

Siena Icon of the Common Good: Lorenzetti and Lonergan

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Inside the Palazzo Pubblico, the dignified Town Hall of Siena, is Ambrogio Lorenzetti's cycle of frescoes of the *Allegories* and the *Effects of Good and Bad Government* painted between 1337 and 1339. The frescoes were commissioned by the Council of the Nine, a régime which retained power in Siena until 1355, after having preserved its peace and prosperity for some sixty years.¹ A wise old man symbolizes the Common Good while a patchwork of neat fields, tame boar and busy hoers suggests order and prosperity.² Bad Government is a desolate place, razed to the ground by a diabolical tyrant, the Sienese wolf at his feet. Lorenzetti's civic masterpiece, Siena's icon of the Common Good, documents the Catholic social tradition which recent papal teachings reaffirm in their critique of both Marxism and laissez-faire capitalism. Lorenzetti's frescoes are not only decorative and celebratory, but they are also didactic; for this was the primary object of all medieval painting. The frescoes, a distillation of Augustinian and Thomist thought, are designed for the eyes of Siena's ruling élite, for few, outside of that charmed group, ever penetrated to the innermost rooms of the Palazzo Pubblico. It is clearly the Nine who are addressed by the words which appear above the head of Justice in the fresco: "Love Justice, you who rule the earth." The frescoes state the obligations of the governor to the governed, rather than the obligations of the governed to the governing. The Sienese, well aware that Augustine had taught in *The City of God* that no régime could survive which was not founded in Justice, saw the pursuit of such justice as the first end of all civil government. Since Justice alone could uphold civic life, the fair administration of justice was a primary justification of any régime. An inscription in the border below spells out the message for those who cannot read the visual image:

Wherever this holy virtue — Justice — rules, she leads many souls to unity, and these, so united, make up the Common Good.

On the east wall of the large rectangular council chamber, this theme receives further elaboration:

Turn your eyes, you who rule, to look carefully at Justice, who, for her glory, is presented and crowned here. She always gives each man his rightful due. See how much good comes from her and how sweet life is and full of peace in the city where this virtue is to be seen, which is more resplendent than any other. She guards and defends those who honour her; and she sustains them. From her light comes the reward of those who are good and she gives to the evil their deserved punishment.

Here, then, Lorenzetti shows Justice enthroned. But, in accordance with Thomist thought, Divine Wisdom, on the higher level of the theological virtues, hovers above Justice, holding a balance, the scales of which are kept in equilibrium by Reason. Justice looks upwards towards Divine Wisdom, thus illustrating the relationship between divine, natural, and human law, for true justice is always inspired by reason. On the left, one angel metes out distributive justice, another, on the right, commutative justice. Cords running from the scales come together in the hands of Concord, enthroned below. This is as it should be, for, next to justice, Concord was seen as the binding force in Sieneese society, and the absence of Concord, expressed through factionalism, the major cause of tyranny.

Concord carries a heavy carpenter's plane which symbolizes the equality of citizens, since, in a well-governed society, no one individual should stand above others, all citizens stand on the same level as if society had been literally planed down.³ Concord passes the cord on to a group of twenty-four Sieneese citizens. The presence of this twenty-four alerts us to an identification between Siena the ideal city and the City of God as portrayed in the book of *Revelation*. The numerical composition of Lorenzetti's fresco follows exactly the numerical composition of St. John's city, the twenty-four Sieneese citizens represent the twenty-four elders about the throne, Justice is seated on the throne; the seven virtues to right of the picture, the seven lamps burning before the throne which are the seven spirits of God; and the four figures — Faith, Hope, Charity and Divine Wisdom — who hover at the top of the picture, the four beasts, in the midst of the throne and around the throne. Thus Lorenzetti clearly identifies the City of God and the city of Siena through the apocalyptic vision of the New Testament.

