

4-18-1999

# The Common Good in a Divided Society - 1999

David Hollenbach S.J.

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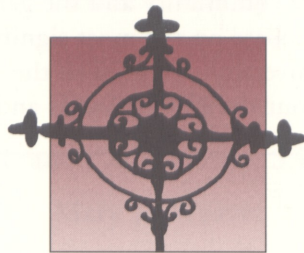
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## Recommended Citation

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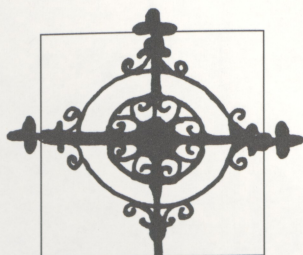
**“The Common Good in  
a Divided Society”**

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Public Lecture  
Santa Clara Lecture  
Santa Clara University  
April 18, 1999

Vol. 5 No. 3



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## The Common Good in a Divided Society<sup>1</sup>

David Hollenbach, S.J.

This essay will address an issue that is one of the crucial intellectual and social challenges facing the United States today, namely how the revitalization of the common good in our divided society entails special obligations toward the urban poor.

Over two millennia ago, Aristotle argued that the good of the community should set the direction for the lives of individuals, for it is a higher or more “divine” good than the particular goods of private persons.<sup>2</sup> This theme has been echoed throughout much of the later history of Christian reflection. For example, St. Thomas Aquinas argued that God’s own self is the highest good we can attain, and that a right relation to God requires a commitment to the common good of our neighbors and of all creation.<sup>3</sup> For Christians, the pursuit of the common good follows from the Bible’s double commandment to love God with all one’s heart and to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

This centrality of the common good in Christian life was echoed by Ignatius Loyola in the 16th century. Ignatius wrote that all the decisions of the Jesuit order he was founding should be directed “according to what will seem expedient to the glory of God and the common good.”<sup>4</sup> This single phrase sums up much that is central to Ignatius Loyola’s religious vision.

### 1. The Common Good in Trouble

This ancient theme in the Western and Christian intellectual traditions is in trouble today—serious trouble. John Rawls speaks for many moral and political philosophers when he says that the pluralism of the contemporary landscape makes it impossible to envision a social good on which all can agree. Rawls asserts that the Aristotelian, Thomistic and Ignatian vision of the common good “is no longer a political possibility for those who accept the constraints of liberty and toleration of democratic institutions.”<sup>5</sup>

This skepticism about the difficulties involved in conceiving of the common good is certainly not limited to academic ivory towers. Ordinary people today are increasingly aware that their neighbors have many ideas about what a good life is. The reality of pluralism impinges on people daily as they rub shoulders at their workplace with those who have different religious beliefs and cultural traditions, and whose race, ethnicity, or language is different from their own. Television brings into middle-class homes images of seemingly foreign worlds of gang conflict, drive-by shootings, and drug-use. It is difficult to see these many different kinds of people as neighbors at all. If it is hard to envision them as neigh-

neighbors, it is not easy to imagine a life that is both shared with them and also a good life.

More to the point, when groups of people are fundamentally divergent in their culture, tradition, and way of life, they can appear as threats to each other. When fear of these threats sets the tone, interaction with people who are different is perceived as a danger to be avoided. When understood in such terms, interaction can seem more like a “common bad” than a good we share in common. Defense of one’s turf becomes the first requirement of the good life.

One does not have to look very hard to find deep divides separating different communities in the United States. The emergence of “cults” and even militias in the U.S. shows that some Americans believe that the traditional religious and social institutions of the country cannot be relied on to help them live good lives. In a different way, memories of slavery, lynchings, ethnic exclusion, and newly awakened awareness of historical patterns of abuse and discrimination lead some minority groups to the conclusion that traditional ways and institutions do not protect their well-being or give them a fair chance to live good lives.

