

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Aquinas, Aristotle, and the Promise of the Common Good **Mary Margaret Keys**

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When a scholar undertakes the onerous task of faithfully delineating the nuances of Thomas Aquinas's thought, he or she always renders a great service to the reader. Mary Margaret Keys has done just this. The vast expanse of Aquinas's corpus (i.e., his books) combined with the economy of his arguments and the breadth of his sources, makes any exegesis of his writings a formidable task. His notion of the common good is especially thorny, as anyone aware of the 1940s De Koninck–Eschmann–Maritain debate knows. The difficulty of the concept and Keys' successful handling of it make her book both timely and timeless.

Keys' objective is clear: She intends to show that Aquinas's political philosophy has currency for addressing the seemingly endless stalemate between an individualist notion of the human person, on the one hand, and communitarian or collectivist notions of the common good on the other. Her thesis is that the foundational principles of Aquinas's political theory reconcile the apparent conflict between the particular good of individuals and the common good of the political community. The nexus for reconciling these two orders (particular and common) is the rehabilitation of two virtues—magnanimity and legal justice.

What makes Keys' work valuable is her meticulous comparison between the foundational principles of Aristotle's political theory and Aquinas's own. The trajectory of her argument originates with a fundamental question: Why Aquinas? The answer is evident in her analysis of three rival concepts of the common good. In the works of John Rawls,

Michael Sandel, and William Galston, Keys finds notable efforts to assimilate aspects of Aristotle's approach to the common good. Nevertheless, in part 1 of her book, she shows how each author's presentation of the common good is incomplete and deficient. She contends that Aquinas's improvement upon Aristotle's theoretical foundations provides an approach to the common good that remedies these shortcomings.

There are three foundational principles of Aquinas' political theory. In the second part, Keys shows how Aquinas constructs his political theory in response to Aristotle's threefold foundation, which she enumerates thus: (1) the notion of a common and essentially social human nature, (2) the virtues conducive to the preservation of particular regimes, and (3) the detailed dissection of the anatomy of different regimes. Keys argues that Aquinas follows Aristotle closely in the first foundation and, to some degree, in the second. However, in regard to the second and third, she convincingly shows on exegetical and historical grounds that Aquinas, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Politics* and in the *Summa theologiae*, foregoes an analysis of Aristotle's second and third foundation in favor of developing the first foundation. In her opinion, Aquinas believed Aristotle proceeded too hastily, leaving "cracks" in his theory.

Keys makes a surprising claim. She argues for Aquinas's originality in replacing Aristotle's third foundation with the introduction of natural law as the basis upon which any regime has legitimacy. Aquinas's notion of the common good unites the particular and the common precisely insofar as natural law is an interior principle within every individual that inclines each citizen to a common good more universal than that of the regime. Even more, natural law inclines every individual to the virtues by which this good is realized within the regime. It is natural law and the virtues to which this law is ordered that thus temper the excesses to which the partiality of any individual or regime is tempted.

Keys furthers her argument in part 3 by demonstrating how our present focus must shift away from a concept of justice as being merely *out there* somewhere, embodied in our laws and institutions. Rather, we must retrieve Aquinas' fuller notion of legal justice as being a virtue that perfects individuals—especially in their sociality—precisely as it directs individuals in their actions to the common good. In this manner, the goods of both individuals and the commonwealth are harmonized.

Aquinas's concept of magnanimity—in contradistinction to Aristotle's—is also vital for the common good. For him, magnanimity comprises (Keys borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre here) the virtues of acknowledged dependence: for example, humility and gratitude. True magnanimity serves the common good by emboldening citizens with the hope to perform grand deeds for the common good, yet to do so with the humility of knowing their complete dependence on others, especially God. True magnanimity ensures that every regime remains open toward God without necessarily being a confessional state.

The final part of the book explores Aquinas's pedagogical theory of law as well as the relationship between civil law and humanity's supernatural end. It also contains the book's chief weakness. It leaves unsaid much that needs saying about the importance of theological virtues for political life. Of particular interest is Aquinas's understanding

of charity as the preeminent social virtue of political friendship and, consequently, of Christianity's benefit to any political order.

Moreover, in addressing the rather uncomfortable aspect of Aquinas's "troubled" case "for the political enforcement of the religious, supernatural, or specifically Christian virtues of faith hope, and love" (226), Keys makes an awkward attempt to explain away Aquinas's teaching, which she otherwise aptly clarifies. She concludes that Aquinas betrays an "unchecked spiritedness" that led him "to endorse in unusually immoderate terms an unjust and unwise ecclesial-political policy" (234). Ironically, Keys' book provides the intellectual context for appreciating Aquinas's view on the controversial matter in question, the civil prosecution of religious heretics.

Aquinas defends the right of government to safeguard peace by preserving the order of justice. If we carefully consider Aquinas's argument, we must ask, why should Jewish believers, but not heretics, be tolerated in a medieval Catholic state? Is it not because, within a state founded to preserve a faith tradition, a *counterfeit* doctrine posited as the true faith poses a real threat to the order of justice? Inasmuch as it claims to be something it is not, "heresy" scandalizes the simple believer, sows strife among the citizenry, and undermines public peace (see ST II-II, q. 10 a. 8). It is on account of the threat it was to public peace—and not in order to coerce interior faith—that Aquinas defended the prosecution of publicly professed heresy. The Albigensian movement, which taught that obedience to civil rulers is contrary to Christian faith, was fresh in Aquinas's mind.

As Keys shows, Aquinas is fully aware that no civil (or ecclesiastical) government can command or enforce the infused virtues of faith, hope, and love. Aquinas explains that civil rulers cannot command the interior disposition of any acquired virtue, even justice, nor judge anything other than the *external* acts of justice necessary for the common good (See ST I-II.100.9; ST I-II.96.2–3). This alone demonstrates that Aquinas's argument is not "immoderate" or "unjust," even if controversial. In any political order, the common good requires the use of coercive force against those who threaten it by public action. Admittedly, within the framework of a secular order wherein we espouse a wall of separation between church and state, we have difficulty seeing Aquinas's point. Nevertheless, it behooves us to understand better the principle behind his position, even if we now reject the idea of a confessional state and his prescribed methods of punishment.

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