen the invisible consequences of neglected health issues; you would not even have noticed that some people were living without electricity for days at a time.

From the road, you would not be able to see that because of a temporary but important moment of poverty, invisible to most New Zealanders, a New Zealand child was set on a course that meant she is always going to be disadvantaged in her education and employment.

With that story in mind, what does it mean to look for the common good, or the missing sheep, in public policy making and legislative change?

VI THE CONSEQUENCES FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

First, protecting the common good is about looking for the consequences of policy or legislative changes for the most vulnerable, for example, proposals that focus on and are intended to address adult behaviour without adequately considering the impact on children. There are numerous examples of this in the welfare changes before Parliament at the time of writing in early 2013, and already being implemented.³⁰

For example, imposing punitive financial sanctions when parents on benefits fail to meet particular welfare obligations always runs the risk of harming children. Even if there may be situations where arguably there is a case for a carrot (incentive) or stick (penalty) to encourage particular adult behaviour, the common good must include consideration being given to the wellbeing of children in those households.

Similarly, Caritas opposed throughout the Welfare Working Group and welfare legislation phases measures which bring contraception use into financial discussions between case managers and clients, or which penalise the birth of children to beneficiary parents. For example, Caritas argued in 2011 that proposals to penalise parents who gave birth to children while receiving

30 See also Stephens' article in this issue.

benefits, or to advise on or distribute contraceptives through Work and Income offices revealed attitudes towards the poor that implied some people are of more value than others.³¹

The unstated assumption is that bringing fewer poor children into the world can and will resolve complex social problems. Among other things this absolves New Zealanders from facing up to the inequalities resulting from historic injustice and structural poverty.

Again, this is policy which overlooks children, who end up being the "lost sheep" of these policies. The United States Bishops Conference opposed similar welfare policy measures in the strongest terms.³²

Putting children at greater risk of victimhood to abortion or severe deprivation runs counter to our solemn duties to protect innocent life, no matter what eventual benefits might accrue to taxpayers or members of future generations.

VII CONSIDERING THE WIDER IMPACT OF CHANGES

The common good is about considering the wider impact of changes, well beyond those apparently targeted or affected by proposed changes. One example of this is the Immigration Amendment Act, passed in June 2013, which provides for detention of asylum seekers arriving in groups of 30 or more.³³

Apart from the potential impact on asylum seekers, in the unlikely event that any do ever reach New Zealand by boat, Caritas told the Select Committee considering the Bill in 2012 that it did not appear that New Zealand had adequately thought through what it could mean on the international stage.³⁴

If countries like Thailand and Kenya, who live right next to situations of conflict and disaster, were to follow our lead in limiting their recognition of the Refugee Convention and cherry pick only those asylum seekers they wish to allow to cross their borders, what would that mean for situations of conflict? What would that mean for international security and peace?

On a different public policy question, Caritas argued from the perspective of the common good in discussing the sale of power companies in the Public Finance (Mixed Ownership Model) Amendment Bill in 2012. Catholic Social Teaching supports both private property and state ownership of assets, however, in the absence of good and clear regulations, we believed it was likely

31 L Beech "Preventing births of the poor: Birth control proposals and welfare reform" (2011) 34 The Nathaniel Report 8 at 10.

32 T Massaro *United States Welfare Policy: A Catholic Reponse* (Georgetown University Press, Washington DC, 2007) at 134.

33 Immigration Amendment Act 2013, s 5.

34 Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand "Submission on the Immigration Amendment Bill 2012" at [20].

that oversight of power supply and prices to vulnerable customers were not adequately protected. Caritas Director Julianne Hickey summed it up to the Committee this way:³⁵

What we must take into account in assessing this legislation is how our arrangements affect the common good, which is the good of all of us, what we all need to live a truly human life as members of a human family. New Zealand does not have the regulatory environment to ensure the protection of the most vulnerable today and in the future, so partial privatisation may not help us to achieve the common good.

VIII OPPOSING STIGMATISING OR MARGINALISING RHETORIC

Ensuring the common good in public policy is about opposing political rhetoric which marginalises, stigmatises or even makes scapegoats of particular groups of New Zealanders. Ethnic minorities have been easy targets in the past. At present, people raising children alone, young people looking for work and people with disabilities appear to be disproportionately the focus of attention in finding solutions to unemployment caused by the global financial crisis, which was not caused by the behaviour of teenagers, sole parents and disabled people.

