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The Common Good (And My Nephew, the Mayor)

by MELANNIE SVOBODA SND on APRIL 1, 2019.

Two weeks ago my nephew, John Hartman, was elected mayor of Churchville, NY, near Rochester. After serving as a trustee and then as deputy mayor for 8 years, John ran unopposed. Churchville is a small town. Population about 2,000. You might be asking: So what's the big deal? Well, even small towns have some of the same issues as large cities: welfare of schools, trash disposal, safety and security issues, road maintenance, zoning issues, and planning for the future. John will be balancing his family and his business obligations along with his new duties as mayor.



Small town, USA

And that's what makes his election a big deal. John and myriads of people like him are investing a significant amount of their time and talent in some form of public service. Another way of saying this: They are assuming roles of leadership in serving the common good. So today I'd like to offer a few thoughts on the vital importance of the common good.

First, what do we mean by the common good? Here's a simple definition: the common good is that which benefits all or most of the people in a society or group. One reason we have taxes, as we know, is to insure that all citizens contribute to those entities that benefit all—such as schools, roads, the military, health care, programs for the poor, to name a few. But sometimes, a major threat to the concept

About Sister Melannie Svoboda, SND

Sister of Notre Dame, teacher, student, author, speaker, listener, friend, poet, farm girl.



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Each Monday I'll post a short reflection, a simple musing on some aspect of spirituality—the everyday kind of spirituality that



includes things like walking in the park, slicing an onion for the casserole, caring for a child, studying for an exam, reading a line from scripture, laughing at a joke, or mourning a significant loss.

Along the way I welcome your questions, comments and insights too. After all, we're all in this life—this spiritual life—together!

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of the common good is the principle of individual rights. Balancing these two values can be challenging.

Historically, the spirit of individual rights has been strong in the United States. In our American lore we celebrate explorers like Daniel Boone who supposedly moved every time he could see the smoke of a neighboring chimney. We have idolized drifters and lonesome cowboys. We see this individualism reflected in popular slogans such as these: my home is my castle, good fences make good neighbors, I have my rights, and don't tread on me. Some hot button issues in our own day—abortion and gun control, for example—can be viewed as conflicts between individual rights and the rights of others or the common good. It boils down to the individual right (to have an abortion or to own guns—even assault rifles) versus another's right to life or the right to be safe in the community, whether at school, on the street, or in a place of worship. Lately, in some instances, the case for the common good seems to be losing.

Embedded within our Constitution is the “Bill of Rights.” Someone has asked, “Why don't we also have a Bill of Responsibilities”? Good question. Why don't we delineate those responsibilities we individuals have toward the common good, that is, toward our local community, our country, or the world community in which we live?



I think there is evidence that reverence for the common good is eroding. We build palatial individual homes in our rural areas while our nearby cities decay. We drive our luxury cars on roads and over bridges that are deteriorating beneath our tires. We complain about money needed to update sewer systems or power grids. We get nervous whenever we hear the phrase “government regulation,” seeing it as an infringement on our right to amass unlimited individual or corporate wealth. We vote against levies for schools, libraries, fire departments, mental health services. We cut funds to the arts and environmental projects. And we run up a national debt that threatens to enslave our children and grandchildren for decades to come.

I know, I have painted a pretty grim picture. Let me add that throughout our history in this country (and in other countries as well) we still have concrete symbols of the promotion of the common good: museums, hospitals, libraries, universities, zoos, courthouses, city halls, police and fire stations, Rotary Clubs, garden clubs, the Scouts

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and 4-H, food banks, community centers, homeless shelters, women's shelters, and our magnificent local, state, and national parks.



A park in Ireland.

Reflecting on our investment in the common good is a good Lenten practice. Lent is a time we remember God's investment in our common good: the person of Jesus. We recall Jesus' core mandate to love one another. We remember his injunction to care for those in need in our midst, an injunction enshrined in Matthew 25. Today, let us ask ourselves:

How are you investing your time and talents in the common good?

Has Matthew 25 ever been a motivating force for you?

If you drew up a "Bill of Responsibilities," what one or two responsibilities would you want to be sure to include?

Where do you see evidence of reverence for the common good in your local, state, national, or world community?

Today's song is the melody that some of us know as "Tantum Ergo," attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas. These words, I believe, were written by Fred Kaan in 1968. I have written out the 3 verses below the video:



For the healing of the nations, Lord, we pray with one accord.

For a just and equal sharing of the things that earth affords.

To a life of love and action help us rise and pledge our word.

