

Catholics & Taxes

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 22, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, my colleague Dennis Coday [called attention](#) [1] to an article by John Gehring of the group Faith in Public Life on the issue of taxes. [Gehring asked](#) [2] where the voices of religious leaders were on the debate about tax cuts. It is a question worth asking.

I suspect everyone agrees that capitalism is better than any other system at determining how to allocate goods and services and at determining the value of such goods and services. The problem is that a capitalist system such as ours lumps labor in with other commodities so far as determining the ?worth? of such labor and how it is to be compensated. Persons are not commodities. We are not means, we are ends. That is a first principle of both Catholic social teaching and of liberalism.

When I ran a small business I was handsomely compensated for my labors, much more so than one makes as a writer. Running a small business, my work enabled many others to make a living, to put a roof over their heads, to pay for their children?s education, and our customers, of course, were enriched by our food and our books. My contribution to society as a writer is different, but it is not less. My ideas about politics and the Church may be important, they may not be, but surely they contribute to the discussion of issues which makes a democracy work. I would imagine that there is as much value to our society in my work as there is, say, in the contribution of an all-star athlete, who may help the rest of us to relax and enjoy her prolific athletic talents, but does less for democracy than running a blog. The market says writers get little and athletes get a lot. But, the market does not say all that there is to be said about the justice of our society. If we follow the ?laws of the market? without further consideration, we fall into a trap we were warned about by a certain first century Jewish teacher: The law is made for man, not man for the law. Jesus, of course, was speaking about the Law of God, not the law of the market, but should we assume that the market deserves greater acquiescence than the Law of God?

This is why persons, as opposed to light bulbs, have the moral right to organize. This is why the price of a car may fluctuate without serious social harm, but a family needs a decent wage to provide for itself. Human dignity is a concern of our society. The dignity of shovels or computers or any other commodity is not a concern. The progressive tax code is an accomplishment of a civilized, humane society.

As well, who has a greater interest in the well-functioning of society than those who have been most rewarded by that society? The super-rich may pay more next year in taxes, but if that payment results in more stable government finances, who benefits more than those with the greatest stake in avoiding government bankruptcy and all the economic calamities and social disruption such a bankruptcy would occasion? Our society should reward hard work and invention, and it does so. But, it is another principle of Catholic social teaching that all goods are held in trust, that all the fruits of creation are provided to us for the good of all. Our society determines the scale of justice, whatever the market determines, and sometimes, through the agency of government, we must adjust the results the market yields. Certainly, Wall Street was not shy about turning to the taxpayers when their own malfeasance and greed brought them a cropper financially. Certainly, it is time that Wall Street and all those who have prospered in the market pay their fair share of taxes to support the Commonwealth that has permitted them to get wealthy.

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- [1] <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/there-catholic-position-taxes>
- [2] http://blog.faithinpubliclife.org/2010/09/are_taxes_a_moral_issue.html