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Is Capitalism "Intrinsically Disordered"?

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

We associate the phrase "intrinsically disordered," with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's statement on homosexuality in 1986. In that instance, the failure to distinguish the technical meaning of the phrase from its common usage resulted in the fact that many people, both those who agreed and those who didn't, viewed it as applying to persons, when the text applies the designation to the inclination. The consequences were unfortunate all around. I addressed this issue in my review of Fr. Lou Cameli's book on Church teaching and homosexuality a few weeks back.

If a thing is intrinsically disordered, it is incapable of achieving its purpose. It is not itself a sin, but is a disposition towards sin. The language in the 1986 document was, as Cameli pointed out, very similar to the Catechism's definition of concupiscence which states: "Etymologically, "concupiscence" can refer to any intense form of human desire. Christian theology has given it a particular meaning: the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of human reason." (CCC, #2515) The Council of Trent called concupiscence the *fomes peccati*, the fuel for sin, though not itself a sin.

In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, we can discern three critiques of modern capitalist culture. First, Pope Francis challenges the economic results, the inequities the market has unleashed, and the millions who are excluded from participating in the economic system. Second, the system itself presumes "winners" and "losers", and human persons are never "losers" in the Church's eyes. Third, Pope Francis notes the ways that modern consumer, capitalist culture enslaves not only the "losers" but the "winners" as well, creating a spiritual poverty at the same time as the system creates material prosperity.

The question before us today involves the last two critiques. We can leave it to the economists to analyze the first, though it is worth pointing out that any assessment of the results of the modern economy tend to track with one's point of view. Papa Francesco, who knows the slums, sees the problems. Father Robert Sirico, busy attracting donors from fat cats for his libertarian leaning Acton Institute, tends not to notice the problems and, in a video released after *Evangelii Gaudium*, adopts an astonishingly patronizing tone towards the pope: "If only he knew what we know," the champion of John Galt seems to say.

When I debated him at the beginning of the year, Fr. Sirico took the position that the market is morally neutral. This is an understandable stance to take: When capitalism messes up, the free marketers can blame it on the bad actors, and on "dirigiste" government policies or crony capitalism. This further allows the Catholic laissez-faire brigade to adopt the kind of moralism that fits neatly with modern political conservatism. Of course, it is hogwash, as the writings of Fr. Sirico and his acolyte Samuel Gregg make clear. No sooner is the claim to moral neutrality out of their lips, then they are listing the virtues that market cultivates and, indeed, demands: thrift, creativity, prudence. These are good things, to be sure, but they are moral things, no?

Fr. Sirico and Mr. Gregg tend not to focus on other moral attributes the market invites and even rewards: a spirit of competition, not solidarity, a prioritization of property rights over workers' rights, the way it turns labor into a commodity, the invitation to denominate everything and everyone into a financial calculus, and, most problematically, the inherent, intrinsic materialism of modern capitalism. Perhaps it could have been otherwise, but in fact, modern capitalism works hand-in-glove with both the depersonalizing forces of hyper-financialization and with a consumer mentality that has turned Christmas into a greed fest, created the "throw away" culture Pope Francis denounces, and holds out the "laws of the market" as a new kind of golden calf, worthy of our idolatry. Perhaps, the market could yield more worthy moral and spiritual results, but it hasn't.

Sirico and Gregg note that the pope denounced unfettered markets but they claim that there are no markets which are really unfettered. True enough. They are really accusing the pope of attacking a straw man when he is only describing what he sees, and what he sees are laissez-faire approaches, perhaps not absolute, but dominant approaches that have harmed millions of people. But, they must allow as well that the market, whatever it might have achieved, has yielded much bad fruit.

My deeper concern, and the reason that I raise the issue of intrinsic disorder, is because the Catholic laissez-faire brigade always views morality as something extrinsic. Values are placed upon the market the way whipped cream is placed on top of a sundae. But, they fail to realize that, with or without the values they champion, the market itself, the ice cream if you will, is still going to make you fat. The market mentality does contain certain moral and anthropological assumptions. Their putatively neutral, empty moral space is a sham because, as Professor David Schindler pointed out in his critique of an earlier crowd of free-marketers, they are constantly pouring the Scottish Enlightenment into this putatively empty space.

An additional difficulty is the real challenge for all of us who have not joined the laissez-faire brigade to

disentangle ourselves from the tentacles of the market. It is not easy. I wrote previously about how I detest the commercialization of Christmas and the frantic behavior we behold every Black Friday. But, I can't really root for more people to stay away from the stores and spend that Friday with their families. If that had happened, hundreds of thousands of people would have seen their jobs at risk. We have to root for the system? even when its effects are palpably baneful.

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Finally, we must resist what I would call the "spiritualization" of Pope Francis' message. He is certainly calling us to a conversion of heart, but he is not only calling us to acts of private charity. The pope is calling for justice, as Jesus called for justice and the prophets called for justice, and justice is not a matter of private morality. I hope that many conservatives will take the pope's message and dedicate themselves to the poor in ways they have not, but unless that dedication extends to a re-examination of political and economic choices, it is insufficient.

I do think the case can be made that the market we have today is intrinsically disordered. I do not think all capitalists, still less all people who engage in commerce, are disordered, intrinsically or otherwise. But, the system is, as Dorothy Day said, "filthy" and "rotten," and Pope Francis sees this with a clarity that is challenging my friend Fr. Sirico more than Sirico has let on. The problem is not in the stars and it is not necessarily in ourselves either. But, the system is of human creation, and it deserves more rigorous moral and anthropological scrutiny than most Catholics have given it. That is what Pope Francis is calling us to undertake.

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