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The 'culture of prosperity'

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic

Stay away from *'The Wolf of Wall Street,'* the three-hour cinematic bacchanal lionizing a Long Island con artist. Based on the memoir of a convicted felon, it's not *'The Great Gatsby.'* There is no enraged husband with a gun to end this real life swindler's story. He is alive and well and living on the California coast.

The only redeeming quality of the \$100 million movie, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as founder of a phony securities firm, is that it demonstrates what Catholic social teaching complains about.

In the film, as in life, the DiCaprio character invents a 'pump and dump' stock fraud scheme. He and his many cohorts buy penny stocks and drive up prices by repeatedly selling some holdings to unwitting investors. Then, the insiders sell their holdings at a profit, prices collapse, and those outside the circle lose. They lose a lot.

They really lost a lot. When the government finally caught up with the scheme and settlements began, over 1,000 defrauded folks got about 20 cents on the dollar.

That ending, unfortunately, is not new. Real world financial scams are all too common. The extra-curricular activities of the players are equally common, and sickening.

What is uncommon is that major studios (Paramount and Universal) have teamed up to distribute a film that can be called pornographic, and which belies the studios' own unbridled profit motives. It does not matter what lines you cross, it does not matter whom you hurt, it does not matter that you pollute or destroy -- in this case hearts and minds -- all that matters is profit for you and yours. Earn more, buy more, consume more, control more. The heck with anyone else. It's all about me.

Such is what Pope Francis called "the culture of prosperity" in his recent apostolic exhortation -- the genuine self-absorption of economic systems that ignore anyone and anything outside the circle.

(Note to Rush Limbaugh and other critics: Francis's *Evangelii Gaudium* does not include the word "capitalism.")

While the movie strips away real-world labor and production, it paints capitalistic excesses in black and cocaine-white. The papal document, on the other hand, argues economic growth alone cannot automatically bring justice or inclusiveness to the world. It is people who control and use economic systems, for good or for ill. Francis criticizes "a globalization of indifference" that ignores those outside economic systems: the poor, the disenfranchised, the powerless.

Any economic system can crush the hopes of the poor. There is nothing new about the competing systems of liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism, and there is nothing new, really, about the Catholic response to these. Papal documents criticizing their excesses are not economic statements, but rather explications of the Gospels and developments of moral theology. When the pope writes about "a lifestyle which excludes others," he is talking about the corporate and financial high flyers whose only god is profit. When the pope warns of how easily persons can slip into narcissistic indifference, he talks about everybody, including himself: "Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own."

Such is the "economic" criticism of his apostolic exhortation. Such is the reality of the movie. The pope challenges the people of the world to be responsible, one to another. The movie praises the ability of one person to live with no redeeming social mores in a bubble of privilege and indifference.

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Whether you support either side -- social concern or boorish self-interest -- you have to admit the movie itself is a caricature of the topic. Some years ago, DiCaprio bought the book's movie rights in a bidding war against Brad Pitt. No doubt seeing a money-printing vehicle, an off-label production company picked up the project after Warner Brothers dumped it.

"The Wolf of Wall Street" did not come in first over the long Christmas weekend, but it took in over \$35 million and will make millions more. No doubt most of it will fuel the "culture of prosperity." Little, if any, will "trickle down" to the poor. Stay very far away from it.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and author of several books in Catholic studies. Her newest book is *Mysticism and the Spiritual Quest: A Crosscultural Anthology*, and her recent books include *Women & Catholicism* (Palgrave-Macmillan), *Women in Ministry: Emerging Questions about the Diaconate* (Paulist Press) and *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* (with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig, Paulist Press). Forthcoming is *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches* (Liturgical Press). She will speak March 13 at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo.]

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