TOWARDS THE COMMON GOOD. A CHURCH AND SOCIETY PERSPECTIVE ON *THE CHURCH: TOWARDS A COMMON VISION*

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The Roman Catholic and Reformed traditions in Scotland have complementary notions of the common good that can inform an ecumenical approach to public issues in Scottish society. The normative understanding of the common good in Catholic social thought should be combined with a Protestant style of social engagement rooted in the Reformation: pursuing the common good through persuasion in the public sphere. The fusion of these two ways of seeing the common good in an ecumenical style of engagement in society will put the ecclesiology of The Church: Towards a Common Vision *into practice through faithful performance and public persuasion.*

From an ecclesiological perspective, the heart of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is to be found in its understanding of the Church as communion or *koinonia*: communion with the triune God and communion with one another in Jesus Christ:

> The biblical notion of *koinonia* has become central in the ecumenical quest for a common understanding of the life and unity of the Church. (13)

From a church and society perspective, the heart of *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* is to be found in its commitment to the common good, and to making common cause for the good of humanity and all creation:

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> Together with all people of good will, the Church seeks to care for creation … by opposing the abuse and destruction of the earth and participating in God's healing of broken relationships between creation and humanity. (66)

In the final section of our document, headed 'The Church in Society', these two ideas of communion and the common good are brought together:

> The world that 'God so loved' is scarred with problems and tragedies that cry out for the compassionate engagement of Christians. The source of their passion for the transformation of the world lies in their communion with God in Jesus Christ. (64)

If this document calls us towards a common vision of the Church as communion, it also calls us towards the common good of society. More than that, it calls on particular churches to work for the common good in ways appropriate to their own particular context:

> Jesus said that he came so that human beings may have life in abundance; his followers acknowledge their responsibility to defend human life and dignity. These are obligations on churches as much as on individual believers. Each context will provide its own clues to discern what is the appropriate Christian response within any particular set of circumstances. (64)

So what does working for the common good mean for church and society in our Scottish context? The common good is an idea that carries weight for both Christians and Scots. In the *Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* issued under John Paul II, the principle of the common good was reaffirmed as a major component of Catholic social teaching. In our recent Scottish Referendum, much was made of the comparison with Scandinavia and its social democratic model of the common good—a sort of IKEA for Independence!

Clearly, the common good is an idea whose time has come in Scotland. So what do we mean by this term in our Catholic and Reformed traditions in Scotland? What clues to its content can we discern in our own Scottish context?

To answer these questions we must go back to a moment in our history that both Catholic and Reformed churches share, Scotland in the 1540s, when the cry for reform in church and society was in the air. At that moment, a poor man stepped on to the stage of Scottish history. He is the most remarkable character in the history of Scottish

drama. His name is John the Common Weal. He appears in the late medieval Scottish play, *Ane Satyre of the Thrie Estaitis*, written by the courtier and diplomat Sir David Lindsay.

As its name suggests, this drama is a biting satire on the corruption of the three estates in contemporary Scotland: the nobility, the Church, and the merchant class. The first half of the drama follows the conventions of morality plays performed across Europe in this period. The personified virtues and vices fight for the soul of the king, Rex Humanitas. The welfare of the kingdom hangs in the balance, depending on whether the king listens to Flatterie and Sensualitie or Guid Counsel and Divyne Correction.

In the second half of the play, everything changes. We move from the conventional style of a morality play to the realist style of a political satire. The Parliament of the Three Estates is summoned to reform the realm. They enter backwards, symbolizing that all is not well in the kingdom. Then on to the stage steps John the Common Weal in the company of a Poor Man. Unlike the imaginary characters in the first half of the play—Sensualitie, Guid Counsel and so on—John the Common Weal and the Poor Man are inhabitants of the real world and live in the real Scotland, facing 'a real history of privation'. John the Commonweal speaks out against the three estates in the name of the poor, who are sorely oppressed by the greed and corrupt practices of the lords, the bishops and the merchants. He calls for reform in the name of Christ and the New Testament, much to the consternation of the bishops. When the king, Rex Humanitas, meets 'Johne the Common-weil of fair Scotland' for the first time, he asks, 'Quhat is the caus the Common-weil is crukit?' to which John replies, 'Becaus the Common-weil hes bene overlukit.'

