

The Common Good as a Relational Good

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IN ORDINARY language, as well as in most empirical sciences, the common good is generally meant as a “something,” an entity belonging to everyone who is part of a community. The community can be big or small, may be a family, a local or national community, or the whole humankind. In any case, the common good is seen and treated as an asset or an opportunity to be preserved and enhanced, if possible, for the benefit of the individuals.

That “something,” of which the common good consists, is generally a tangible reality, but it may also be an intangible good. Tangible goods are, for instance, the natural resources that must be at everyone’s disposal (as air and water), community spaces usable by everyone (such as streets and squares; today we would consider the Web and Internet spaces as well), artistic monuments that are not to be commercialized. Intangible goods are, for instance, peace, social cohesion, international solidarity with the institutions safeguarding and promoting them.

Modern thought has increasingly compared the common good with a collective, materialized, and utilitarian good, which must be available to all members of the community. The notions of affluence, development, and progress are intended as such, when they are considered “common goods.” Thus modern thought always risks reducing the sense and value of the common good to a possession (a property), whose holders are conceived as shareholders or stakeholders.

Thus we understand the supremacy, up to today, of prevailingly economic and/or political concepts which reduce the common good to a sum of individual goods.

Most of the current economic theories intend the common good as “*the greatest possible good for the greatest possible number of individuals.*” In the best case scenario, the “greatest possible number of individuals” would mean *all* sentient beings. This definition of the common good presents it as an entity that is convertible, or reducible, to the sum total of all the private interests of the individual members of a society and interchangeable with them.

In the definitions given by the prevailing social, economic, and political sciences, the common good is *an allocation of resources that everyone takes advantage of*. Of course, that means that such allocation can be also unequal and even unfair, cut off from justice. What is relevant is that everyone may take some benefit from the allocation of resources.

Difficulties are not considered so much in the definition of the common good as within the rules of its implementation. Such implementation may take place based on four criteria:

1. “familiarity” (within the family, the allocation of resources consists in giving something to each one accepting the distribution by *consent*);
2. *merit or credit*, dictated by the individual moral conscience (each one accepts the allocation because he believes himself to deserve what he has received);
3. mutual benefit (the allocation is accepted because it is based on the expectation of a *cooperative action* enhancing everyone’s affluence; if someone does not cooperate in creating a common good, he will be punished by exclusion from future cooperation; it is a principle of reciprocity);
4. *enforcement* (the use of force by a third party, generally the State). Economists think that the common good is produced only if there are sanctions for those who shirk their responsibilities. Such sanctions are different in the four cases above:
 - a. the family takes one’s consent;
 - b. the individual who did not deserve his individual good, arising from the common good, will feel an inner guilt;
 - c. one loses the possibility of cooperation (one can draw no more from the common goods);
 - d. one receives a penalty from outside (fines, sanctions of different kinds, as in the case of tax evasion).

From political studies's point of view, the common good is defined as the central and essential aim of the State, consisting in granting fundamental rights to the individuals entering society, especially everyone's right to have the opportunity to freely shape his own life through responsible acting and according to the moral law. In this case, the common good is defined as the sum total of the conditions of social life, which enables people the more easily and straightforwardly to enjoy their rights. The object of state sovereignty is the free choice of means for creating these conditions. Some political thinkers, in particular John Rawls, make the distinction between the Good, that is, actively creating a better world (however that may be defined), and the Just, which creates a fair, liberal social infrastructure that allows the pursuit of virtue, but does not prescribe what the common good actually is.

Such ideas of common good are institutionalized today in the *liberal-labour*¹ political structures, that is, in those social, economic, and political systems based on two complementary principles: from the one side, the market's individual freedom (*liberal* side), from the other side, the equality of the individual opportunities granted by the political power (*labour* side).

Such structures appear to be limited and misleading as regards a deeper and more inclusive notion of the common good, because they obscure the social conditions transforming an object into something common and into a good, according to the moral point of view. If something is a *common* object, it is because the individuals who share it have certain relations among themselves. If it is a *good* (in a moral sense), it is because people relate *in a certain way* to such an object, and also to one another.

A good is a common good because it is generated and regenerated *only together* by the people involved in it. It must be at the same time produced and enjoyed together by all those who have a stake in it. For such a reason, *the good is within the relation connecting the subjects*. It is such a relation that includes the common good. The fruits that every individual subject may obtain derive from being within such a relation.

The relational definition of the common good displays those fundamental qualities that are obscured by proprietary definitions.

To understand such qualities, let us start from a consideration. If the common good is an asset belonging to the whole community, the ones belonging to that community recognize it as something preceding and going further than themselves. It is a good that they cannot freely dispose of. They can and must use it, but only under particular conditions,

¹ "Liberal-labour" refers to a societal configuration (e.g. a political system) based upon the complementarity between liberal (individualistic) and labour (socialist) ideologies.

excluding its divisibility and commodification. Should they divide or alienate it, they would not be able to enjoy its fruits.

What makes indivisible and not commodifiable the so-called common good? Is it maybe an inner quality or power of that object (tangible like water, or intangible like social cohesion and peace)?

Generally, the answer is negative. The object in itself is always *potentially* divisible and marketable. For instance, both water and social peace, although common goods, are susceptible to be divided and marketed. The reason why the common good cannot and must not be divided and marketed lies in the fact that, if it were divided or commodified, the relations among the members of that community would be estranged or even canceled. The common good is, before and above anything else, the guarantee of their social bond.

The quality that makes an object a common good lies neither in the thing as an indivisible and inalienable “whole” in itself, nor in the will of the members of a community. It does not depend on their options, tastes, preferences, individual and aggregate choices. People generate and regenerate it, but the good has its own reality that does not depend on people desiring or receiving benefit from it. They contribute to generating it, but they do not create it by themselves. They can destroy it by themselves, however. If they do destroy it, they break the social bonds connecting them to the other persons.

