

The Good Servant: Catholic Economic Teaching on Government and the Private Sector*

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Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated religious, honorable judges, fellow attorneys, and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ: I am very grateful to have been invited to speak with you today. As we celebrate this Red Mass for the judges, lawyers and civic officials here in the Archdiocese of Saint Louis, we seek the intercession of Saint Thomas More, patron saint of lawyers and politicians.

Sir Thomas More was a devoted husband, a loving father, a generous friend, a gifted writer, a renowned scholar, and a skilled lawyer and judge. He is also remembered as a devoted servant in the court of King Henry VIII in which he held a number of important posts, rising to become Lord Chancellor of the Realm, a position that would be roughly equivalent in our political system to being White House chief-of-staff, Secretary of State, and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court all at once, a position second in power only to the King himself.

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Of course most of all, and in a way that captures all the best qualities that he exhibited in life, Thomas More is remembered today as a *saint* – a man who was devoted to Christ and his Church, and who willingly sacrificed his power, his wealth and security, and ultimately his life out of love for God. Because he would not accede to the Act of Supremacy declaring Henry to be the supreme head of the church in England or take the Oath of Supremacy, renouncing Rome’s authority in ecclesial matters, More was beheaded on Tower Hill, July 6, 1535. As he stood on the scaffold before his execution, he briefly addressed the crowd gathered, telling them that he died “the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”¹

In this simple phrase – “the King’s good servant, but God’s first” – St. Thomas More summarizes the call of Christian discipleship and the proper perspective we must all bring to our daily work – *to be God’s servant first!* As such, in his life and in his death, St. Thomas More is a model for Christian engagement in the world. And this is precisely the vocation that most of us receive from God – to be *in* the world as the followers of Jesus Christ proclaiming the Good News – to be the leaven that makes the bread rise. There are, of course, people who have vocations that are not active in the world – monastic men and women in contemplative communities who

“pray without ceasing.”² While not *active* in the world in the temporal order, they are *engaged* with the world in the order of grace as they pray for the salvation of all humanity – men and women, living and dead. That is a special vocation for which we should all be grateful, one that bears witness to and reminds us of the *last things* – death, judgment, heaven and hell.

Most of us, however, are called to be *in* the world – to address *present things*, even as we keep our eyes fixed on heaven. Specifically, as Christians and as citizens, we are obliged to work for justice and promote the common good – an obligation that is especially meaningful in a democratic society like ours, where a government by, of, and for the people possesses limited constitutional authority to care for the common good, and where the balance is entrusted to the care of non-governmental institutions, including churches and other religious groups. To aid us in the exercise of this responsibility, the Church offers the faithful and all the peoples of the world her social magisterium – a body of papal, episcopal and conciliar texts that offer critical reflection on the economic, political, and cultural problems of the day.

The documents that make up Catholic social teaching address a wide array of topics including the rights of workers and the plight of the poor

and working classes; the nature of property and the responsibility of capital and the need to regulate markets; the nature of family as the first and vital cell of society³ and the need to protect the family in law; the challenges posed by globalization, the role of international bodies, and the need to work for peaceful solutions to conflicts between nation-states; the injustice of abortion – the legal slaughter of the innocent – and other threats to human life posed by euthanasia and capital punishment; and the immorality of racial and ethnic discrimination and the proper treatment of immigrants and refugees.

In speaking of “Catholic social teaching,” it is important to distinguish between those aspects of the teaching that are *binding principles* and those that are *prudential judgments*. Principles are binding insofar as they must be held by the faithful for the sake of salvation. Prudential judgments involve the reasoned application of these principles that allow for considerable latitude and discretion. Statements of Popes and bishops on policy, legislation, and other situational applications of principles provide guidance to the faithful, but they are not binding. Note, however, that the distinctions between binding principles and prudential judgments are not always clear and absolute.⁴ Different legal and policy proposals are

often compatible with a particular binding moral principle. But it is not always so. For example, there is no circumstance or context in which it could be just to deprive any class of persons of the legal protection for their lives which other classes of persons enjoy. Because support for what many today call “pro-choice” laws about abortion necessarily involves willing this departure from legal equality which justice requires, the “pro-choice” position is always gravely wrong.

This distinction between binding principles and prudential judgments is well recognized in the Church’s social magisterium, including the 1986 pastoral letter of the Catholic Bishops of the United States, *Economic Justice for All*;⁵ the *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*, issued in 2002 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;⁶ the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published in 2005 by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace;⁷ and the 2007 document, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States*.⁸ In practice, however, the distinction is not always readily apparent to the reader of such statements.