The twenty-four elders or Sieneese citizens carry the cord they have received from Concord in procession to the Common Good, in whose right hand the cord ends. The universalized portrait of the Common

Good is also a particular image of the commune of Siena; for the figure is robed in black and white, Siena's traditional colours, his shield is the official shield of Siena, and, at his feet are nestled the wolf and the twins, which is the most ancient of Siennese symbols. The Common Good/Commune is represented by a venerable old man dressed in the colours of the "Balzana", the black and white Siennese coat of arms, seated on a throne and surrounded by the four Cardinal Virtues and by Magnanimity and Peace.

Above Common Good hover the three theological virtues, Faith, Charity and Hope. Faith bears a cross; Hope turns her eyes towards Christ; Charity, above the others, carries a heart and an arrow symbolizing not only the love of God and neighbour, but also the love of the fatherland which, according to the definition of Tolomeo of Lucca, has its roots in charity. This virtue is placed in the highest position because it is the one that considers the common good of the community most important. God, according to Thomas Aquinas, is the Common Good of the universe. God is the origin, ground and destiny of all created goodness, the Common Good in which all creation shares. Just as Justice is an emanation of Divine Wisdom, in the same way its practical application in the reality of the Common Good is also derived from God, for it is inspired by the highest of all principles.⁴

The allegorical figures are linked by a band of soldiers and two groups of lancers to the lower group of figures. As well as the twenty-four citizens, this includes a number of prisoners and two kneeling knights who are donating their castles to the city of Siena. The secular figures link the allegory with the reality of Siennese life which thus becomes amalgamated with an ideal world.

The key for the interpretation of Lorenzetti's allegory is given in the explanation directly below the fresco. Justice creates unity, and the united body of citizens are the Common Good. The rulers of the state keep "the glorious faces of the virtues" always about them, and "for this reason taxes, levies and . . . estates are given . . . in triumph. Hence civic welfare follows, without war, and is useful, necessary and happy."

The fresco reflects a concept of Aristotelian origin that was basic to the political thought of Thomas Aquinas. Nowhere had the Thomist teaching of the supremacy of the Common Good over that of the individual been so enthusiastically received as in the Italian city-state, where it had been rapidly propagated by the preaching of the friars. Its best-known expression was a tract, *De Bono Communi*, written in about 1300 by the Dominican friar, Remigio de'Girolami. The *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* illuminates reasons for the success of the Thomist doctrine, whose acceptability lay in the fact that adherence to

the good of the community as a whole, at the expense of particularist interests, offered the security of civic peace and unity without recourse to despotism. Siena, which had suffered from factional struggle, welcomed the Thomist political doctrine that subordinated private interests to those of the common good of all citizens.

Another aspect of Thomist thought contributes to our understanding of the Lorenzetti fresco. Justice, the Common Good, Concord and Peace are the four figures that most stand out, either because of their size, or position, or their pose. In the political philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, justice and the Common Good are always the basis for Concord and peace, the most desirable effects of good government. Thus Peace and Concord are emphasized and provide a necessary thematic link with the east wall of the Hall of Peace, on which is painted that section of the Lorenzetti frescoes referred to as *The Effects of Good Government*.⁵ What we see depicted on the east wall is an iconic statement that the city is the only possible complete form of human existence: without cities there can be no civilization. The structure of the fresco is based on this assumption. The centre of the painting, where the dancing girls celebrate civic life, is the point from which all the light flows both in the city and in the countryside. The fresco must be read outwards from this central point. The beneficent vitality of a secure and ordered urban life extends into the countryside where, under the protection of the city wall, peasants are seen tilling the land and where there are many settlements. The further one's eye wanders from Siena, however, the more empty the countryside becomes, and fortified castles take the place of villages and farms, until, at the right edge of the fresco, Siena's newly-acquired port of Talamone is identified with an inscription. For those who fail to take his point from the extended visual image, Lorenzetti provides a key in the scroll held by the presiding figure of Security:

Let every man go without fear, and let every man sow for as long as
this lady rules, for she has taken power from all the guilty.