In its submissions to the 2010 Welfare Working Group, Caritas argued that the common good was not guaranteed by a process which started with an inadequate problem definition. The terms of reference for the Welfare Working Group were framed in terms of the behaviour and motivation of beneficiaries, rather than the economic climate in which beneficiaries were being required to show they were unceasingly seeking work.³⁶ In a submission to the Welfare Working Group's Options Paper, Caritas said:

As a community consultation exercise, a due date of Christmas Eve for submissions is not one we would engage in with our own communities...it does, however, lead us to deeper parallels with our faith tradition.

It is easy to overlook the poverty of the birth of Christ in the context of today's highly commercial and sentimental portrayal of it. His parents were turned away from the only place which could have offered them formal shelter, despite his mother being in labour. An inclusive and caring society would have found or made room at the Inn...Blaming beneficiaries for benefit receipt is like blaming Mary for giving birth in a stable – and making changes to the stable (like making the door harder to open or evicting her sooner) will not change her situation. The approach of the Welfare Working Group has been to consider substantial welfare reform only from the perspective of the availability of the 'stable'; the question should be the capacity of the inn.

35 Public Finance (Mixed Ownership Model) Amendment Bill 2012 (7–1) (Submission by Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand) (Caritas, 2012) Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand <www.caritas.org.nz/resources/submissions>

36 Caritas Aotearoa New Zealand "Submission on the Welfare Working Group Options Paper" (2010) <www.caritas.org.nz/resources/submissions> at [2–3].

IX LOOKING BEYOND THOSE PRESENT

Considering the common good in public policy debates always asks us to look beyond the people gathered together in whatever "room" we are in. We ask, does this policy affect people in other parts of the world, who we may not know or even meet? Does it affect generations not yet born? While this approach has the perspective to make the common good look like an unachievable goalpost, it is always tempered by its practical application in the lives of particular groups of people.

These questions are particularly relevant in environmental issues, such as climate change, in which current policy makers driven by immediate political pragmatism need to know that at least some of their current constituency expect them to consider the long-term impact of policies. In the 2006 Social Justice Week focus on environmental justice, the New Zealand Catholic Bishops said that climate change was among the most urgent threats facing the people of the Pacific.

As in other parts of the world, the Bishops warned those suffering the consequences of climate change were those who played the least part in contributing to it:³⁷

Our faith and our religious tradition have much to offer the world at this time, including the importance of simplicity, and of learning to give up some things that we want, so others may have what they need. Our understanding that we are stewards of God's creation, our solidarity with the poor, and our respect for the common good make the issue of environmental justice the responsibility of every person.

The common good is not just a yardstick by which to measure the performance of government departments and other public decision-makers; Caritas assesses its own policies and practices by this as well. It is the reason that it works with communities rather than individuals; and it is the reason that it does not use schemes such as child sponsorship which enable and even encourage donors to see children as separate from their families and communities.

The common good is a relational concept – a Catholic perspective always sees and considers people in their social contexts, as members of families, hapū and iwi, communities, neighbourhoods. It arises out of our sense of God as a relational being – Father, Son and Spirit, and people being made in God's image also being naturally created as social and relational beings. This is a measure by which we judge public policy, because the Church also judges us and our actions from this perspective.

X CONCLUSION

The Catholic understanding of the common good is a powerful lens through which to consider public policy debates and decisions. It does not stand alone, but is always complemented by other

³⁷ New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference "Statement on Environmental Issues" (2006) The Catholic Church in Aotearoa New Zealand <www.catholic.org.nz/news>.

equally significant principles such as human dignity, the protection of the poor and vulnerable, solidarity and subsidiarity.

While Catholics may not always share the same vocabulary or definitions as others using similar words and concepts in public debates, their ethical and moral tradition brings something distinctive to political considerations. In the midst of the 20th century ideological struggles between individualism and collectivism, the Catholic church has developed and articulated a perspective which considers both personal and communal rights and responsibilities.

The common good has motivated members of Catholic communities and those of other churches to take action, as was seen in the Churches' response³⁸ to the economic and social concerns of the 1990s.

The challenge in this generation is to find the words and the process to bring that motivation and inspiration of the common good to today's beneficiaries, today's state house tenants, today's impoverished communities, and to the neighbours who love and care for them. The common good is found in working together for each other's wellbeing. In that way the wellbeing of each person, of the whole person and of all people are protected.

38 New Zealand Church Leaders, above n 7.

