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The Pope or the Tea Party?

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COMMENTARY

It's time to stand up for government's essential role in serving the common good and challenge the anti-government fervor of Tea Party activists. If you're looking for a bold champion of economic justice who rejects the movement's infatuation with unfettered markets and hostility toward government, start with the spiritual leader of 1 billion Catholics around the globe.

Pope Benedict XVI offers a compelling response to those who decry "excessive" government that "distorts the free market," as the Tea Party Patriots declare on their Web site -- echoing a familiar philosophy shared by conservative leaders for decades. Indeed, the pope's most recent encyclical stands in stark contrast to those who tout an ideology that would lead to slashing an already fraying social safety net at a time when the number of people living in poverty has reached its highest level in a half century and millions of Americans are unemployed. Catholic social teaching can offer a particularly useful critique of Tea Party philosophy given that a new poll just released by Public Religion Research Institute found that nearly half of Americans who consider themselves part of the movement also identify as Christian conservatives.

A figure embraced by many conservatives for his traditional views on family and sexuality, Pope Benedict XVI sees government as a positive force with vital responsibilities to help create the conditions for a just society. This is not a vague commitment. Benedict advocates for robust financial regulations, challenges governments to address climate change and even calls for a more equitable distribution of wealth. He recently urged the leaders of wealthy nations to do more to tackle the problem of global poverty, describing this priority as "too big to fail." If he ran for office in the U.S., you can imagine the political attack ads accusing the pope of being a socialist! But our roiling political arguments would be far more productive if we tuned out strident commentators and listened to this soft-spoken theologian who articulates the teachings of a faith tradition that for centuries has offered timely wisdom about the moral dimensions of the economy.

While the Tea Party movement gets most of the attention these days, think tanks, conservative political leaders and right-wing pundits have waged a relentless assault on government for decades. Free-market fundamentalists have blind faith in privatization, deregulation of corporations and trickle-down economic theories that endorse tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans. These true believers refuse to question their orthodoxy despite the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, growing income inequality and tragic accidents like the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in the Gulf of Mexico prove the perils of this philosophy.

In contrast, Catholic teaching strikes a prudent balance between legitimate market pursuits and the responsibility of government to safeguard the public interest. The pope's call for "a new synthesis between the common good and the market" could help political leaders stuck in a simplistic paradigm that often pits the free market against big government in cartoonish opposition. A reasonable debate about the size and scope of government is legitimate, but sensible dialogue is stymied when Tea Party activists and even many prominent Republican leaders use terms like "socialism" and "tyranny" to distort the truth and score cheap political points.

Catholic teaching also provides a useful rejoinder to the Tea Party's angry message about taxation. Taxes are a moral issue. Will our children have access to a world-class education? Will the elderly and sick in our communities be cared for with dignity? Tax policy should responsibly balance legitimate individual interests and our collective obligation to strengthen the social fabric that knits us together as citizens with shared interests. The Tea Party's exaltation of individualism and personal liberty surely resonates at a time of growing economic anxiety, but it also erodes another important national ethos that affirms we are all in this together. A commitment to the common good is a timeless value that has strengthened our country during previous eras of crisis and would serve us well today.

As midterm elections approach and fevered battles about the role of government heat up, we need leaders of vision whose values transcend partisan politics as usual. We might consider looking away from Washington and toward Rome for some answers.

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