Lorenzetti's Siena, bathed in the light of justice and divine wisdom, appears joyful and radiant. People go about their work calmly, almost effortlessly, in a city teeming with life. To the left, we see a wedding procession, with the bride being led to the ceremony; then we see a tailor, with his back to us, sewing, and a little further away, a goldsmith's workshop, a merchant examining his ledgers, and some nobleman on horseback. To the right, in the foreground, a cobbler's workshop from which a little child peeks out, a teacher with his pupils, a shop selling wines and meats, where a peasant with a basket of eggs on

his arm and his donkeys laden with wood are headed. A shepherd with his flock is leaving the city for the countryside, while a peasant with his mules carrying bales of wool is arriving; he is taking the wool to a nearby shop, where a group of men and women are busy weaving and examining fabrics. There are also two peasant women arriving from the country with all sorts of provisions and hens. The city walls are like an architectural stage-set, placed there to stress the constant going and coming of people and animals. The gates are open because there is no fear of enemies. Fairly well out into the countryside a cheerful group, setting off on a hunting expedition, is stopped for a moment by a blind beggar. A peasant, from the other direction, is leading a piglet to market in the city, and other peasants, alone or in groups, are moving along the roads leading to and from the city. In the city, the buildings are beautiful and distinctively Sieneese, suggesting the pride of the Council of Nine in their architectural achievements. On the rooftops there are masons at work, and there is even a woman among them. In this exaltation of manual labour, practical activities and crafts, together with the liberal arts, Lorenzetti was emphasizing a new social reality: in a well-functioning city all professions are reciprocally useful and necessary.

On the opposite wall, the *Allegories and Effects of Bad Government* (unfortunately very fragmentary and in bad repair) form an exact contrast of ideas and techniques. The diabolic figure of *Bad Government* is surrounded by vices, while at his feet is Justice reviled and in fetters; in the city, among crumbling buildings, are scenes of robbery and violence, and from the city gate a sinister party of armed men is setting out into the desolate countryside. Tyranny/Bad Government is surrounded by Cruelty, Treachery, Fraud, Fury, War, and Discord who wears a divided gown on the black half of which is written 'No' and on the white half 'Yes,' to symbolize the incessant factional squabbles which divide the community. Pride, Avarice and Vainglory hover over the Tyrant's head and, at his feet is the bound figure of Justice, her scales now cast to the ground. The city over which the Tyrant rules is without meaning because it has no centre, no point of rest or concentration, none of the harmony to be found in *Good Government*. Fear, instead of Security, holds sway. His scroll reads:

Because he seeks his own welfare in this world, he subjects justice to tyranny. Thus no one treads this road without fear, for pillage is rife both within and without the city-gates.

The inscription on this border reemphasizes the centrality of Justice in the life of the well-governed state:

Where justice is bound nobody struggles for the Common Good or fights for the law, but rather permits the rise of Tyranny, which has no desire to do anything against the base nature of the vices which are here united with it, in order to give fuller reign to evil. Tyranny persecutes those who wish to do good, and attracts all those who plan evil. It always defends those who use force, or rob or hate peace. For this reason, Tyranny's land is uncultivated. . . .

A further inscription reminds the viewer:

To avoid unhappiness, everyone must bow to justice. Banished be all those who are against her, for the sake of our peace.

Further elaborations of the allegory are to be found in the quatrefoils which are interspersed in the borders above and below the frescoes. They indicate the extent of Lorenzetti's learning and his symbolic and allegorical vocabulary. Thus Good Government is bordered by the sun shining on its régime, by the kindly planets, Venus and Mercury, by the moon and by the papal crossed keys to symbolize ecclesiastical authority. The medallions in the lower border depict the Liberal Arts: Grammar, Dialectic and Rhetoric — Rhetoric has subsequently been obliterated by a door set into the wall — Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy and Philosophy. For Lorenzetti the Liberal Arts represented natural wisdom, inherited from the past, and valuable because that natural wisdom prepared the way for the divine wisdom revealed in Jesus Christ.

