

PROMOTING “GOOD WEALTH” – HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

This month we are going to focus on wealth. With the help of members of our group I found the below edited version of an article by Charles Clark written in 2011. Also earlier this month Pope Francis in an address celebrating the 25th anniversary of the founding of Economy of Communion (associated with the Focolare Movement) called for - “a change of the rules of the game of the socio-economic system,” adding “imitating the Good Samaritan of the Gospel is not enough.”

Living in a society blessed with such material abundance, it is sometime difficult for us as men to understand the meaning of the Gospel on this issue. Faced with the responsibility of providing a good life for our families, we sometimes ask ourselves How much is material wealth must we amass to fully carry out this responsibility? Hopefully the materials contained in these two articles will help us answer this very personal question of - How much is enough?

Promoting Good Wealth: The link between Wealth, Well-Being and Poverty Alleviation (Edited)

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Executive Summary - In the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace’s document *The Vocation of the Business Leader* there is a call for Good Goods, Good Work and Good Wealth. This article shows how the Catholic social thought understanding of wealth, particularly its call for —**good wealth** presents a challenge to how we understand economic and business practice.

The Church does not wish to take over each community’s agency in solving its own economic problems. Yet it does provide a more complete view of well-being and human nature. To promote human flourishing Catholic social thought suggests that:

- Good wealth promotes integral human development, the whole person and all people
- Bad wealth stores up material wealth at the expense of spiritual wealth
- Good wealth creation respects human dignity, communities and the environment
- Bad wealth creation (capture) exploits workers, resource owners, citizens and customers
- Good wealth is economically, socially and environmentally sustainable
- Bad wealth sacrifices future prosperity, social stability and environment
- Good wealth is distributed widely, promoting participation based on ability to contribute.
- Bad wealth creates artificial scarcities and inequalities

1. The distinction between Good and Bad Wealth

Historically, individuals and communities have accumulated wealth by stealing valuable assets from their neighbors or by conquering and enslaving them. Looking back it is hard to find wealth creation free of force and fraud. A look at the great empires from the ancient world (Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, Egypt) or the modern world (British Empire, Spain, Japan, Third Reich, USA) clearly demonstrates the connection between military conquest and economic surplus. The transition from Conquest to Commerce is played out over and over in human history, on both a large and small scale. One has only to look at the role of the slave trade and the extraction of gold, silver and other minerals from Latin America, two activities that played a key role in the rise of the West (and its continued dominance) to see how massive wealth creation can at the same time cause massive and lasting

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human suffering and poverty. Even the recent Financial Meltdown of 2008 and the subsequent Great Recession was at its heart a massive fraud designed to redistribute wealth from the great majority to a small elite, leaving tens of millions unemployed, and even worse outcomes in the developing countries.

Yet history also teaches us that capital accumulation based on technological improvements, in tools, techniques and management, have greatly augmented human effort, producing real improvements in producing goods and services and providing for real and significant rise in the standard of living of hundreds of millions in the Developed World. While there is no doubt that the rise of the West was subsidized by the wealth of the world’s poor, it is also true that the massive increase in production levels go way beyond what was stolen from Africa, Latin America and Asia (and the original inhabitants of North America). While no country has made the transition from developing to developed without a large infusion of wealth from outside the country, it is also true that many countries that have gained from force and fraud do not make the transition, as most of the increase in wealth go to the elites to support their lavish lifestyles, and not invested in productive activities. From this we might say:

- Good wealth consists of assets that are created, distributed and used in a manner that respects human dignity and promotes the common good, thus leads to increases in well-being
- Bad wealth consists in assets that are accumulated in an unjust manner (using force or fraud), is distributed in a manner that benefits only elites and excludes the poor and marginalized, and is used to create invidious distinctions and not for the common good
- All wealth, it should be noted, is due to two factors: God’s gift of creation and the store of technical knowledge humans have developed over the centuries, both which we in the present have inherited, and for which we can take little credit

2. The Catholic View of Wealth

There is no objective standard by which we can measure wealth, or make the even more complex distinction between —good and —bad wealth. Markets are social institutions, and yield outcomes based on social values (or the values of those with a —market voice), and markets can create —good or —bad wealth, and often both. The distinction between —good and —bad wealth is often a distinction between conceptions of well-being, which in turn is based on the theorists’ adopted view of human nature.

