

Pope Francis Catechism for Economics

Gospel provides practical implications for an economy that upholds the dignity of human persons

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In a Jan. 11 interview with the Italian journal *La Stampa*, Pope Francis spoke again and at some length about issues regarding the economy. From his words, in clear continuity with his predecessors, we can deduce five practical implications.

The core problem with our economy, according to Pope Francis: "When money, instead of man, is at the center of the system, when money becomes an idol, men and women are reduced to simple instruments of a social and economic system."

When we idolize money, our economy is reduced to a consumerist outlook dedicated to the pursuit of material things, which "sustains itself through a culture of waste": waste of time, waste of God's creation and waste of human lives — because we "labor for the food which perishes" instead of "for the food which endures to eternal life" (John 6:27). The Pope highlights, in particular, two serious aspects of the culture of waste: "that which leads people to discard babies through abortion ... [and] to a hidden euthanasia of older people, who are abandoned."

What should we do? Pope Francis' predecessor, St. John Paul II, wrote in *Centesimus Annus* (The 100th Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*):

"It is, therefore, necessary to create lifestyles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments" (36).

The first practical implication is therefore: *Strive, in however small or humble a way, to ensure that our work — the products and services we help produce and sell — and our investments serve to promote "truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others," rather than false illusions, ugliness, harm or division.*

If reorienting our work and investments in this way seems difficult, it is. Indeed, it is impossible without God's help. The virtue of charity (to will and act for the good of others) is a theological virtue, one that comes as a grace from God. And, thus, Pope Francis reminds us: "We need, as Benedict XVI recalled in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), men and women with their arms raised in prayer to God; conscious that love and sharing, which engender genuine development, are not a product of our hands, but a gift to ask for." Our second practical implication is then: *Pray to God for the gift of charity to transform our work and investment activity into acts of service.*

Pope Francis affirmed, "We need ethics in the economy, and we also need ethics in politics." Too often, he is interpreted as calling for statist solutions to social ills. The Pope is not so naïve; he realizes that corruption and greed exist among politicians and public servants as well as among business people.

The interviewer from *La Stampa* asked Francis what he thought of his predecessor Pope Pius XI's "strong and prophetic words" about the international imperialism of money. His response: "Pius XI only sounds extreme to those who feel struck by his words and hit where it hurts by his prophetic condemnations." What are those "prophetic condemnations," and who should feel struck by them? In 1931, after the Great Depression, Pius XI wrote in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (The Reconstruction of the Social Order):

"In the first place, it is obvious that not only is wealth concentrated in our times, but an immense power and despotic economic dictatorship is consolidated in the hands of a few, who often are not owners but only the trustees and managing directors of invested funds, which they administer according to their own arbitrary will and pleasure. This dictatorship is being most forcibly exercised by those who, since they hold the money and completely control it, control credit also and rule the lending of money. Hence, they regulate the flow, so to speak, of the lifeblood, whereby the entire economic system lives, and have so firmly in their grasp the soul, as it were, of economic life that no one can breathe against their will" (105-106).

What and who does Pius XI, and now Pope Francis, refer to here? It is the collusion between big business and big government that promotes concentration of wealth: through subsidies that benefit the rich at the expense of the poor, "corporate welfare," mandates and regulations that favor special-interest groups. It is also any effort that focuses more on rent-seeking (capturing wealth created by others) than on actual wealth creation.

The condemnation falls on all who participate in this kind of activity — particularly on those who, as Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Caritas in Veritate*, instead of using finance as an "instrument directed towards improved wealth creation and development," use it according to "their own arbitrary will and pleasure," for personal gain. A third practical implication: *In my work, ask: "Am I creating wealth? Or am I engaging in rent-seeking behavior?"* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, "Vocation of the Business Leader," p. 26).

The interviewer asked Francis whether Pope Paul VI's claims about private property not being an absolute right are still valid. The Pope responded, "Not only are they still valid, but the more time goes on, the more I find they have been proved by experience."

The social doctrine of the Church has taught consistently that there are two aspects to private property. The first is that it is legitimate and indeed "wholly necessary for the autonomy of the person and the family" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 71). The second is the "universal destination of created goods": God created the world for the good of all, not just for those who are rich; therefore, we should use our private property to serve others. As Pope Leo XIII wrote in *Rerum Novarum* (Capital and Labor), "When the demands of necessity and propriety have been sufficiently met, it is a duty to give to the poor out of that which remains" (36). Pius XI later pointed out that investing one's wealth in ways that enable others to do productive work is also a realization of the universal destination of goods. Our fourth implication is: *Make an honest assessment of the financial needs of your family and then use the rest to help others, by giving to the poor and investing in ways that enable others to work.*

A final theme in the *La Stampa* interview could reasonably be considered the *leitmotif* of Francis' pontificate: concern for the poor. The Holy Father said:

"Jesus tells us what the 'protocol' is on which we will be judged. It is the one we read in Chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel: I was hungry; I was thirsty; I was in prison; I was sick; I was naked, and you helped me, clothed me, visited me, took care of me. Whenever we do this to one of our brothers, we do this to Jesus. Caring for our neighbor; for those who are poor, who suffer in body and in soul, for those who are in need. ... The Gospel's message is for everyone; the Gospel does not condemn the wealthy, but the idolatry of wealth, the idolatry that makes people indifferent to the call of the poor."

Francis points out further: "This concern for the poor is in the Gospel; it is within the Tradition of the Church. It is not an invention of communism, and it must not be turned into an ideology, as has sometimes happened before in the course of history." The fifth practical implication is clear: *Give to the poor of your time, money and self. Again — and again.*

Pope Francis has a profound, transformative message about how the Gospel should penetrate our complex modern economy. It's a message that everyone, no matter how lofty or lowly, who has any connection with the economy can act on, starting now.

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