Baptists and *Rerum Novarum*: The Common Good and Complex Space

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> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.
> -Jeremiah 29:5-7 (NRSV)

Contemporary public discourse has appealed to the "common good" as the impetus to pursue specific political action. Jim Wallis's recent book, *God's Politics*, is described as being "about a new vision for the common good that could inspire us all to lives of service and to a whole new set of public (read political) priorities."[1] Concerned about the privatization of faith, Wallis argues for a recovery of the common good as a way for Christians to engage the broader society: "[T]o influence a democratic society, you must win the public debate about why the policies you advocate are better for the *common good*."[2] Wallis is not alone in his use of the common good. George W. Bush, in addressing the Southern Baptist Convention in 2002, stated, "Our democratic government is one way to promote social justice and the common good."[3] Bush, like Wallis, places the common good in the hands of the government (which presumably represents the citizenry). Moreover, Marv Knox, editor of the Texas Baptist newspaper, *The Baptist Standard*, has written an editorial asking, "What would Jesus put in the budget?," where he invokes the common good in order to persuade readers that Baptists should work to influence policy decisions (e.g., child health insurance, programs aimed at helping low-income families) concerning the budgets of the state of Texas and the federal government.[4]

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[1] Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), 27-28; parenthetical phrase original.

[2] Ibid., 32; emphasis original.

[3] See "Remarks by the President via Satellite to the Southern Baptist Convention 2002 Annual Meeting." Available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020611-5.html.

[4] Marv Knox, "What Would Jesus Put in the Budget?," *The Baptist Standard* 117, no. 4 (February 21, 2005): 5.

While these uses of the common good are commendable, especially as they are intended to help the poor and marginalized within society, there is another dynamic present within them: they utilize the common good as a non-theological term.[5] One might construe them, then, as emphasizing the "public" interest – i.e., the sum of the private interests of the individual members of society.[6] As Michael Dauphinais writes, this public interest often is reduced to economic interests, so that concerns for federal budgets can assume priority in discussions about the "common good."[7] By employing such macro-level language, the above examples all use the common good in this manner.

We find a striking contrast in the more theological understanding of the common good found in the Thomistic tradition. Two points about this must be made. First, the Thomistic version of the common good has a specifically theological end, while the other voices in this conversation tend to employ the common good more as a utilitarian term that does not point in any particular teleological direction. Rooted in Aristotelianism, Aquinas understood that "a man willing a particular good does not will it rightly unless he intends to will in it the common good as goal, so that the particular matter is willed as a reflection of the common good that is God."[8] Second, the common good for Aquinas is located within the cultivation of virtue, which requires devoted attention to the particular (circumstances, people, places, etc.). As Dauphinais writes, "[T]he common good is not simply the sum total of each person's particular economic good, but is in reality the final goal of the individual person. The doctrine of the common good keeps the human person at the center of society and orders material goods so that the each person can live a good life."[9] The interlocutors mentioned at the outset do not attend to the particular in this way, and instead (abstractly) focus on government, indicating (at least

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[5] Similarly, Jeffrey Stout writes, "The consent of the governed, respect for the rights of the people, and proper concern for the common good are all recognized as conditions for the possession of such authority in modern democracies, but none of them is explicitly theological" [Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy & Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 103].

[6] In this way, the common good becomes more synonymous with the utilitarian notion of the "greatest good." Any dissenting view might be seen as "sectarian" or "private."

[7] Michael A. Dauphinais, "The Common Good and the Body of Christ: St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Worker," *Houston Catholic Worker* 17.6 (November 1997), n.p. Available at http://www.cjd.org/paper/roots/rbody.html.

[8] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, Timothy McDermott, ed. (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1989), 198.

[9] Dauphinais, "The Common Good and the Body of Christ," n.p.

indirectly) that the common good is guarded and kept to some degree therein.[10] Thus, while the latter method tends toward legislation that has a more uniform impact on society and is therefore more theoretical, the former makes use of practical reasoning in order to discern the appropriate actions at particular times and places that "fit" with the (theologically understood) common good.

Several questions arise from this comparison. How do these two articulations of the common good relate to one another? What are the implications of one as opposed to the other? Further, what are the conditions that enable the church (and, more specifically, Baptist churches) to pursue a theological notion of the common good? Finally, should the nation-state be seen as the primary contributor to and keeper of the common good, and if it is, what impact does this have on the ability of the church to promote a Thomistic understanding of the common good? In response to these and other questions, it will be shown that the non-theological references to the common good mentioned at the outset contribute to a particular mapping of social space that introduces a public/private distinction, hindering the work of churches to genuinely pursue a theological vision of the common good. However, another mapping of social space is possible and necessary for Baptists, one that is expressed and embodied in the tradition of Catholic social ethics, beginning with the nineteenth century encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

