



John 13:35
 By this shall all
 men know that ye
 are my disciples, if
 ye have love one to
 another.

Pope Francis at the Capitol told members of Congress that they must cooperate "generously for the common good."
 Credit Zach Gibson/The New York Times

The Church and the Common Good . . .

Working together for the common good of all has always been a foundation of Catholic social teaching, but what exactly does it mean?

In his address to the US Congress in September, 2015, Pope Francis summed it up in the Golden Rule-- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Mt 7:12).

"We need to avoid a common temptation nowadays: to discard whatever proves troublesome," he said. "Let us remember the Golden Rule which points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us. The Golden Rule also reminds us of our responsibility to protect and defend human life at every stage of its development."

"We need to live as one, in order to build as one the greatest common good: that of a community which sacrifices particular interests in order to share, in justice and peace, its goods, its interests, its social life," Pope Francis said. "I do not underestimate the difficulty that this involves, but I encourage you in this effort.--to respond in a way which is always humane, just and fraternal."

"There is another temptation which we must especially guard against--the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners. The contemporary world, with its open wounds which affect so many of our brothers and sisters, demands that we confront every form of polarization which would divide it into these two camps. We know that in the

attempt to be freed of the enemy without, we can be tempted to feed the enemy within. To imitate the hatred and violence of tyrants and murderers is the best way to take their place.

The "common good" is a term that has an ancient meaning and Popes have long invoked that heritage.

Leo XIII most famously appealed to the conscience of the world in his 1891 encyclical "Rerum Novarum." Writing near the end of the Industrial Revolution, he feared a death struggle between two opposing camps: the plutocratic captains of industry against socialism. Leo sought a middle ground, most especially by stating a vigorous case for the rights of labor. "This much," he said, "was demanded by the common good."



Subsequent popes made use of similar arguments, especially on the questions of economic development and justice. St. John XXIII was especially emphatic on these themes. In "Mater et Magistra" (1961), Pope John said nations, must provide social security and disability for those too old or otherwise unable to work; and they must also commit to

ensuring the well-being of workers and farmers.

Pope Paul VI and Benedict XVI both fit firmly within this tradition begun by Leo and advanced by John XXIII. In 1967, Paul VI promulgated on Human Progress. Recognizing the breakdown of traditional societies, Paul recommended building just social structures to assist in the transition to modernity. Education, just and fair wages, the promotion of human development and flourishing, these were the goals Paul VI called on the world to meet. "Freedom from misery" (para. 6) was his ambition. And in "Love in Truth," (2009), Pope Benedict XVI warmly restated Paul's ideals.