

Sustaining the Sacramental Commons¹

John Ikerd²

The term “common” is used to identify that which applies equally to all – in general; of all; from all; by all; to all. Things owned “in common” are owned equally by all, and the term “commons” refers to the things owned or shared equally by all. Thus, when we do something for the “common good,” we do it for the good of all.

A society is something more than a collection of independent individuals. Societies are made up of people with shared interests and shared values – of people who have something “in common.” A society is a whole – something more than the sum of its parts. The nature of the relationships among people within a society is as important as the nature of its individual members – and, relationships exist not within but among people. A root cause of most of the ecological and social problems confronting humanity today is an inability to maintain strong positive relationships.

A sustainable society must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. Lacking any one of these three aspects, a society quite simply cannot be sustained over time. Ecological sustainability depends upon our willingness and ability to maintain the integrity of natural ecosystems. The health and regenerative capacity of natural ecosystems might be referred to as the “commons good³” – the good of the natural commons upon which all of life on earth ultimately depends. The sustainability of life on earth is still as dependent upon the health of land as when humans were all hunters and gathers.

Social sustainability depends on our willingness and ability to maintain the integrity of human society. Maintaining the health and regenerative capacity of families, communities, and societies in general may be referred to as pursuit of the “common good” – the good of all people for all times. The health and regenerative capacity of future generations will depend in no small part on the cultural values passed down from generation to generation.

Economic sustainability depends upon our willingness and ability to maintain personal integrity in our pursuit of individual self-interest. A healthy, regenerative economy ultimately depends upon a healthy, regenerative natural ecosystem and a healthy, regenerative society. A sustainable economy must accommodate the production of “common goods” – goods and services to which all, including those of future generations, have an equal right – as well as private goods for those willing and able to pay. An economy that encourages and rewards the

¹ Presented at Rural Life Day 2003, Farming in the Sacramental Commons, sponsored by Social Concerns Office, Diocese of Jefferson City and MSR Center for Rural Ministry, Jefferson City, MO. December 6, 2003.

² John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA.
web site: <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/>

³ John Hart, “Water: A Sacramental Commons,” workshop sponsored by NCRLC in Washington, DC, February 8, 2003.

extraction and exploitation of the natural and human resources upon which its productivity ultimately depends, quite simply, is not sustainable.

Government is the primary organizational structure through which people protect the good of the commons, produce common goods, and pursue their common good. Other types of organizations – nonprofit, voluntary, philanthropic, charity, civic, and religious – also play important roles in promoting social responsibility. However, governments have both the means and the authority to function on behalf of the people who form them, as a whole rather than as individuals.

Obviously, Americans do not share a consensus concerning the legitimate role and scope of their government. Most relationships involved in living and working together are interpersonal in nature – something to be worked out among people, one-on-one. Beyond purely personal relationships, all sorts of civic and religious organizations provide us with opportunities to work together on matters of community and local interest. For many relationships, however – particularly at city, state, and national levels of society – we must learn to work together through government. Admittedly, a government is capable only of reflecting the social and moral principles of those governed, but government is nonetheless a necessary means of taking collective actions for the common good.

“The government that governs least governs best.” This has been a commonly held view in the United States since its beginning. However, the American Declaration of Independence suggests the intent of the Founding Fathers might have been otherwise. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” so it begins. “That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” It is obvious that the founders of the American democracy believed that all people have certain rights that are undeniable and equal for all, which include the pursuit of happiness as well as life and liberty. It is also clear that one of the fundamental purposes for instituting this government was “to secure these rights.”

Earlier versions of the Declaration had included the phrase “life, liberty, and possession of private property.” However, the Founding Fathers apparently concluded, quite wisely, the opportunity to possess private property was not equivalent to the pursuit of happiness. The United States Constitution spells out the fundamental purposes of government: “to establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.” Clearly, this was not a government designed to govern least, but instead, to govern best. And, the framers of the Constitution were clearly concerned with the well-being of those of all generations, not just their own. People who believe there is no legitimate role for government other than to protect and promote private well-being are pursuing a philosophy of government fundamentally different from that envisioned by the Founding Fathers of the American Democracy.

The fundamental purpose of government is to ensure social equity and moral justice for all – to promote the “common good.” All of the necessary functions of government spelled out in the Constitution stem from this basic purpose – including national defense, law enforcement, general

welfare, and civil liberties. Assurance of equity and justice for all is the best means of ensuring the ability of all to acquire and secure private property and to benefit economically, as well as socially and spiritually.

Thus, government is a legitimate and necessary means of pursuing and protecting the “common good.” This does not imply government ownership of all property or even a significant amount of property. “Common good” does not imply Communism, for indeed, we have important individual or private needs, as well as common needs, in pursuing a desirable quality of life. Private property rights are both necessary and appropriate in those many cases where our interests are clearly individual or private in nature. But, pursuit of the common good requires recognition that many societal, ethical, and moral values accrue to the people in common, and not to just individuals. Thus, we must pursue the “common good” together.