The common good has its own inalienable nature, with regard to the relations among the ones sharing it, because it preserves the foundations of the social bond. But the *sharing* must be voluntary. It cannot have a deterministic character. Precisely because the common good has a relational character, it lies in the mutual actions of those who contribute to it. Should the social bond break, there would be a collapse of the personal character of the action. Only if we see the common good as a relational good, may we understand its inner connection with the human person.

That is exactly what is stated by Catholic social doctrine.

As a matter of fact, the social doctrine of the Church proposes a concept of the common good quite different from the economic and political versions of it. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC, §1905–1912) and in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (*Compendium*, §164–170) a vision of the common good is outlined according to which

1. the common good is the social bond joining people together, on which material and immaterial goods of the individuals depend (as the *Compendium*, §165, states:

The human person cannot find fulfillment in himself, that is, apart from the fact that he exists 'with' others and 'for' others. This truth does not simply require that he live with others at various levels of social life, but that he seek unceasingly—in actual practice and not merely at the level of ideas—the good, that is, the meaning and truth, found in existing forms of social life. No expression of social life—from the family to intermediate social groups, associations, enterprises of an economic nature, cities, regions, States, up to the community of peoples and nations—can escape the issue of its own common good, in that this is a constitutive element of its significance and the authentic reason for its existence.

2. the common good does not consist either in a state of things, or in a sum of single goods, or in a prearranged reality, but it is “the whole of *conditions* of the social life that allow the groups, as well as the single members, to completely and quickly reach their own perfection” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 26); in particular, it consists in the exercise and conditions of natural liberties that are essential for the full development of the human inclinations (for example, the right to act according to one’s conscience, the right to freedom of religion, etc.);
3. the common good is the social and community dimension of the moral good; the common good is the moral good of a social or community relation

The common good does not consist of the mere sum of the particular goods of each subject of the social bodies. Being of every and each one, it is and still is common, because it is indivisible and because it is possible to reach it, enhance it and preserve it only together, considering the future as well. As the moral acting of the individual is fulfilled in the good, so the social acting comes to its height when realizing the common good. The common good, in fact, may be intended as the social and community dimension of the moral good. [*Compendium*, §164]

The social doctrine of the Church shows, therefore, a critical point of view as regards the materialistic, positivist, and utilitarian objectification (reification) of the common good. Its picture of the common good openly clashes with the “proprietary and utilitarian” picture given by today’s prevailing thought. It appeals to reasons based on the sociability of human beings. From human sociability, it draws conclusions according to which the common good cannot be confused with only apparently similar concepts, such as the concepts of *collective* good, *aggregate* good, *total* good, *vested* interests, *general interest*, and so on.

Nonetheless, the concrete application of Catholic social doctrine does not appear yet to live up to its potentiality.

In fact, the concept of the common good—rather than being developed in a relational way—is often practically traced back to an organic and vertically stratified picture of society, a picture based on two mainstays: (1) the assertion of the primacy of politics as the “synthesis” of the common good (“If every human community owns a common good permitting it to recognize itself as such, its complete realization lies in the *political community*” [CCC, §1910]); and (2) the consequent granting to the State of the privileged role of top and center of the society, which protects, rules, and creates its civil society (“It is the State’s duty to defend and promote the common good of civil society, citizens and intermediate bodies” [CCC, §1910]).

Thus, we wish to push Catholic social doctrine forward by claiming that, today, social doctrine can and must enlarge its horizons on the common good through a *widening of its relational vision*. It can develop its potential to illuminate and give its support to new politics and social practices, insofar as it widens the relational basis of the common good and derives the necessary consequences, on the applicatory and operative level, in the new context of globalization.

This position points out some problems that cannot be bounded any more inside the political configuration to which social doctrine still refers when it claims: “*The responsibility to obtain the common good, besides belonging to the individuals, belongs also to the State, because the common good is the reason for the political authority.*” The State, in fact, must assure cohesion, unity and organization to the civil society that it expresses, so that the common good may be obtained with the contribution of all citizens. The individual, the family and the intermediate bodies are not able to reach their full development by themselves; from that comes the necessity of political institutions, whose aim is to make necessary goods accessible to people—material, cultural, moral and spiritual goods—to lead a real human life” (*Compendium*, §168). Certainly, “the aim of social life is the historically feasible common good” (*Compendium*, §168), but the State is not the exclusive holder of such a task. The task of ensuring assure participation, social inclusion, security, and justice is certainly what justifies the existence and the action of the State, but the State must accomplish those tasks in a subsidiary way as regards the civil society (local, national, and international).

A development of social doctrine is required, considering the globalized society’s differentiation into spheres increasingly distinct among themselves, both at an infra-state and at a supra-state level. The common good becomes a responsibility not only of the individuals and of the

State, but also—in a completely new way—of the intermediate social bodies (“*civil societarian networks*”²) having a fundamental role in mediating the processes of the creation of the common good. These are not only *bottom-up* (realization of the common good through movements that come up from the bottom) and *top-down* (the creation of the common good from the State to the grassroots) processes, but also horizontal and lateral processes among organizations which neither depend on the State, nor are Market actors.

Summing up what has been said so far, the common good is not the result or the sum of individuals’ actions, because it is a reality exceeding individuals and their products. On the other hand, it is not an “already given whole,” having inner properties making it indivisible and not commodifiable. It has an inalienable character as regards the fruits given by it, because without the common good those fruits cannot exist. But people can always make it divisible and commodifiable. When they do so, they destroy the common good and consequently the community ceases to exist.