This can be seen, for example, in the recent letters of Bishops Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, California, and Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairmen of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and the Committee on International Justice and Peace, respectively, urging Congress to resist proposed cuts in hunger and nutrition programs. In their April 16, 2012 letter to the Chairmen of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for Agriculture, Rural Development Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, Bishops Blaire and Pates wrote, "A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects 'the least of these' (Matthew 25)." Here, quoting the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, the Bishops were stating a binding principle of the divine moral law as taught by Christ himself, that is, whether or not we fed the hungry during our lifetime will be one of the criteria by which we are judged at the Last Judgment. Later in the letter they say, "The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly food stamps), received a \$2 billion cut made to the reserve fund in the 2010 child nutrition bill. Restoration of funding is necessary as families continue to struggle with joblessness and poverty." Here, they are not speaking of necessity in the sense that voting for this

program would be necessary for salvation. They are simply making a prudential judgment that this program is a necessary practical means to feed the hungry. However, reasonable minds can come to different conclusions about more effective ways to alleviate hunger.

Because this body of Catholic social teaching stretches well over a hundred years – from the Industrial Revolution to the Information Age, from Leo XIII to Benedict XVI – it has sought to help the world confront new problems that have arisen as history unfolds. Thus, over the decades, different documents in different times have emphasized one or another aspect of this teaching – a teaching that has developed in light of “the signs of the times.”⁹ However, the principles that underlie the social magisterium have not changed, in that these principles are derived from both the natural moral law and the Gospel which reveals the Eternal Word of God, Jesus Christ, who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.”¹⁰

The principles set forth in Catholic social teaching are principles that the Church believes *must* be embodied in the laws, structures, and policies that govern social life, including the economic dimension of that life. But Catholic social teaching does not specify *how* these principles are to be embodied. That is, it does not mandate the means – the specific laws,

structures, and policies – through which justice and the common good are to be brought about.

Catholic social teaching, then, is not a blueprint for the organization of society or a detailed platform for social reform. Indeed, in her social doctrine the Church announces that she “has no models to present”¹¹; she “does not have technical solutions to offer.”¹² Instead, within the principles of morality that Catholic social teaching makes clear, it belongs to the laity “to take the initiative freely and to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which they live.”¹³

The same is true with respect to Catholic teaching on the economy. The precise role of the State in the economy – the manner in which both economic activity is to be regulated and those who are unemployed or unable to provide for themselves are to be cared for – is a question of prudential judgment that different societies will answer in different ways at different times, depending upon the culture and the circumstances of the day. What is not a matter of prudential judgment is the principle at the heart of Catholic social teaching on the economy – that the human person is the source, center and purpose of all economic life¹⁴ such that the economy

is not an end in itself but has only an instrumental value – to uphold the dignity of the human person and aid in human flourishing, that is, in his or her integral development.¹⁵ Recognition of and respect for the dignity of the human person *requires* a system of law that upholds the principles of justice and a political system that is oriented toward the common good.

This idea is given greater clarity in the form of principles that derive from the dignity of the human person and are found in Church’s social magisterium: in the *right to private property* and the *universal destination of goods*; in the *dignity of work* and *the rights of workers*; in the *principle of solidarity* – “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good,”¹⁶ a “sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone”¹⁷ from which we derive the preferential option for the poor;¹⁸ and in the *principle of subsidiarity* – a principle that “fosters freedom and participation through the assumption of responsibility,”¹⁹ a principle that restricts transferring to higher levels of authority those “functions which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies.”²⁰ Still, the idea that animates the entire body of Catholic teaching on economic life, the idea that every economic and political order must strive to possess, is the dignity of the human person as a creature made in

the image and likeness of God. Because every human being is a *person* – a being in relation who is radically connected to every other human being with whom he or she shares the same earth – the political-economic order must be organized in a way that respects human freedom and preserves human dignity. This sometimes calls for enhancing the market and competition, and at other times intervening in the market either to answer a need that the market cannot meet or to prohibit a certain kind of transaction that should never occur. It sometimes calls for various forms of social assistance to help those in need and at other times for policies that push individuals to take responsibility for their lives and to seek a measure of economic independence.

