

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY AND THE RESTORATION OF CATHOLIC CULTURE

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...the Faith would never have produced Huddersfield or Pittsburg.

- Hilaire Belloc

What is the connection between economic activity and Catholic culture? Is there such a connection? The link between the two is man, who is the subject of both economic and cultural activity, and possesses a mixed spiritual and physical being. Thus both economic activity and the most rarefied cultural products are centered on man, who is the link between them. Man produces both and, in turn, both affect how he lives. My thesis then is this: That the kind of economic activity we have, the economic arrangements we make and our attitudes toward them, have considerable effect on how we live, that is on our culture, and tend to affect how we think about life, what we consider most important and what sorts of motivations we consider respectable.

A good place to begin is to consider Medieval civilization in contrast to our own. Richard Tawney pointed out that the Medieval attitude toward economics and moneymaking can be summed up in the words of St. Paul, "as long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that" (I Tim. 6:8). Now these words, if taken seriously, would have a tremendous effect, not only on the life of the individual, but on the life of society, which is what I am concerned with here. And this tremendous effect would come about, I think, because of a corollary that can be drawn from Paul's statement, namely, that economic activity has a purpose of its own.

Everything that has a purpose of its own, that is, a purpose inherent in the activity, whether or not men recognize and accept that purpose, is necessarily subject to limits, limits arising from the nature of the activity himself. Eating, for example. If Socrates' dictum, that we eat to live rather than live to eat, is true, then eating has a purpose of its own. Doubtless there are gluttons who live to eat, but is eating has its own purpose, then they are simply wrong. It is not a matter of opinion, such as that Peter eats for one reason and John for another, and each is right for himself. No, eating has a purpose, and the most we can hope for is to recognize and accept that purpose. Of course, this does not mean that we cannot enjoy

good food, but only that our enjoyment of such food must be within the limits of eating's own purpose. Otherwise we pay the price for getting sick or fat. The main point here is that although eating is something we all do, one does not have the right to ignore eating's own ends. If eating is for living, then to eat oneself to ill health or to death violates eating's own ends. No one may do this, and if one does, one will pay the penalty.

Moreover, as I said, when a thing has a purpose it has its own limits. It is naturally subordinate to some other thing, the thing for the sake of which it exists; in the case of eating, living. Anything that has a purpose exists for the sake of something else, and is therefore subordinate to that something else.

All this is equally true of economic activity. It also exists for something else; thus it also has limits, and it also is subordinated to its end. What is its end? That also can be derived from St. Paul's words. The provision of "food and clothing," or, in other words, the supplying of what is needed or useful for the physical side of our lives. And the supplying of our physical needs is surely likewise for the sake of, and subordinate to, our family life and social life, our intellectual life, and our spiritual life. For we do not need houses, food, clothing, medicine, etc. as ends in themselves, but so that we can raise families, meet with our friends, educate ourselves and our children, and worship our God. Thus, just as one's eating is disordered if it defeats its end, the maintenance of our life and health, so a nation's economic activity is disordered if it defeats its ultimate end, namely the supporting, on the physical side, of our social life, family life, intellectual life, religious life.

Eating, though it certainly has a social side, is primarily a personal thing, and if one chooses to eat oneself to death the community as a whole will usually not suffer much. Economic activity, however, though it has its personal side, has profound effects on the entire community. Whether prices rise or fall, whether there is inflation, whether interest

rates are high, whether there are many jobs or few — all these are of considerable interest to the community. And because all this economic activity exists for the sake of supporting the life of the community — in individuals and families — the community has a right to some say over the quality and type of economic activity, else the community would be defenseless against one of its potentially most destructive enemies, disordered economic activity.

Now the sorts of controls over economic activity which a community directly or indirectly may rightly exercise are spelled out for us in two places, the practice of Catholic nations in the Middle Ages and later, and the teachings of the modern Popes in their social encyclicals. And though this is not an article on Catholic social teaching, it will be necessary for me to discuss this a little. But first I think it is necessary to speak about the various kinds of effects economic activity has on a community and its culture, and to understand how this economic activity can either support or undermine the culture of the community.