Rerum Novarum

Rerum Novarum, commonly known in English as "On the Condition of the Working Classes," was issued in May, 1891, by Pope Leo XIII. It addressed the effects of and responses to the century-old Industrial Revolution, which gave rise to a new context for the Catholic Church, economically and politically. The forces of change associated with capitalism produced problematic circumstances for

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[10] Knox even writes, "Now, more than ever, Christians need to influence state and federal budgets to be just and compassionate" (Knox, n.p.). James A. Nash, in a similar fashion, argues, "Only through the federal government can we establish national norms to meet national needs. Only the federal government can be the social instrument through which we support the common good and share the benefits and burdens of being a truly united people" [James A. Nash, "The Church's Political Ministry – Some Propositions to Provoke Debate," *Christian Ethics Today* 16 (June 1998): 27]. In another place, Nash states, "[T]he state exists not to be the Defender of the Faith, but to be the Protector of the Common Good" [James A. Nash, "On the Goodness of Government," *Christian Ethics Today* 7 (August 1996): 20].

laborers. Seen as opponents of laissez-faire free trade, the guilds of the medieval society disappeared, leaving workers disconnected from one another. Production began to be condensed into regional centers of industry, which eventually attained a more national scope, with the locus of work shifted from the rural to the urban. Consequently, according to Joe Holland, workers became increasingly subject to an industrial-political-economic system that was acquiring vast power:

> Now, for the first time, the majority of the laboring force of the industrialized nations began to be uprooted from the land and drawn into the new industrial system. Thanks to the railroad, the agricultural system was directly integrated into the industrial system and a new mechanized factory form of farming began to develop. This national industrial economic structure in turn became the economic foundation for a new external nationalism marked by great industrial wars and by a new industrial colonialism, now made feasible by the machine revolution. The steamship, the railroad, and the machine gun as well gave European and European-American national governments the power to invade and conquer all of the Third World. And the machine gun, the tank, and the aircraft would enable the great industrial powers to turn their destructive energies against one another.[11]

Contrasting these shifts was a Marxist response, which served as the most prominent counter position to capitalism. This form of socialism emphasized the protection of workers centered in a socialist state that owned the means of production. Furthermore, the feudal system of the medieval period had broken down as centralized state authorities, democratic or monarchical, capitalist or socialist, had absorbed several positions of power (e.g., the authority of lords, local administration of justice, defense, and public order), reducing the original hierarchy to the peasant and the landowner. Following Lockean political thought, the result of these developments was a society understood to consist of a mass of individual persons and the sovereign of the government, be that a single person or a legislative body. Intermediate associations were viewed as impediments to political freedom as they interfered with the pursuit of one's individual ends.

The papacy was also in transition, having lost the Papal States (save Vatican City), a situation that brought about a great deal of tension between the Catholic Church and rulers of various European nations. In total, Leo XIII had observed the multifaceted changes occurring in the century before *Rerum*

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[11] Joe Holland, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: The Popes Confront the Industrial Age, 1740-1958* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 14-15.

Novarum, and concluded that the Catholic Church must respond to these developments.[12] "On the Condition of the Working Classes" addresses these changing economic conditions, identifying the problems associated with them, noting that state socialism is a false remedy, and then offering a solution based on the principle that "Each needs the other: capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital."[13] The church stands in an important place, charged with the tasks of bringing together the rich and the poor, reminding the state, laborers, and employers of their responsibilities, and creating Christian institutions.[14] In this way, the church pursues a vision of the common good where "all men are children of the same common Father, who is God; that all have alike the same last end, which is God Himself."[15]

Spatial Considerations

While some have read this encyclical as advocating a return to the medieval guild system and the societal hierarchy of pre-modern Christendom,[16] *Rerum Novarum* is better read, in part, as defending a particular mapping of space. John Milbank states that there exist "spatial preoccupations [in] Catholic social teaching, and in particular its advocacy of 'complex space.'"[17] In fact, Milbank's discussion of complex space offers significant resources for reading *Rerum Novarum*. He argues that, in "simple space," differences are relativized and society is ordered in a singular manner between the sovereign and the individual. Milbank describes these conditions as those where "bodies intermediate between the state and the individual – guilds, religious associations, universities – tend to suffer reduced autonomy, or else

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[12] For more information on the context of *Rerum Novarum*, see Thomas A. Shannon, "Commentary on *Rerum novarum* (*The Condition of Labor*)," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 128-133.

[13] *Rerum Novarum*, §19.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., §25.

[16] See Shannon, 127-128.