Our pursuit of the common good must be rooted in the realization that value arises from our human relationships and our ethical and moral sense of purpose, as well as our individual self-interests. The quality of our lives is affected by the way we treat other people, and the way we feel about ourselves – not just by the amount of personal property we can acquire and accumulate. Certainly, the government must protect private property rights; but it also has equally important roles in protecting the values that arise from human relationships and from our common virtue – from our being part of an equitable and just society.

The U.S. Constitution, by design, allows the U.S. government to fulfill a multidimensional role – although it doesn't necessarily force it to do so. The Constitution clearly spells out the right of citizens to own private property and the responsibility of government to respect and protect the rights of private ownership. However, the Constitution also clearly spells out that all citizens have certain rights that are held equally by all, without regard to their ownership of property or anything of economic value. The Constitution also has its foundation in a set of ethical and moral responsibilities, which are to guide the actions of all, regardless of their economic or political status. These rights and responsibilities are not to be bought and sold in the private marketplace, but are to be assured equally to all, regardless of their economic or political power.

If two people go into a Wal Mart store, one person with a hundred dollars and another with only ten, the person with a hundred dollars has the right to buy ten times as much as the person with ten dollars. Wal Mart is a legitimate private business where people pursue their individual interests. However, if the same two people go into a voting booth, one with a hundred dollars, and the other with only ten, each person has only one vote. The voting booth is the place where people make public decisions for the common good, where all people have equal rights. In a democracy, people vote on matters affecting the “common good,” and thus, each person has one vote – regardless of how rich or poor they may be. Each person has an equal voice in making public decisions because each person has an equal right to benefit from “common goods” and services.

The commonly held ethical and moral values of a nation are determined neither by economic power in the marketplace nor by political power in the voting booth. A nation's ethical and moral values are written into its constitution. If a constitution is to be effective in providing the ethical foundation for a nation, it must reflect a national consensus of the people of the nation. A

consensus doesn't require unanimous approval, but consensus does reflect something far more than simple majority rule. A consensus means that a dominant proportion of the people agrees with a proposition, and equally important, that those who don't agree with the proposition do agree to abide by the dominant viewpoint, regardless of their personal position.

On matters of personal ethics and morality, people of integrity do not buy and sell their opinions and do not vote or accept anyone else's opinion concerning what is fundamentally right and wrong. Still, on matters of ethics and morality, we must be willing to work toward a national consensus. We must be willing to continue to search for ways to carry out the day-to-day private functions of the economy and public functions of government by means that don't conflict with our individual ethical and moral values. We must agree to participate in an ongoing process of reaching and maintaining a national consensus – not in the marketplace, nor in the voting booth, but in the hearts and minds of the people.

The “tragedy of the commons” is a story told by skeptics of government about people in a mythical village who owned cattle individually, but shared common grazing lands in the surrounding countryside. Since the village had access to a limited amount of common land, only a limited number of cattle could be supported by the land. However, each person had an incentive to graze as many cattle as they could afford to own, because the land was held in common. It was “government land,” so to speak. As might have been expected, the number of cattle in the village grew larger and larger over time, and eventually, the land held in common was overgrazed and the villagers were forced to sell all of their cattle. As each individual pursued their self-interest in using property held in common, government property, they collectively destroyed its ability to serve the interests of anyone.

Obviously, if each person in the village had been allowed to buy a parcel of the common property, they would have had an incentive to take care of their property, and might have been able to sustain their cattle operation. Each landowner would have had an incentive to maintain the productivity of their land, so their cattle would continue to have good grazing, and the land would have maintained its value. Private land ownership and a “free market” for land could have avoided the “tragedy of the commons.” The moral of the story is that people will exploit, and ultimately will destroy, anything that is owned in common, i.e. by the government, and people will take care of and build up anything that they own privately.

However, the moral of the “tragedy of the commons” depends on a critical, but unstated, assumption that people realize benefits only as individuals, not in common with others as members of communities, nor in any sense other than their material well-being. In the story, there is no recognition of rational incentives for people to act for the “common good.” Each person attempts to maximize their short run individual self-interests while ignoring the obvious longer run implications for the well-being of the community as a whole, of which he or she is a part. Neither is there any recognition of any ethical or moral responsibility to protect the “good of the commons,” for the benefit of those of future generations.

Pursuit of the “common good” ultimately is rooted in a belief that the natural resources of the earth and the people of the earth are sacred – they are endowed by their Creator with certain inherent characteristics, which cannot be altered or denied. We must act for the “common good”

in the pursuit of our own individual good because we were created as social beings. We need positive relationships with other people, and thus, must treat others with equity and justice. We must protect the natural ecosystem because we have a God-given responsibility to be stewards of the earth. Individually and collectively, we humans have unique places within a higher order of things, which gives purpose, meaning, and thus, quality to our lives.

Our relationships with each other and with the earth are sacramental in nature – they are physical and social means by which we express our relationships with the sacred. The long run sustainability of human life on earth depends on our understanding and acceptance of the higher order to which these relationships must conform – our understanding and acceptance of our relationship to the sacramental commons.