When Pope Benedict XVI stated that **“*The economy needs ethics in order to function correctly not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centered*”** he gets to the heart of the matter, and Catholic social thoughts contribution starts with is view of the human person. Humans are created to be social and only become fully human, and achieve authentic human development, by living, working and giving themselves with and to others. The Christian view of the human person leads to a different definition of wealth.

- It recognizes the role of God in wealth creation. All wealth stems from a gift from God for all, and not just for the few. Our social nature is directly linked to wealth creation, just as much as God’s gift of creation, for all wealth is based on shared human knowledge, human cooperative efforts and our natural environment.

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- It recognizes that human dignity and justice have to be respected for —good wealth to be created. Human dignity is central to understanding all economic activity. Every person, created in the image and likeness of God, is therefore radically oriented towards the Creator, and is constantly in relationship with those possessed of the same dignity.
- An insight on wealth from the Catholic tradition is that wealth is a means to a higher end and that wealth cannot be our ultimate or final end. This is probably the most common lesson the Bible gives on wealth. We see the warning of wealth being a distraction to our higher ends clearly when Jesus tells us: —**“Do not store up yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”** (Matthew 6:19-21).
- The first claim on the use of wealth is the poor. As Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 we will be judged based on how we treat the poor and marginalized both as individuals and as a society. The last section of Matthew 25 is the judgment of the nations. The creation of wealth can never be at the expense of the poor, and when economic activity creates inequality, such inequality must be to the benefit of the poor and marginalized.

3. A Catholic understanding of Poverty

Poverty and the treatment of the poor is a fundamental issue for the Catholic social thought tradition and the mission of the Church. The centrality of the —option for the poor comes from God’s special love of the poor as evidence that He loves us for us and not for our accomplishments or attributes. Jesus instructed His followers to care for the poor, that collectively we will be judged at the last judgment based on how we treated the poor and marginalized. Every economic issue, problem, structure, process and outcome is evaluated first from the perspective of how they affect the poor.

A Catholic understanding of poverty can be summed up in the phrase —**poverty is exclusion**. Poverty cannot be reduced to being merely an economic phenomena or outcome, such as low income. Poverty can be social, political, cultural and spiritual as well as economic, and often these are interconnected. Economic poverty is exclusion from the production and consumption of economic goods. Social poverty is exclusion from the social life of the community one lives in. Political poverty is exclusion from the processes by which public and civic decisions are made. Cultural poverty is exclusion from participating as a producer and benefactor of the cultural life of a community. And spiritual poverty is exclusion from God. All forms of poverty, that is all exclusions, can be individual or structural and most often are both, as they reinforce each other, and it is hard to separate individual and collective causes and effects neatly.

Poverty constitutes a vicious circle of which exclusion affects the nuclear family, as it is unable to develop capacities and is denied the opportunities necessary to provide for itself, the extended family and its community. Excluding the poor means denying them from their rightful share in the life of the human family, in its hopes and dreams, its successes and its accomplishments, all of which are rooted in our common humanity, and to which no one country, people or culture can claim exclusive ownership.

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4. Wealth and Poverty Alleviation

Most theories of economic growth or economic development emphasize the importance of —capital accumulation. Economic development, especially sustainable development that promotes integral human development, has to go beyond these current categories of wealth. Research shows economic success is more than just the technical problem of capital accumulation. Institutions, culture, politics, and history also are necessary if we want to explain why some countries, or some people, are rich and some are poor. Poverty results from people and communities being excluded from participating in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the societies in which they live.