Seen in its totality the Church's social teaching is *both/and*, not *either/or*. So it is not a question of choosing *either* the private sector *or* governmental involvement, but of *both* the private sector *and* the government working together in their appropriate spheres. The word "catholic" means "universal," and as such the Catholic approach to matters is to seek inclusion rather than exclusion of views, options, methods and persons.

This way of looking at things is helpful to keep in mind in the context of our current election campaigns. While not all-encompassing, Catholic social teaching is broad enough to include a variety of approaches to these complex issues, most of which are, as I have said, a matter of prudential judgment, about which reasonable people – including reasonable Catholics – can disagree.

Put another way, with respect to the role of the government in the regulation of the economy and care for the disadvantaged, Catholic social teaching does not propose a moral binary: either a centralized, administrative welfare-state or a laissez faire economy; either, on the one hand a government that occupies a dominant role in the provision of healthcare, the regulation of manufacturing, finance and agriculture, and the enjoyment of a dignified life by those left behind by the market or, on the other hand, a government that has no role to play in the management of these affairs. In responding to the challenges of social life, Catholic social teaching is not *either/or* but *both/and*. It does not dictate one approach or the other. Rather, within the limits established by its foundational principle, Catholic social teaching allows for the formulation of creative

solutions to address problems of poverty, unemployment, healthcare, and financial and industrial regulation.

I wish to be clear: I am not passing judgment on the merits of any candidate's budgetary proposals as matters of public policy. But those who claim that a candidate's prudential judgments on economic matters contradict the principles of Catholic social teaching undermine the good will that is necessary for dialogue within the Church, even as it contributes to the impoverishment of public discourse more broadly in American society. Dialogue within the Church should be a model for others, not a replica of the hyperbole and superficiality that typifies conversation in the public square today.

After we conclude this Red Mass and go back to our daily work tomorrow, let us remember that St. Thomas More was a man who was deeply engaged in the world in which he lived as he sought to serve his king and the men and women of the realm, while also caring for his own soul's sake, and for that he was recognized as a saint and raised to the glory of the altar. This should be our life's ambition – to live with Jesus through all eternity in the endless joy of heaven. Most of us are called to “work out our salvation”²¹ by engaging the world as citizens who work for

justice and the common good. In attending to this most important task – our life’s work – we would do well to study the Church’s social teaching as we welcome the Good News into our hearts.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ E.E. REYNOLDS, ST. THOMAS MORE 299 (1958).

² 1Thessalonians 5:17.

³ Apostolicam actuositatem ¶11.

⁴ Robert J. Spitzer, S.J., “Let Prudence Be Prudence and Doctrine Be Doctrine: The Doctrinal Status of Catholic Social Teaching,” *Catholic Social Teaching and Economics* (Plymouth, Michigan: Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, 2011), 187-198.

⁵ “We do not claim to make these prudential judgments with the same kind of authority that marks our declarations of principle.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the Economy* (Washington, D.C., 1986).

⁶ “Christian Faith has never presumed to impose a rigid framework on social and political questions, conscious that the historical dimension requires men and women to live in imperfect situations, which are also susceptible to rapid change.” Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* ¶ 7 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 15-16.

⁷ “When reality is the subject of careful attention and proper interpretation, concrete and effective choices can be made. However, an *absolute value* must *never* be attributed to these choices because no problem can be solved once and for all.” Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* ¶ 568 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005), 246.

⁸ “Decisions about candidates and choices about public policies require clear commitment to moral principles, careful discernment and prudential judgments based on the values of our faith.” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility from the Catholic Bishops of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB, 2007), ¶ 50.

⁹ Gaudium et Spes ¶ 4.

¹⁰ Hebrews 13:8.

¹¹ Centesimus Annus ¶ 43.

¹² Caritas in Veritate ¶ 9.

¹³ Populorum Progressio ¶ 81.

¹⁴ Gaudium et Spes ¶ 63.

¹⁵ Caritas in Veritate ¶ 36; Centesimus Annus ¶ 49.

¹⁶ Sollicitudo Rei Socialis ¶ 38.

¹⁷ Caritas in Veritate ¶ 38.

¹⁸ See, Thomas J. Paprocki, "Option for the Poor: Preference or Platitude?" *America*, vol. 172, no. 14 (April 22, 1995) 11-14.

¹⁹ Caritas in Veritate ¶ 57.

²⁰ Quadragesimo Anno ¶ 79.

²¹ Philippians 2:12.