Ambrogio Lorenzetti's magnificent frescoes display his wealth of medieval learning whence he created a visual *Summa* of contemporary Catholic culture. Lorenzetti employs his vast learning to universalize the meaning of Siena within an overall structure of traditional medieval culture. There still exists in the Loggia of the Town Hall the now ruined traces of a Lorenzetti Madonna in which he made, yet again, an appeal for civic Concord. The Madonna holds a white and black globe in her hand representing Siena (the *Balzana*, Siena's black-and-white emblem, represents the mystery and purity of the life of the Madonna, the patroness of Siena). The Christ Child blesses the globe and beneath it a scroll instructs observers to "love one another", quoting *John 15:34*. Thus Jesus Christ's call for fraternal love is particularized for the people of Siena. More significant in this context is the tradition that the Nine also commissioned from Ambrogio Lorenzetti that map of the world from which the Sala del Mappamondo takes its name. Siena, in that map, is located at the focal point which the medieval theorist normally reserved for Jerusalem. Siena and Jerusalem, as prototypes for the

perfect civilized life, have become conflated in Sienese thinking, and this conflation has ever since remained a central feature of Sienese cultural life.

Lorenzetti's cycle of frescoes is a celebration of the commune of Siena, and an expression of its intense cultural vitality, of that love of the beauty of its Catholic tradition which spilled over into all spheres of Sienese life. Lorenzetti's fresco cycle portrays the moral and religious virtues necessary for leading a full and good life as a citizen both of Siena and of the City of God.⁶ His fresco cycle affirms the Thomistic truth that fellowship in the communion and communications of society is not mere exchange between individuals or groups, nor mere peaceful coexistence, but an active and receptive sharing in a common good which authentically enhances the efforts of each and enables each to realize his or her own ends more fully. That sharing in a common good is indispensable for the attainment of truth, goodness, beauty, science and wisdom. Communion, community and communications in a common good are at the heart of an authentically and fully human life. The basic reality on which the church of Thomas Aquinas and Lorenzetti is founded is a mystery of communication in the Common Good (God) of the universe: the communication of divine life to humankind through the gift of the Son and Holy Spirit of God.

From Lorenzetti to Lonergan

Bernard Lonergan, writing about the human good as object, illuminates the Catholic social doctrine that he shares with Lorenzetti.⁷ The human good, Lonergan affirms, is not an abstraction, not an aspect, not a negation, not a double negation, not a mere ideal, not something apart from evil, not static. It is not just a set of negative precepts, or of very general positive precepts. It is not a system, a legal system or a moral system. It is a history, a concrete, cumulative process resulting from developing human apprehension and human choices that may be good or evil. And that concrete, developing process is what the human good in this life is, the human good on which depends our eternal destiny.⁸

Lonergan affirms the invariant structure of the human good: what is true about the human good in any place or time.⁹ He distinguishes three main aspects: the particular good, the good of order, and value. The particular good regards the satisfaction of a particular appetite. The good of order is the setup or flow of particular goods: the family, technology-economy-polity, the educational system, the Church, the world of learning (art, letters, sciences, philosophy).¹⁰ Four characteristics of the human good of order are the following: a regular recurrence of

particular goods, coordinated human operations, a set of conditions of these operations (habits, institutions, and material equipment), and the personal status that results from the relations constituted by the cooperation.¹¹

Value is the third element in the invariant structure of the human good.¹² Not only are there setups/structures, but people ask 'Is the setup good?' They say, 'There is nothing wrong with him, it is the setup'. The Cold War tension existed because people in the West had a different idea of the good of order from that of the Soviets. The question of what precisely is to be the good of order concretely functioning and determining the habits, the institutions, the material equipment, the personal status of everyone in every aspect of their lives — the total human good of order — raises the question of value. Is the order good?

Loneragan distinguishes three kinds of value which are also depicted in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's frescoes of Catholic social doctrine: aesthetic, ethical, and religious.