Some recent social-scientific investigations have concluded that this is leading to a “culture war” in the United States today, i.e. that a fundamental conflict of world views has developed in mainstream groups of the American middle class. If this is true, the consequences for the United States as a whole could be ominous. It raises “the prospect that the democratic stability that has kept the country together since the Civil War will no longer be attainable.”<sup>6</sup>

For this reason the contention that the United States is not only pluralistic but culturally at war with itself over a broad range of moral values calls for careful scrutiny. Sociologist Alan Wolfe believes that the facts do not support the culture-war hypothesis and he is relieved to be able to say so. Nevertheless, the data that lead Wolfe to this conclusion are not reassuring from the point of view of concern for the common good. Wolfe suggests that conflict is being avoided precisely by abandoning the pursuit of the common good. Wolfe’s study, *One Nation After All*, finds something close to consensus on what is valued most highly by the middle-class in the United States today. It can be summed up in a single word: *tolerance*. The high value placed on tolerance is evident in middle-class attitudes toward religious belief. Most middle-class Americans seem to have added an eleventh commandment to the biblical decalogue: Thou shalt not judge thy neighbor.<sup>7</sup> Middle-class Americans have an almost absolute aversion to strife and conflict about religious beliefs. Such tolerance is also evident in attitudes on many other questions with important consequences for the quality of public life. These include the structure of fam-



ily life, gender roles, immigration, multiculturalism, and race. A notable exception is low levels of tolerance for homosexuality. Average Americans are too non-judgmental to get sucked into battles on such issues that might tear the country apart.<sup>8</sup> The basic stance resembles the principle underlying laissez-faire economics: you can do what you want so long as you let me do what I want.<sup>9</sup>

Wolfe calls this tolerant stance on a broad spectrum of issues “morality writ small.” It is an ethic that aspires to “modest virtues” and “ordinary duties,” such as kindness and honesty rather than larger goals of social justice and social equality. These modest virtues are surely important; a culture-war in the United States would be a very bad thing. The American Civil War has already shown this vividly, and the abominations in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda have confirmed it afresh. So Wolfe breathes a sigh of relief to find tolerance alive and well in the United States.

But shortly after the appearance of his book, Wolfe confessed that his research left him somewhat depressed. For morality writ small lacks “a shared sense of national purpose.” Americans have a distinct lack of enthusiasm for meeting the responsibilities of national citizenship. “They seemed to want the benefits of being American without the obligations of paying taxes or paying attention.” They are also distinctly unenthusiastic about the international responsibilities that go along with being an American in the emerging global context. Wolfe conjectures that this narrowness of vision is a by-product of the prosperity of the middle-class. In the comfortable world of the middle-class, morality writ small translates into “couch-potato politics,” an unwillingness or inability to articulate common purposes and act to secure them.<sup>10</sup> In other words, middle-class Americans lack a vision of the common good, both in their approach to national life and in their understanding of the role of the United States internationally. Avoidance of conflict has its virtues to be sure, but there are major social and political questions today that call for more vision than tolerance can generate on its own. Let me illustrate this by focusing on the struggles of poor African-Americans in central cities.

## **2. A Problem Tolerance Can't Handle: Poverty in Central Cities**

The reality of urban poverty illustrates the fact that tolerance, taken by itself, is not a sufficient resource for addressing the urgent problems confronting American public life today. The quality of life in American cities is marked by economic deprivation, unemployment, single parenthood, homelessness, and frightening drug-related violence. The populations of inner cores of many large American cities are heavily African-American and they are largely poor. I believe one of the most important factors

impeding an adequate response to this reality is the preeminence of the virtue of tolerance over commitment to the common good in the United States today. A case for this claim takes the following form.

First, most middle-class Americans live in neighborhoods that isolate them from people of significantly different social-economic backgrounds. This isolation is due, on one level, to the apparently impersonal forces of the real estate market. These market dynamics, however, are sustained by zoning laws and other boundaries that are the result of political choice rather than geography. A challenge to these choices can arise only within a moral framework that expands the understanding of community beyond that of homogeneous groups of the like-minded or those who are similarly situated economically. Such a challenge will be dependent on the development of an understanding of the common good that reaches beyond the boundaries of existing groups.