The commonweal, the common good, is here described not in the abstract terms of virtue but in the concrete terms of poverty. In a memorable line from the play, we learn that the condition of the poor in contemporary Scotland, 'gars John the Common Weill want his warm claes'. Poverty in a cold climate makes the common people want for warm clothes.

Seen through the eyes of John the Common Weal, the common good is defined by whether the poorest among us have clothes on their back, food in their stomach, shelter from the storm, and hope for tomorrow. If the poor go cold and ragged into an uncertain tomorrow, then there is no equity in the land, and no wellbeing for anyone in

society, not even the rich and mighty, no *common* good. In this definition of the common good, as applicable to the wretched of the earth today as it was to late medieval Scotland, we surely hear the echo of Jesus in the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel: 'I was naked and you clothed me … When, Lord, did we see you naked? … In as much as you did it to the least of these, you did it to me.' Here too the common good is a question of whether you have clothes on your back to keep you warm.

I have drawn on Scottish drama as well as the Gospels to define the substance of the common good as the *want o' warm claes*, and a theology of the common good as a warm claes theology. The common good is about clothing the naked, and righting every wrong in the crooked commonweal to make it so. The common good has evangelical litmus tests that we can see and God can judge: the naked are clothed; the hungry fed; the stranger welcomed; and the prisoner visited. As the *Satire of the Three Estates* reminds us, the commonweal of Scotland means that the poor are not forgotten.

But nor do the poor forget. While a student at Edinburgh University, I spent three summers working as a night cleaner, cleaning the offices and toilets around George Square. Among the local men I worked with was Jimmy Kelly. Jimmy loved to reminisce about his Catholic childhood in the Cowgate—especially when he was skelped for skipping Mass because he couldn't tell his mother the right colour for the liturgical season. Early one morning in our tea break, looking out from the David Hume Tower over the Southside of Edinburgh, Jimmy Kelly turned to me and said, 'Aye, son, this is no' a poor man's city.' In heeding this document's call to the churches to seek the common good of society, let us not forget that it is the poor who are the experts on what that means in reality.

Of course, the roots of the idea of the common good lie deep in Western culture as well as the biblical tradition. Aristotle argued that the common good is the goal of public life for all free citizens of the *polis*, but not for the women, slaves and aliens who were excluded from public life and citizenship. Aquinas wrote that 'the supreme good, namely God, is the common good, since the good of all things depends on God.' More recent Catholic social teaching has a twofold understanding of the common good as both the societal conditions for human flourishing and the goal of society.

These are definitions of the substance of the common good. I wish to argue that the common good is about style as well as substance. The case for the common good is not only about the unacceptable style of ragged poverty. The style in which we argue for the common good is important as well. It illuminates the substance of the common good in new ways. Style matters.

My interest as a public theologian in the question of style has been prompted by a remarkable study of style in politics by the American professor of rhetoric and communication studies, Robert Hariman, in his book, *Political Style: the artistry of power.*[1] There he argues that to understand politics one must look not only at questions of governance and law, political ideology and interests, but also at the question of political style.

Hariman has in mind the repertoire of persuasive skills that every successful politician intuitively possesses in making an appeal for support or agreement: the artful way with words and use of gestures in order to appeal to voters or colleagues or even opponents. There are different political styles, each with its own 'sensibility, taste, manners, charisma, charm', and accepted ways of communicating in speech, in written texts or in performance. Hariman defines political style as: 'a coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions for political effect.' In other words, a political style is a distinctive way of communicating and acting intended to win an appreciative response and political outcome—'I like the candidate. She seems one of us. She gets my vote.'

Hariman sees each political style as drawing on universal elements in the human condition but configuring them in distinctive ways. His thesis is this: 'To the extent that politics is an art, matters of style must be crucial to its practice.' While arguing that questions of style can shape human conduct and represent important elements of human communication, he also recognizes the importance of other factors in determining human action. Style matters but it is certainly not the only thing that matters. However, it matters more than we think.

