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MSW v. Sirico: Part III

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Distinctly Catholic

Today, we finish our postings that flow from the debate I had Monday night with Fr. Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute. The question before us was: Can the free market adequately care for the poor? Father Sirico argued in the affirmative and I opposed. Tuesday, I set out what I considered the economic difficulties and yesterday, I set out the ethical problems. Today, we look at the deeper theological issue, the issue of theological anthropology, namely, in the light of our faith, what does it mean to be a human person?

Conservative critics of the modern social welfare state, like Father Sirico, often complain that the welfare state creates a "culture of dependency," among those whom the programs seek to assist. In a pedestrian sense, of course, this can be true and we should always structure our social welfare programs in ways that do not create a disincentive to take a job or to marry or to start a family. Sadly, some social programs did, quite unintentionally, create such disincentives, so I do not dismiss the conservative criticism in its entirety and we should always structure our social programs in ways that reinforce the incentives to work, to marry, to have a family, etc.

But, at a deeper level, it seems to me that a "culture of dependency" is exactly what is missing from the laissez-faire vision of the world. The laissez-faire worldview champions the individual, not the society in which the individual must flourish. The laissez-faire worldview makes a hero out of Henry Ford, but not of the government that built the roads for his cars. In the world of laissez-faire economics, the myth of Horatio Alger is normative, not fiction, and everyone who stumbles on tough times is told to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, even if they don't have bootstraps. Father Sirico and his friends always remind me of the great New Yorker cartoon during the 1964 election that portrayed Barry Goldwater walking past a hobo on the street and muttering, "If he had any gumption, he would inherit a department store chain like the rest of us!"

Father Sirico, in his book, argues that his worldview is theologically sound by citing the Creation account in Genesis. Because we human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, we should model ourselves on the creative activity of God in the account of creation. The market allows the possibility for creativity and, just so Sirico argues, it is actually godlike. The apostle as entrepreneur or the entrepreneur as apostle. I admire the entrepreneurial spirit, but it does not, I submit, exhaust the Christian vocation and the system of contemporary, modern, financialized capitalism is a far cry from my local farmers' market.

Catholic Christians, however, possess a different lens, a different model for our lives. Jesus Christ did not only reveal the Triune God to us, He revealed us to ourselves. "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light," states the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* (#22). "For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come,(20) namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown." This text is the key to an authentic Catholic anthropology. Not for nothing did Pope John Paul II cite this conciliar text more than any other in his many encyclicals. The model of Christian discipleship is not God, the Creator, but God, the Son.

The problem with Sirico's argument, then, is that it misunderstands the idea of creativity that he uses to justify the whole capitalist system, as we noted yesterday. This seemingly small issue ? what does it mean to be creative for a Catholic Christian ? is so foundational that it affects all subsequent judgments made by Sirico and other Catholic conservatives. As Professor David Schindler has pointed out, the model for Christian creativity is the receptive, dependent, suffering creativity of Jesus, the Son. And, secondly, our model in this life is that of the Blessed Mother who begins her great prayer, the Magnificat, with the words, "Let it be done to me according to thy word," which are not the words one expects to hear from a captain of industry or a titan of finance. I suppose that is why the Blessed Mother went on to point out that when the Kingdom of God comes "the rich will be sent away empty."

Let us state it very clearly: There is nothing protean, nothing self-made, nothing frugal or thrifty, nothing self-assertive, nothing competitive, nothing greedy or self-interested in the lives of Jesus and His Mother. The personal characteristics the market demands and champions are not discernible in the life of Him who is most obviously characterized by His radical submission to the will of His Father, nor in the life of His Mother. This is deeper than ethics. It gets to the very stance a human person takes towards reality. If you get this wrong, you tend to get everything wrong, which is why Pope Pius XI famously referred to libertarian economics as a "poisoned spring." Libertarian economists get self-interest wrong, as mentioned, by trying to wiggle it into a virtue. They get ideas about the common good wrong, about the universal destination of goods, about our obligations to the environment, about the need to change established Western lifestyles.

Most importantly, by misunderstanding creativity, the libertarian and neo-con economists (they are not

exactly the same group although their policy prescriptions always seem to end up at the same place) misunderstand what must be a priority in the life of a Christian. As Professor Schindler has written, "a self that first (ontologically, not temporally) serves the other, and thereby finds itself, is not identical with a self that first seeks itself, and thereby serves the other. A selfishness become mutual is not yet mutual generosity." And the primary exigence and general disposition of the Christian must always be towards mutual generosity, towards other-centeredness. The Christian must recognize that all is gift and grace before he sets his hand to manipulating creation for profit. This especially holds for the poor. Yes, it is a good thing to find work for the poor, but the aim of Christian interaction with the poor cannot be, primarily, to reduce them to their economic significance and, then, find salvation by instrumentalizing their labor. We must love the poor. We must learn from the poor ? who have much to teach our culture, which is currently drowning in the false myth of a happiness rooted in the purchase of consumer goods.

I do not know what a Christ-centered economy would look like. Perhaps the best we can do are the kind of systems we have in Europe, rooted in the Christian Democratic tradition, with robust social welfare programs but high degrees of economic freedom as well, systems that value solidarity as much as autonomy. But, if the idea of a more Christ-centered economy, that values the poor, seems idealistic, so be it. I am reminded of the words of Pope Benedict in the second volume of his trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth:

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my word will not pass away." (Mk 13:31) The word ? which seems almost nothing in comparison to the mighty power of the immeasurable material cosmos, like a fleeting breath against the silent grandeur of the universe ? the word is more real and more lasting than the entire material world. The word is the true, dependable reality, the solid ground on which we can stand, which holds firm even when the sun goes dark and the firmament disintegrates.

The word, the Word made flesh, is a word of gratuitousness, of super-abundant, uncalculating, self-surrendering, other-centered, ineffable love, especially love for the poor. The market may engage some of the poor and help them. It may make them "winners." But there will remain those for whom the market has nothing to offer. And it is these ? the infirm, the useless, the addicted, the "losers" ? it is in the face of these that we encounter the face of Jesus Christ.

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