News



Sen. Marco Rubio speaks at Catholic University of America on Nov. 5, 2019, in Washington. (RNS/Video screengrab via CUA)

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Florida Republican Sen. Marco Rubio's speech on faith and economics is triggering mixed reactions from his fellow Catholic faithful, with some praising his remarks and others arguing that he ignores elements of Catholic social teaching and that his rhetoric doesn't match past policy positions.

Rubio delivered his address, "Human Dignity and the Purpose of Capitalism," at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday morning (Nov. 5), speaking before a crowd of mostly students and hosted by the university's Busch School of Business. Over the course of roughly 40 minutes, the onetime presidential candidate outlined an economic vision he said was rooted in the theology of a "19th-century Italian named Vincenzo Pecci" — a man also known as Pope Leo XIII.

"I want to ask the outrage police for forgiveness, for I have sinned," said Rubio, who is Catholic. "I have once again mixed politics with religion."

Rubio pointed to Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which he said described an ideal economy as one in which "workers and businesses are not competitors for their share of limited resources, but instead partners in an effort that benefits both and strengthens the entire nation."

The senator argued it offered a model for the current political era.

"I wanted to revisit what he wrote because we are once again in the midst of transformative and disruptive economic change," Rubio said. "And we once again face rising calls for socialism."

He added: "We are quite familiar and enthusiastic about our rights, but not nearly as familiar or excited about our obligations."

Rubio criticized both sides of the political aisle in his remarks. He said that while conservatives have become "defenders" of businesses and championed the "obligation to work," they have "neglected the rights of workers to share in the benefits they create for their employer."

Liberals, on the other hand, have focused on "everyone's right to various benefits" but ignored the rights of businesses and the "obligation to work," he said.

Rubio also bemoaned negative trends including increased student loan debt, lack of homeownership, drug addiction and the impact of the recent financial crisis. He dismissed socialism as a potential answer to such woes, calling instead for "common-good capitalism."

The senator outlined an array of policy proposals, such as limiting the shifting of jobs overseas, expanding the federal per-child tax credit and revamping existing structures to invest in small businesses.



Pope Leo XIII. (RNS/Image courtesy of Creative Commons)

Overall, he championed "a system of free enterprise in which workers fulfill their obligation to work and enjoy the benefits of their work, and where businesses enjoy their right to make a profit and reinvest enough of those profits to create dignified work for Americans."

Writing for the conservative magazine First Things — where Rubio published his own piece on economics in August — Catholic writer Emile A. Doak heaped praise on Rubio's speech. Doak lauded Rubio's vision as "a more authentically Christian approach to political economy than anything either major party has put forth in recent memory" and said it signified a break from the norm.

"In looking to Rome rather than Vienna for his economic thought, Rubio seeks to reclaim a holistic disposition that recognizes the members of the U.S. economy as human persons, not simply scientific datum," Doak wrote in his piece, which was later promoted by Rubio's Twitter account. "Conservatives are turning against outsourcing — both of American jobs to China and of economic thought to libertarians."

Other Catholic thinkers were less enthusiastic. Vincent Miller, a professor of religious studies at the University of Dayton who has written on the intersection of religion and economics, was largely unimpressed with Rubio's remarks.

"Rubio's focus on work is promising," Miller said, "but his policies largely ignore labor. This is a glaring omission for a speech that so ostentatiously invokes Pope Leo XIII."

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Miller noted that Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* explicitly voiced support for unions and "defended them precisely as the sorts of associations which are endangered by an overbearing state" — something Rubio did not do in his speech.

"Republicans have systematically undercut the power of unions for decades," Miller observed. "Will Rubio propose policies that strengthen organized labor's power to bargain for a ‘share in the benefits they create for their employer' and have a say in how ‘businesses … act in the best interest of the workers and the country that have made their success possible'?"

Miller also noted that while Rubio decried socialism in his speech, the specific brand of socialism often discussed in modern progressive circles — democratic socialism — was once praised by Joseph Ratzinger, who would later become Pope Benedict XVI.

"In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has in any case made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness," then-Cardinal Ratzinger said in a speech to the Italian senate in 2004.

Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of the often liberal-leaning Catholic social justice lobby Network, told Religion News Service in an email that she saw a disconnect between Rubio's rhetoric and his past policy stances.

"I was glad to see Senator Rubio talking about his Catholic faith and an economy for the common good, but our faith requires action," said Campbell, who famously sparred with former House Speaker Paul Ryan over his own Catholic-inspired approach to economics. "If he's not ready to raise the minimum wage, expand working family tax credits and enact paid family leave, then his support for the common good is all talk. I pray that Senator Rubio has seen the light and will become a partner in this struggle for justice, because his past votes have hurt the very people he now says he wants to protect."

Campbell was echoed by John Gehring, a Catholic program director at the advocacy organization Faith in Public Life.

"I give Marco Rubio credit for challenging a profit-only business mentality and a culture of greed," he tweeted on Tuesday. "But many of the policies he's supported helped create the same trends he denounced in his Catholic University speech."