Second, pursuit of community by middle-class Americans today takes forms that in fact deepen the crisis of the inner cities. Many Americans recognize today that they cannot go it alone in the face of the complexities of contemporary life. But Robert Bellah has argued that the quest for community among suburbanites often leads to the development of “lifestyle enclaves.” People in such enclaves find and express their identities through linkages with other persons with “shared patterns of appearance, consumption, or leisure activities. . . .” Their relationships are based on some feature of private rather than public life. They “do not act together politically” as citizens but as friends together in a kind of club.<sup>11</sup> So they are not likely to translate their need for community into ways of thinking and acting that are capable of addressing issues such as the divisions between core cities and suburbs. In fact the need for community, when expressed in lifestyle enclaves, can have exactly the opposite effect. It can lead to the construction of walls and moats, in the form of bigger and better malls and tougher zoning ordinances that are designed to strengthen the locks that protect the privileged from those who are different.

Third, increased racial tolerance among white suburbanites is not a single key that will unlock the doors that keep the poor of the inner-city from sharing in the national well-being. Socio-economic class differences between suburb and inner city are more important in sustaining these boundaries than are negative racial attitudes and prejudices. Racial prejudice continues to be an operative force in American life to be sure. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the presence of racist attitudes has notably declined over recent decades. This change has not been accompanied by an improvement in the situation of blacks who live in the inner-city. African-Americans at the lower end of the economic spectrum continue to live in dire straits. Nearly 10 million African-Americans live in poverty.



This is close to 25 percent of the black population in the United States. Black families are more than three times more vulnerable to poverty than their white counterparts. Hardest hit are black children.<sup>12</sup> In other words, a large portion of blacks in the United States—those who have not made it into the middle-class—have not benefited from increased racial tolerance.

So a credible case can be made that the disparity between the quality of life in suburbs and in core cities is based less on racial intolerance than on class differences, though race continues to play a subordinate role.<sup>13</sup> The division between classes is of course a matter of incomes—money matters here as almost everywhere. But urban/suburban differences are also manifest in the quality of schools, rates of labor force participation and unemployment, levels of drug use, incidence of crime, and levels of single parenthood. So even if disadvantages based on race have declined, serious class-based disparities remain very real, and those who are on the bottom side of these disparities lack the basic conditions that make good lives attainable.

If intolerance is not the principal cause of urban poverty today, tolerance is not the principal solution. Further efforts to overcome racial intolerance or prejudice are not *by themselves* going to heal the wounds of the inner city. Acceptance of racial differences within a commitment to our common humanity must surely be pursued in its own right. Nothing I have said should be taken to suggest otherwise. But the virtue of tolerance, by itself, is not now a sufficient moral resource for addressing the problems of the poor in America's core cities. Toleration alone will not overcome social isolation and the despair it engenders. Addressing these problems in a serious way will require concerted efforts to overcome these class barriers. These barriers are the result of economic inequalities that are deeply ingrained and institutionalized in the class structures of society, so more than an attitude of tolerance is needed.

This means the dominant middle-class morality writ small, with its preference for the quiet virtues, is an inadequate cultural resource for addressing the plight of American cities. Tolerance implies that if people would just leave each other alone everyone would be better off.<sup>14</sup> This is not an adequate stance if we hope to address the isolation and despair of the inner city poor. Making "Thou shalt not judge" the first commandment of public life undercuts such efforts from the start. It prevents us from raising questions about how the well-being of individual people might be advanced by a moral vision of goods we must share in common if we are to have them at all. Such a common good is the good of being a country that is not marred by a division between privileged suburban enclaves and despairing inner city ghettos. In my judgment, and I hope yours, such divisions are bad (a "common bad" we all live with today) and

overcoming these divisions would be a good (a "common good" we could all share in together). If we are to move toward such a society we need to become willing to make judgments that distinguish between such bads and goods. A culture that makes the commandment "Thou shalt not judge" into a first principle will be unable to address such questions. We will only be ready to address the realities of urban poverty if we move beyond tolerance to the pursuit of the common good.

