

Distorted Receptions of Vatican II Panel: John Paul II, Francis, & CST  
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In my time, I wish to highlight three brief points. First, that this resistance seems intimately tied to economics. Second, that this did not begin with Francis but was already present as resistance to Benedict XVI's social teaching; and finally, that all Catholics must be spiritually formed by *Gaudium et Spes* – without that, one cannot appreciate Francis's call to profess Christ crucified, but neither can one truly understand the social magisterium of John Paul II either.

1. I am a moral theologian whose specialty is Catholic social teaching. The distortions and rejections of Vatican II already noted most clearly appear in CST with respect to economic justice.

When *Fratelli Tutti* was released, I received multiple journalistic inquiries, including from Catholic media outlets, asking me to comment on the Pope's big new teaching on economic justice – called the universal destination of goods. Now, as everyone in this room will know, the doctrine of the universal destination of created goods not only predates Francis, pre-dates Vatican II – *Fratelli Tutti* itself grounds the section in St. John Chrysostom and St. Gregory the Great before referencing both *Gaudium et Spes* and John Paul II. There is remarkable consistency between GS 69, SRS 45, and FT 120 (see handout). Francis himself quotes *Laborem Exercens* – labeling the universal destination of goods or the common use of goods as “the first principle of the whole ethical and social order” (LE19).

How can it be that something that was foundational for the Church fathers, for Vatican II, and for JP2, can be perceived in the United States as a “significant change” when it is spoken by Pope Francis?

Now, a little bit may be writing style – my students readily understand Francis, but struggle with the writing style of the philosopher John Paul II. The density of his prose has perhaps allowed for the misrepresentation of his own teaching on economic justice to take root. This then allows him to be set up incorrectly as a foil to Pope Francis. This has manifested directly in a preference for certain paragraphs in *Centesimus Annus*, writing in part to mark the end of the cold war, over *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, which tackles neocolonialism and solidarity, as well as ignoring entirely *Laborem Exercens* (again something I know my students wish we'd ignore too).

John Paul II regularly raised alarm bells about the influence of money and profit as a central or dominant motive/goal in private industry (see handout). The social mortgage on all property that permeated John Paul II's contribution to social doctrine – an emphasis on work and land – in CA 43, JP2 noted:

“Ownership of the means of production, whether in industry or agriculture, is just and legitimate if it serves useful work. It becomes illegitimate, however, when it is not utilized or when it serves to impede the work of others, in an effort to gain a profit which is not the result of the overall expansion of work and the wealth of society, but rather is the result of curbing them or illicit exploitation, speculation, or the breaking of solidarity among working people.

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Ownership of this kind has no justification and represents an abuse in the sight of God and man.”

Yet, one would never know this element of John Paul II’s teaching existed from the attacks on Francis’s condemnation of the throwaway culture and rejection of trickle down economics in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

There are many notable catholic commentators (such as George Weigel and Michael Novak) who built a brand of presenting John Paul II as a proponent of free market capitalism with the united states as a “virtuous example” again, this has led to position JP2 as a foil to Francis and even Vatican II itself slips away entirely from view.

John Paul II’s own experiences of Communist Poland added authenticity and moral weight to his teaching; if the American church afforded Francis the same valuing of his experiences of global capitalism, inequality, and neocolonialism – his economic teachings would have had a very different reception.

When Francis decries the throwaway culture in which “Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded.” ....and “those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers” (EG 53) – he is speaking from his experience in Argentina and developing Catholic social doctrine in deep continuity with both John Paul II and Vatican II.

For my undergraduates, it is often the Catholic students who comment with surprise at how similar John Paul II and Francis’s statements on economic justice are – as they have often socialized to expect a chasm between the two popes. This realization opens up a depth and continuity to the social doctrine they did not expect.

2. As we consider the important and challenging issues raised this morning, we must note that this new rejection of Vatican II began before Francis. The already lurking dismissal of Catholic social doctrine and Vatican II was exposed in 2009 when *Caritas in Veritate* was

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attacked, with Weigel dismissing its treatment of economic activity, gift, and redistribution as written with a red pen and not really by Benedict XVI. Alongside a commitment to addressing the basic needs of those in poverty, there has long been a deep hesitancy within American Catholic social teaching conversations for tackling inequality or the structures of capitalism itself. But as Fr. Drew Christiansen, SJ noted back in 1984, the movement of Vatican II was a movement for relative equality – almost forty years later, both Benedict and Francis draw our attention back to economic justice and a call to consider other modes of structuring a market economy. Ultimately, both Vatican II and Pope Francis highlight that for Catholic social doctrine, the common good is in fact COMMON – it is not an individual project. And herein lies the primary place where commentators like Weigel and Novak misrepresented John Paul II's magisterium thus setting them on a path to dismiss that of Benedict as inconsequential and outright attack Francis personally --- the common good is not an individual virtue – the social aspect of humanity and CST does not support such individualism.

3. As we consider the Way Forward, I want to propose that a way forward in communion with pope Francis is found by embracing the Spirituality of *Gaudium et spes*. The pastoral constitution on the church in the modern world is for moral theology and catholic social doctrine the key document of Vatican II. Its core is an invitation to be in the world And I wish to propose that it also reveals a deep Christological spirituality to Catholic social doctrine that calls upon us to recognize the church, that is the people of God, as the Body of Christ in history – an image that permeated St. Oscar Romero's own reflections on *Gaudium et Spes*. It is a spirituality that Pope Francis himself has recently talked about as permeating his own teaching – including on economic justice.

