

# Social Justice and the Fear of Hell

—Thomas Storck—



any people look upon preaching about Hell fire as an old-fashioned and largely ineffective way to deter would-be fornicators and drunkards. Now if such preaching does do anything to keep people from these sins

that is fine with me, but there is another kind of sin I am thinking of that the fear of Hell has also been known to prevent. These are sins against the commands of justice and the common good, a type of sin widely denounced in Holy Scripture and in classical Catholic preaching. Two of the four sins that cry to Heaven for vengeance, for example—grinding the face of the poor and withholding the wages of the workingman—are sins against justice. I think, therefore, that it is worth a closer look to discover whether a connection between justice and fear of Hell might indeed be useful to the common good of society and help prevent injustices to the poor.

In order to weigh one's conduct against the possibility of eternal punishment it is necessary to know that one has done wrong. The Seventh Commandment, You shall not steal, might seem fairly straightforward in its meaning. Nowadays when we think of violations against this Commandment we are apt to think only of auto thieves or burglars. But this was not always so. Despite the simpler economic life of the Middle Ages, people of that time had a much more sophisticated sense of economic sin than we have today. It was not just obvious cases of theft which they considered to come under the scope of this Commandment, but practices which turned economic activity away from its purpose of serving the common good, such as

lending money at usury, attempting to buy up and control the entire supply of raw materials, selling products at an unjust (generally too high) price, selling poorly made goods or food that was not fresh, or in general behaving in such a way that one forgot that economic activity did not exist simply to enrich the individual person. The medievals even institutionalized safeguards against such economic abuses by setting up the craft guilds, whose regulations often went beyond the absolute demands of the natural law to try to prevent even the beginnings of injustice, for example, by regulating the number of apprentices and journeymen each master craftsman could employ so that no one establishment could grow too large and gain too large a market share, or (in some places) by actually putting a limit on the amount of money a guild member could possess, requiring the excess to be given for charitable purposes, or by prohibiting advertising in order to prevent consumer deception, a restriction that remained in France into the 18th century.

No doubt such an emphasis on justice and the common good seems like a paradise to us who live in the midst of the dog-eat-dog free market system, but it is a mistake to look at these regulations in isolation. They only make sense, and indeed, they will only check evil conduct, when they are in the setting of a culture which takes seriously the Gospel's demands for just conduct and believes that Almighty God will enforce those demands by punishment after death, including the possibility of eternal pain in Hell.

It is commonplace today that one hardly ever hears sin of any kind denounced from the pulpit. But even before the present

*The oppressors of the poor are to know that they win a heavier sentence when they prevail against those they seek to harm. The more strongly they prove their power on the lives of the wretched here, the more terrible is the future punishment to which they must be condemned. Let the judges and rulers of the nations hearken: for the temporal miseries they bring upon the people, they shall be burned with everlasting fire*

—St. Isidore of Seville, d. 636 AD



crisis in the Church, economic sins were rarely condemned in sermons. Consider these words of Fr. John Cronin, written in 1950: "...sermons on greed, avarice, selfishness in business matters, unwarranted ambition, and unsocial conduct are as rare today as they were common in medieval times." Why was this the case? Had economic wrongdoing disappeared by 1950? Unfortunately not. The reasons for the rarity of denunciations of economic injustice by preachers were two, I think. The first reason is that Catholics no longer took the trouble, admittedly more difficult as our economic life became more complex, to understand the exact nature of economic transactions and thus to be able to pronounce on their sinfulness or lack thereof, with any degree of certainty. Cronin, for example, writes further:

"Our moral theology texts were, in general, hopelessly out of date in applying moral principles to economic life. Apparently few moralists knew enough about economic facts to work out a realistic and complete solution. Hence, moral teaching generally confined itself to obvious justice and injustice and clearly defined motives."

Richard Tawney says the same thing about the Protestant Church of England in the early seventeenth century, which initially carried on most of the economic morality of the Medieval Catholic Church, but which failed to adapt that teaching to the more complex commercial transactions of post-Reformation England: "The social teaching of the Church had ceased to count, because the Church itself had ceased to think." Though a few notable writers, even in the 20th century, such as Fr. John A. Ryan, worked out exact and detailed analyses of economic transactions and questions of justice and injustice, most writers on the Church's social teachings contented themselves with general statements. Unlike the dozens of pages of close and careful analysis that confessors and preachers could consult on the Sixth and Ninth Commandments (say), there was no such source for the multifarious forms that economic injustice can take, especially since the desire for gain continually spawned complicated new types of contracts and new schemes for getting rich.

