NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Editorial: Pope's tweet on inequality points to moral course

NCR Editorial Staff | May. 7, 2014
Editorial

It came with the clarity of a thunderclap on a Kansas plain. It shot across the world in a tweet retweeted 14,000 times within a day. It followed by only hours the last fading cheers on St. Peter's Square ending the canonization ceremony of Sts. John XXIII and John Paul II.

It was as if, history now behind him, Pope Francis was telling us where we have to go, as a church and human family, if we are to follow a moral course. It's out there among the poor and dispossessed of the world. That's where we find salvation.

Declared Francis in a seven-word tweet: "Inequality is the root of social evil."

We live in an unprecedented time. We have a pontiff who has a fix on global issues and the human family, its longings and failings, as none other before him. This is our first pope from the global South. Meanwhile, his stage is vast; his voice clear; his delivery simple; his authority unassailable; his mastery of communication keen as the latest cellphone.

Of course, not everyone can listen. For some the message is simply too much to take. Perhaps it will take time. Some, for example, on the political right were quick to pooh-pooh Francis' tweet. His words, they said, were puzzling, too simplistic, even naive, incapable of understanding modern economics.

What they see -- and fear -- is a pope who has a moral voice with a political edge. The storm will only get larger.

As if to strengthen the poignancy of the moment, Francis' words came as French economist Thomas Piketty's new book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, was appearing on all the best-seller lists. This well-documented, 700-page treatise argues that 21st-century capitalism is on a one-way journey toward greater inequality. We are assured of greater inequality in the decades ahead -- short of a major political intervention. Piketty is not suggesting discarding capitalism. He says it can work for all, but needs serious readjusting -- like 15 percent tax on capital, an 80 percent tax on high incomes, and enforced transparency for all bank transactions.

These are not the messages the right wants to hear. Some on the left might question his embrace of the possibility of reform within the system.

How bad, or, rather, how immoral, has the system allowed the situation to become? In the U.S., according to Piketty, the wealthiest 1 percent has appropriated 60 percent of the increase in national income between 1977 and 2007. The course, he says, will not change, given current political directives, laws being written by those profiting most from the system.

Francis and Piketty see the same human condition, the former through the eyes of experience and the Gospels, the latter through boxes of documents and spreadsheets.

Essentially, we live in a state of social sin, requiring social, political and economic recalibration. Francis is neither a sociologist nor an economist. What he knows from experience -- and is shouting out to the world -- is that his people are not eating, while a relative few superrich live in unimagined splendor. More than wrong, it cannot last without more unrest, more violence and more wars.

Within the current global economic system, wealth equals influence on policy. The more wealth the more influence, the greater the ability to shape self-serving laws that add to privilege and political power. The challenge is that along with super wealth has come political influence and power -- and greater inequities on a host of issues, from prison sentences and public education to taxes on capital gains and private yachts.

Unprecedented inequality is mired in political inertia. Those who shape the laws resist change -- even when change might be require for the health, even survival, of the planet.

Francis' tweet comes as an exclamation point to his November apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, in which he wrote: "Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape. Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded."

Can there be any doubt?

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