### 3. A Community of Freedom

The tradition of Catholic social thought, especially as it has developed over the past century, is positioned to make a significant contribution to the recognition of the importance of the common good in both small-scale and wider forms of community. Its understanding of the common good is based on the recognition that the dignity of human persons is achieved only in community with others. This understanding has biblical roots in the notion of covenant—the fact that God called Israel precisely as a *people*, not as individuals one at a time. It also has Greek roots in Aristotle's understanding that the human being is a social or political animal, whose good is essentially bound up with the good of the community. These understandings of the person have direct implications for the way freedom is understood. Freedom's most important meaning is *positive*, the ability to shape one's life and environment in an active and creative way, rather than the negative state of privacy or being left alone by others. For the ancient Greeks, privacy was a state of deprivation, a fact echoed in the etymological link of privacy and privation. Similarly, the biblical understanding of freedom, portrayed in the account of the Exodus, is not simply freedom *from constraint* but freedom *for participation* in the shared life of a people. Liberation is *from* bondage *into* community.<sup>15</sup> To be sure, freedom from oppression demands that persons' dignity and rights be protected from infringement by other people, by society, or by the state. Freedom in its most basic form is freedom from oppression. But freedom will be understood in a truncated way if its meaning is understood only as the negative immunity that protects one from interference by others. Individualistic isolation is finally a prison, not a liberation.

Pope John Paul II has stressed this social dimension of freedom in his frequent discussions of the moral basis of democracy. Catholicism, of course, has often been regarded with justifiable suspicion in discussions of democracy because of its history of opposition to democratic movements in earlier days. Since the Second Vatican Council, however, the Catholic church has become one of the strongest advocates and agents of democratization visible on the global stage today.<sup>16</sup> In his role as advocate of democratic government, John Paul II has been critical of ideas of democ-



racism based on individualism and on strictly negative understandings of freedom. His analysis echoes some of the founders of the American experiment in its insistence that the success of democracy over the long haul is dependent on the virtues present in the citizenry and the link between the life of virtue and commitment to the common good.

According to this way of thinking, the basis of democracy is not simply tolerance for decisions made solo by autonomous individuals. Participation in democratic life and the exercise of real freedom in society depend on the strength of the communal relationships that give persons a measure of real power to shape their environment, including their political environment. Solitary individuals, especially solitary individuals motivated solely by self-interest and the protection of their rights to privacy, will be incapable of democratic self-government. Democracy requires more than this. It requires the virtues of mutual cooperation, mutual responsibility, and what Aristotle called civic friendship.<sup>17</sup> In more contemporary terms, it requires a commitment to solidarity with the others who live in our region, our country, and our world. It sees the good of each person as linked with the good of these larger worlds.

The scale and diversity of the world, however, tempts us to conclude that community is achievable only in private enclaves of the like-minded. Local, small-scale communities are very important, as the Catholic tradition's principle of subsidiarity stresses. But these must be complemented by a kind of solidarity that is more universal in scope. This wider solidarity is essential if the pursuit of community is to avoid becoming a source of the kind of conflict underway in Kosovo and other parts of the world. Commitment to community with the like-minded must be complemented by positive engagement with those who are different. It means working to overcome the boundaries of class that separate us.

