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Community (Dictionary entry)

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COMMUNITY

Human persons find themselves placed in a variety of relationships and associations with one another. These relationships and associations constitute community to the extent that they enable those who are so related to share common interests, intentions, purposes, sentiments, or understanding, and/or to participate in common activities. Although "community" can be treated in certain contexts as synonymous with "society," it is frequently taken to encompass bonds of affective and personal commitment among its members that enable their interactions and relationships to be conceived in terms that are less formally and institutionally structured than those generally connoted by the term "society." In this use, "community" still includes reference to the range of human associations and relationships for which society is considered to provide a more formal institutional structure.

When "community" is understood in this most generic sense, a person can be a participant in more than one community; these various communities can be differ-

entiated from one another with respect to what they enable their participants to share. One can thus belong, at the same time, to the cultural community of one's ethnic and linguistic heritage, to the civic community of this town or nation, to the intimate community of one's family and friends, to the worshiping community of this congregation or parish, to the working community of one's particular occupation, trade, or profession, as well as to any number of communities delimited by their participants' shared interests and activities in art, music, sports, and the like. In this context of multiple participation, the particular communities of which one is a member may each carry different weight with reference to the fundamental moral significance and function of community. "Community" can be defined, in this sense, as that set of relationships that provides the primary locus for the formation of a person's identity as a moral agent in relation to all others; this formation encompasses the development of those modes of understanding, intention, affection, and action that enable one to participate in the activities that sustain the relationships that provide the bases for the community's existence, identity, and attainment of its end(s).

In its presentation and explication of the moral significance and function of community, Catholic social thought has developed particular emphases upon themes that show how community stands in direct and intrinsic relationship to a proper and adequate understanding of the human person. The philosophical exposition of these themes, generally set within a conceptual framework of natural law, has most often given primary focus to concepts, considerations, and arguments that (1) explicate and ground the claim that human persons are intrinsically social and (2) elaborate the implications this claim has for the ordering of human social activity. These implications have been framed principally in terms of the constitution and function of social institutions and the delimitation of the ways that members of a community appropriately participate in the workings of such institutions. Among these institutions the family takes primacy as "a kind of school of deeper humanity" and "the foundation of society" (*Gaudium et spes* 52). The theological exposition of these themes has principally clustered around a varied but interrelated set of concepts, images, and symbols—for example, creation, covenant, *koinonia,* kingdom of God—that also affirm an intrinsically social character to human existence but that also explicitly root this human exigency toward community in the graciousness of God's salvific activity. In consequence, the church receives special consideration within this theological exposition, since it is understood as the community that preeminently owes its existence to God's salvific initiatives (*Lumen gentium* 2).

Within both philosophical and theological expositions of the moral significance and function of community, the concept of the dignity of the human person has played an especially prominent role. The Genesis account (1:26–27) of the creation of the human person in God's image (*imago Dei*) stands as the starting point for theological treatment of the concept of human dignity (GS 12; *Economic Justice for All* 32). Three aspects of this treatment are of particular importance in the elaboration of the intrinsically social character of human existence and its rootedness in God's salvific activity: (1) an insistence that the full acknowledgment and achievement of this dignity for individuals is possible only within the context of each one's membership and participation in the life of a community (GS 24–27); (2) the correlation of the source of human dignity in God's gracious act of creation with the final destiny—sharing in God's own life—to which humanity is called and which requires the active cooperation of human persons (GS 34; *Populorum pro-*

gressio 15–17); (3) the identification of the conditions for the acknowledgment and attainment of this dignity with the protection of the full range—political, economic, and social—of human rights and with the exercise of the corresponding responsibilities to others that these rights entail (*Pacem in terris* 35).

To the extent that Catholic social thought has cast its philosophical discussion of the intrinsically social character of the human person in terms of Aristotelian and Thomistic categories, it has viewed the concept of human dignity and its bearing upon the moral significance and function of community in terms of a finality that is inherent to human persons. This finality has its ultimate focus upon the attainment of a personal communion with God that enables and perfects our communion with one another as well as with the whole order of creation; it also encompasses a range of specific and limited goods that play an essential role in the constitution of the authentic human good possible for us to attain within the finite conditions of human existence (GS 39). This finality also assigns to the common good a special ordering function in the attainment of the authentic human good, particularly with respect to the concrete workings of human social, political, and economic institutions. As an ordering principle, the common good is neither the mere sum total of the goods sought by individuals nor is it the good of the whole—be it a particular community or the entire human species—for which individual parts may be sacrificed. "It is the good *human* life of the multitude, of a multitude of persons; it is their communion in good living. It is therefore common to *both the whole and the parts* into which it flows back and which, in turn, must benefit from it" (Maritain, p. 41).

This placement of the meaning and attainment of human dignity within an account of human good, which aspires to comprehend its plurality through the ordering principle of the common good, stands in contrast with an understanding of the dignity of the person that takes the freedom of individuals to make their own choices to be its central, if not sole, constitutive feature. This latter understanding of human dignity has played an important role in the establishment and operation of the institutions of Western liberal democracy: autonomy, that is, the freedom of individual self-determination, functions as a central conceptual underpinning for the social-contract views that have generally been taken, in popular as well as academic argument, as both the morally appropriate and practically persuasive justification for these institutions and for the individual's participation in them. One consequence of such social-contract views has been to place the exercise of an individual's freedom of self-determination in strong tension, if not inevitable conflict, with the responsibilities that membership in a community and participation in its institutions entail for the individual. In particular, to the extent that contractarian views make the moral significance and function of social relationships turn upon questions of whether and to what extent the origin of such relationships lies in the free self-determination of individuals, these views also place at the moral periphery one's membership and participation in communities whose bonds of relationship are matters that are not readily and simply subject to free self-determination, for example, ties of family, language, ethnicity, and culture.

