



Pope Francis, Capitalism and Social Justice

In a world in turmoil with Iran on the verge of developing nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems, Christians being murdered and enslaved throughout the world, refugees flooding into Europe, and American leadership in retreat, Pope Francis has stepped onto the world stage as a critic of global capitalism and an environmental activist.

His first major proclamation on the environment came this May when the Vatican issued the papal encyclical *Laudato Si* (Our Common Home). In the encyclical, Pope Francis declares, “Climate change is a global problem with grave implications: environmental, social, economic, political and to the distribution of goods.” Echoing environmental activist language, the letter warns that climate change “represents one of the principle challenges facing humanity in our day.”

The pontiff applauds the environmental activist movement for having made great progress, while lamenting that not enough people are on board on the climate change threat. The letter praises the worldwide environmental movement for having made “considerable progress and led to the establishment of numerous organizations committed to raising awareness of these challenges.” However, it continues, “Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition, but also because of more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity.”¹

Pope Francis combines his call for ecological activism with strong condemnation of global capitalism, wealth inequality and the greedy rich.

We at the *Mindszenty Report* wonder what has happened to perspective from our political and religious leaders. We

understand President Barack Obama’s lack of perspective: His left-wing views were well expressed from the outset of his political career. More troubling are Pope Francis’s passionate denunciations of capitalism, often using the qualified phrase “unbridled capitalism,” and his promotion of socialists such as Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker movement.

Shortly before he arrived in the United States this fall, Pope Francis went so far as to denounce air-conditioning as a major contributor to environmental degradation and a sign of excessive consumer culture. The statement revealed a bit of hypocrisy since the Vatican accepted an advanced HVAC system to help preserve Michelangelo’s masterpieces from pollution caused by the estimated 6 million visitors to the Sistine Chapel each year.²

We will not challenge Pope Francis’s understanding of the complexities of climate change, other than to say that scientists differ on the *causes* and the *degree* of climate change. We do feel obligated, however, to say a word about capitalism and social justice.

‘The Dung of the Devil’

In early July, while visiting Bolivia, Pope Francis urged the downtrodden to challenge the world economic order and reject the greed of unbridled capitalism, which he graphically described, quoting a fourth-century bishop, as “the dung of the devil.”³ Denouncing a “new colonialism” by international agencies that impose austerity programs which disproportionately fall on the poor, he proclaimed, “Let us not be afraid to say it: we want change, real change, structural change.” He decried the world capitalist system as having imposed “the mentality of profit at any price, with no concern for social exclusion or the destruction of nature.” He concluded, “This system is by now intolerable: farm workers find it intolerable, laborers find it intolerable, communities find it intolerable, people find it intolerable.”

In a later speech on his Bolivian tour, he attacked international monetary organizations and the policies of some developed countries. “The new colonialism,” he said, “takes on different faces. At times it appears as the anonymous influence of mammon: corporations, loan agencies, certain ‘free trade’ treaties, and the imposition of measures of ‘austerity,’ which always tightens the belt of workers and the poor.” Pope Francis’s speech was preceded by a long-winded speech from Bolivian president Evo Morales, who wore a jacket adorned with the face of Argentine revolutionary Communist Che Guevara.

The following day Pope Francis praised Morales’s social reforms (modeled on Venezuela’s socialist reforms) to redistribute wealth in Bolivia. Morales later gave Pope Francis a gift of a sculpted wooden hammer and sickle with a figure of a crucified Christ on the hammer. Instead of being insulted by this overt symbol of an ideology which the Catholic Church has long opposed—Communism—Pope Francis appeared bemused by the gift.

A Priest from Argentina

Pope Francis is not a Marxist, Communist, or liberation theologian. As a Jesuit, he resisted liberation theology. In an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Stampa* in December 2013, he observed, “Marxist ideology is wrong. But I have met many Marxists in my life who are good people, so I don’t feel offended.” He defended his Exhortation condemning “unfettered capitalism” as faithful to Church doctrine. “Trickle-down theories,” he said, “assume that economic growth encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing greater justice and social inclusiveness in the world. The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefitting the poor. But what happens, instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger and nothing ever comes out for the poor.”⁴

A full understanding of Pope Francis’s worldview begins with knowing that his formative years as a young man and priest were in Argentina. Born Mario Bergoglio in 1936, he grew up in a poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires. He was the oldest of five children born to an Italian immigrant father and a mother from an Italian immigrant family. His father’s family left Italy in 1929 to escape Mussolini’s fascist regime. Mario attended Catholic grade school and then a technical school, graduating with a chemical technician’s degree. He worked for a while in a corporate laboratory, while working part-time as a bar bouncer and as a janitor.