Solidarity does not appear among the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude that were central for the Greeks and Romans, nor among the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love enumerated by Christian thinkers in the past. Pope John Paul II, however, has recently proposed to add solidarity to these classic lists by calling solidarity a key virtue needed to address the problems of our world. He defined this virtue as "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."<sup>18</sup>

Such solidarity has both intellectual and social dimensions. What I propose to call intellectual solidarity is a spirit of willingness to take other persons and groups seriously enough to *engage them* in conversation and debate about how the interdependent world we share should be shaped and structured. Thus it calls for public discourse about diverse visions of

the good life. Such discourse is quite different from tolerance. Tolerance, as I use the term here, is a strategy of disengagement and of leaving each other alone. Disengagement from serious discourse about the life we must live together is precisely what we cannot afford if we wish to shape our interdependent existence in humanly worthy ways. In contrast with this, intellectual solidarity calls for engagement with the other through both listening and speaking, in the hope that understanding might replace incomprehension and that perhaps even agreement about the good we share in common could result. Short of full agreement, such engagement is already itself a major part of common good, for through it we become a community of active citizens rather than political couch potatoes.

Because intellectual solidarity demands *mutual* listening and speaking, it can only occur where all are genuinely free to set forward their visions of the common good and the reasons why they hold it. But it also depends on people having something to say and being unafraid to say it. Aristotle maintained that the very existence of human society is dependent on the human power of speech, the ability of citizens to set forth publicly their understandings of "the expedient and the inexpedient," "the just and the unjust." These understandings are rooted in a "sense of good and evil" which only human beings possess.<sup>19</sup> Thus to avoid serious public speech about the good life and the good society is already to surrender a major dimension of the human good. It will also have the further effect of undermining the concrete conditions necessary for a life of freedom. As Benjamin Barber has warned, "citizens so tame as to shrink from the consequences of what they take to be public justice and common interest are scarcely citizens at all and are unlikely to be capable of defending freedom in any form."<sup>20</sup> Because intellectual solidarity is mutual engagement, the freedom it both presupposes and generates is not the freedom of being "left alone." Put positively, where conversation and argument about the good life begins and develops in intellectual solidarity, a *community* of freedom begins to exist. And this is itself a major part of the common good. Indeed it is this freedom in reciprocal dialogue that is one of the characteristics that distinguishes a community of solidarity from one marked by domination and repression.

This solidarity in commitment to the common good also has social dimensions. It directly influences the way we understand what justice means in the social-economic realm.

An adequate discussion of the full meaning of justice is impossible here. The task can be simplified, however, by noting the United States Catholic Bishops' 1986 description of the bottom-line demands of justice. They said "*Basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of*



participation in the life of the human community for all persons.” Put negatively, “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race.”<sup>21</sup> The U.S. Bishops call this exclusion “marginalization”—exclusion from social life and from participation in the common good of the human community.

Unjust exclusion can take many forms. Most relevant to the United States today is exclusion from the booming economic life of the country. There are so few decent jobs in most urban ghettos that many people simply give up looking for work. This amounts to the institutionalization of despair. When human beings are told repeatedly that they are simply not needed, it takes extraordinary self-confidence to keep trying. Such messages, built into class structures of American life today, lead to the drugs and violence of many American urban centers today. They are the source of what Cornel West has dared to call the “nihilism” found among far too many urban youth today.

When citizens “tolerate” such conditions when remedial steps could be taken, injustice is being done and the common good undermined. One can hardly think of a more effective way to deny people active participation in the economic life of society than to leave them facing unemployment for years, even over generations. Similarly, when people face the extremes of poverty in a vastly rich society like ours, they are effectively told they don’t count as members of our community at all. Their good is not part of any commonwealth. The extent of their suffering shows how far we are from being a community at all.<sup>22</sup> The willingness of citizens to tolerate such conditions and even take actions that perpetuate them shows how far we are from an effective commitment to the common good in this nation.