Lead us now, Lord, into freedom, from despair your world release.

That redeemed from war and hatred, all may come and go in peace.

Show us how through care and goodness fear will die and hope increase.

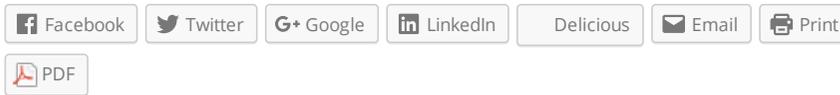
You, Creator God, have written your great name on humankind,

For our growing in your likeness bring the life of Christ to mind.

That by our response and service earth its destiny may find.

Now it's your turn. I invite you to serve the common good of our Sunflower community by offering a response below:

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Thomas DeFreitas April 1, 2019 at 5:00 am



Sr Melannie, good morning!

Allow me, please, to congratulate your nephew upon his election as mayor of Churchville. He has my prayers that his efforts toward the common good of his town will bear copious fruit!

I, too, am noticing a lack of reverence for the common good in our nation, and deeply deplore the tendency. I despair of finding a remedy in our major political parties (although, as a kind of a stopgap measure, I'm hoping that the fortunes of one political party prevails over the other in the next national election).

We are imperfect instruments, all of us as individuals; and if we emphasize our differences, and treat others as "other," there's potential for major warping of the vision, of serious rending of the social fabric. Of course, it is our collective solidarity, our acknowledgment of our God-bestowed dignity as human beings, in which lies any hope of restoration of the common good.

I do cherish the right to vote, and exercise it – but my vote can do little, it often seems. And even though prayer is not always of immediately apparent efficacy, I pray for those who govern us and who seek to do so: that they may govern with wisdom, prudence, restraint, and compassion, and an unswerving awareness of the dignity, indeed the sanctity, of all human persons, of all human lives.

REPLY

Mary James April 1, 2019 at 7:36 am



God bless your nephew for getting into politics. He is in my prayers. Every good he does WILL have a good effect even if he never sees it. Hope he does and doesn't become discouraged I,too, hold the right to vote as a very important responsibility. Writing,calling Congress,also. It's my responsibility to help any marginalized person I can if I have the means, opportunity, and energy.

REPLY

Kathleen Magiera April 1, 2019 at 8:09 am



Sr. Melannie,

I know exactly where Churchville, NY is and have passed it by several times. Good for your nephew that he is working for the common good. The common good is such a wonderful Lenten theme.

I live in a small village where the common good seems more apparent. Folks know each other more and have input into our village more directly. The common touch seems to work better for the common good.

God bless!

Kathleen

REPLY

Jean Canatsey April 1, 2019 at 10:13 am



The mayor of the very small town of Cornell, Illinois, (population 500) is the father of one of daughter-in-laws. I have often been amazed at all the duties and activities that entails! Thanks to all the mayors and council members of small towns. They are the ones who keep our country going.

We reread Matthew 25 this morning with the common good as our focus and it was a completely different parable. I'd always thought the story of the 10 Virgins was to emphasize being prepared. Suddenly, I am seeing it as the obligation to share. I assumed that the parable of the talents was about using our assets wisely. Today I heard it as, "Do not hoard." The two parables are really the same, aren't they?

REPLY

Diane April 1, 2019 at 10:28 am



Wow, your words about the Common Good ought to be in every homily in every church, Mass, and denomination, as well as every political speech, community meeting, etc. May the Grace of God help us work with love for the common good of all! Profound!

REPLY

Marilyn Woidat April 1, 2019 at 12:54 pm



" The purpose of government is to serve the common good of the citizens". My husband's major was Political Science and his professor freshman year began his class with that definition . Having a son-in-law who is currently a mayor of a suburban town near Chicago means that we see the everyday challenges facing his city council members. However, each time I visit the library in this town, I see the smiling faces of everyone leaving it and I realize how awesome to have a public service like this for everyone to enjoy. It is one small example of The Common Good. Thanks Sr. Melanie for sharing this dialogue today. Marilyn

REPLY

Marty April 1, 2019 at 1:02 pm



I agree with the idea of you helping homilests.

REPLY

Marty April 1, 2019 at 2:14 pm



Got distracted accidently signed. My comment not mine but I agree "Sometimes we bear the unbearable. And it is only in that dark night of the soul that you are prepared to see as God sees and to love as God loves "Ram Das

This means to me that until I die to self the common good will not matter because I am blinded by the mask I wear. Always in prayer for your evangelizing. Marty L

REPLY

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