Barriers to development are found in underdeveloped political, social or human assets, and not because of a scarcity of natural or financial assets. Giving support to the poor is giving them the same support as is given to the affluent. In rich countries like America the government subsidizes housing for the middle-class and rich much more than it does for the poor, it just calls it a tax deduction instead of public housing, but it is government assistance none-the-less. The same is true for rich countries versus poor countries. The businesses in rich countries are highly subsidized by their national governments. Giving such aid to businesses in poor countries is just evening out the playing field.

Pope Francis: “Change the rules of the socio-economic system” (2/4/17)

Pope Francis calls for a change of “the rules of the game of the socio-economic system,” adding “imitating the Good Samaritan of the Gospel is not enough.”

“Economy and Communion,” – Pope Francis said – “These are two words that contemporary culture keeps separate and often considers opposite.” The Pope commended the organization for holding their profits in communion, and warned about the danger posed by money. “Money is important, especially when there is none and food, school, and the children’s future depend on it,” – the Pope said – “But it becomes an idol when it becomes the aim.”

He said the “goddess fortune” has become the divinity of a hazardous financial system which is destroying millions of families around the world. “This idolatrous worship is a surrogate for eternal life,” – Pope Francis explained – “Individual products (cars, telephones ...) get old and wear out, but if I have money or credit, I can immediately buy others, deluding myself of conquering death.” The Holy Father went on to note that although there are many public and private initiatives to fight poverty, “capitalism continues to produce discarded people whom it would then like to care for.” “The principal ethical dilemma of this capitalism is the creation of discarded people, then trying to hide them or make sure they are never seen,” – the Pope continued – “A serious form of poverty in a civilization is when it is no longer able to see its poor, who are first discarded and then hidden.”

Pope Francis said the *Economy of Communion*, if it wants to be faithful to its charism, must not only take care of the victims, but also build a system where the victims are fewer and fewer, until maybe there are no longer any. “As long as the economy still produces one victim and there is still a single discarded person, communion has not yet been realized; the celebration of universal fraternity is not full,” he said.

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“Therefore, we must work toward changing the rules of the game of the socio-economic system;” – the Pope continued – “imitating the Good Samaritan of the Gospel is not enough.” “Of course, when an entrepreneur or any person happens upon a victim, he or she is called to take care of the victim and, perhaps like the Good Samaritan, also enlist the fraternal action of the market (the innkeeper),” – Pope Francis continued – “I know that you have sought to do so for 25 years. But it is important to act above all before the man comes across the robbers, by battling the frameworks of sin that produce robbers and victims. An entrepreneur who is only a good Samaritan does half of his duty: He takes care of today’s victim, but does not curtail those of tomorrow.”

The Holy Father stated that our first gift is the gift of self: “Your money, although important, is too little.” “Capitalism knows philanthropy, not communion,” – the Pope said – “It is simple to give a part of the profits, without embracing and touching the people who receive those ‘crumbs.’ Instead, even just five loaves and two fishes can feed the multitude if they are sharing of all our life. In the logic of the Gospel, if one does not give all of himself, he never gives enough of himself.” “May the ‘no’ to an economy that kills become a ‘yes’ to an economy that lets live,” – he concluded – “because it shares, includes the poor, uses profits to create communion.” Feb. 4, 2017 (Vatican Radio)

The full text of the Pope’s prepared remarks:

Dear Brothers and Sisters

I am pleased to welcome you as representatives of a project in which I have been genuinely interested for some time. I convey my cordial greeting to each of you, and I thank in particular the coordinator, Prof. Luigino Bruni, for his courteous words.