[17] John Milbank, "Against the Resignations of the Age," *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited*, Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale, eds. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993), 6.

total extirpation."[18] Indeed, under these conditions, space is understood to be "suspended between the mass of atomic individuals on the one hand, and an absolutely sovereign centre on the other."[19]

As the embodiment of Lockean ideals, the modern nation-state stands as the prime example of such a configuration of space, where "[t]here is an enfeebling of local common spaces by the power of the center, and a simultaneous parochialization of the imagination of Christendom into that of the sovereign state…. [S]overeignty is the triumph of the one over the many, the creation of a unified simple space."[20] This form of space, though, is a fiction (*e pluribus unum*), since "no action can be perfectly self-contained, but always impinges upon other people, so that spaces will always in some degree 'complexly' overlap, jurisdictions always in some measure be competing, loyalties remain (perhaps benignly) divided."[21] Thus, simple space requires an increase in the regulative power of the state and the associated power ascribed to the market, necessitating that the sovereign seek an "extension of merely formal regulation of human transactions (with its utilitarian and more predominantly liberal individualist presuppositions). More of life becomes economized and legalized, as legislation seeks – hopelessly – to catch up with every instance of 'overlap.'"[22] Therefore, intermediate associations (e.g., the church) either are eliminated, marginalized (by being labeled "sectarian" or "private"), or tamed, with any prominent "public" voice facilitating the dualistic relationship between the individual and the sovereign.[23] A society based on Locke's philosophy "relegates all other forms of common life – those based on biology, locality, common blood, common tasks, or common calling – to the status of the essentially private 'voluntary society.'"[24] Thus, those who would have Baptists and other Christians influence society for the common good solely via public policy decisions are conforming to the simple

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[18] John Milbank, "On Complex Space," in *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 275.

[19] Ibid.

[20] William T. Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20.2 (April 2004): 251.

[21] Milbank, "On Complex Space," 281.

[22] Ibid., 282.

[23] Cavanaugh writes of these intermediate associations, "[T]hey are expected to convey identities, virtues, and common ends in a context in which their relationships to production, mutual aid, education, and welfare have been absorbed into the state and the market" (Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company," 258).

[24] Ibid., 254.

spatial arrangement between the aggregate citizenry and the sovereign government, privatizing local churches and marginalizing many ecclesio-centered forms of pursuing the common good.

William Cavanaugh, in his article "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is Not the Keeper of the Common Good," counters this influence of the nation-state by arguing, following the words of Alasdair MacIntyre, that the state should be treated like the telephone company, an institution that supplies goods and services, which are promised to, but never quite do, give value for the price paid.[25] In this way, the state is demystified, so that the positive goods it provides (e.g., mail delivery) can be accepted without granting it the status of promoter and keeper of the common good.[26] This stance toward the nation-state provides the church with the authority to "judge if and when Christians can kill, and not abdicate that authority to the nation-state."[27]

Milbank and Cavanaugh contrast the simple mapping of space with the recovery of complex (for Milbank, "gothic") space. Here one finds "various communal contexts with overlapping jurisdictions and levels of authority."[28] Milbank writes that, aside from the dualistic relationship between the sovereign and the individual, "there can also be *intermediate* organisms, with their own 'group personality' between the individual and state bodies; these organisms have a 'natural' function independent of the fictive creativity of an absolute sovereign rule."[29] Further complexity arises in that, instead of the part/whole division signaled by the individual/sovereign relationship, within complex space, "multiple associations cease merely to 'mediate' between part and whole, but become themselves a new sort of context, a never 'completed' and complexly ramifying 'network', involving 'confused',

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[25] This is the source of the title of his article, with Cavanaugh concluding that certain Catholic social commentators who argue that Catholics should defer to the leaders of nation-states in determining whether a war is just or not are advocating for killing for the sake of the telephone company (Ibid., 263).

[26] Ibid., 267.

[27] Ibid., 268.

[28] Ibid., 251.

[29] Milbank, "On Complex Space," 275-276. Baptist theologian A.J. Conyers recognizes the same landscape, stating that Lockean society "is a bipolar vision of society, fatally simplified because it neglects the social reality that lies about us on every hand: a world of multilayered associations, most of which are not organized and formal, as is the relation between citizen and state, but which are spontaneous, organic, ever changing, and evolving, calling upon spiritual energies that are deeper than citizenship can ever hope to imitate" [A. J. Conyers, *The Long Truce: How Toleration Made the World Safe for Power and Profit* (Dallas: Spence Publishing, 2001), 138-139].

overlapping jurisdictions, which disperses and dissolves political sovereignty."[30] In short, complex space allows for the existence of alternate visions of the good, visions that not only call into question the validity of the nation-state's (simple space) claims and its understanding of the common good, but also orient the good toward the local, where particular practical judgments are needed in order to discern how the good is to be reached and embodied in local and particular situations.

This understanding of space has significant implications for reading *Rerum Novarum*, with Leo's condemnation of both laissez-faire capitalism and state socialism functioning as a rejection of the simplification of space. His lament over the loss of the guilds – "the ancient workingmen's guilds were abolished in the last century, and no other protective organization took their place" – mourns the shift towards simple space, and is not merely a nostalgic longing for the "good ol' days."[31] Leo recognizes the corruptive centralizing influence of capitalism, noting that "the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few."[32] At the same time, he avoids falling into state socialism, viewing it, with state-ownership of all property, as also constituting simple space: "[T]he socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies."[33] Here, socialist alternatives simplify space by unifying control in the hands of a few persons (or even one person).[34] Both economic systems (laissez-faire capitalism and state socialism) represent simple economic space, which continues its consolidation in the social sphere as

[30] Milbank, "On Complex Space," 276.