# Universal Destination of Goods

- **Gaudium et Spes 69:**
  - God intended the earth with everything contained in it for the use of all human beings and peoples. Thus, under the leadership of justice and in the company of charity, created goods should be in abundance for all in like manner.<sup>(8)</sup> Whatever the forms of property may be, as adapted to the legitimate institutions of peoples, according to diverse and changeable circumstances, attention must always be paid to this universal destination of earthly goods.
- **Sollicitudo Rei Socialis 45:**
  - It is necessary to state once more the characteristic principle of Christian social doctrine: the goods of this world are originally meant for all.<sup>28</sup> The right to private property is valid and necessary, but it does not nullify the value of this principle. Private property, in fact, is under a "social mortgage,"<sup>29</sup> which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods. Likewise, in this concern for the poor, one must not overlook that special form of poverty which consists in being deprived of fundamental human rights, in particular the right to religious freedom and also the right to freedom of economic initiative.
- **Centesimus Annus 31:**
  - God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone. This is *the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods*. The earth, by reason of its fruitfulness and its capacity to satisfy human needs, is God's first gift for the sustenance of human life. But the earth does not yield its fruits without a particular human response to God's gift, that is to say, without work. It is through work that man, using his intelligence and exercising his freedom, succeeds in dominating the earth and making it a fitting home. In this way, he makes part of the earth his own, precisely the part which he has acquired through work; this is *the origin of individual property*. Obviously, he also has the responsibility not to hinder others from having their own part of God's gift; indeed, he must cooperate with others so that together all can dominate the earth.
- **Fratelli Tutti 120:**
  - For my part, I would observe that "the Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property".<sup>[95]</sup> The principle of the common use of created goods is the "first principle of the whole ethical and social order";<sup>[96]</sup> it is a natural and inherent right that takes priority over others.<sup>[97]</sup> All other rights having to do with the goods necessary for the integral fulfilment of persons, including that of private property or any other type of property, should – in the words of Saint Paul VI – "in no way hinder [this right], but should actively facilitate its implementation".<sup>[98]</sup> The right to private property can only be considered a secondary natural right, derived from the principle of the universal destination of created goods. This has concrete consequences that ought to be reflected in the workings of society. Yet it often happens that secondary rights displace primary and overriding rights, in practice making them irrelevant.

# Role of Profit & Economic Activity

- **Gaudium et Spes 65:**
  - Economic development must remain under man's determination and must not be left to the judgment of a few men or groups possessing too much economic power or of the political community alone or of certain more powerful nations. It is necessary, on the contrary, that at every level the largest possible number of people and, when it is a question of international relations, all nations have an active share in directing that development. There is need as well of the coordination and fitting and harmonious combination of the spontaneous efforts of individuals and of free groups with the undertakings of public authorities. Growth is not to be left solely to a kind of mechanical course of the economic activity of individuals, nor to the authority of government. For this reason, doctrines which obstruct the necessary reforms under the guise of a false liberty, and those which subordinate the basic rights of individual persons and groups to the collective organization of production must be shown to be erroneous
- **Centesimus Annus**
  - The Church acknowledges the legitimate *role of profit* as an indication that a business is functioning well. When a firm makes a profit, this means that productive factors have been properly employed and corresponding human needs have been duly satisfied. But profitability is not the only indicator of a firm's condition. It is possible for the financial accounts to be in order, and yet for the people — who make up the firm's most valuable asset — to be humiliated and their dignity offended. Besides being morally inadmissible, this will eventually have negative repercussions on the firm's economic efficiency. In fact, the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a *community of persons* who in various ways are endeavouring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Profit is a regulator of the life of a business, but it is not the only one; *other human and moral factors* must also be considered which, in the long term, are at least equally important for the life of a business. [ We have seen that it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called "Real Socialism" leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization. It is necessary to break down the barriers and monopolies which leave so many countries on the margins of development, and to provide all individuals and nations with the basic conditions which will enable them to share in development.
- **Caritas in Veritate 36:**
  - Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of *commercial logic*. This needs to be *directed towards the pursuit of the common good*, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility. Therefore, it must be borne in mind that grave imbalances are produced when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution.
- **Fratelli Tutti 168:**
  - The marketplace, by itself, cannot resolve every problem, however much we are asked to believe this dogma of neoliberal faith. Whatever the challenge, this impoverished and repetitive school of thought always offers the same recipes. Neoliberalism simply reproduces itself by resorting to the magic theories of "spillover" or "trickle" — without using the name — as the only solution to societal problems. There is little appreciation of the fact that the alleged "spillover" does not resolve the inequality that gives rise to new forms of violence threatening the fabric of society. It is imperative to have a proactive economic policy directed at "promoting an economy that favours productive diversity and business creativity"<sup>[140]</sup> and makes it possible for jobs to be created and not cut. Financial speculation fundamentally aimed at quick profit continues to wreak havoc. Indeed, "without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfil its proper economic function. And today this trust has ceased to exist".<sup>[141]</sup> The story did not end the way it was meant to, and the dogmatic formulae of prevailing economic theory proved not to be infallible. The fragility of world systems in the face of the pandemic has demonstrated that not everything can be resolved by market freedom. It has also shown that, in addition to recovering a sound political life that is not subject to the dictates of finance, "we must put human dignity back at the centre and on that pillar build the alternative social structures we need"