Economy and communion. These are two words that contemporary culture keeps separate and often considers opposites. Two words that you have instead joined, accepting the invitation that Chiara Lubich offered you 25 years ago in Brazil, when, in the face of the scandal of inequality in the city of São Paulo, she asked entrepreneurs to become agents of communion. She invited you to be creative, skillful, but not only this. You see the entrepreneur as an agent of communion. By introducing into the economy the good seed of communion, you have begun a profound change in the way of seeing and living business. Business is not only incapable of destroying communion among people, but can edify it and promote it. With your life you demonstrate that economy and communion become more beautiful when they are beside each other. Certainly the economy is more beautiful, but communion is also more beautiful, because the spiritual communion of hearts is even fuller when it becomes the communion of goods, of talents, of profits.

*In considering your task, I would like to say **three** things to you today. The **first** concerns money. It is very important that at the center of the economy of communion there be the communion of your profits. The economy of communion is also the communion of profits, an expression of the communion of life.*

Many times I have spoken about money as an idol. The Bible tells us this in various ways. Not by chance, Jesus’ first public act, in the Gospel of John, is the expulsion of the merchants from the temple (cf. 2:13-21). We cannot understand the new Kingdom offered by Jesus if we do not free ourselves of idols, of which money is one of the most powerful. Therefore, how is it possible to be merchants that

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Jesus does not expel? Money is important, especially when there is none, and food, school, and the children’s future depend on it. But it becomes an idol when it becomes the aim. Greed, which by no coincidence is a capital sin, is the sin of idolatry because the accumulation of money per se becomes the aim of one’s own actions. When capitalism makes the seeking of profit its only purpose, it runs the risk of becoming an idolatrous framework, a form of worship. The ‘goddess of fortune’ is increasingly the new divinity of a certain finance and of the whole system of gambling which is destroying millions of the world’s families, and which you rightly oppose. This idolatrous worship is a surrogate for eternal life. Individual products (cars, telephones ...) get old and wear out, but if I have money or credit I can immediately buy others, deluding myself of conquering death.

Thus, one understands the ethical and spiritual value of your choice to pool profits. The best and most practical way to avoid making an idol of money is to share it with others, above all with the poor, or to enable young people to study and work, overcoming the idolatrous temptation with communion. When you share and donate your profits, you are performing an act of lofty spirituality, saying to money through deeds: ‘you are not God’.

The **second** thing I would like to say to you concerns poverty, a central theme of your movement. Today, many initiatives, public and private, are being carried out to combat poverty. All this, on the one hand, is a growth in humanity. In the Bible, the poor, orphans, widows, those ‘discarded’ by the society of those times, were aided by tithing and the gleaning of grain. But most of the people remained poor; that aid was not sufficient to feed and care for everyone. There were many ‘discarded’ by society. Today we have invented other ways to care for, to feed, to teach the poor, and some of the seeds of the Bible have blossomed into more effective institutions than those of the past. The rationale for taxes also lies in this solidarity, which is negated by tax avoidance and evasion which, before being illegal acts, are acts which deny the basic law of life: mutual care.

But — and this can never be said enough — capitalism continues to produce discarded people whom it would then like to care for. The principal ethical dilemma of this capitalism is the creation of discarded people, then trying to hide them or make sure they are no longer seen. A serious form of poverty in a civilization is when it is no longer able to see its poor, who are first discarded and then hidden.

Aircraft pollute the atmosphere, but, with a small part of the cost of the ticket, they will plant trees to compensate for part of the damage created. Gambling companies finance campaigns to care for the pathological gamblers that they create. And the day that the weapons industry finances hospitals to care for the children mutilated by their bombs, the system will have reached its pinnacle.

The economy of communion, if it wants to be faithful to its charism, must not only care for the victims, but build a system where there are ever fewer victims, where, possibly, there may no longer be any. As long as the economy still produces one victim and there is still a single discarded person, communion has not yet been realized; the celebration of universal fraternity is not full.