[31] *Rerum Novarum*, §3.

[32] Ibid. It should be noted that this situation has only worsened as capitalism has developed into more advanced forms and spread worldwide.

[33] Ibid., §4.

[34] This is not to say that Leo is advocating the hoarding of private property. Rather, he is articulating a more complicated form of sharing than state socialism. One might think of Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, where the early Christians held all things in common, but sold their private property and gave the proceeds to the poor as any had a need, actions that reflect the existence of private property without the hoarding behavior that has prompted many socialist critiques.

well. Thus, unifying political and socioeconomic power under the authority of the single state (whether autocratic or democratic) simplifies social space and hinders the pursuit of the common good.[35]

To counter both of these problematic stances, Leo points to a smaller community, the family. Yet, he does not point to the family as a component part of society, but as a society in itself: "[W]e have the family, the 'society' of a man's house – a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, and one older than any State. Consequently, it has rights and duties peculiar to itself which are quite independent of the State."[36] Because it is a society in and of itself, the family operates according to a different authority, allowing it to stand up against the power of the state: "A family, no less than a State, is, as We have said, a true society, governed by an authority peculiar to itself, that is to say, by the authority of the father."[37] Leo is advocating for complex space in his discussion of the family by orienting the family toward an alternate goal from that of the state. Further, because the family is a whole to itself, it can pursue the good apart from the actions of the nation-state (even though the actions of the latter will have an impact on the efforts of the former).

In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo articulates a vision for the church as well. Complex mapping of space offers resources for the church to pursue the common good without succumbing to the "public" or "common" of the nation-state or the market. In this manner, the church is presented with another option to those provided by the public/private distinction (i.e., the privatization of faith or the embrace of governmental policy as only public routes available). Leo states that the commonwealth, the society ordered by a government that does not seek to simplify space, exists for the common good, yet he also views the church as possessing "a power peculiarly her own."[38] This means that the church does not

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[35] The global market, controlled by a handful of transnational corporations, functions in the same manner as it extends the simplification of space found under the nation-state by means of an aesthetic that reduces the multitude of differences to "one overriding imperative to consume" [William T. Cavanaugh, "Balthasar, Globalization, and the Problem of the One and the Many," *Communio* 28.2 (2001): 332].

[36] *Rerum Novarum*, §12.

[37] Ibid., §13. This is not to underwrite the patriarchal nature of this sentiment. What is most important is that families operate under an authority all their own, regardless of whether this authority is matriarchal, patriarchal, or shared. Nevertheless, the authority exists, which enables the family to stand over against the state when necessary.

[38] Ibid., §26. Leo describes the commonwealth as one that facilitates the existence of multiple associations and does not seek to simplify space as does the modern nation-state (See ibid., §51-56).

serve the ends of the state, prompting the encyclical to call for "civil society… renovated in every part by Christian institutions."[39] Complex space is found in the function of these institutions. For example, Leo points out that, rather than seeking the establishment of a state-centered relief system, multiple religious communities, all aimed at aiding the poor and marginalized, have been created. These organizations, though, promote a theologically-grounded understanding of the common good because they perform these works of mercy according to the virtue of charity, which is "the fulfilling of the whole Gospel law" and "pertains to the Church; for virtue it is not, unless it be drawn from the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ."[40]

Therefore, as Cavanaugh states, "[t]he Church must constitute itself as an alternative social space…. The Church needs, at every opportunity, to 'complexify' space, that is to promote the creation of spaces in which alternative economies and authorities can flourish."[41] The creation of such spaces is at the heart of Leo's discussion of guilds, as Cavanaugh writes:

> The medieval synthesis, though fused with static social hierarchies, at least preserved the biblical sense that the Church was not a private association that mediated between the putatively universal state and the sovereign individual. When modern Catholic social teaching has insisted on the need for complex space, therefore, it should not be dismissed solely as nostalgia for medieval hierarchy….The solution, according to Leo, is the proliferation of associations along the lines of the medieval Guilds, in complete independence from the state, and under the auspices of the Church. Critics have noted the vagueness and nostalgia of Leo's cure, but his diagnosis is insightful: *the source of injustice is the modern creation of simple space, the individual cut loose from community and left isolated.*[42]

The multiplication of these associations relocates the efforts to promote the common good. Rather than understanding the common good as best sought in "high" places such as national legislatures and global human-rights agencies, efforts for the common good take on a local character. Along these lines, Milbank writes,

> [T]he issue of the common good most pointedly surfaces, not in the abstract deliberations of governments, where, on the contrary, its reduction to utilitarian calculus or promotion of free

[39] Ibid., §27.
[40] Ibid., §63, 30.
[41] Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company," 267.
[42] Ibid.; emphasis original.