But the second reason why moralists and priests in general failed to emulate their Medieval predecessors in preaching against injustice was, I am afraid, less creditable. This was because, by and large, in the most important countries of the

Western world, most Catholics had long ago accepted the basics of free market capitalism. What capitalism saw as virtues, they generally saw as virtues, and what capitalism saw as vices, they too generally saw as vices. Ecclesiastics accepted large gifts for building churches and seminaries from the industrial magnates of the late 19th century, instead of refusing to take money that rightfully belonged to the workers and to the consumers of the products and services sold by these monopolists. Of course, one must except from this indictment the Popes themselves, who never accepted the logic of the capitalist system, and invited competent Catholics to do the kinds of detailed studies that were lacking. But, alas, there was not an abundance of willing workers.

So in order to restore the vibrant sense of economic justice and injustice that existed during the Middle Ages, several things are necessary. First is a restoration of the sense of sin in general, something that Pope John Paul himself has called for; second is the difficult thinking about economic transactions and their consequences that is necessary to distinguish between mortal and venial sin, imperfection and other anti-social conduct, that which is not sin at all, and what sorts of conduct should be encouraged and lauded. Until this is done, few preachers or confessors will dare to pronounce with certainty on the ethics of specific complex economic acts.

But this will not be enough. This exact knowledge of the morality of economic activities must be taught and made real to people, so that pious Catholics have just as much horror of sins against justice as they presently do of sins against chastity. Both are horrible. Our Medieval ancestors realized that the religion of Jesus Christ has as much detestation for the one as for the other. Part of the problem lies in overcoming our individualism and grasping the corporate and social nature of man. This is especially hard for us Americans to do, but it is possible if we are willing to judge the American ideology by its compatibility with the Catholic Faith.

But granting that this tall order could ever be accomplished, what could we hope for were our sense of economic responsibility, and thus of economic sin, restored? What would happen were people ever again to fear that selling harmful products or closing factories simply to *increase* profits, or any other grave injustice might merit for them an eternity of horrible pain?

Fanfani notes that during the high Middle Ages, with its increasing economic complexity, the "number of individuals who yield to the lure of capitalism increases, though there are few who fail to repent either on their death-beds or during life..."

And of course it was precisely this fear of Hell that moved these early and tentative capitalists to salutary repentance. This healthy fear helped to make the guild regulations and the prohibitions of the civil and canon laws respecting economic crimes something more than a dead letter to be evaded whenever possible. They also moved those guilty of usury and other injustices to give alms—sometimes in the form of magnificent endowments of schools or churches—as they lay dying, in hope of avoiding Hell or shortening their time in Purgatory. Very often the endowment was for a priest to say Mass in perpetuity for the soul of the deceased usurer—and incidentally to provide free education to the poor of the district. Anyone familiar with the history of England before the Protestant Revolt will remember all the good done by these chantry priests and their schools.

Despite the obvious imperfections of the Medieval period, it is nevertheless true to say that at that time people took the Gospel seriously enough to try to reshape the entire society according to its precepts. And unlike many modern disciples of Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, they did not confine their efforts to opposing sins against chastity while leaving the economic realm to the Devil. Rather, they took the words of Our Lord and the Apostles seriously, and made an honest attempt to restrain man's appetite for pecuniary gain. Only if we come to realize that this appetite, like the desire for unlimited sexual pleasure, must be curbed for the sake of the common good, can we even begin to lay the groundwork for a Christian order. But if we begin to rise above our ingrained individualism and consider with St. Paul that if we have *sufficient* material goods we ought to be content, we might be able to be transformed by the grace of God into people who are really willing to let the spirit of the Gospel change their lives and their ways. And if the Church could combine clear teaching about sin in the economic realm, together with a firm statement of the reality of death, judgment and Hell, then we might see some souls held back from acts of economic and financial injustice. This would not only help to relieve the poor and save souls from Hell, but aid the Church greatly in her credibility, perhaps attracting more people to the Body of Christ on earth. But primarily what this would accomplish would be to further the social reign of Christ the King, which, after our own salvation, is that for which all of us must pray and work the hardest.

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