² M. S. Archer (personal communication March 20, 2008) has rightly pointed out that a network, *per se*, is not necessarily relational, as in the case of a distribution list. She suggests that “perhaps, that’s the key, the distinction between relational and non-relational networks (say the difference between kinship and genealogy).” I agree with that. I must at the same time say that in my language networks are always intended to be networks of relations (and not networks of material objects or simply “nodes”), and therefore, since a social relation implies a reciprocal action, what I call networks are to be understood as “relational networks.” (For my relational theory of society, see P. Donati, *Teoria relazionale della società* [Milano: FrancoAngeli, 1991].) That’s what distinguishes my critical (and relational) realism from others, namely, Dave Elder-Vass’s, in which social relations are understood as “real” structures (as in the relation between two atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen in a molecule of water). Social reality is ontologically different from material (physical, chemical, biological) reality. And therefore relations are made up of a different stuff (which implies a different concept of “structure”). The term “civil societarian” can be explained in the following way. A *civil societarian* strongly supports the institutions of civil society. These include families, corporations, religious groups, private schools, charities, trade associations, and the other peaceful, voluntary, collective organizations that promote our individual and collective well-being in so far as they are relational networks. These are the civil societarian networks to which I am referring. The stereotypical libertarian might cite Ayn Rand and exalt the independent individual. Instead, a civil societarian would cite Alexis de Tocqueville, and his observation that democracy is based upon people who, whatever their age, social conditions, and personal beliefs, constantly form associations. These voluntary associations are what a civil societarian sees as the key to civilization. Government may contribute to civil society, but it also intrudes on it. The means to avoid colonization is precisely to appeal to the principle of subsidiarity. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s theory of the general will serves as a good contrast to the civil societarian’s view.

The common good belongs to a reality which is relational in character. (“[L]ife is relation,” affirms Benedict XVI in the encyclical *Spe Salvi*, §27.)

Social dynamics continuously create and destroy common goods. Within modernity the processes of immunization from social relations have made the destructive forces more powerful than the creative ones. But, at the end of Western modernity, in what we call a *post*-modern society, the opposite may occur: society can make inalienable what was actually divisible and marketable; namely, it can generate a common good anew. What was once mistakenly viewed as divisible can be reclaimed as an indivisible value.

The empirical processes are always reversible. In any case, concretely speaking (not being limited to a metaphysical notion of the common good), we observe that human society lies in a variety of common goods: there are non-negotiable common goods and others that, under some circumstances, may be subjected to arguments of utility or convenience.

To trace the distinction between the common goods which can be made negotiable (let us think of some natural resources) and those which are not negotiable in any way (for example, human dignity and peace) is the task of a relational vision of the common good.

Let us make this claim clearer by introducing a basic argument. The first common good is the dignity of the human person, which is—at the same time—also the basis of any common good. It is a fact that human dignity cannot be violated without all the surrounding community suffering it. To violate human dignity means to wound the possibility to pursue the common good from the beginning.

But what is human dignity? What can be or cannot be negotiated within it?

Human dignity is not a quality that individuals may individually own and upon which they may individually decide. On the other hand, neither is it the sum (the aggregate) of a quality of all the members of a community. It is something coming before them and going beyond them. It is something that they enjoy without being able either to divide or to alienate it.

According to the Catholic point of view, human dignity takes root in the filial relation with God. Such a relation is therefore the first, origina-tive (*fontalis*), and decisive common good among human persons. It is so for all the great religions in the world. If we deny the existence of such a relation, as non-believers, atheists, or agnostics do, human dignity is hardly justifiable as a common good: in fact, where else can it otherwise take root? Many will answer that dignity resides in and is conferred by a particular community, which is exactly what the Catholic thought denies,

since human dignity cannot stem from a human artefact (such as a cultural tradition or a collective social structure).

So we see what can be negotiated in the common good. It is what does not touch its vital root, which root is the divine filiation of the human person and its implications in interpersonal relations. The rest can be discussed, modified, made the object of accords or contingencies, with the purpose of a further good.

Outside its religious basis, human dignity, being the first among the common goods, must find some justifications, but they always seem insufficient. All the criteria at the disposal of contemporary social sciences are insufficient. They appeal to human reason, but scientific reason is not enough. They appeal to the individual's abilities, but this criterion results in discriminating between those who are able to perform functionally and those who are not. They appeal to an abstract concept of humanity, but it appears as a purely artificial and contingent construction.

That is why a certain "secularized reason" of our time appeals to "a religion without God" (as claimed, for instance, by G. Teubner). Post-modern thought needs religion to solve its paradoxes, but it does not accept the divine filiation, where the solution to those paradoxes lies.

Nonetheless, Catholic thought, too, needs to take some steps forward. In fact, in the Catholic field, the "metaphysics of the common good," which has been formulated in past centuries, needs a deep revision. Such metaphysics has defined the common good of humankind as consisting in God, and—as a consequence—the relation of each individual with him. This perspective is certainly not wrong; it is undoubtedly right, but not completely adequate. Taken in a simplistic way, it obscures the common good existing among human persons (which should not be understood as a reflex of their fundamental individual relation and as an expression of the Mystical Body). Today, such metaphysics has to be considered necessary but insufficient; it should be revised starting with the remark that the dignity of the human person is neither an individualistic (inherent to the individual *qua talis*) nor a holistic reality (stemming from some collective entity, including the Mystical Body), because it is connected and inherent to each human person, as provided not only by one's relation of filiation with God, but also by one's relations with other human persons. The dignity of the human person, if considered as a common good, shows us that such a quality is not an individual one, but it is connected and inherent to the relations of the person with the whole creation, with God and with other human persons.

Before every other reason, the good is common thanks to its dignity. And dignity is a quality that cannot be circumscribed and limited to the

single individual, but it spreads to the relations where the individual expresses himself, where he is preserved and where he flourishes. The family, for instance, is a common good if and because it is seen as a specific relation realizing the dignity of the human person.