> choice will seem most seductively plausible, but rather in the ever re-encountered "boundary disputes" and occasions for collective action in the everyday lives of citizens.[43]

The local nature of these disputes will require a different manner of adjudication. Universal rational arguments – "an *a priori* rational logic of subsumption of parts under wholes" – will not suffice.[44] Instead, decision-making becomes more complex, focused on practical wisdom, where "every act of association, every act of economic exchange, involves a mutual judgement [*sic*] about what is right, true and beautiful, about the order we are to have in common. It is no longer a matter of 'transparent' principles of reason, nor of mere diversification of desire, regardless of what that desire may be *for*."[45] Such practical judgments will have a fluid character, as, in various localities, they are "always being repeated with a same yet different character."[46] Thus, a properly theological understanding of the common good involves not theoretical reasoning concerning what might provide the greatest good for the greatest number of citizens or the moral laws that all people of goodwill would legislate for themselves, but practical reasoning that can vary in many ways while remaining oriented toward the final end of the common good.

Therefore, Leo XIII calls not for a nostalgic return to a pre-modern society, except insofar as that society embodied complex space.[47] This spatial mapping, and its manifestation in specific Catholic associations, is particularly helpful for Baptists as they seek to articulate and instantiate a vision of the common good that enables them to genuinely "seek the welfare of the city," as the exiles in Jeremiah 29 were charged with doing, while still faithfully living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.[48]

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[43] Milbank, "On Complex Space," 281.

[44] Ibid., 279.

[45] Ibid. I am indebted to D. Michael Cox for explicitly making this connection with practical wisdom.

[46] Ibid., 280. One can recognize the relationship between this understanding of practical judgments and Milbank's notion of "non-identical repetition." Moreover, these judgments cohere with the Thomistic notion of the common good, where the cultivation of virtue informs particular moral decisions in various local contexts.

[47] John Paul II echoed Leo's call for complex space, writing in *Centesimus Annus* on the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, "According to *Rerum novarum* and the whole social doctrine of the Church, the social nature of man is not completely fulfilled in the State, but is realized in various intermediary groups, beginning with the family and including economic, social, political and cultural groups which stem from human nature itself and have their own autonomy, always with a view to the common good" (§13).

[48] That Leo's encyclical was viewed as calling for the complex space found in multiplying intermediate associations is confirmed by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), an encyclical delivered on the fortieth anniversary of *Rerum*

Localist Politics

To understand the nature of the common good within the complex social space advocated by *Rerum Novarum*, "the *Magna Charta* upon which all Christian activity in the social field ought to be based,"[49] one must look at communities that instantiate this vision of complex space. One inheritor of the encyclical's teaching is the Catholic Worker Movement. Founded in 1933, founders Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day were heavily influenced by the Leonine encyclicals and the subsequent contributions of the tradition of Catholic social teaching (e.g, *Quadragesimo Anno* by Pius XI): "To form our minds, Peter brought us things to read, Chesterton and Belloc and Gill and Cobbett and Father Vincent McNabb, the encyclicals of the recent Popes, from Pope Leo XIII down to the present day. 'Making the encyclicals click,' he used to say."[50] Furthermore, the Catholic Worker did not seek the common good at the macro-level. Instead, Day, Maurin, and the Catholic Worker saw the common good as requiring a common life, a small-scale setting, or, in the words of Michael Baxter, "localist politics" that "goes beyond houses of hospitality to encompass neighborhoods, villages, and provinces, any number of associations in which people relate to each other in a personal, dignified, face-to-face manner."[51] Day herself describes the shape of this form of politics and its public witness: "We would like to see more small communities organizing themselves, people talking with people, people *caring* for people, people

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Novarum. He underscores the increase in the numbers of associations since 1891 and the sometimes divergent circumstances in which they have been set. See *Quadragesimo Anno*, §31-40, 79.

[49] *Quadragesimo Anno*, §39; see also Holland, 176-190.

[50] Dorothy Day, "Letter to Our Readers at the Beginning of Our Fifteenth Year," *The Catholic Worker* (May 1947). Available at Dorothy Day Library on the Web at http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/. Another person who was influential on Day and Maurin was Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), who, like Leo XIII, criticized what he saw as the centralization of power under the rise of the modern nation-state: "The very forms of the village community, unknown to their code, the very principles of federalism were repulsive to them as "barbarian" inheritances. Caesarism, supported by the fiction of popular consent and by the force of arms, was their ideal, and they worked hard for those who promised to realize it. The Christian Church, once a rebel against Roman law and now its ally, worked in the same direction" [Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London, 1902; repr. New York: Black Rose Books, 1989), 216-217].

