

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 28, 2011 at 10:07am

Is the idea of a global government agency radical?

by Vincent Miller



Activists kick off "Occupy Detroit" with a rally and march through downtown Detroit Oct. 10. (CNS photo/Jim West)

Commentary

It's a hopeful sign that The Council for Justice and Peace note "reform of the international financial system with a view toward a general public Authority" is getting a good amount of press. The Vatican has again added its voice to those calling (some from the streets) for a return of ethics and political oversight to the titanic power of financial institutions that have grown beyond political control after decades of deregulation and technological innovation. And yes, the Vatican does stand with the "basic sentiment" of the protesters on Wall Street and around the world.

Most coverage has focused on the document's call for a global governmental authority through which the global community can "steer its institutions towards achieving the common good." It is true, as George Weigel has sputtered out between angry outbursts of "rubbish, rubbish, rubbish!" that this document has a low level of authority.

The central point of this document -- the need for a global governmental structure -- is nothing new. It has been taught by every pope since John XXIII. (This, of course, will not be enough for Weigel, that John Dominic Crossan of Catholic Social Teaching, who rejects papal statements unless he judges them to express the "gold letter" *ipsissima verba* of the true pope of his own imagining.)

The message is, alas, jarring to more than aging neo-cons. Neo-liberal (what we call "conservative" in the United States) foundations have invested untold hundreds of millions (quite a few of them through Weigel's home, the Ethics and Public Policy Center) to make "government" a dirty word.

But it is worth stopping for a minute and asking: Is the idea of some sort of global government really that radical? There was a time when democratic government meant more than a vote for every dollar; when it was common sense that political institutions and political participation were essential to the common good. It's an indictment of how radical we've become that a moderate proposal such as this would be received as controversial. No wonder people feel they have no option but to take to the streets.

The document raises fundamental moral questions -- well within the proper purview of magisterial teaching. It challenges the reduction of human existence to a narrow economic logic as our current global economic order has done. It warns that such an approach banishes the moral and spiritual, ignoring "anything that cannot be explained in terms of matter alone."

This riff on materialism from *Caritas in Veritate* is no small point. It is the same critique that was once leveled at communist regimes. This document indicts neo-liberal economics for having spiraled into a similar ideological rigidity that promotes abstract laws of the market "without measuring them against reality."

The document is eminently moderate. The church embraces the potential good that market economies can provide, but it rejects what John Paul II called the "idolatry of the market" that ignores questions of justice and shirks the need to manage market's destructive potential. It applies Benedict XVI's very reasonable observation that emergence of a truly global economy has placed markets beyond the regulation and control of national governments and politics. Thus, we need some form of global political government to steward a global economy to serve the global common good.

The document advances Benedict's call for reform of international governmental and financial organizations "so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth." While the Vatican doesn't do revolution, the demands are revolutionary ? and as old as the Hebrew prophets. Any just order must attend to the needs of the poor. Any just system of global governance must give the weakest a meaningful seat at the table. It does espouse a revolutionary courage that weds a call for creative thinking with Mary's Magnificat: "We should not be afraid to propose new ideas, even if they may destabilize pre-existing balances of power that prevail over the weakest."

The document's proposals are, however, decidedly gradualist. It embraces the so-called "Tobin" tax on financial transactions, and proposes strings on public recapitalization of banks. It calls for the reform and enhancement of current systems of global governance such as the UN, the IMF and the G20. These are substantial, but not exactly a call to the barricades.

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It imagines a "polyarchic" society that comprises many different organizations and different cultural

perspectives. It offers a vision of government built out of regional and local organizations and that is broadly participatory.

The Catholic principle that undergirds this vision is, of course, subsidiarity. The document presumes its full meaning -? both negative limits and positive obligations to assist. During the Cold War era, the principle was deployed primarily as a limit on government. In the ensuing years, American Catholic neo-cons have pruned the concept like a potted plant, taking care that it would never outgrow their small government agenda. All the while, "private" corporations and financial institutions have grown ever more powerful.

In the last 30 years the world has witnessed the epochal emergence of massive powers rivaling those of states. "Too big to fail" financial organizations and transnational corporations play in shadow markets and global territory beyond state regulatory reach. These are the powers that daily usurp the rightful authority of local communities. These dictate in terms of iron the constraints on our economic lives, the food we eat, and the news we hear. These reach into our homes and form our children as surely as any Eastern bloc youth movement. It's about time we as a church begin to apply this wisdom to the new powers of the age.

This document applies subsidiarity's positive meaning as an obligation to lend assistance (*subsidium*) when "individual, social or financial actors are intrinsically deficient in capacity or cannot manage by themselves to do what is required." The thrust of the entire document is that private financial organizations and the global system of voluntary governance have failed and thus require intervention. In short, the document reaffirms the "no bigger than necessary, no smaller than appropriate" understanding of subsidiarity in CST.

The positive aspect of subsidiarity speaks directly to the most vital concerns of the day. Many feel that corporate power has grown out of control, but lack a framework in which to conceive politics that is both responsive to local concern and participation and big enough to influence massive corporate entities. The Catholic notion of subsidiarity does just this.

It's a very hopeful sign that as youth take to the streets protesting a world out of joint, that the Vatican has both the courage to stand with them and real wisdom to offer to the political debate we all so desperately need to have.

[Vincent Miller is the Gudorf Chair in Catholic Theology and Culture at the University of Dayton.]

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