Opinion

NCR Voices



Mayor Zohran Mamdani appears on a large screen during his inauguration on the steps of City Hall Jan. 1, 2026, in New York. (AP/Heather Khalifa)



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Bishop Robert Barron had a nightmare. He dreamed that a cultural meme came and went before he could post something on X about it.

I have noted previously Barron's jumping into discussions best avoided by a successor of the apostles, such as the opening ceremonies at the Paris Olympics and his exclusively right-wing approach to the issues of the day.

His criticism of New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani's Jan. 1 inaugural address, however, really evidences a mendacity that is unworthy of a minister of the Gospel and a gross distortion of Catholic social teaching.

In his impassioned and visionary speech, Mamdani said, among many other things: "We will replace the frigidity of rugged individualism with the warmth of collectivism."



Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minn., speaks at the National Eucharistic Congress July 20, 2024, in Indianapolis. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

Barron commented on X:

"Collectivism in its various forms is responsible for the deaths of at least 100 million people in the last century. For God's sake, spare me the 'warmth of collectivism.' Socialist and communist forms of government around the world today — Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, etc. — are disastrous. Catholic social teaching has consistently condemned socialism and has embraced the market economy, which people like Mamdani caricature as 'rugged individualism.' In fact, it is the economic system that is based upon the rights, freedom and dignity of the human person."

The bishop's tweet got picked up by the New York Post and was sent to me by several Catholic friends.

Mamdani self-identifies as a democratic socialist, not as a Stalinist, and Barron is smart enough to know the difference. Perhaps he has forgotten what Pope Benedict XVI had to say about democratic socialism: "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."

Barron is right that the Catholic magisterium has "consistently condemned socialism," starting with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, but as the quote from Benedict illustrates, those condemnations applied to more aggressive, and aggressively secularist, varieties of socialism, not to the democratic socialism that, along with Christian democratic political parties, shaped the postwar political landscape throughout Western Europe.

It was one thing to tar a complex phenomenon like socialism with the sins of its worst iterations, but if that is to be Barron's approach, how can he claim that Catholic social doctrine "embraces the market economy" without noting the many times popes have issued stark warnings about the excesses of market economies? Did the bishop forget Pope Pius XI's condemnation of certain strains of capitalism contained in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*?

> Just as the unity of human society cannot be founded on an opposition of classes, so also the right ordering of economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces. For from this source, as from a poisoned spring, have originated and spread all the errors of individualist economic teaching. Destroying through forgetfulness or ignorance the social and moral character of economic life, it held that economic life must be considered and treated as altogether free from and independent of public authority, because in the market, i.e., in the free struggle of competitors, it would have a principle of self direction which governs it much more perfectly than would the intervention of any created intellect.

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Or St. John Paul II's condemnation of unchecked capitalism in *Centesimus Annus*, issued in 1991, after the fall of the Berlin Wall:

> Vast multitudes are still living in conditions of great material and moral poverty. The collapse of the Communist system in so many countries certainly removes an obstacle to facing these problems in an appropriate and realistic way, but it is not enough to bring about their solution. Indeed, there is a risk that a radical capitalistic ideology could spread which refuses even to consider these problems, in the a priori belief that any attempt to solve them is doomed to failure, and which blindly entrusts their solution to the free development of market forces.

Or, more recently, Pope Leo XIV's Christmas homily in which he stated: "While a distorted economy leads us to treat human beings as mere merchandise, God becomes like us, revealing the infinite dignity of every person. While humanity seeks to become 'god' in order to dominate others, God chooses to become man in order to free us from every form of slavery. Will this love be enough to change our history?"

To be sure, when I heard Mamdani use the word "collectivist," I knew he was leading with his chin, and intending to lead with his chin. The phrase "rugged individualism" is a common one in American discourse, and "communal" or even "communitarian" would have been a better word choice than "collectivist" if I had been writing the speech. That does not absolve the bishop of his tendentiousness.

As egregious as Barron's distortion of Catholic social doctrine is his inability to speak about any shortcomings among his friends on the right. I went back over his X feed for the past month and did not find a single criticism of anything emanating from the White House even though the president or one of his acolytes says something far more outrageous and contrary to Catholic morals on a daily basis than what Mamdani said. When a man of the cloth is this one-sided, he is no longer an evangelist. He is an apparatchik.

Finally, will someone remind the bishop that his diocese is in Winona-Rochester, Minnesota? New York has a new archbishop coming soon, Archbishop-designate Ron Hicks, and he will have to develop a relationship with whoever is the mayor of that city. Does Barron not realize he complicates things for his brother bishops by

spouting off on matters far outside the proper concerns of the bishop of Winona-Rochester?

Barron, whose work on the series "Catholicism" was rightly acclaimed, whose devotion to the beautiful artistic expressions of the Catholic faith are erudite and passionate, has demeaned himself in his political commentary. He should be invited by his brother bishops or by the pope to curtail his commentary. It is scandalizing the faithful.

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