[51] Michael J. Baxter, "Notes on Catholic Americanism and Catholic Radicalism: Toward a Counter-Tradition in Catholic Social Ethics," in *American Catholic Traditions: Resources for Renewal*, Sandra Yocum Mize and William L. Portier, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 63-64.

coming together in order to make known what they believe and what they would like their nation to do."[52] Thus, the Catholic Worker's approach to the common good is one of particularity:

> The doctrine of the common good embodies a personalist approach in which we love our neighbor particularly, not merely humanity in general. Just as love of humanity is worthless if we do not love this neighbor before us, the common good demands that we strive for the particular goods of those neighbors. Here "neighbor" is not an abstraction consisting in everyone, everywhere, at all times, but initially these very people who are near to us.[53]

In this way, the Catholic Worker bears witness that what is "common" is inextricably related to the local and particular.

A personalist approach to seeking the common good connects with the sort of boundary disputes mentioned by Milbank. The Catholic Worker, operating according to christologically-shaped understandings of terms such as "natural" and "politics," employs "selective engagement" with the broader society (including the nation-state) in order to locate the appropriate actions that pursue the common good:

> Some practices sponsored by the nation-state are unproblematic, such as obeying traffic laws, putting out the garbage, and using the postal service. Others are a matter of judgment, voting in elections, for example, or supporting certain political action groups. And others are to be resisted, such as paying federal taxes for war or abortion, and refusing conscription…. This discernment requires regular, casuistic judgments about the kind of political activity in which one is involved.[54]

These judgments are necessary to resist the simple space of the nation-state and cohere with the principle of subsidiarity, which appears for the first time in Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*, where he writes,

> The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance, which would otherwise dissipate its efforts greatly. Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands. Therefore, those in power should be sure that the more perfectly a graduated

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[52] Quoted in Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1987), 107-108.

[53] Dauphinais, "The Common Good and the Body of Christ," n.p. Maurin and Day were both introduced to personalism through the work of Emmanuel Mounier. See Mark and Louise Zwick, "Emmanuel Mounier, Personalism, and the Catholic Worker Movement," *Houston Catholic Worker* (July-August 1999), n.p. Available at http://www.cjd.org/paper/roots/rmounier.html.

[54] Baxter, 64.

> order is kept among the various associations, in observance of the principle of "subsidiary function," the stronger social authority and effectiveness will be the happier and more prosperous the condition of the State.[55]

The Catholic Worker sees itself, along with the church, as an intermediate association that resists the centralizing powers of the state and the market. Their emphasis is on the local, where the common good is promoted in personal encounters. As Day and Maurin state, "'Charity is personal. Charity is love.'"[56]

Significance for Baptists

This understanding of *Rerum Novarum* is important for Baptists because of our historic emphasis on local communities of faith constituted by particular practices.[57] Baptist historian Bill Leonard notes that there have been multiple manifestations of Baptist polity, and "[a]n uneasy tension often existed between local congregations and associations, particularly when local autonomy appeared threatened by authoritarian bureaucracies."[58] Several Baptist confessions of faith have reflected this emphasis on the local. The Orthodox Creed (1678) of the General Baptists in England states:

> [W]e believe the Visible Church of Christ on Earth, is made up of several distinct Congregations, which make up that one Catholick [*sic*] Church, or Mystical Body of Christ. And the Marks by which She is known to be the true Spouse of Christ, are these, *viz.* Where the Word of God is rightly Preached, and the Sacraments truly Administred [*sic*], according to Christ's Institution, and the Practice of the Primitive Church; having Discipline and Government duly Executed by Ministers or Pastors of God's Appointing, and the Churches [*sic*] Election, that is a true constituted Church: to which Church (and not elsewhere) all Persons that seek for Eternal Life, should gladly joyn [*sic*] themselves.[59]

The New Hampshire Confession of Faith (1833) notes, "[A] visible Church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the Gospel; observing the

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[55] *Quadragesimo Anno*, §80.

[56] Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of Dorothy Day* (New York: Harper, 1952; repr. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997), 179.

[57] The Anabaptist *Schleitheim Confession* describes seven practices of churches, most of which (e.g., baptism, the ban, breaking bread) require a local community of faith in order to be properly performed and made intelligible.

[58] Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 6.

[59] Orthodox Creed, article 30, in *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, rev. ed., William L. Lumpkin, ed. (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 318-319.

ordinances of Christ; governed by his laws; and exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by his word."[60] Thus, for Baptists, the local ecclesial community gained a place of prominence throughout Baptist history.

It is important to note, however, that, despite this emphasis on local communities, cooperation among congregations is not to be ignored or eliminated.[61] Indeed, the vision of complex space includes cooperative associations among people and churches and, for Catholics, continual connection to the church in Rome. Baptists, therefore, cannot embrace complex space simply by promoting absolutely autonomous congregations. Instead, some connection to a Baptist/baptist (and even broader, catholic) tradition is necessary in order to hold the various particular communities of faith together and have any hope of pursuing a genuinely common good. Thus, the emphasis on local communities grounded in particular practices does not preclude the existence of a broader authority under which these communities live.[62] What results for Baptists is complex space where various cooperative efforts (and possibly even national conventions) between congregations exist alongside the work of local communities. What are to be avoided, then, are two arrangements of simple ecclesial space: the hegemony of the national assembly (as might be described currently within the Southern Baptist Convention) and the totalizing control of the individual (as can be seen with the so-called Baptist "moderates" who tout freedom as the defining Baptist distinctive).[63]

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[60] New Hampshire Confession of Faith, article 13, in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3d ed., John H. Leith, ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 338. The 1925 *Baptist Faith and Message* (*BFM*) retains the language of the New Hampshire Confession, while the subsequent versions of the *BFM* (1963, 2000) describe the church as an autonomous local body of believers.

