

Catholic 'common good' notions embedded in Obama policies

Vincent Miller | Nov. 1, 2008



As the campaign draws to its close, John McCain and economic adviser Joe the

Plumber have reached into the Cold War closet for one last desperate round of attacks: painting his opponent as a 'socialist' bent on the 'redistribution of wealth.' This strange attack is based on Joe's ignorance of the Federal Tax code, which will remain progressive should either candidate win. Joe's ignorance is excusable; McCain's is not. He certainly knows the tax code and the idea of a 'graduated tax on big fortunes' was championed by none other than McCain's hero Teddy Roosevelt as a tool to fight 'socialism.'

Such election year silliness rests on a deadly serious foundation however. Decades of anti-tax and anti-government ideology preached by the Republican Party have left us desperately unprepared to debate the role of government in this time of crisis. The only government action we can conceive is cutting taxes. A surplus? Cut taxes. An economic slowdown? A tax rebate. The worst economic crisis since the Great Depression? Warn of tax cuts that favor the middle class at the expense of the wealthy. We desperately need a better vision.

For all the political attention lavished on Catholics in elections, the Catholic vision of government always gets ignored. Catholic social thought sees government as having a necessary positive role in society. Yes, as those well-paid Washington think tank Catholic pundits always insist, the Catholic vision of government is limited, respecting the roles of local communities and families. But government must also do its job: provide for the common good and assist in those things local communities cannot do for themselves. For more than a century popes have argued for a just distribution of resources, living wages for workers, labor rights, and regulation to yoke the power of capitalism in service to the common good.

Perhaps the catholic notion of the common good lacks a voice because few Catholics know much about it anymore. Generations grew up in union households hearing 'Pope Leo says workers have a right to unionize.' Such knowledge has long faded. The Bishops Conference and many individual bishops continue to promote the full range of social teaching, but their voices are outside the media glare garnered by the minority who offer a reliable single-issue focus on abortion.

Our instincts for the common good have been dulled by an economic system that reduces us all to individuals. Gone are mutual aid societies, local credit unions, and even company pensions. We're all on our own now, masters of shrinking 401k accounts. We turn to credit cards in rough times rather than sharing with family and neighbors. Standing alone with our tax cuts, we are all going down the tubes together.

Despite our ignorance, the relics of the common good still speak from the past. It echos in the common man architecture of the New Deal: the fieldstone and mortar picnic shelters and lodges in our parks, the town halls and libraries across our nation. I had a great uncle whose childhood was shattered by the Depression. His unemployed father drifted away leaving his mother to raise him in poverty. He landed a job with the Civilian Conservation Corps building retaining walls and shelters along the Skyline Drive in the Shenandoah National Park. It paid his mother's bills, but it also let him build something for the generations. At the end of his life he still lit up when he spoke of that work and took joy when he met someone who had visited it.

Common goods help us understand the common good. It's encouraging to hear Barack Obama proposing more than tax cuts to address the economic crisis: investments in our crumbling infrastructure and schools, national initiatives in clean energy and energy independence.

Obama has consistently offered a deeply Catholic vision of government and the common good. Perhaps he absorbed it in his work as a community organizer funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development. It was masterfully expressed in his acceptance speech. "Individual responsibility and mutual responsibility" that's the essence of America's promise. "Government cannot solve all our problems, but it should do what we cannot do for ourselves."

Curiously his campaign has not used this in catholic outreach. Alas, perhaps it's because the common good is such a foreign language in America today. To win this election, and to govern in this time of crisis, Obama will have to throw his shoulder into three decades of impoverished thinking about government. Let's hope he succeeds.

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