

## Reply to Gregory Beabout's "The Primacy of Culture"

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I want to make only two points with respect to Professor Beabout's paper. The first is a quibble and the second is an idea to which reflection on the paper has given rise.

The quibble has to do with Professor Beabout's discussion of the common good. I suspect that our difference on this point is one of language and is a matter of clarification rather than of disagreement. The way the paper states the relationship between the individual person and the common good is this: The common good is "greater" than individual interests, but the good of authentic personal development is greater than the common good. I worry that this formulation does not sufficiently nuance the relationship between the person and the common good. More precisely, I worry that this formulation could be interpreted in such a way that it could allow the following kind of reasoning: It is good to be concerned about the common good, but in those cases where the common good and the personal good come into conflict, it is better to choose the personal good, because it is, in the final analysis, the more important (for the reasons Professor Beabout cites).

The language of "greater than" opens the possibility of conflict between the common good and the genuine personal good. This is a possibility, it seems, that Maritain (on whom the paper draws) would deny. Let us consider more carefully Maritain's discussion in *The Person and the Common Good*. The common good, he states, is "subordinate" to the personal good, but not as a "pure means"—that is, not as means to end—but as an "infravalent end."<sup>1</sup> Thus, within its own order, the common good is an end, not a means. Yet, considering the spiritual and eternal end of the person (as Professor Beabout notes), the good of the person transcends the common good of society. There is, of course, much more that could be said here—for instance, a discussion of the definition of the common good itself. I will leave it to the discussants and the moderator to determine if we should pursue that line. I will end this point with two quotes that I see as crucial for understanding the relation between the person and the common good. The first is from Maritain in *The Person and the Common Good*:

The person as person insists on serving the common good freely. It insists on this while tending toward its own fullness, while transcending itself and the community in its movement toward the transcendent Whole. The person as an individual is necessarily bound, by constraint if need be, to serve the community and the common good since it is excelled by them as the part by the whole.

This paradox, this tension, and this conflict are something natural and inevitable. Their solution is not static but dynamic.<sup>2</sup>

More concisely, there is this statement, in a letter from Yves Simon to Maritain: "To the degree that a created person is a person there is a tendency toward coincidence of personal good and common good."<sup>3</sup>

The second issue, the idea to which the paper gave rise, has to do with the very nature of the economic personalist enterprise. It raises questions such as: What will be its preferred subject matter? What will be its thrust?

I propose that the following argument, if not made explicit, is nonetheless contained in Professor Beabout's paper. One premise is: The most important ingredient for a just society is a healthy moral-cultural sphere. Another premise is: The most important ingredient for a healthy moral-cultural sphere is a strong family life. The conclusion, then, is that the most important ingredient for a just society is a strong family life.

This paper has prompted me to think that perhaps a discussion of family life as a key factor in the creation and maintenance of a free and virtuous society ought to be an important part of economic personalism. Perhaps, then, a sentence on the family should be part of the statement of principles that this conference aims to produce. A logical place for such a sentence, it seems, would be under the heading "primacy of culture." Another possibility would be under "the importance of social institutions."

## Notes

1. Jacques Maritain, *The Person and the Common Good*, trans. John J. Fitzgerald (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1948), 44.

2. *Ibid.*, 54.

3. Yves R. Simon to Jacques Maritain, 11 December 1945. Quoted in Ralph McInerny, "The Primacy of the Common Good," in *The Common Good and U.S. Capitalism*, eds. Oliver F. Williams and John W. Houck (Lanham, Md.: University of America Press, 1987), 82, n. 19. The statement was one of a series Simon drafted to mediate an agreement between Maritain and Charles De Koninck.