[61] One can see the importance of local communities in the five themes that constitute James McClendon's "baptist vision": biblicism, liberty, discipleship, community, and mission [James W. McClendon, Jr., *Ethics*, rev. ed., Systematic Theology, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 26-30].

[62] Barry Harvey, in arguing for a stronger acceptance of authority by Baptists, notes several communal practices that have proven durable over time and offer resources for sustaining Baptist identity: "communal reading of Scripture; the preaching, teaching, and baptism that nurture a called-out church membership; the eschatologically-oriented sharing of burdens within the fellowship of the church and the extension of hospitality to those without; and the work of fraternal admonition and mutual forgiveness within congregations and the task of moral discernment and doctrinal consultation between them" [Barry Harvey, "Where, Then, Do We Stand?: Baptists, History, and Authority," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 29.4 (Winter 2002): 378].

[63] See, e.g., Walter B. Shurden, *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 1993).

One case of the Baptist emphasis on the local and its impact on Baptist politics is Walter Nathan Johnson.[64] Born in North Carolina in 1875, Johnson graduated from Wake Forest College in 1899 and proceeded to serve as pastor of numerous churches in North Carolina and Louisiana and in various capacities within each state's denominational structure. At several points, however, Johnson stands out from other (Southern) Baptists. First, in 1920, shortly after its launch, Johnson opposed the "Seventy-Five Million Campaign," a Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) fundraising effort that directed mission donations to the national denomination to be redistributed. Johnson based this position on several grounds. As David Stricklin writes, "[Johnson] disagreed with the campaign's premise that large amounts of money should be directed through central SBC offices, which theretofore had not operated as transfer points of local church offering proceeds."[65] Johnson, therefore, sought a greater emphasis on the local: "[He] came to be increasingly suspicious of all ecclesiastical 'federations,' including voluntarily cooperating conventions, taking a determinedly free-church, congregational position on matters of church governance and accountability."[66] At the same time, Johnson did work with people from various Baptist institutions, such as officials from the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina as well as Mars Hill College in North Carolina. Johnson even placed at the masthead of his newsletter, *The Next Step in the Churches*, the phrase "not to destroy any denominational organization," indicating that his criticism concerned the operation and administration of such cooperative efforts, not simply their existence.[67] Further, he promoted meetings between various ministers and laypeople, with the goal of cultivating what he called "church vitalization." Despite the complicated nature of his interactions with Baptist organizations, Johnson's concern was for a more complex configuration of Baptist space.

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[64] David Stricklin describes a "genealogy of dissent," a counter-tradition within Baptist life that centers on Johnson and includes those who were influenced by him, such as Carlyle Marney, Martin England, and Clarence Jordan. See David Stricklin, *A Genealogy of Dissent: Southern Baptist Protest in the Twentieth Century* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

[65] Ibid., 30. He notes that when the Seventy-Five Million Campaign began in 1919 with a simple monetary goal, Johnson supported it. In 1920, however, Johnson distanced himself from these efforts when, among other things, state quotas were put into place; Johnson eventually described the Seventy-Five Million Campaign as a "'religio-military organization'" (See ibid).

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 34.

Moreover, Johnson's emphasis on local communities did not simply offer an internal critique of institutions within the denomination (i.e., betraying their own congregationalism by creating a massive bureaucracy) but also involved a positive vision for the church. As Stricklin writes,

> He took the basic idea of stewardship to its most dedicated, if not extreme, forms, advocating an attitude toward church involvement that affected one's entire lifestyle. He never turned against the local congregation as a setting for the embodiment of the gospel. Indeed, he based his entire hope for the future propagation of the Christian message on it. He proposed, however, a program of church "vitalization," a drastic series of measures intended to produce followers of Jesus prepared to live, think, and act in ways that required increasingly costly discipleship.[68]

Faithful witness to the gospel became central and was manifested in radical ways. For example, *The Next Step in the Churches* addressed topics concerning local churches as well as broader national and international political and economic issues. Johnson was critical of capitalism as well, believing that "true Christianity was 'subversive of capitalism in its present habits of life.'"[69] Issues of economic justice and race relations also characterized what became overnight retreats in North Carolina. Further, Johnson sponsored interracial retreats in the 1940's with the aim of embodying genuine Christian fellowship.[70] As Stricklin notes, there was a particular goal associated with Johnson's interracial efforts, which were all performed apart from the mainline Southern Baptist denominational organization:

> [T]hat local churches would be revitalized by a new kind of devotion that focused attention on the ethical demands of Jesus and away from the corrupting demands of the culture, including those that prompted people to engage in racist behavior…. Johnson believed that such revitalization would infuse the Holy Spirit into the work of transforming that culture in the 'here and now.'[71]

Thus, Johnson bears witness to the importance of complex space in Baptist life by his resistance to the consolidating power of the Southern Baptist Convention and the simple space displayed by the administration of the Seventy-Five Million Campaign. Moreover, Johnson's vision for being Baptist was

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[68] Ibid., 31.