There are different styles of rhetoric and performance in politics. Similarly, I wish to argue, there are different styles of rhetoric and

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[1] Robert Hariman, *Political Style: the artistry of Power* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

performance when it comes to imagining the common good. But what is our style of imagining the common good as Christians in contemporary Scotland?

Christians in particular and society in general are deeply indebted to the classical and Catholic traditions of thought on the common good from Aristotle and Aquinas to more recent statements by the Catholic Church, its bishops and theologians. From this body of literature, we can see there is a Catholic style of imagining the common good, just as there is an Aristotelian style of imaging the common good, and indeed a civic republican style from Cicero to Rousseau.

In particular, I would draw your attention and acknowledge my debt to the Jesuit ethicist David Hollenbach for his seminal study, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics.* Hollenbach believes that in a globalizing and pluralistic world, 'the idea of the common good is an idea whose time has once again come.' He believes that a Christian ethic and theology can help people to build the solidarities with one another that our globalizing and pluralist world needs. He sees the biggest challenge to the idea of the common good today lying in the very pluralist nature of the contemporary world, with many different, sometimes conflicting notions of the public good leading many to say the very idea is impossible. The notion of the common good he offers takes that plurality into account. He states: 'The common good that can be achieved in history is a pluralistic ensemble of goods.'[2]

In making that argument for the global common good, however, Hollenbach rightly draws on his own Catholic tradition to articulate that case in his style of composition and sources, drawing not only on papal encyclicals and Catholic social teaching but on the example of John Paul II's global travels and media impact. Writing today, he would surely highlight the Franciscan style of Pope Francis and its global impact: the power of moving from the splendor of the papal apartments into hostel accommodation, driving a second-hand car, and employing the rhetoric of compassion rather than condemnation. Once again, we see that style matters and sheds light on substance.

Hollenbach also urges his own Catholic community to remember the historic ways in which they have imagined the common good as a resource for their contemporary engagement in society:

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[2] David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243.

> In the Europe of the medieval epoch … the notion of the common good played a very important role in serious thinking about the direction of governments, economics, and culture, in a world where nation-states did not exist. It also exerted practical influence … Is it too far fetched to suggest that the idea of the common good could play an analogous role today? To go one step further … it may be fruitful to ask whether the Catholic community remembers something from its medieval history that could make a distinctive and perhaps even indispensible contribution to a globalizing world.[3]

That is certainly true for the Catholic community in Scotland. If it remembers the figure of John the Commonweal from its medieval history, the Roman Catholic Church would indeed make a distinctive and indispensible contribution to Scotland, where the poor still want their warm clothes in winter.

In closing, I wish to focus on a Protestant style of imagining the common good as the way in which my own Church of Scotland might respond to the challenge with which *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* concludes: the call to compassionate engagement in society. I have in mind an *ecumenical* Protestant style of imagining the common good that has its source in the Reformation. Like Hollenbach for his Catholic community, I want to call on my own Reformed community to remember something from our Reformation history that could make a distinctive and even indispensible contribution to the common good in contemporary Scotland.

I should at the outset come clean on my motive for doing so. As a minister in the service of that ecumenical Protestant tradition, I want to see our name restored to its true estate in the world at large and Scotland in particular. I want us to recover our nerve. Ecumenical Protestants are being written out of the story of global Christianity in the twenty-first century. We are seen as a dying minority in the West. Growing conservative churches despise our numbers. Radical theological voices dismiss our civility. I take a contrary view. Far from declining into the past, we are inclining to the future. In a complex, pluralist world, marred by militant religion, ecumenical Protestants bring a vital gift to our global era, a commitment to the creative tension of being both disciples and citizens.

[3] David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics,* 241-2.

