

Choices should form common good

Brian M. Kane/CNS

Pope John XXIII described the common good as a set of conditions in which it is possible for each of us to reach perfection. The common good is the structure in which all people can make the kinds of choices that allow them to be who God intended them to be.

Choice is our modern culture's value. On television, in newspapers and on billboards we are given a steady stream of messages that work to influence how we choose. Each advertising pitch plays on our desires for a future we can shape and control.

Looking into our children's eyes, we glimpse the future. From an early age, we teach them that by making the right kinds of choices, they might have whatever it is that they desire. As they grow we help them decide who they will become.

The 20th century marked a first in human history in terms of the ability to create choices and match them to desires. We conquered many obstacles that lay in front of us. Science triumphed over sickness with penicillin and other antibiotics. Electricity became commonplace in homes. Sophisticated communications and transportation inventions connected us to places that preceding generations could only have imagined.

At the same time, human choices created the bloodiest century in human history. So, in a century that marks a triumph of the individual person, we also witness the diminishing value of life.

Choice, or free will, is a power God gave to human beings. Yet, this abil-



Karen Callaway/CNS

"From an early age, we teach (our children) that by making the right kinds of choices; they might have whatever it is that they desire," says theology professor Brian M. Kane.

ity, as time has shown, is not value neutral. Our choices contribute to or detract from the common good.

At the heart of free will is another idea that often gets lost in our consumer culture: freedom. Many people will confuse the two, saying that they are the same. But true freedom means using free will to choose what is right — what the Creator has determined is good for us.

Freedom is at the heart of any society. Our individual choices connect us to one another. And what we choose for ourselves influences the choices that others are able to make.

Freedom is ultimately about choosing the future that God intends

for us. Just as parents are able to see what the future holds for their children and to desire it for them, so God wants us to use our choices to be who he intends us to be. But he doesn't force us.

A profound characteristic of free will is that it is so powerful. In choosing, we make a claim not only upon our personal future, but also on those of others and on those who will come after us. The choice is ours.

Kane is associate professor of theology at DeSales University in Center Valley, Pa. He wrote *Just War and the Common Good*, Catholic Scholars Press, Bethesda, Md., 1996.

How are we promoting social justice?

Cynthia Dewes/CNS

Asked what they do as individuals to promote social justice, people often mention work and personal efforts as well as church-sponsored opportunities.

Kevin McDowell, general counsel for the Indiana Department of Education, said his job allows him to help establish a just hierarchy of values in public and private schools. He said he tries to balance the concepts of "legal," "moral" and "ethical" — all dimensions of the common good — in the essential teaching functions of schools.

McDowell hopes that when a just set of values is practiced in schools, students will learn to recognize the dignity of the individual, to respect others and to accept responsibility for being a participating member of their communities.

Language is another tool for promoting justice. Ann Rambo is associate director of international education and part-time Spanish instructor at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind. Growing up in New Mexico, she saw many injustices done to others because of language differences.

Now, she said she often is called upon to serve as a translator for non-English speaking Hispanics in hospitals, courts and jails. She also aids Hispanic immigrant members of her parish.

Many contribute to the common good and promote social justice through work. Jackie Bauman is Purdue University extension educator for Putnam County in Greencastle, Ind. Her work involves promoting homemaking and farming education among often isolated women who

live in small towns and rural areas.

"We like to think that we are good and fair people and that we help others, but when we stop to think about what we actually do for social justice, it doesn't seem like much," she said. Still, she clearly keeps others' needs in mind. Instead of buying gifts for each other last Christmas, family members purchased items and donated money to homeless or needy families. They "try to learn what is right and share that with others," she said.

The Baumanns and the others are correct when they adhere to what Pope Paul VI wrote: "If you want peace, work for justice."

We all share in the common good when we serve that cause.

Dewes is a freelance writer in Bainbridge, Ind.

Faith Alive!

This month's adult-education package notes that contemporary Catholic social teaching calls the followers of Christ to defend and promote the common good. But how do we identify the common good, even as we enter a voting booth?

Food for Thought

What is the "common good?" This basic term in contemporary Catholic thought isn't an abstraction. In a sense, the common good is something people "do."

To act for the common good, we have to guard against defining our own needs in such a way that others' needs count for nothing. In making decisions — spending decisions, voting decisions, time decisions — this means recognizing the realities of human interdependence.

Pope John Paul II cautioned in 1987 that providing for the common good requires a firm "determination to commit oneself ... to the good of all and of each individual because we are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, No. 38).

Faith in the Marketplace

Earlier this year, Faith Alive! posed this question to readers around the country: What do you do — within the church or other contexts — that promotes social justice?

Selected reader responses:

"I think I just let God work through me.... I believe every person I come in contact with gives me the opportunity to share the joy I have in me." — Kathy Gipson, Mountlake Terrace, Wash.

"We (St. John the Evangelist Church, Girard, Pa.) keep a posting in our bulletin of all U.S. executions. We also have a regular insert from our right-to-life group announcing local peaceful demonstrations and prayer services against abortion." — Cindy Groszkiewicz, Girard, Pa.

"We (St. James/Immaculate Conception Churches, Toledo, Ohio) work with the St. Vincent de Paul Society to benefit the needy. We also have a ... food pantry." — Joyce Scarbrough, Toledo, Ohio

Want more Faith Alive?

Nineteen issues — with more on the way — are now available at www.CatholicCourier.com. Click the Faith & Family tab, then select Faith Alive! at left.