He was 16 years old, on his way to propose marriage to a girl he loved, when he happened to pass a church. He decided to enter to take confession. He recalls, “Something strange happened to me in that confession. I don’t know

what it was but it changed my life.”⁵ The next day he sought out the Jesuits whom he knew in the city. He admired the Jesuits’ tight community, their missionary focus and their disciplined lives. Over the next ten years he completed his religious training, which included theological and philosophical studies, missionary work and intense spiritual retreats.

Bergoglio was ordained in 1969, becoming Argentina’s provincial superior of the Society of Jesus from 1969 to 1973, as well as a professor of theology. Next he became rector of the Philosophical and Theological Faculty of San Miguel. He was removed from this position because he emphasized the importance of educating young Jesuits in pastoral work and popular religiosity, in contradiction to the order’s insistence on emphasizing direct political action. Due to his continued dissent from the Jesuit agenda of political action, he was asked in 1992 by Jesuit authorities not to reside in Jesuit houses.

The same year that Jesuits undertook to ostracize him, he was named Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires. He adopted an episcopal motto, *Miserando atque eligendo*, from St. Bede’s homily on Matthew 9:9-13, wherein Bede explained how Jesus came to select the unpopular tax collector Matthew as a disciple: “because He saw through the eyes of mercy and chose him.”

Ministering to the Poor

In 1998 Bergoglio became the Archbishop of Buenos Aires. In this role, he expanded the mission of the church in the slums, doubling the number of priests assigned to work in poverty-stricken districts. He denounced actions of Argentina’s military dictatorship in the 1970s for its “dirty war” tactics of kidnapping and executing hundreds of innocent people. Anti-clerical opponents accused him of collaboration, although there is no evidence of this. He furthered his reputation for humility, standing for principle and his commitment to the poor. In 2001, Pope John Paul II appointed him a cardinal.

As a cardinal Bergoglio served in a number of capacities in Rome. He drew admiration from fellow cardinals for his personal humility, doctrinal conservatism and commitment to social justice. He used public transportation and cooked his own meals in his small apartment.⁶

Pope Francis holds a complex view of the world. He seeks political reconciliation, pastoral care and service to the poor. This is admirable, for sure, but what is strikingly absent in his intellectual development is a grasp of his own country’s history. In the early 20th century, Argentina was one of the richest countries in the world per capita. It drew

immigrants from throughout the world. Buenos Aires was known as the Paris of Latin America, and most Argentines considered themselves more European than South American. This all changed under the socialist populism of the Perons in mid-century and a succession of dictators who followed. Today Buenos Aires is crime-ridden, the middle class has disappeared, and the political system is utterly corrupt.

Pope Francis's Misconceptions

Pope Francis's politics cannot be categorized as either right or left. Nevertheless, his statements about climate change and the free market, and his apparent accommodation with the Castro brothers' Communist dictatorship in Cuba, have elicited sharp rebuke on the right and many encomia on the left. Liberal Catholics such as *Washington Post* columnist E. J. Dionne noted just prior to the Pope's visit to America this fall that progressives welcome Francis because he has "radically reordered the priorities of the church. He is not fighting cultural wars. He is fighting against them. This, in part, is what accounts for his broad popularity among former Catholics, Americans of other faiths and even secularists and atheists." Dionne quoted Father Tom Reese's declaration that Pope Francis "preaches the Gospel, not the catechism."⁷

Dionne's distinction between the Gospel and the catechism reveals much. The Roman Catholic catechism, although it has changed over time, reflects the Church's understanding of the Gospel, as revealed historically to the faithful. The Gospel and the catechism are inseparable and to teach one is to teach the other.

All Catholics should welcome Pope Francis's message of caring for the poor. Christ's message conveyed, above all else, that we, as God's children, are our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Christ's message was one of love and obligation toward one's neighbor.

Christians can differ on how this message is translated into politics and economics. The Gospel does not promote a singular political or economic system. The Gospel does not speak of the virtues of capitalism or individual rights. As Christians our faith should inform our politics, but the Gospel does not offer policy prescriptions. Yet it is fair to say that certain broad principles follow from the Gospel. God's gift to humanity is life. If a family with two parents, a man and a woman, is central to life, then as Christians we need to promote family values. If human dignity is at the core of our Christian faith, then a society built on individual rights should be central to our political views of the world. Our protection of life commits us to social and economic betterment. As a consequence our religious values should inform our view of economics.