Against the background of this normative understanding of solidarity and the common good, the fear that we are on the brink of a cultural war that can be prevented by tolerance seems rather naive. We live in a dangerously divided nation and world. If we are to begin the task of securing even minimal justice, we need to confront these divisions, not “tolerate” them. The poor and marginalized people in our societies are members of the human community and we have a duty to treat them as such. Tolerance, non-judgmentalism, and “couch potato politics” will not do so. Only a real commitment to the common good will—a good that must be there for us all if it is to be there for any of us. When we begin to take steps toward this shared good, we will be on a path marked out for us by the deepest traditions of Western and Christian thought. We will be on the path toward an American public life healed of some of its deepest wounds and on the way to a new realization of the good that is common.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The title of this essay is a variation on the title of a work by Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., “Human Rights in a Divided Society,” in *Human Rights in the Americas: The Struggle for Consensus*, Alfred Hennessey and John Langan, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1982), 52-65. Ellacuría was the rector of the University of Central America who was assassinated along with five other Jesuits and two women in San Salvador in 1989. This essay is written in memory of Ellacuría and his work.

<sup>2</sup>Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, III, 17.

<sup>4</sup>This formulation can be found in the apostolic letter of Pope Julius III, *Exposcit debitum* (July 21, 1550) that gave papal approval to the “formula of the Institute” of the Society of Jesus. The apostolic letter is contained in the collection of contemporary normative documents of the Jesuit order, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and Their Complementary Norms, A Complete English Translation of the Official Latin Texts* (Saint Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), I. Formulas of the Institute of the Society of Jesus, Julius III, no. 1, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 201.

<sup>6</sup>Alan Wolfe, *One Nation After All: What Middle-Class Americans Really Think about God, Country, Family, Racism, Welfare, Immigration, Homosexuality, Work, the Right, the Left, and Each Other* (New York: Viking, 1998), 14-15.

<sup>7</sup>Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 54.

<sup>8</sup>Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 309.

<sup>9</sup>Wolfe, *One Nation After All*, 63.

<sup>10</sup>Wolfe, “Couch Potato Politics,” *New York Times*, Sunday, March 15, 1998, sec. 4, p. 17.



<sup>11</sup>Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 335.

<sup>12</sup>Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America's "Racial" Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Civitas Counterpoint, 1997), 28-29.

<sup>13</sup>The Public Broadcasting System television newsmagazine, "Frontline," produced an overview of the emerging class divisions among African-Americans, titled "The Two Nations of Black America," originally aired in February 10, 1998. It features interviews with a number of members of the Harvard University Afro-American Studies program, among others. The "Synopsis" of the broadcast summarizes its argument as follows: "In this "Frontline" report, correspondent Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a Harvard scholar, explores the gaping chasm between the upper and lower classes of black America and probes why it has happened: 'How have we reached this point where we have both the largest black middle class and the largest black underclass in our history?' His personal essay draws a picture of growing black success along with deepening black despair and argues that black upper classes now have more in common with their white colleagues and peers than with those they have left behind in the inner cities. Reviewing the 30 years that have passed since the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Gates shows that while many blacks reaped the reward of the civil rights movement and affirmative action and gained middle class status, just as many were left behind in an expanding underclass of poverty." Internet source: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/race/etc/synopsis.html> (April 22, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rorty says this is his and Dewey's view of the matter: "He [Dewey] assumed that no good achieved by earlier societies would be worth recapturing if the price were a diminution in our ability to leave people alone, to let them try out their private visions of perfection in peace." See Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*, Merrill D. Peterson and Robert Vaughan, eds., (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 273. This, however, is only one aspect of Rorty's [and Dewey's] public philosophies, for they both have strong commitments to human solidarity in the context of democracy. This tension raises central issues about the relation between private and public life in Rorty's thought.

<sup>15</sup>See National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986), no. 36.

<sup>16</sup>For a discussion of the transformation of the role of the Catholic church in efforts to secure democratic forms of government since Vatican II, see Samuel P. Huntington, "Religion and the Third Wave," *National Interest* 24 (Summer, 1991): 29-42.

<sup>17</sup>See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1167a, b.

<sup>18</sup>Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38, in David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds., *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

<sup>19</sup>Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a.

<sup>20</sup>Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 106.

<sup>21</sup>National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 77.

<sup>22</sup>National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 88.