If we consider the diverse types of economic activity, production, labor, distribution, lending and borrowing, we can see that the quality of each sort often has considerable influence on the life of a community. Thus if unemployment is high, family life is likely to deteriorate. Alcohol abuse, wife beating, child abuse, divorce, evictions, bankruptcies, all follow from unemployment. Low wages are often the cause of mothers working outside the home, causing increased strains on families, juvenile delinquency, etc. If rates of interest are too high, then families have difficulty borrowing to buy homes, family farms often go bankrupt because of inability to meet interest payments, etc. If a factory closes, especially in a small town, the entire town may die. Neighborhoods and extended family groups will break up as the individual members seek jobs in different places. All these are obvious ways in which economic activity has a direct impact on community life. Yet if economics exists to serve community life, then it is legitimate for the community to take steps to prevent or regulate these deleterious activities.

Economic activity, however, can also affect the social, cultural and religious life of a people indirectly. Does the economy, for example, through production and advertising of many luxury goods, take advantage of our fallen nature's proclivities to encourage people to spend their money, even go into debt, buying useless or harmful goods? Does it stimulate competition for the sake of competition, that is, does it encourage people who already have

enough "food and clothing" to expand their businesses, compete bitterly with rivals, work long hours, for the sake of more? Does it foster dissatisfaction with the size of our houses and cars by inspiring envy for a higher standard of living? Does it help people understand the purpose of economic activity, and teach them to be satisfied if that purpose is accomplished, or does it promote economic activity for its own sake, or rather, for the sake of greed and restlessness?

If our economy does promote much restless activity, then what effects does this have on the way people live? How does it affect the stability of neighborhoods or of extended families? If, for example, living near grandparents is a good thing, then does our economic system encourage a young father to be satisfied with a job that is merely financially satisfactory, or does it encourage him always on to something bigger and better-paying? Does it teach him that advancement on the job is more important than the stability of his family and neighborhood? Or still worse, if what is called a dynamic economy is promoted as an unqualified blessing, then jobs are likely to move around from place to place quite a bit — the mobility of capital and labor — necessitating moving even by those who prefer to stay where they are.

Does the economy make it easy for small enterprises to stay in business, or is it mainly large firms that survive? A small or family-run business can often be flexible and permit family reasons equal place with purely economic ones, e.g., to close for lunch or to allow children to help their parents in their work. Few or none of these things can a large firm do, and a large firm can more easily schedule people to work the lunch hour, thus destroying a potentially common family meal.

These are enough examples to show some of the ways, both direct and indirect, that the quality of economic activity in a nation influences the life that is led. The root problem here, as I suggested before, is that when a nation has an economic life that is disordered according to the ways I sketched above, then that people has forgotten that economic activity has a purpose, a purpose of its own, regardless of the personal motives that any individual has. Even if every man in a particular country believed that the purpose of economic activity was to make as much money as possible, that would not change its purpose, just as if everyone thought that the purpose of eating was to endlessly gratify the palate, that would not change the inherent end of eating. What therefore is to be done?

First a truth must be realized: That ideas ultimately determine conduct and that man has free will. As Hilaire Belloc liked to point out, modern writers talk about "trends" and "forces" and "the state of the economy" as if they were active agents and the real movers of men. As in "Trends force us to act in such a way . . ." or "The state of the economy obliges us to . . ." Not true. As Belloc said, these kinds of statements are signs of our practical materialism. Men, human beings, are free, and, depending on what decisions they make, can decide to do anything humanly possible. Of course, man cannot make bricks if there is no straw, but the range of choices possible for us is much wider than most men realize. And the choices we make depend largely on what we believe about the ultimate things, what we believe is important. Our economic system, which values families so low, did not come into being by itself. It came into being because of ideas, ideas which influenced those with power enough to persuade or force everyone else to accept the new system. It is neither inevitable nor natural.

If we admit that certain ways of living are better than others, that is, that certain cultural arrangements are better than others, and that an economic system can affect our ways of living, then what can be done about an economic system that is not serving its end of supporting the culture very well? First, as I said above, we must be convinced of what is right and convinced that we can do something about it. Then we have to know what to do. Most forms of socialism were originally attempts to establish an economic system that was supportive of certain human values, but they all founder on either materialism or collectivism or both. On the other hand, the claim that is commonly made for free market capitalism, namely that if the government, not to mention intermediate groups, lets the economy alone things will turn out best for everyone, is also inadmissible, as both history and papal authority testify (cf. *Guadragesimo Anno*, sections 88 & 107). Since I am not writing on Catholic social teaching I will not say much about the exact methods the popes mandate or suggest for restoring the social order. I will, however, talk about the spirit in which Medieval Catholic culture and the papal teachings regard the economic order.