So we come to see the moral dimensions of the common good, surpassing its concretely expressible dimensions (material and immaterial), since the moral dimensions are of a transcendental nature. The moral dimensions point out that the common good is a relational good, legitimated by the fundamental criterion of human dignity.

In brief: the common good is neither a “collective heritage” that may be expressed concretely in an entity existing apart from the human person, nor an aggregate of individual goods (in this case, we name it total or collective good). It is something that belongs, at the same time, *to all the members of a community and to each of them, as it lies in the quality of relations among those who share it.*

As regards the social sciences, here intervene the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. In fact, only a relational theory may observe the common good as an emerging effect of the combined actions of subsidiarity and solidarity of subjects (individuals or social groups) operating in the framework of a relational anthropology. From the perspective of this relational vision it is more clearly seen which are the negotiable and non-negotiable common goods. The task of discovering and understanding the relational character of the common good has just started; it must be further analyzed thoroughly in the future.

Consequences for the Definition of Subsidiarity and Solidarity

There is a variety of definitions of subsidiarity, as well as of solidarity. For example, subsidiarity has been defined as follows: proximity/nearness to the subjects concerned, better organizational dimension, devolution, privatization, articulation of citizenship rights, multilevel governance, and so on. Many different types of subsidiarity have been devised: vertical and horizontal subsidiarity, defensive and promotional subsidiarity, reflexive subsidiarity, strengthened subsidiarity, and so on. Solidarity, in its turn, has been conceived of as redistribution, beneficence, charity, social compensations, interdependency, and so on.

What we want to point out here is that, for a correct vision of the two terms (subsidiarity and solidarity), we need not only to use them together, but also *to define them insofar as one relates to the other.* That is exactly what the relational approach does. It claims that, considered in their social phenomenology, *the common goods are the products of action systems that have,*

as a value model, human dignity (referring not only to the individual as such, but also to his social relations) and operating through forms that are both solidary and subsidiary among the subjects concerned.

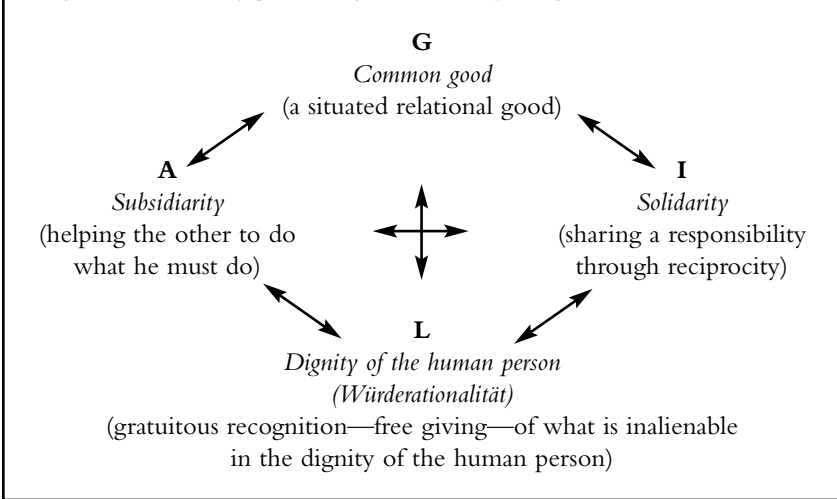
The relational definition of the common good leads to a relational vision of the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, meaning that subsidiarity and solidarity are seen as two ways to relate to others, considering the other in his dignity.

Solidarity is a relation of *Ego* with *Alter*, doing what one can to meet the responsibility that everyone has towards the common good. Solidarity means that everyone assumes his own part, according to his capabilities. Subsidiarity means to relate so as to help the other to do what the other has to do according to a relational guidance system of action.³

These two principles should generally operate together because otherwise no common good could be generated. At the same time, it is clear how one is defined in its relation with the other. As a matter of fact, if *Ego* wants to help *Alter* without oppressing him, *Ego* must be *at the same time subsidiary and solidary*. Subsidiarity (the very fact that *Ego* wishes to help *Alter* to do what *Alter* has to do) needs an act of solidarity. In this case, solidarity is neither (unilateral) beneficence nor charity, but assumption and practice of joint and varied responsibility that both *Ego* and *Alter* must have towards the common good. (This is also the meaning of solidarity as interdependence, which is still valid when one part of the relationship cannot give anything material to the other part.)

³ A relational guidance system of action is needed in order to avoid the fallacy that subsidiarity requires a presupposed "normative approach" to the help relation. When I say that subsidiarity means that *Ego* helps *Alter* to do what he has to (or must) do as a *suum munus*, I do not intend to say that *Ego* dictates the norms of conduct to *Alter*, by providing him, with a sort of Decalogue. In this case, in fact, *Alter* would be impeded in his internal and external reflexivity. Relational guidance, on the contrary, means that *Ego* acts as a stimulus to the internal and external reflexivity of *Alter*, since all the needs, desires, projects of *Alter* should be met by supporting her/him to develop her/his own capabilities, aspirations, concerns, etc. through an evolving relational setting in which *Ego* is charged with the task to ensure that the goals are ethically good and that the activated relations are adequate to the pursuit of these goals, which are primarily defined by *Alter*, or, when *Alter* is a child or a handicapped person, together by *Alter* and his in/formal helper. (See the relational guidance scheme in P. Donati, *Teoria relazionale della società*, ch. 5). In the case of a parent-child situation, relational guidance is not a directive command or impulse (it is not directly normative), but is a prompt to activate those relationships which lead the child to the good things he desires, whereas the guiding *Ego* is helping in so far as s/he makes the assessment of the goodness of the goals and makes sure that proper reflexive relations are activated in order to attain those goals.