The mutual and intrinsic relationship of community to the value and dignity of the person, which is central in the development of Catholic social thought, has provided a basis for both the implicit and explicit criticisms that church pronouncements have made of both the contractarian understanding of the social relationships that undergird human community and the atomistic individualism it serves to encourage (e.g., PT 78; GS 74;

Octogesima adveniens 26, 35). These criticisms are set within a framework that acknowledges the value of freely undertaken human associations and the centrality of consent for the moral legitimacy of political authority within any particular human community (GS 75; OA 45–46). Presupposed is an understanding of the dynamics of human freedom in which the value of the exercise of human freedom is measured not merely by its satisfaction of the principle of individual autonomy but also by its congruence with an intrinsic ordering of human persons to participation in common good.

The understanding of the dynamics of human freedom that is presupposed in Catholic social thought on community has been paralleled in important ways by a set of challenges that a number of thinkers, both secular and religious, have recently posed to the cultural and academic dominance of a contractarian understanding of the moral character of social relationships. These challenges have frequently been taken to function as a "communitarian" critique of contractarian views. Consonant with an affirmation of an intrinsic mutual relationship between the persons and community, these authors have encouraged a retrieval of the idea of common good: the "public argument" (Murray, p. 8) that constitutes the civic and civil moral conversation at the heart of the reflective life of a community must have the common good as its focus, particularly as that argument bears upon decisions and actions that affect the life and well being of each and all the members of the community.

In addition to encouraging this retrieval of the common good, certain versions of the communitarian critique have also proposed a narrative mode of understanding as the most appropriate way to comprehend the structure of the intrinsic mutual relationship between persons and community. Within this mode of understanding, learning the narratives that exhibit the finalities embedded in the constitutive practices of the community and acquiring the skills requisite for participation in those practices are the primary activities that shape a person's identity—most crucially, one's identity as a moral agent. The moral identity of persons is thus primarily located by reference to the practices, including those of reflective inquiry, in which one participates as a member of a particular community and which constitute that community's moral tradition.

The narrative approach to understanding community as the matrix for the formation of the moral identity of its members frequently places great stress upon the historical particularity of the moral tradition that the practices of any community embody; in consequence, its account of community stands vulnerable to charges that it does not offer an adequate basis upon which universal moral claims that bind all persons can be pressed. This criticism, on the philosophical side, sees in the narrative approach no more than yet another formulation of moral relativism; on the theological side, it sees the narrative approach limiting the applicability of crucial Christian moral claims to those who are within the ambit of sectarian community.

However, this narrative approach also offers possibilities for enriching a number of the concepts and themes involved in the continuing development of Catholic thought on community. For instance, this approach helps to underscore the importance that the church, precisely as a worshiping community, plays in the formation of moral identity. The enacted events, images, and stories that constitute the worship of the Christian community mediate to its participants the salvific activity of God and have power to shape the moral agency of those who worship so that their dispositions, actions, and affections may more and more be drawn into accord with the responsive pattern of agency that is

most fully exhibited in Jesus Christ. A second possibility for enrichment lies in the accounts of the dynamics of tradition that the narrative approach has been required to develop in response to criticism that the historical particularity of the moral practice and the reflective moral inquiry of any community does not offer an adequate basis on which to press universal moral claims. Of particular interest are those accounts (e.g., Alasdair MacIntyre's *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*) in which maintaining and developing a viable moral tradition requires commitment, on the part of those who represent the traditions of their particular communities, to sustain and take part in a continuing public conversation with one another about our common human good, that is, a commitment to engage in what John Courtney Murray characterizes as "public argument."

There are a number of other current philosophical and theological discussions that also offer potential resources for the enrichment of Catholic thought on community. Three that deserve particular attention can be briefly noted here. First, theological proposals to interpret the relations among the persons of the Trinity on the model of community suggest that the fundamentally social character of the human person created in the image of God has its roots not just in God's act of creation but also in the Trinitarian life of God. Second, both feminist and liberation thinkers have explored the positive and the negative dimensions of the ways in which the social location of individuals, the ideological commitments embedded in a particular culture, and the structure of relationships of power within a society all function in the formation of the identity of persons. Although they join their voices to the sharp criticism that Catholic social thought has leveled at contractarian understandings of social relationships having atomistic individualism at their base, feminist and liberation thinkers also fault Catholic thought for containing understandings of community that presuppose hierarchical models for the structuring of social institutions and relationships. These models are seen as inevitably functioning to exclude those at the margins of community from participation in the determination of their own destinies. An important basis for such criticism has been a model of human connectedness in which solidarity with those who are powerless and outcast forms a touchstone with which to test the moral adequacy of a community's institutions and practices. Third, ecological and environmental concerns have suggested significant ways in which our thinking about community may need to include not only our relationships to one another as persons but also our relationships to all animate life and its environing world.

See also BASE COMMUNITIES; COMMON GOOD; FAMILY; PERSON, DIGNITY OF; RIGHTS AND DUTIES; SOCIETY; SOLIDARITY.

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