Therefore, we must work toward changing the rules of the game of the socio-economic system. Imitating the Good Samaritan of the Gospel is not enough. Of course, when an entrepreneur or any person happens upon a victim, he or she is called to take care of the victim and, perhaps like the Good Samaritan, also to enlist the fraternal action of the market (the innkeeper). I know that you have sought to do so for 25 years. But it is important to act above all before the man comes across the robbers, by battling the frameworks of sin that produce robbers and victims. An entrepreneur who is only a Good Samaritan does half of his duty: he takes care of today’s victims, but does not curtail those of tomorrow. For communion one must imitate the merciful Father of the parable of the Prodigal Son and wait at home for the children, workers and coworkers who have done wrong, and there embrace them and celebrate with and for them — and not be impeded by the meritocracy

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invoked by the older son and by many who deny mercy in the name of merit. An entrepreneur of communion is called to do everything possible so that even those who do wrong and leave home can hope for work and for dignified earnings, and not wind up eating with the swine. No son, no man, not even the most rebellious, deserves acorns.

Lastly, the **third** thing concerns the future. These 25 years of your history say that communion and business can exist and grow together. An experience which for now is limited to a small number of businesses — extremely small if compared to the world’s great capital. But the changes in the order of the spirit and therefore of life are not linked to big numbers. The small flock, the lamp, a coin, a lamb, a pearl, salt, leaven: these are the images of the Kingdom that we encounter in the Gospels. And the prophets have announced to us the new age of salvation by indicating to us the sign of a child, Emmanuel, and speaking to us of a faithful ‘remnant’, a small group. It is not necessary to be in a large group to change our life: suffice it that the salt and leaven do not deteriorate. The great work to be performed is trying not to lose the ‘active ingredient’ which enlivens them: salt does not do its job by increasing in quantity — instead, too much salt makes the meal salty — but by saving its ‘spirit’, its quality. Every time people, peoples and even the Church have thought of saving the world in numbers, they have produced power structures, forgetting the poor. We save our economy by being simply salt and leaven: a difficult job, because everything deteriorates with the passing of time. What do we do so as not to lose the active ingredient, the ‘enzyme’ of communion?

When there were no refrigerators, to preserve the mother dough of the bread, they gave a small amount of their own leavened dough to a neighbor, and when they needed to make bread again they received a handful of leavened dough from that woman or from another who had received it in her turn. It is reciprocity. Communion is not only the sharing but also the multiplying of goods, the creation of new bread, of new goods, of new Good with a capital ‘G’. The living principle of the Gospel remains active only if we give it: if instead we possessively keep it all and only for ourselves, it goes moldy and dies. The economy of communion will have a future if you give it to everyone and it does not remain only inside your ‘house’. Give it to everyone, firstly to the poor and the young, who are those who need it most and know how to make the gift received bear fruit! To have life in abundance one must learn to give: not only the profits of businesses, but of yourselves. The first gift of the entrepreneur is of his or her own person: your money, although important, is too little. Money does not save if it is not accompanied by the gift of the person. Today’s economy, the poor, the young, need first of all your spirit, your respectful and humble fraternity, your will to live and, only then, your money. Capitalism knows philanthropy, not communion. It is simple to give a part of the profits, without embracing and touching the people who receive those ‘crumbs’. Instead, even just five loaves and two fishes can feed the multitude if they are the sharing of all our life. In the logic of the Gospel, if one does not give all of himself, he never gives enough of himself.

You already do these things. But you can share more profits in order to combat idolatry, change the structures in order to prevent the creation of victims and discarded people, give more of your leaven so as to leaven the bread of many. May the ‘no’ to an economy that kills become a ‘yes’ to an economy that lets live, because it shares, includes the poor, uses profits to create communion. I hope you continue on your path, with courage, humility and joy. “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7). God loves your joyfully given profits and talents. You already do this; you can do so even more. I hope you continue to be the seed, salt and leaven of another economy: the economy of the Kingdom, where the rich know how to share their wealth, and the poor are called ‘blessed’.