Figure 1. *The Configuration of an Action System for the Common Good.*



The common good is therefore the fruit (the emerging effect) of a relation of reciprocity between solidarity and subsidiarity, implemented by *Ego* and *Alter* in their mutual interaction.

At this point, one realizes the importance of the claim that the common good is the fruit of reciprocity understood as the rule of an action, which stems from the spirit of free giving. Reciprocity exists in society as an autonomous reality, since it is neither a sharing of useful goods (*do ut des*: such a form concerns contracts and the sharing of equivalent goods) (as Alvin Gouldner maintains), nor a sharing for the sake of sharing (as Mark Anspach argues), namely the recourse to reciprocal giving in order to underline the sense of belonging to a common tribal entity (the *Hau* as interpreted by Marcel Mauss). Reciprocity is a mutual helping, performed in a certain way, or rather, is a help concretely given by *Ego* to *Alter* in a context of solidarity (that is, common responsibility, interdependency), that is, where *Ego* is aware (recognizes) that *Alter* would do the same (namely, *Alter* would take responsibility within the limits he can afford) when *Ego* would need it. Reciprocity is supported and made effective as long as it is grounded by the recognition of the dignity of the other.

Under these premises, we can understand the specific configuration of the action system generating a common good (Figure 1). The relation between the human person and the common good is the referential axis, which is needed to link the rationality of what has an inalienable dignity in itself with the situated relational good in a given context (the axis L–G). To be made operative, an action system turned to the common

good needs means and rules (the adaptive axis A–I), which must befit the value model of human dignity. Only such an action system can avoid both holism and individualism. What makes the action system for the *situated* common good performatory (namely a concrete common good that must be produced here and now, context after context, situation after situation) are the two principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. They have the task of identifying the means and rules of the acting “system.” Without them, the common good could not be actually generated.

We may say therefore that the common good is the emerging effect of an action system operating as the “combined provisions” of subsidiarity and solidarity to increase the value of the dignity of the human person (Figure 1).

The principle of subsidiarity is an operating instrument. It is not to be confused with the principle of competence attribution (the distribution of the *munera*) (as clearly stated by Russell Hittinger). The distribution of tasks lies on the axis that connects the dignity of the human person to the common good.

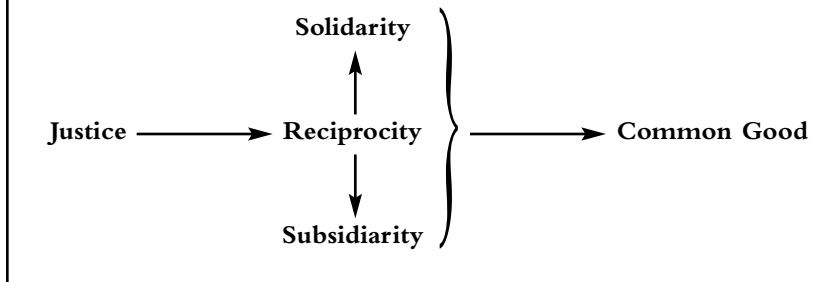
Subsidiarity is a way to supply the means; it is a way to move resources to support and help the other without making him passive. Subsidiarity allows the other to accomplish his tasks, namely to do what he should do, what is up to him/her and not to others (*munus proprium*). For its part, solidarity is a sharing of responsibility, operating according to the rule of reciprocity.

To provide some means, resources, aid, and benefits to *Alter* could have the consequence of making him dependent on *Ego*, or of exploiting him for some other purpose. That is why subsidiarity cannot work without the principle of solidarity, through which *Ego* recognizes that, when helping *Alter*, there is a joint and several liability (with *Alter*), namely an interdependency linking *Ego* and *Alter* (interdependency as a moral category according to the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*).

The above-mentioned framework explains why the common good is not equivalent to justice.

Sure enough, the common good is a right good. Justice is a mean to reach the common good (being the aim). By itself, justice runs the risk of being purely legal. What makes it “substantial” (or rather “fully adequate”) is that its constitutive criterion (*suum cuique tribuere*) works through the connection between subsidiarity and solidarity. For instance, the person committing a crime must be sanctioned because he violated the common responsibility (solidarity), but the sanction must not have a merely punitive or revengeful aim; it should aim at helping the guilty person to do what he has to, namely, to re-establish the circuit of reciprocity.

Figure 2. Justice Produces the Common Good Only If It Passes Through the Combined Work of Solidarity and Subsidiarity.



If an action of solidarity towards those who commit a crime is not subsidiary to them (in order to have them re-enter the networks of social reciprocity) it is not a right one. Solidarity by itself does not produce the common good: quite often, it becomes pure charity or a kind of egalitarianism that does not take differences into account, not to mention the cases where solidarity can lead to real evils (such as “Cosa Nostra”).

On the other hand, neither does subsidiarity by itself produce the common good. It may be easily interpretable by itself in a reductive way as a *devolution*, the system of balanced powers, the *laissez-faire* at its lowest, and so on.

Justice generates the common good only if it works through an active complementarity between solidarity and subsidiarity (Figure 2). We must remember that, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§1905), “in conformity with the social nature of the human person, the good of everyone is necessarily in connection with the common good. It must be defined in relation to the human person: ‘Do not live isolated, falling back on yourself as if you were confirmed in justice; gather together instead, to find what is useful to the good of everyone’” (my translation).

In short: the common good is that relational good coming from the fact that *Ego* freely recognizes the dignity of what is human in *Alter*, and he moves through actions jointly inspiring solidarity and subsidiarity towards *Alter*. The common good of a plurality of subjects is generated based on the assumption of equal moral dignity of persons as an emerging effect of actions combining reciprocity (pertaining to the principle of solidarity) with the empowerment of the other (pertaining to the principle of subsidiarity).

