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Pope Francis on capitalism

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The church began to proclaim a consistently strong message on social justice in 1891 when Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Every pope since then has upheld the rights of workers, and the need to provide a living wage and decent working conditions to everyone.

Now Pope Francis is adding his voice to the chorus of papal statements fostering social justice. How is what he is doing different? I think it is different in at least three ways. For one, he has gained the attention of the whole world for what he has to say. Since his recent elevation to the papacy, he has struck a different tone which has captured the imagination of much of the world and given him an enhanced opportunity to be heard.

While the writings of other popes have tended to sit on shelves collecting dust, the words of Pope Francis are front and center in the current debate. They are especially timely in this country as debates on the budget and other relevant issues rage in Washington. The country and Congress are deeply involved in deciding the proper role of government and what an appropriate safety net might look like. Wittingly or unwittingly, the pope has waded into this debate.

Also, I believe Pope Francis himself is a factor. He is so genuine. He is so connected with people. His style is so pastoral. All of this tends to give even greater credence to his words. He is seen as embodying the message he preaches.

This straightforward style also leads to a third factor, which involves the content of what Pope Francis is saying. I think his comments tend to be stronger and more specific than some of his predecessors. Pope Francis' writing and speaking style is clear and unambiguous. Everyone knows exactly what he is saying, and it is very difficult to pretend that he really means something else. Let's consider some of his comments from *Evangelii Gaudium*.

I find it significant that he eschews a focus on relativism and materialism that seemed to preoccupy his predecessors. He still has problems with the world's culture, but for him it is a world that is about competition and survival of the fittest. It is a world where the powerful feed upon the powerless. This constitutes a decidedly different focus.

He addresses capitalism directly noting that there is a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power. He is concerned that this culture has produced global indifference. Society seems content to believe that poverty is somebody else's problem. For him, the poor are not only exploited but excluded. They have become the outcast, the leftovers.

He hammers the injustice of growing inequality. He sees this income gap as a result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace. He speaks of the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system.

He also speaks of growing world-wide corruption which is at least tolerated as the world eagerly seeks to serve the interests of a deified market which become the only rule. He specifically mentions self-serving tax evasion, and the thirst for power and possessions, as examples of the harmful corruption that abounds and knows no limits.

Finally, Francis makes clear that unless opportunities are provided for the poor, violence and conflict will inevitably result. This is true not just because inequality provokes violence, but because the socioeconomic system is unjust at its root.

It would be difficult to read these words and believe that the pope is just some nice guy who feels compassion for the poor. Francis speaks clearly and dramatically about structural problems that need to be addressed. He speaks of an economic system that is inimical to the poor, and he says it must change.

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