[69] Ibid., 33. Johnson stood against "selling out" to corporations, as is seen in his opposition to the relocation of Wake Forest College from Wake Forest, NC to Winston-Salem, NC, a move that was financed indirectly by large-scale tobacco producer, R.J. Reynolds (See ibid., 34-35).

[70] "And we are going to treat them [the African-Americans and Native Americans invited to attend one of his retreats in 1944] all as brothers, neither our inferiors, nor our superiors, but utterly our equals in the fellowship of Christ dwelling in us" (Quoted in ibid., 33).

[71] Ibid.

decentered, focused instead on the multiple associations that inhabited and navigated the social and ecclesial landscape.

Not only should Baptists configure ecclesial space in a complex manner, but this mapping of space has implications for how Baptists pursue the common good. As has been demonstrated with the Catholic Worker, local Baptist communities can promote the common good better than any high-level political influence. The complex social space created by these communities (which extends beyond congregations to include other organizations such as social service agencies and foster care groups) enables Baptists' understanding of the common good to be freed from the ends of the nation-state and market (or, perhaps, a distant and unresponsive bureaucracy)[72] and directed toward an ultimate end. In this way, the theological understanding of the common good articulated at the outset can be embraced, and the end toward which the common good is directed can shape the means that Baptist churches use to reach it. That is, like the exiles in Jeremiah 29, within the cities where they live, these local Baptist groups can "seek the welfare of the city" precisely by traveling toward another city (Heb. 13:14) that genuinely cares for all people in a personal, local manner rather than the abstract way in which the common good generally functions in political discourse.[73] For example, regarding concerns about the plight of the poor, "the common good could mean the Church itself creating authentically common spaces among 'the haves' and 'the have nots', rather than advising the state on technocratic solutions to poverty."[74] Like the communities of the Catholic Worker Movement, Baptist churches and other local communities can and should seek to complexify social space, thereby challenging the claims of the state and the market to the common good. Instead, they can embody another way, one that takes seriously the

[72] It should be noted that, during Walter Johnson's lifetime, the Southern Baptist Convention was largely inactive in promoting or enabling engagement with economic and racial concerns, thereby enhancing the radical and even scandalous nature of his efforts and underscoring the importance of complex space for his pursuit of the common good.

[73] There is the related question of whether governmentally-grounded understandings of the common good can provide a broad enough "common good" for all people in the world. Along these lines, Cavanaugh notes that within the nation-state, "[w]hat is 'common' is reduced to what fits into national borders, and what is good can be purchased at the expense of what is good for other nation-states" (Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company," 264).

[74] Ibid., 268.

personalist dynamics intrinsic to the pursuit of the common good. Therefore, Baptist communities concerned about the common good must embrace localist politics and the complex space they create.

Conclusion

Complex space, as seen in *Rerum Novarum*, offers resources for freedom – freedom from the nation-state's understanding of the common good, as well as freedom for the pursuit of an alternate, explicitly theological vision of the common good that is genuinely oriented toward God. As has been demonstrated, this notion of the common good is local, where charity is enacted in personal, face-to-face encounters. Baptists can learn from their Catholic brothers and sisters with the aim of recovering resources within their own tradition (e.g., an emphasis on local communities in complex relationships within cooperative associations). The result will hopefully be that Baptists can better discriminate between the various uses of the language of the "common good" by the nation-state, cultural and religious commentators, as well as local Baptists. In a way, this will involve Baptists seeing their way clear to a more clearly defined understanding of the common good. At the same time, the emphasis on the local will make the promotion and pursuit of actions related to the common good more complicated. Rather than simply identifying actions (e.g., political legislation) that will work uniformly toward the common good in all locations, Baptists in local areas must embrace deeper communal practices of discernment in order to determine which efforts will "seek the welfare of the city."

In other words, viewing the common good through the lens of complex space returns us to the *ad hoc* practical judgments that must be engaged in order to navigate the boundary disputes between churches, civil societal institutions, and the actions of the nation-state. These practical judgments, formed by the virtue of charity, will be situated in particular settings where localist politics can promote the common good in a personal manner. Hence, Baptists can learn a great deal about seeking the common good from Catholic social teaching and the inheritors thereof, as exemplified by *Rerum*

Novarum and the Catholic Worker, lessons that can facilitate greater faithfulness to the Baptist vision and better care for all people of the world.