

# THE CHURCH'S ECONOMIC - SOCIAL TEACHINGS

## Father Ronald Rolheiser blog 3/29/2009

Most of us have been raised to believe that we have the right to possess whatever comes to us honestly, either through our own work or through legitimate inheritance. No matter how large that wealth might be, it's ours as long as we didn't cheat anyone along the way. By and large, this belief has been enshrined in the laws of democratic countries and we generally believe that it is morally sanctioned by the Christianity.

Partly this is all true, but it needs a lot of qualification. From scripture, through Jesus, through the social teachings of the churches, through papal encyclicals from Leo XIII through John Paul II, the right to private ownership and private wealth is mitigated by a number of moral principles. Let me list a number of those principles (which are taught with the weight of Ordinary Magisterium within Roman Catholicism and the ecclesial equivalent of that in most Protestant churches). For Roman Catholics, I will list the major references to church documents:

- **God intended the earth and everything in it for the sake of all human beings. Thus, in justice, created goods should flow fairly to all. All other rights are subordinated to this principle.** (*Gaudium et Spes* 69 - 1965, *Popularum Progressio* 22 - 1967) We do have a right to private ownership and no one may ever deny us of this right (*Rerum Novarum* 3-5 - 1891, 14, *Quadregesima Anno* 44-56 - 1931, *Mater et Magistra* 109 - 1961) but that right is subordinated to the common good, to the fact that goods are intended for everyone. (*Laborem Exercens* 14 - 1981) Wealth and possessions must be understood as ours to steward rather than to possess absolutely. (*Rerum Novarum* 18-19 - 1891)
- **No person (or nation) may have a surplus if others do not have the basic necessities.** (*Rerum Novarum* 19 - 1891, *Quadregesimo Anno* 50-51 - 1931, *Mater et Magistra* 119-121 & 157-165 - 1961, *Popularum Progressio* 230 - 1967) Thus, no one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities for life. (*Popularum Progressio* 23) People are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and if a person is in extreme necessity he has the right to take from the riches of others what he needs. (*Gaudium et Spes* 69 - 1931)
- **The present economic situation in the world must be redressed.** (*Popularum Progressio* 6,26,32 - 1967, *Gaudium et Spes* 66 - 1931, *Octogesimus Adveniens* 43 - 1971, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 43 - 1987) Thus the law of supply and demand, free enterprise, competition, the profit motive, and the private ownership of the means of production may not be given complete free reign. They are not absolute rights and are only good within certain limits. (*Popularum Progressio* 26 - 1967, *Quadragesimo Anno* 88, 110 - 1931)
- **In regards to the private ownership of industry and the means of production, two extremes are to be avoided: Unbridled capitalism on the one hand, and complete socialism on the other.** (*Quadregesimo Anno* 46, 55, 111-12 - 1931)
- **Governments must respect the principle of subsidiarity and intervene only when necessary.** (*Rerum Novarum* 28-29 - 1891, *Quadragesimo Anno* 79-80 - 1931,

*Mater et Magistra* 117-15 - 1961) However when the common good demands it, they not only may step in, they are obliged to do so. (*Popularum Progressio* 24, 33 - 1967, *Mater et Magistra* 53 - 2961, *Gaudium et Spes* 71 - 1931) As well certain forms of property should be reserved for the state since they carry with them an opportunity of domination too great to be left to private individuals. (*Quadragesimo Anno* 114 - 1931, *Mater et Magistra* 11 - 1961)

• **Governments may never sacrifice the individual to the collectivity because the individual is prior to civil society and society must be directed towards him or her.** (*Mater et Magistra* 109 - 1961, *Quadragesimo Anno* 26 - 1931)

• **Employers must pay wages which allow the worker to live in a “reasonable and frugal comfort”** (*Rerum Novarum* 34) **and wages may not simply be a question of what contract a worker will accept.** Conversely, workers may not claim that the produce and profits which are not required to repair and replace invested capital belong by right to them (*Quadragesimo Anno* 55, 114 - 1931) and they must negotiate their wages with the common good in mind. (*Quadragesimo Anno* 119 - 1931, *Mater et Magistra* 11 - 1961) As is the case with the employer, it is not just a question of what kind of contract can be extracted.

• **Both the workers and the employers have an equal duty to be concerned for the common good.** (*Laborem Exercens* 20 - 1981)

• **And, the condemnation of injustice is part of the ministry of evangelization and is an integral aspect of the Church’s prophetic role.** (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* 4 - 1987)

The church has history on its side in teaching these principles. The failure of Marxism in Eastern Europe highlights precisely that an attempt to create justice for everyone without sufficiently factoring in the place of private profit and private wealth (not to mention God or love) doesn’t lead to prosperity and justice, just as our present economic crisis highlights that an unregulated profit motive doesn’t lead to prosperity and justice either. There is a middle road, and the Church’s social teachings are that road-map.

#### **REFERENCES**

- ***RERUM NOVARUM*** ON CAPITAL AND LABOR, POPE LEO XIII, May 15, 1891
- ***QUADRAGESIMO ANNO*** ON RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SOCIAL ORDER, POPE PIUS XI, May 15, 1931
- ***MATER ET MAGISTRA*** ON CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIAL PROGRESS, POPE JOHN XXIII, MAY 15, 1961
- ***GAUDIUM ET SPES*** ON PASTORAL CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD (Vatican II Apostolic Constitution), POPE PAUL VI, DECEMBER 7, 1965
- ***POPULORUM PROGRESSIO*** ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLES, POPE PAUL VI, MARCH 26, 1967
- ***OCTOGESIMA ADVENIENS*** ON JUSTICE AND PEACE, POPE PAUL VI, May 14, 1971

- ***LABOREM EXERCEN ON WORKERS & EMPLOYERS RESPONSIBLE FOR COMMON JUSTICE*** - POPE JOHN PAUL II, Given at Castel Gandolfo, September 14, 1981
- ***SOLLICITUDDO REI SOCIALI ON CONDEMNATION OF INJUSTICE*** - POPE JOHN PAUL II, Given in Rome, at St. Peter's, December 30 1987