Aesthetic value is the realization of the intelligible in the sensible: when the good order of a society is transparent, when it shines through the products of that society, the actions of its members, its structure of interdependence, the status and personality of the persons participating in the order¹³ you can recognize a happy home or a happy community. The good of order can be transparent in all the things made, all the actions performed, in the habits and the institutions. It strikes the eye. We can see the joy on people's faces. It is an aesthetic value that enables us to apprehend the human good on its deepest level or, on the contrary, to sense that something is wrong, in a very immediate fashion, an immediate apprehension that we may later be able to analyze; for the moment it is enough to recognize its existence.

Secondly, there is ethical value: the conscious emergence of the subject as autonomous, responsible, free.¹⁴ People mature to the extent that they become aware of freedom and of its meaning and responsibilities. Because the subject is intelligent, rational, free, and responsible, the development of the subject consists in becoming aware of that nature — intelligent, rational, free, responsible — and taking a stand on the criteria immanent in that nature, on absolute norms, on being guided by the true and false, right and wrong, good and evil, and devoting oneself to, even sacrificing oneself for, these criteria.

If we stop short at ethical value, we are left with a secularist philosophy of education. But there is also religious value. With ethical value there emerges the autonomy of spirit, the subject taking a stand upon the truth, upon what is right, upon what is good. Religious value appears when the autonomous subject stands before God, with his

neighbour, in the world of history, when we realize within ourselves the internal order, the inner hierarchy in which reason is subordinate to God, and sense to reason.

- 1 Nowhere in Europe were the visual arts so closely integrated with every aspect of social life as they were in Siena. The very chests in which government documents were stored were elaborately decorated.
- 2 The old man is dressed like a royal judge, with a sceptre, shield and crown. He is the Commune of Siena whose black and white garments reflect the colours of the city. Around his head are the letters CSCV, meaning *Commune Senarum Civitas Virginis*. He is the "*Bene Commune*" or "Common Good" in all the ambiguity of the Italian term, both the "Good of the Commune" and "The Common Good" of all its citizens. On the shield there is a depiction of the Madonna and Child, the protectress of Siena after the battle of Montaperti.
- 3 Concord corresponds to the "civic friendship" which, according to Aristotle's *Politics*, is a precondition for civilization.
- 4 Judith Hook, *Siena. A City and its History* (London, 1979) affirms, on the back cover of the Italian translation (Siena, 1988), that "The necessity of a synthesis of the sacred and the profane for the good of the community, the defence of traditional institutions and above all the conviction that human beings are capable of living together is in itself a work of art and the chief characteristic of Siennese civilization. The way the Siennese created and maintained such values for centuries is the theme of this book."
- 5 Peace, near the centre of the composition, is gently reclining and bearing an olive branch, while treading swords and shields beneath her feet. Peace is the most beautiful figure in the whole cycle, because of which the room is called Hall of Peace. The individualism, factionalism and lawlessness of the nobility in clan rivalry threatened the peace of Siena. The Council of the Nine countered these disruptive tendencies by encouraging a sense of civic, communal purpose, finding expression in peaceful manifestations. The Nine encouraged the corporate life of Siena through buildings like the new cathedral and Town Hall to fulfil specific religious and civic functions.
- 6 The best-loved and most popular of Ambrogio Lorenzetti's paintings, both in his own life-time and through succeeding centuries, has been his *Madonna del Latte* which was painted in about 1340 and hangs in the seminary of San Francesco. The warm relationship in this painting of the Virgin nursing the Christ-child was subsequently used by Siennese mystics and preachers to symbolize the relationship between Christ and his people, or between the church and the devout. Christ is the Common Good of his people; the Holy Spirit of Christ is the life of his people, uniting his people in his love, wisdom and peace.
- 7 Robert M. Doran and Frederick E. Crowe, eds, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan: Topics in Education* (Toronto 1993). See chapter 2, "The Human Good as Object: Its Invariant Structure," pp. 26–43.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 33
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 34–36
- 12 *Ibid.*, 36–39.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 37
- 14 *Ibid.*, 37–38.