Some Catholics concerned with social justice believe that socialist political and economic systems fulfill Christ's message. Socialism, whether under the guise of social democracy or communism, betrays basic principles of human dignity and economic advancement. Moreover, socialism belies historical experience which has shown that free markets have advanced human freedom and have provided prosperity for average people never imagined by our ancestors. For this reason, Pope Francis's praise of socialist Dorothy Day in his speech before Congress is disturbing.⁸ Having one's heart in the right place is not a substitute for sound thinking.

Like many progressive Catholics in both Europe and the United States during the Great Depression, Day concluded that capitalism had failed. Given devastating unemployment her socialist philosophy at the time is understandable, though wrong-headed. Her commitment to pacifism, even after the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor and the Nazis had swept through Europe, reveals the sanctimonious thinking of an ideologue unwilling to confront evil. She announced after visiting the internment camps of Japanese-Americans in California, "I saw a bit of Germany on the west coast." To equate the internment of the Japanese in California with the murderous concentration camps of Nazi Germany expressed moral equivalence typical of the American left then and now.

Day later led anti-nuclear demonstrations in the 1950s and opposed the Vietnam War not on strategic grounds but because of her faith in pacifism as an ideology derived from her interpretation of Christianity. There is a long tradition of pacifism within Christianity. There is an equally strong tradition that dates back to St. Augustine and St. Thomas of a "just war" theory. Day accepted the part of Catholic tradition that fit her contemporary politics.

Capitalism and Christianity

Socialists such as Day reject, in effect, the Anglo-American tradition of individual rights and free markets. John Locke (1632-1704) developed in his two 1689 treatises on government basic principles of classical republicanism that upheld individual rights to "life, liberty, and property" as essential to individual rights. Locke, who was a Christian, maintained that these natural rights were endowed in nature by a Divine Creator. Locke saw the right to property as the spiritual extension of man's labor. The natural rights to life, liberty and property were indivisible.

Adam Smith, the Scottish economist writing nearly a century later, developed the importance of free markets to this liberal tradition. Smith understood fully the greed

and self-interest of the merchant. Smith was no Pollyanna when it came to man's greedy nature. He believed human nature consisted of both passion and reason. The greed of the merchant, he argued in his treatise *The Wealth of Nations*, needs to be restrained by a moral social order and, at times, government regulation, but he warned against extensive government involvement as a threat to liberty and economic advancement. Economic prosperity allows humans to develop their rational faculty to create a more enlightened society.

Capitalism Benefits the Poor

This Anglo-American tradition of natural rights and free markets upholds the dignity of the individual, a basic tenet of Catholic social justice theory. Pope Francis's experience as a priest in Latin America, working with the poorest of the poor, informs his view of the world. He fails to realize that many of the problems of Latin America, Africa and Asia come not from *too much* capitalism, but from *not enough* capitalism. He appears to reject the lessons of modern history. Pope Francis and his economic advisers would do well to read two well-received and pathbreaking reports, a 2009 article by Ethan Kapstein published in *Foreign Affairs* and a 1968 study by Charles R. Frank, Jr. on how capitalism is benefitting the poor in Africa.¹⁰

Market economies have produced unprecedented wealth not only for the rich but for average men and women, who are living longer and better than ever before in human history. Neither democracy nor capitalism is without flaws. Full salvation is found only in the afterlife. Heaven will not be found in intrusive government dictating to us to abandon our air conditioners, our traditional family values, and our very liberty in the name of a misconceived social justice. Intellectual humility, too, is part of our Catholic tradition.

THANKSGIVING TO GOD

President George Washington advised Americans to set aside a day of public Thanksgiving to God for the great favors He has bestowed on our nation. On October 3, 1789, Washington proclaimed the first Thanksgiving Day—the first of a long series of presidential orders that have remained part of American life down to the present:

“Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the Providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint committee requested me ‘to commend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness,’ now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th day of November next, to be devoted to the service of that great and glorious Being, Who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or will be.”

George Washington

Our most beloved American holiday prompts us once again to be thankful to Almighty God for the blessings he has bestowed upon our country. We at CMF are thankful to you who have supported us always. We are very grateful.

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Eleanor Schlafly, *Publisher*
e-mail: info@mindszenty.org
web site: www.mindszenty.org
orders.inquiries@mindszenty.org

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