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**Pope Francis on Work and Business**

In his encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis insists that an “integral ecology,” designed to care for the earth and the poor, needs a “correct understanding of work,” which includes all purposeful human activity, manual and mental, involving a “modification of existing reality” (125). Drawing on the wisdom of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, Francis notes that God placed Adam and Eve in the garden not only to preserve it but also to make it fruitful (Gn 2:15). This suggests that we ourselves are called to be instruments of God by doing our work well in order to develop the potential inscribed by the Creator in the material world (124). A Christian theology of work is based on our fundamental attitudes toward the world, including both an “awe-filled contemplation of creation,” represented by Francis of Assisi, and a deep respect for manual labor as spiritually meaningful, represented by Benedict of Nursia. We grow spiritually through a fruitful interplay between recollection and work, which imbues our relationship to the world with a “healthy sobriety” and deep reverence (125-126).

According to Francis, work should be the setting for moral and spiritual growth, “where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God” (127). This theology of work is grounded in the teaching of Vatican II that “man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life” (Gs63).

Since we all have a “vocation to work” and find personal fulfillment in our work, it is important to “prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone” (127). In caring for the poor, financial assistance should always be a “provisional solution.” The broader objective should always be to afford them a dignified life through work. In this regard, the pope insists that the worst material poverty is the kind which prevents people from earning a living and deprives them of the dignity of work.

For Francis, a spirituality of work must include the proper role of rest and leisure in an integrated life that enjoys relaxation and festivity. In the United States, there is a tendency to demean rest as unproductive and unnecessary. The pope argues that this outlook actually undercuts the full meaning of work, which must include “a dimension of receptivity and gratuity.” Rest enables us to keep our work in proper perspective so that it does not become empty activism, or foster unfettered greed, or blind us to the rights of others. Francis encourages us to keep Sunday, focused on the Eucharistic celebration of the Resurrection, as a day of rest that illumines the deeper meaning of our whole work week (237).

For a more comprehensive papal theology of work, we have the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* of Pope John Paul II. Nevertheless, we can glean from Pope Francis some helpful insights on work, including the integral connection between respect for the material world and our responsibility to engage in meaningful work which hones our talents and contributes to the spread of God’s reign in the world.

Turning to the position of Pope Francis on business, it is important to remember that Jorge Bergoglio, ordained as a priest in 1965, carried out his ministry in his native Argentina during turbulent economic times. Up until the Great Depression in the 1930s, Argentina enjoyed impressive economic development, ranking in the top ten countries in GDP per capita. After 1962, the country experienced a series of economic problems, including high unemployment, chronic inflation and a huge national debt that culminated in a national default. Bergoglio was well aware of how ordinary people, especially the poor, were hurt by Argentine economic policies, typically called “crony capitalism” by critics.

The criticisms Pope Francis now levels at capitalism reflect his experience of an economic system that served the rich and exploited the poor. For example, he often cites the failures of modern neoliberal economics to serve the common good and the needs of the poor. He insists that we need to reject a “magical conception” of the market, which suggests that problems can be solved simply by increasing the profits of corporations or individuals. More specifically, he criticizes “trickle down“ theories that claim economic growth, fostered by a free market, will inevitably produce greater justice and inclusion. He claims that these theories are unproven and represent “a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system” (EG54).

In a letter to the 2018 meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos Switzerland, Francis notes that global economies, conditioned by an “ambition for profit at all costs,” seem to favor fragmentation and individualism rather than more inclusive community. Recurring financial instabilities produce growing inequalities between those who enjoy a selfish opulent lifestyle and those reduced to “mere cogs in a machine” subject to exploitation. The pope insists that governments have a proper role to play in regulating markets so they are more respectful of individual persons and promote family life.

In his book *The Business Francis Means: Understanding the Pope’s Message on the Economy*, the priest-theologian Martin Schlag claims that the interest of Francis in the world of business and his support for the “good entrepreneur who creates work,” is the “unique contribution” of the pope to the social question. It is true that Francis has lauded the business world: “Business is a noble vocation, directed to producing wealth and improving our world. It can be a fruitful source of prosperity for the areas in which it operates, especially if it sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good”(LS129). He promoted the beatification of a rich Argentine business man who administered his wealth well so as to help those in need to grow. Francis called true entrepreneurs “fundamental figures” in any good economy. They know their workers, sharing their fatigue and their joy of accomplishment. Recognizing the dignity of work, they avoid firing anyone if at all possible. The pope sharply distinguished true entrepreneurs from “speculators,” who do not love their workers but only see them as “a mere means to make profit.” When entrepreneurs are in charge, businesses are friends of the people and the poor. When speculators are in charge, the economy “loses its face” and people are hurt.

In his letter to the 2018 Davos participants, including President Trump, Francis also noted that entrepreneurs play an important role by “increasing the quality of productivity, creating new jobs, respecting labor laws, fighting against public and private corruption, and promoting social justice, together with the fair and equitable sharing of profits.”

The Davos letter taken as a whole provides a balanced outline of the pope’s position on business. It places his praise of enlightened business leaders in the larger context of his passionate care for the poor and marginalized, who suffer under current economic systems, and his conviction that the free market needs social constraints to function more justly and humanely.

Pope Francis, who recognizes the limitations of the Church in addressing complex social issues, has invited economic experts to respond to his major public statements, primarily *Laudato Si*. In response, Robert Whaples, managing editor of the quarterly journal *The Independent* *Review,* organized a conference of generally conservative scholars on the economic views of Pope Francis. He edited the papers in a book*, Pope Francis and the Caring Society* (Independent Institute 2017), that includes a forward by the since deceased Michael Novak and an Introduction by Whaples himself.

Among these conservative economists, there is general agreement that Francis is excessively influenced by the crony capitalism operative in Argentina, and that he does not understand or appreciate the way free markets work in the United States. When he claims that neoliberal economies have hurt the poor, he has in mind the recent history of corruption, inflation, and unemployment in his native country and not the more moderate fluctuations in the U.S. economy. The economists say they share the pope’s concern, if not his intense passion, for the billion people still living in abject poverty, but like to remind him that worldwide poverty is not increasing, as he often says, but is rapidly declining, with two billion persons lifted above the poverty line since 1980, largely due to free market approaches. They tend to agree with his claim that economic inequality is increasing but do not seem to share his concern that this harms the poor.

One contributor, Gabriel Martinez, professor of economics at Ave Maria University, defends Francis and his criticism of trickle-down economics. Noting that Francis is not a Marxist, as some right wing commentators claim, nor an opponent of economic liberty and rising prosperity, Martinez argues that the pope is properly concerned that this economic theory justifies indifference to the poor on the grounds that the free market will eventually take care of them. Other scholars contend that Francis does not appreciate the potential of free markets to make corrections which will benefit those on the margins. The contributors commonly dismiss the pope’s strong attacks on “unfettered markets” and “unbridled capitalism” on the grounds that no existing economic system is actually free of restraints. In fact, for those conservative economists, the problem in the United States is too much regulation and not enough trust in the self-correcting dynamics of the free market.

In this discussion, it is important to remember that Francis speaks as a pastor concerned about those left behind and not as a trained economist. Representing Christian priorities, the pope insists that we should judge free market businesses not just on efficiency and profit but on moral criteria of how they serve the common good and promote integral human development, especially by providing meaningful work.