Great consequences come from all this for the configuration of society.

Implications for the Relationship Between the State and Civil Society

The relational understanding of the common good leads to various implications for society's organization, beyond the *liberal-labour* configuration typical of the twentieth century.

Firstly we see that *the common good coincides neither with the State nor with the State-Market compromise*, but it is the product of a system of social action, involving a plurality of subjects orientating themselves one to another, based on reciprocal solidarity and subsidiarity.

Secondly we see that *subsidiarity does not concern only the vertical relations* existing inside a society conceived as a sort of pyramid going from the supranational to the national level (State, regions, municipalities), to the family, and to the human person. Such a version of subsidiarity is quite limited and is suitable for the internal hierarchic relations of the political-administrative system (that is why it is called "*vertical* subsidiarity").

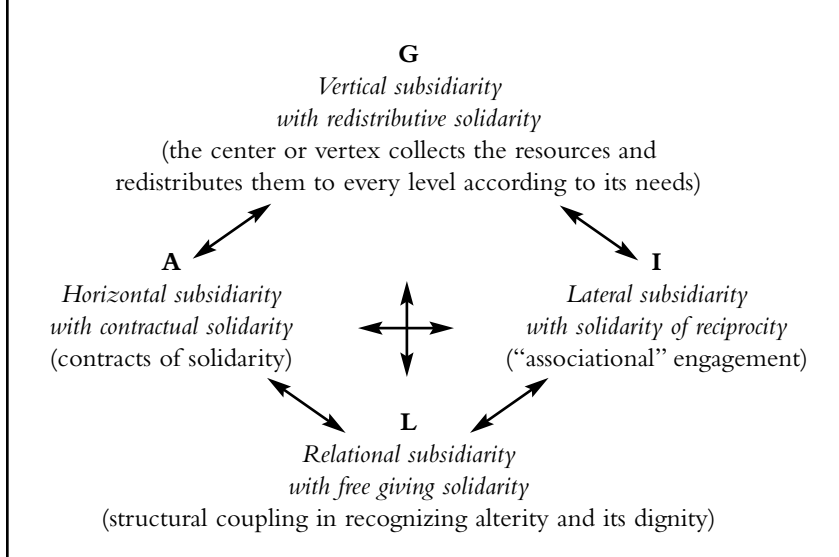
When we affirm that subsidiarity means that responsibility is closer to the citizens (*subsidiarity means taking responsibility at the actual level of actions*), generally we refer to this kind of subsidiarity (as defined by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno*, §80). But it is not always like this, because the idea of closeness to citizens implies other modes of subsidiarity: (1) there is a principle of subsidiarity between State and organizations of civil society (for instance, municipalities and volunteer organizations) called "*horizontal* subsidiarity"; and (2) there is a principle of subsidiarity among subjects of civil society (for instance, between family and school; between an enterprise and the employees' and clients' families, etc.) which may be called "*lateral* subsidiarity."

The distinction of subsidiarity in these various modalities (vertical, horizontal, and lateral) is possible only if one has a generalized idea of subsidiarity. This is *relational* subsidiarity, consisting in helping the other to do what he should. Such a generalized concept is vertically, horizontally, and laterally developed, according to the nature of the problems and subjects at issue.

Thirdly we see that, as happens with subsidiarity, solidarity too can take various shapes. There is solidarity through redistribution, but also through free giving, solidarity by contract or through reciprocity. Solidarity as a sharing of responsibility unto interdependency is its more generalized meaning (namely always effective as a value model), defined in one way or another according to subjects and circumstances.

In brief, the relational approach leads us to understand what is meant when we say that the global society can and must *extend* and *enlarge* (the concept of) subsidiarity and solidarity.

Figure 3. *The Extension of the Solidarity-Subsidiary Relation in Its Various Articulations.*



To extend these two principles of social action means to be able to generalize and differentiate them at the same time. So, for instance, to extend subsidiarity means to have a generalized concept (relational subsidiarity) structured in its different modalities (vertical, horizontal and lateral) and applied from time to time, according to the exigencies of the various social spheres involved and of their actors. The same applies for solidarity. Thus we identify a generalized system of the creation of the common good through the extension of the solidarity-subsidiary relationship (Figure 3).⁴

⁴ One might ask whether this is a typology of subsidiarity rather than an action system. From a theoretical point of view this question goes back to the meaning of the Parsonian AGIL (a scheme based upon four functional prerequisites: A means Adaptation, G means goal attainment, I means Integration, and L means Latency). In the relational version, the AGIL scheme is never a pure typology, but is a compass to observe the structure and dynamic of an action which is supposed to be reciprocal (in the sense of being an action in response to another action). This is where reflexivity comes in. The paper by M. S. Archer “Education, Subsidiarity and Solidarity; Past, Present and Future” [in M. S. Archer and P. Donati (eds.), *Pursuing the Common Good: How Solidarity and Subsidiarity Can Work Together* (Vatican City:Vatican Press, 2008), 377–415] is a fine example of how the scheme can work when applied to the field of education. The four dimensions of subsidiarity must, and in fact do, interact and work together if we want to get out of the modern system, which is now producing a loss, instead of

The norm of reciprocity nourishes the recourse to the subsidiary-solidarity relation (complementarity between subsidiarity and solidarity) among distinct, varied, and differentiated spheres, like an enterprise and the employees' families, or the local political-administrative institutions, a volunteer organization and the beneficiaries of the voluntary work.

