Common Good

Daniela Ropelato

Question: Can you give us an overview of the common good, how it is commonly understood and how we try to see it?

I would like to start with a fact. The protagonists of my story are the mothers of Naples, a city in Italy with 3 million people. Some time ago, I could know a neighbourhood of that city, walk the streets and stairs of those old and sometimes poor houses, talk with some of those inhabitants. And they told me their concerns and above all their concrete and daily commitment. Families had limited economic resources, but when it was necessary to clean the classrooms of the school, they did it; when it was necessary to keep company with a sick person in hospital, they took turns… They need a closer medical clinic and they went to the mayor to ask for… I wonder whether I would find the same energy among the families of other neighbourhood in that city, more wealthy and modern… The same attention and the same commitment to life, to the life of others. I can imagine that you have the same impression in a lot of

How much our cities are sustained by these networks, by this social force… We can easily understand it, if we think what our neighbourhoods, our schools, our hospitals would be without all those young people, women and men, who give themselves to defend and grow what is good, a good that is not individual, but belongs to everyone. It's something that for hundreds of years has been defined so: the common good, the good that defines our humanity, because it says who we are, what is important to us.

It is estimated that on November 15 2022 the world population reached 8 billion. But the living contexts are very different: more people live in the slums on the outskirts of Mumbai in India than in the whole of Norway in northern Europe. We know that life expectancy also is very different: in the Central African Republic life expectancy is 53 years, while in Japan it is 87 years…

So when we think of the common good, it is not possible to describe a single concrete object, or give a single definition: rather, we think of an open and dynamic concept, where the different dimensions - health, work, culture, democracy, the environment, peace … have

different stories. It is a set of conditions that make the development of our humanity possible.

So, working for the common good means moving from less human to truly human conditions (this is an expression used by *Populorum Progressio*, a document of the Catholic Church written in 1968): "*What are truly human conditions? The rise from poverty to the acquisition of life's necessities; the elimination of social ills; broadening the horizons of knowledge; acquiring refinement and culture...*". (n. 20 and 21).

I would like to tell another fact.

Recently, the skeleton of a man who lived between 9.000 and 8.000 BC was found in an area of ancient human settlements in the Middle East. This skeleton has aroused great interest among anthropologists because it belonged to a man who was about 30 years old and had a fractured leg. The trauma dated back to his childhood and the man had lived in that condition almost his entire long life (for that time, 30 years is a long life)! This meant that only the help of other people had allowed him to continue living in a severely hostile environment. Someone beside him had allowed him to live. That man could not be useful to the others, but he had not been abandoned.

This fact has given anthropologists an important confirmation: at the origin of the formation of the first urban spaces, the first cities, at the origin of the development of social organisation there is a choice: men and women began not only to be in a group, not only to live 'with' someone else, but to live 'for' others. What holds together and makes our cities, our communities grow is the choice to live 'for'.

So our idea of common good is this: it is a set of living conditions that grows more and more when each one of us does something 'for' others, progressively modifying our communities, developing a quality of life that makes each community flourish and transforms the earth, so that it can be home to all.

And I would stress something: when we are waiting for great political institutions, big corporations and media powers to promote change, often the good being produced is a partial, fragmented good. For this reason, our idea of the common good gives value to another network of actors as protagonists: the society of us. They are our communities the main protagonist in building the common good, the good of all.