At its best, the identity of ecumenical Protestants is complex: porous not watertight, a dazzling mixture not filtered and pure. We don't have all the answers. We look to our neighbors for wisdom. We aim to be good disciples and good citizens. We are called to be saints, set apart for God's purposes in the world. We are called to be citizens, commanded to seek the welfare of the city. We make common cause with strangers for the public good. We connect faithful discipleship of Jesus with active citizenship in the public sphere. We are moved to action by regard for the public interest. Our gift to the wider Church and world is this public spirit. The public spirit of ecumenical Protestantism needs to be re-affirmed, re-thought and renewed in a global era, not rejected or relegated to history. It is the breath of our Christian humanism. It may even be the breath of the Spirit on occasion.

We live with the creative tension of trying to connect citizenship and discipleship in our thinking and practice as ecumenical Protestants. This case for a Protestant style of imagining the common good is for all those who recognize that tension and welcome it as God's gift. More broadly, it is delivered in gratitude for the good Samaritans and porous saints of every tradition who see the common good as a shared conversation on the question of who is our neighbor.

I am an unlikely candidate to talk about style! The particular Christian tradition to which I belong seems disqualified from the start. Isn't the Protestant Reformation the end of all style in religion and the beginning of an abstract, rational way of believing and living, devoid of all color, imagination and artistry? That is the received view but recent scholarship has proved it to be otherwise. As Peter Matheson has shown in his superb study, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation*, the several Reformations of the sixteenth century were characterized by a popular revolution in the religious imagination, as much as by elite disputes on doctrine:

> The new vogue for dialogue, satire and narrative history gave priority to story-telling, to the *via rhetorica* over the *via dialectica*; conversation, intuition and empathetic imagination took over from logic, paradox from syllogism, open disputations in the 'public square' from magisterial pronouncements behind closed doors. These are not

> just matters of style and form. They point to a fundamentally new way of perceiving and presenting the truth.[4]

The Protestant Reformation was not just a matter of style and form but certainly it was not less than a question of style and form. Matheson marvelously describes the Reformation as 'less a shopping-list of demands than the choreography for a new dance'.[5] And in that new dance, everyone was invited to participate, whether in the open disputations of the public square or the intimate steps of dialogue and conversation. In particular, as he points out, it offered new communicative as well as religious opportunities.

What we see emerging is an empowered laity that is finding its own voice in both church and society. Against Jürgen Habermas' dating of the emergence of a public sphere in the bourgeois world of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, Matheson argues that the Reformation's embrace of these new means of communication led to the creation of the first public sphere in Europe, where everyone was free to persuade public opinion of the merits of one's case. While the disputation had been a scholastic exercise within the walls of the medieval university, it went public after 1517, as Matheson notes in his book, *Rhetoric of the Reformation*:

> As the Reformation began to take root the disputation left the cloistered realm of the university for the Rathaus, or Town Hall, the inn and the home, and—through the new medium of the printing press—went on to address the wider forum of public opinion ... As reformer and conserver clashed, the body public would act as jury, and come to an informed and just verdict. Under the proper conditions polemic would elicit the truth, or at least that which best served the common weal.[6]

A Protestant style of imagining does not see the common good as the teleological goal of society, as in the Aristotelian style of imagining; nor as the ideal conditions for human flourishing, as the Roman Catholic style of imagining sees it; nor as the cause for which one would die, as the civic republican style of imagining the common good would have it. From the perspective of the Protestant principle, none

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[4] Peter Matheson, *The Imaginative World of the Reformation* (T&T Clark, 2000), 28.

[5] Ibid. 9.

[6] Peter Matheson, *Rhetoric of the Reformation* (T&T Clark, 1998), 2.

of these notions of the common good are ultimate and absolute goods to be defined by philosophers or authorities in church and state. Our goals, ideals, and causes are all relative and therefore contested matters for public debate.

The Protestant style of imagining the common good sees the good of all as a daily, continuing and never ending public debate about our common interests and public goods in a pluralist society. The common good lies in our style of public argumentation—and the question of who is included in or excluded from it. The common good is about who steps on to the public stage, like John the Common Weal, and who is left in the wings, like the million Scots living in poverty today.

As sisters and brothers in the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches of Scotland, that is our common vision, our common cause, the common good of our common earth—the world God loves.