First of all, harmony is the most prominent note in this Catholic attitude. God's creation, though marred by the fall, is still essentially good, and therefore there is no necessary conflict among the various elements in the social or economic orders, labor and capital, producers and consumers, rural and urban dwellers. All need each other, and this

need does not require any one group to exploit any other. To make use of our neighbor's labor is not exploitation, if the neighbor receives his due. Secondly, the concept of what is reasonable. A worker, the popes teach, needs a living wage because he must live and must support his family. It is unreasonable for him to receive anything less, because man has a duty to preserve his life and a workingman has no means other than his labor to provide for his and his family's needs. Similarly, the medievals conceived that a craftsman deserved the opportunity of providing through his work for his and his family's reasonable standard of living, but it was not considered reasonable for him to expand his business and drive his fellow craftsmen into ruin. A man deserved one living, not two or three, even if he were clever or unscrupulous enough to accumulate two or three or more livings. As Chesterton said, to put limits on the amount of property a man may have is no more to attack the institution of private property than to limit the number of wives a man may have is to attack the institution of marriage. It is not that no man can be rich or that all must have the same amount, rather that no man can reasonably expect the opportunity to make more than a decent living, since society will suffer by the striving, the fierce competition, the bankruptcies, strikes, layoffs, etc., that invariably accompany an economy in which men are permitted to strive for anything they want. If a man can become rich without disturbing the health or stability of the social order, without engaging in practices which are harmful to others, then the community should not hinder him. But if economic activity has a purpose, then it is unreasonable for anyone to resent society having regulations to foster and protect this purpose, especially if violation of the purpose results in great social upheaval. It is just as unreasonable for someone to resent society having regulations forbidding adultery or homosexual activity. An individual might claim that for him sex has no other purpose than pleasure, but that does not change the facts. Sex has a purpose of its own, regardless of any personal inclinations. We are not reasonable if we expect society to adjust its institutions and laws to permit us to indulge ourselves unchecked by consideration for others. This is as true in economics as it is in sex. We cannot expect more than what is reasonable, and if we think the purpose of economics is opportunity for limitless gain, then society has the right to restrain us, just as it does to the man who thinks the purpose of sex is limitless irresponsible pleasure. A problem only arises if the community, via the state authorities, goes about defending itself from lust or greed in a way that

brings about some greater evil, as statism or socialism do with economics, and as (say) placing a policeman in every bedroom or motel would do with sex.

The thing to be desired, therefore, is that everyone in the community be persuaded that economics has a purpose, and that it is a part of the hierarchical order of human activities, the lower serving the higher. One of the earliest and greatest defections from Christian morality and truth by modern man was the setting up of economics as an autonomous activity within human society, no longer serving the common good, but existing for whatever private ends each individual invested it with. Of course, according to Adam Smith, this totality of private ends was somehow going to serve the common good, but it is odd that every other human activity is thought to

need intelligent direction and control, the only exception being the free play of greed and monetary gain. As Pope Pius XI wrote in *Quadragesimo Anno*,

Just as the unity of human society cannot be built upon "class" conflict, so the proper ordering of economic affairs cannot be left to the free play of rugged competition. From this source, as from a polluted spring, have proceeded all the errors of the "individualistic" school. This school, forgetful or ignorant of the social and moral aspects of economic activities, regarded these as completely free and immune from any intervention by public authority, for they would have in the market place and in unregulated competition a principle of self-direction more suitable for guiding them than any created intellect which might intervene. (section 88) *continued on p. 151*

ADDRESS OF ARCHBISHOP PIO LAGHI

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS ANNUAL MEETING November 11, 1985

Bishop Malone, my dear brother bishops, and friends:

As I near the completion of five years of service as Papal Representative in the United States, it is a pleasure for me once again to share certain reflections with this assembly. I wish to offer you encouragement in carrying out the important tasks before you and to express sincere appreciation for the commitment and love of the Church which you bring to your work.

During these five years, I have already had the privilege of observing the development and publication of your pastoral letter on war and peace. Now you are far along in the process of preparing your collective pastoral on the economic system. These documents are important examples of how a conference of bishops functions today in offering the service of leadership on public issues.

This is true not only of their contents but of the process used in preparing them — a process which has been marked by dialogue and by a collegial methodology. This characteristic makes the process itself exemplary, for here we witness a collegial body in action.