Nonetheless, reciprocity needs a reason to be activated (who gives first?). In fact, the "structural coupling" of the various spheres that are distant and varied from one another, and probably scarcely disposed to create subsidiary-solidarity relations with each other (for example, a local government and an organization of mutual aid, an enterprise and the employees' families, etc.) needs a free act of recognition (a "gift") as a starting act moving solidarity and directing it towards subsidiarity. A symbolic, even if rare, case is that of an enterprise not only activating *family friendly* services for employees, but conceiving more widely the professional work as subsidiary to the family rather than the contrary (it is called "corporate family responsibility").

A society that, because of its organization, is inspired by the common good must extend its subsidiary-solidarity relations through all the spheres of life. It is clear how such configuration is different from all those theorized in the modern age, starting from T. Hobbes to F. Hegel, K. Marx and the great theorists of the welfare state of the twentieth century, to the current *liberal-labour* structures. The *liberal-labour* welfare systems do not take inspiration from the model of systems oriented toward the production of the common good through the principle of subsidiarity combined with that of solidarity. They are based instead on the compromise between Market and State (profit and political power); that is, they stand on two legs: on the one side, individual liberties to compete in the market; on the other side, state interventions to ensure equality of opportunity for all.

It should be underlined that the relational model of the common good is necessary today not only to solve the failures of the couple State + Market. It is not a model simply understandable in terms of better evolutionistic adaptation. It arises from a new "relational anthropology of the civil society," that is, from a new way to mean and practice human reflexivity in civil relations (those which are not "political" because they do not

an increase, of common goods (as relational goods) in education. For an empirical investigation, see *Capitale sociale delle famiglie e processi di socializzazione. Un confronto fra scuole statali e di privato sociale*, ed. P. Donati and I. Colozzi (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006). The same holds true for health care and many kinds of social services (particularly family services: see *Buone pratiche e servizi innovativi per la famiglia*, ed. P. Donati and R. Prandini [Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006]).

refer to the political-administrative system, though not excluding it or operating against it).

On this basis, we may better point out the implications of the relational theory of the common good in configuring, in a new way, the relations between state and civil society. The discontinuity with the past does not lie in the key concepts (person, subsidiarity, solidarity, common good). The discontinuity lies in the interpretation and implementation of such concepts, which is *not only of the functionalist, but of the meta-functionalist kind*.

In the context of the functionalist approach, the common good is a state of affairs that, other things being equal, improves the position of at least one participant. It does not need solidarity, not to mention reciprocity. It says nothing about human dignity. Subsidiarity is meant as a kind of *smooth functioning*. Solidarity is understood as a social compensation (redistribution, charity) necessary to make the system run.

In the context of the relational interpretation, things are different. The common good is a *quality of relations* on which the concrete *goods* (in the plural) of the participants of a situation depend, the goods of all those belonging to a community, according to their different needs.

In short: the State (or the political-administrative system, from the supranational to the local one) has four ways to relate to civil society (Figure 3):

- (G) a vertical modality, maintaining solidarity through redistributive measures;
- (A) a horizontal modality, supporting the organizations of civil society with relational contracts, called “contracts of social solidarity,” namely, not acting by a political command and not oriented to mere profit, but operating on the basis of mutual subsidiarity;
- (I) a lateral modality, applying subsidiarity among subjects of civil society that are “pairs,” among which solidarity is exercised through the norm of reciprocity;
- (L) a generalized relational modality simply recognizing the dignity of the other and giving him the gift of such recognition through free acting (the opening of a free credit that sets reciprocity in motion).

Such a configuration seems to be able to produce common goods far beyond the current configurations, where the State relates to civil society as an absolute power (Hobbes’s Leviathan), or as an ethical State (Hegel), or as an expression of the hegemonic forces of the civil society (A. Gramsci), or as the political representation of the Market (R. Dahl).

In such “relational” configuration, the third sector and the fourth sector (constituted by families and informal networks) play a central role, precisely because they are moved by free giving and reciprocity. These two sectors are put in the position to express their potentialities (namely to develop their own *munera*) rightly because they are not treated as residual subjects, as if they needed only aid, rules, and control by the complex State + Market.

Third sector organizations and family associations become social actors with their own powers, independent from State and Market. Concrete instances are the *community foundations* widespread in many countries, *charter schools* in the U.S.A., the Forums of family associations in Italy, Spain, and other countries.

A New Sociocultural Order Suited to a Globalized Society

We ask ourselves: can these new actors, generating the common good through the joint work of subsidiarity and solidarity, indicate a generalized action model for the governance of a globalized society?

The answer may be affirmative. In fact, the society of the twenty-first century is neither pyramidal nor hierarchic anymore, but reticular and self-poietic in its structures and in its morphogenetic processes. In such kinds of structures and processes, common goods are produced more effectively, efficiently, and fairly through modalities maximizing criteria based on subsidiarity and solidarity, rather than confiding in the primacy of command and/or profit (as the *liberal labour* systems). Concrete instances are fair trade, NGOs for health assistance in developing countries, the so-called “epistemic communities” transferring knowledge and learning outside the commercial circuits.

The main problem here is represented by the political system, no longer able to represent and govern civil society. Civil society enhances its developing potentials far beyond the ruling and controlling abilities of the political systems (local, national, and supranational). In some cases, in fact, we see that the political systems try to corrupt civil society, because they introduce into civil society such ideological and interest-based divisions typical of the political parties, rather than directing the civil actors towards the promotion of the common good.

The principles of Catholic social doctrine—as regards the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity—have been expressed as having the *political constitutions* of the national states and of the supranational political systems (such as the EU) as a horizon. But the age of political constitutions of state-nations is disappearing (it survives in those areas having yet to pass through the construction of a state-nation, as the ex-Yugoslavia, the Balkans, some geopolitical areas of Africa and Asia). National states cannot

govern globalization. Nor can we think of the UNO as a supranational state. To cope with globalization, new political configurations are necessary on a supranational and infranational level, for which it can be useful to draw on the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. Such principles must be interpreted in a new perspective, not of the national states, but rather of an emergent global civil society, not limited and bound to the frontiers of the national states any more.

The principles that are the foundation of the action systems fit to generate common goods may constitute the fundamental axes of new modalities to elaborate and promote the rights–duties of persons and social formations in the networks of civil society, emerging from the processes of globalization: this is the theme of *civil constitutions*. It has to do with *charters* or *statutes* drawn up by civil bodies, rather than by the political apparatuses of the national states, self-regulating the actions of the civil subjects operating in a certain activity sector. The activities may be economic, mass media, social, and cultural ones. We may find some examples in the statutes of ILO and WTO, internationally forbidding juvenile work, or in the charters approved by journalists' international organizations, forbidding the exploitation of children in television advertising.

Civil constitutions are normative dispositions having the following features. (1) They are “constitutional” because they concern the field of the fundamental rights of the human person (let us think of bioethics, labour, and consumption). (2) They are civil because the social subjects, to which these constitutions are addressed to define a complexity of rights and duties, have a civil, rather than political, feature (they are not the expression of political parties or political coalitions, but of the associational world in the economy and in the non-profit sectors, for example, WTO, NGOs, etc.). (3) They give shape to deliberative, rather than representative, forms of democracy, since the social subjects to which civil constitutions are addressed (and applied) are, at the same time, the subjects that have to enhance them through forms of societal governance (not political government); in other words, the subjects of such constitutions are at the same time the bearers of rights and duties and the actors responsible for their implementation.

These civil constitutions are quite independent from territorial boundaries, because they are elaborated and implemented by global networks, often international ones, made of civil subjects. So they place themselves alongside of (not against) the classical political relation of citizenship (namely the relation between the individual citizen and the national State), assuming certain functions, particularly of advocacy and empowerment of rights–duties of persons and social bodies.

This is the new scenario making obsolete the *liberal-labour* configuration of society. Social sciences have coined several terms to capture this new reality. We talk of “society of networks” or “network society” (Manuel Castells), of “city by projects” (Luc Boltansky and Eve Chiapello), of “atopia” (what exists anywhere), which takes the place of utopia (what exists nowhere) (Helmut Willke). We talk of a “relational society.”

All these expressions suggest the birth of a society that is a pluralist whole of spheres, somehow de-territorialized, where different criteria of justice (and ultimately of justification) are valid.

The phenomenon of “pluralization of the spheres of justice” spreads without solving the problem of how to put the more and more differentiated spheres of justice in relation with one another (a problem left unsolved by Michael Walzer). To address that problem, we need a “relational reason” that is capable of “meta-reflexivity”.

From this point of view, the principles of social doctrine that configure a social system capable of generating the common good appear to be exactly what we need in order to meet the new demands of a “relational” society.

The mix of subsidiarity and solidarity (the axis A–I of Figure 1) may lead to building social practices that, from the one side, are sensitive to basic human rights and, from the other, are able to generate those common goods that neither political command nor the economic motive of profit can realize.

There are many examples of social practices reflecting, in some ways even if not completely, such a new spirit. We may mention some of them: the *économie solidaire*, the economy of communion, the local Alliances for the family (*Lokale Bündnisse für die Familie*), the food bank, electronic giving and sharing, NGOs like Médecins sans Frontières, the microcredit run by non-profit entrepreneurs, the ethical banks, and so on.

We need to start a new process of reflection to examine whether, how far, and in what ways these initiatives are sensitive to human rights and allow new common goods to emerge through the joint work of solidarity and subsidiarity, each of them operating in its “sphere of justice.”

The task of analyzing the aforesaid concrete examples in the light of the theory summarized here (Figures 1, 2, and 3) is still unfinished. Such an analysis should show under which conditions so-called “good practices” actually produce new common goods or are lacking in this. In the current state of things, it seems that the initiatives mentioned here need a more precise and shared theoretical-practical context, underlining how subsidiarity and solidarity cannot currently produce common goods if they do not operate as forms of recognition of the dignity and rights-duties (*munera*) of the human person, in the various social spheres.

To pursue the common good in a generalized way, we need to widen the range of reason; namely, human reason has to be put in the position to see and handle the qualities of the action systems generating common good.

In such systems, the subsidiarity-solidarity relation has certainly a central role. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the more delicate and critical dimensions are the forms of recognition of human rights, always running the risk of being ideological or reductive of human dignity.

Contemporary Western culture urgently needs to elaborate a theory of recognition of human rights while not losing the peculiar quality of the human. Surely modernity has expressed a strong ethical tension in elaborating the forms of recognition based on love (friendship), rights (legal relations), and solidarity (community of value). Nevertheless, the current phenomena of de-humanization go far beyond the forecast of modernity. We talk of the coming of a post-human, trans-human, in-human, supra-human era. We talk of hybridization and metamorphosis of humankind. These phenomena create such radical challenges that we need a new vision: we have to re-configure human rights from the point of view of the common good, that is, to *conceive human rights as common goods*.

A society wanting to pursue the common good in a progressive and not regressive (not to mention ideological) way must reformulate its recognition of what is human through good practices, that is, practices which can be called “good” insofar as they combine four elements: *the gift of dignity conferred to the human person, interdependency among people, acting to empower the other, and caring for the relations among persons as goods in themselves* (the common good as a relational good). These elements are relational in themselves and relational to one another.

Each element is a relation endowed with its own sense, having to realize itself at the same time in relation with the other. Each one makes sense in relation with the others, not according to a sequence of “dialectic overcoming” between a thesis and an antithesis that should “unite them while preserving their inner truth without any contradiction to each other” in a utopian “synthesis” (the common good is not like this), but as relations (reciprocal actions!) concurring to actualize the common good in the different social spheres. N.V