The Extraordinary Synod of Bishops convened by Pope John Paul II provides another occasion for reflect-

ing on collegiality, which was central to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and remains central to the life of the Church today. As you know, the Council introduced a clear distinction between episcopal collegiality in the strict sense and affective collegiality. When *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the collegiality in the strict sense, it refers to bishops only, all the bishops, in communion with the Roman Pontiff; affective collegiality, on the other hand, is the expression of that "spirit of communion" which exists among bishops and bishops only. It is true that collegiality has always expressed an essential fact about the nature and structure of the Church; but it is likewise true that Vatican II brought collegiality into new prominence and increased its importance as a *modus agendi*, an operating principle.

During the last twenty years much has been done to realize collegiality affectively. I think of such recent instances in your own experience as the visits exchanged by some of you with bishops of the Church in Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua and other nations. In this way bonds of fraternal union have been strengthened and the groundwork has been laid for fruitful contacts in the future. But collegiality has an effective dimension as well as an affective one. As I have suggested, a number of your recent projects and activities have helped illuminate its importance from this perspective too.

In view of the fact that the principle of collegiality is established firmly on the foundation of the charism of Peter and his successors, the Holy Father also offers us

WE ARE ALL ITS VICTIMS

The National Catholic Women's Union, through its National Publicity Project, has rendered a valuable service in the fight against pornography by calling our attention to the Statement of the bishops of New York State entitled, "Porn — We Are All Its Victims."

After stating that "God's gift of sexuality is part of God's own plan of love to involve us in His creative act of giving life," the Statement says that "pornography is an evil act making a mockery of human sexuality, corrupting young and old alike and giving rise to further crimes such as molestation, rape, and other dehumanizing evils."

They point to "the use of modern media technology 'to pollute' the air-channels with depictions of sado-masochism, incest, bondage and bestiality" as "an assault on public decency that has called forth public outrage."

After stating "Far from there being no victims of pornography, all of us are victims," the Statement continues, "Pornography arrives unrequested in family mailboxes. It glares from newsstands at five year old passersby, cable television includes in some areas purveying of perverse explicit sex, regular night programs with commercials obviously selling prostitutes' services, and weekly programs offering homosexually erotic depictions to promote homophile activity."

The letter "urges all people of good will to enlist now in the 'war on pornography' against the polluters of our society's values.

"By asking a consistent effort on behalf of our people,

"By enlisting the good will of media professionals in self-regulation,

"By demonstrating the public interest in the dignity of the human person,

"By allying themselves with other interested parties who seek to remove the evil of pornography from our cities and towns" by enforcement of existing laws and especially by working for the enactment of more stringent laws.

"With similar concern, we echo the words of Pope John Paul II for World Communication's Day 1965 (May 19th) That rather than denigrating and debasing humankind; the efforts of mass media through the

cooperation of all persons of good will may truly contribute to the 'realization of justice, of peace, of freedom and of human progress.'"

from p. 126

Our Medieval ancestors showed us the right path, when they subordinated economic activity to the "created intellect" of the guilds for the sake of the common good, not in a statist or socialist manner, but in a fashion consonant with legitimate human freedom and prosperity. We have gone so far in the opposite direction that large corporations openly justify selling technical equipment and processes to the communists for the sake of gain, evidently unconcerned with the fact that they thus support the plans for conquest by our chief human enemies, not to mention the oppression of the nations ground under the Soviet heel. But if the pursuit of the almighty dollar is judged superior even to our national security, how can we possibly convince them that such seemingly trivial matters as the welfare of our families and the stability of our neighborhoods are more important than more money? We cannot convince them, the owners and directors of wealth, because we have not yet convinced ourselves. Our chief problem is that our culture is not subordinate to Catholic teaching about materialism, the pursuit of wealth, the place of the family, etc. We do not listen to the voices of the supreme pontiffs, the record of Catholic history, and the opinions of nearly all authentic expounders of Catholic traditions in our time, such as Chesterton, Belloc, Christopher Dawson, etc. Instead we see how far we can justify our present ways of living and thinking without obviously violating any explicit papal condemnation.

Under our present system we put man and the things necessary for man, the worship of God, the family, even material prosperity itself, in a less important place than the freedom to seek private gain regardless of the unsettling consequences on the community. A restoration of Catholic culture must have as one of its first concerns the creation of a proper recognition of the correct place of economic activity in a nation, with a firm resolve to use every legitimate means to confine it to that place, avoiding at the same time both statism and socialism. If the role of economics in restoring Christian culture is neglected on the grounds that something so material has nothing to do with culture, or because of complacent acceptance of the modern outlook, then no lasting renewal can come about, either in society or in our own minds. □