

A Response to Santelli and Mueller

Daniel K. Finn

I am honored by and grateful for the responses of Anthony Santelli and John D. Mueller. In each case, we agree on a number of issues, but due to the constraints of space, I will focus my comments on our differences.

Santelli often indicates his agreement with portions of my article, but he rarely disagrees with statements there about how a number of neoconservative Catholic scholars claim that their positions are Catholic in spite of their being founded on libertarian principles that conflict with the Catholic tradition. Thus, for example, I criticize Michael Novak for relying on Friedrich Hayek's view of social justice: Novak's reducing it to a virtue of individuals, Hayek's taking it as an assertion about social life and calling it "empty and meaningless" and "a fraud." Santelli simply explains his own position, concluding that "no libertarian in his right mind could deny the existence of social justice in this sense." In this he ignores Hayek's claims, Novak's defense, and my argument that Novak's use of Hayek allows him to defend a view of social justice in conflict with Catholic social thought.

Santelli also sidesteps my arguments about the Catholic rejection of methodological individualism. He says that my critique is "purely semantic and irrelevant," and that entities (institutions, social structures) do not act. However, my article explicitly stated that only persons are actors. Institutions nonetheless have causal effects—enablements and restrictions—originally emergent from human action but, once established, operating independently of the actions of the individuals. It would seem that he himself may so thoroughly embody methodological individualism that he cannot imagine the alternative, embodied

in the Catholic tradition and often referred to as a more “organic” understanding of society than libertarians can endorse.

Similarly, he says that “I am not culpable as an American if America engages in an unjust war.” This is too individualistic for Catholic social thought. We have a joint responsibility for the institutions we participate in, benefit from, and sustain. Thus Catholic social thought recognizes that we are to some degree culpable if our democratically elected leaders start an unjust war. Libertarians may think they are off the moral hook, but the Catholic tradition says we all are to some extent responsible (with those supporting the war more responsible than others, of course) and that we have an obligation to try to change the situation. Recall that many German Christians denied their own culpability for actions of the Third Reich.

Santelli asserts that “laws should ensure that people have the *ability* to do what they should; they should not *force* people to do what they should.” This leads him to reject, for example, the traditional Catholic endorsement of government’s role in collecting taxes to help meet the needs of those who cannot meet their own. However, human institutions are more complicated than his assertion implies. No one can literally force you to *do* anything. Force can only restrict you physically; the rest is the coercive power of a threat. Even the mugger whose gun is pointed at your chest is not forcing you, but he is threatening to use force: he will kill you if you do not decide to turn over your money. Although laws cannot force people to act in certain ways, the Catholic tradition has always seen government as appropriately using threats (and force as a penalty, if necessary) to collect taxes or to prevent speeding and corporate fraud, or to preclude the sale of votes, children, and ground-to-air missiles.

Essential to Santelli’s position—that the law must enable people to meet their needs—is the proposal in note 8: a one-time grand redistribution of wealth (the Catholic part), after which no further redistributions would be allowed (the libertarian part). The key here is that each person would be given some amount of “promised land” on which they could depend to support themselves if they cannot find a job. Santelli seems aware that this redistribution is politically impossible in the United States, and so he seems to view Catholic social thought as far more abstract and sectarian than the very practical-yet-principled approach that characterizes the tradition. Many people working in large cities would have to own their piece of promised land far beyond commuting distance. Unemployed managers, computer programmers, and hairdressers would be presumed to also have agricultural skills and somehow possess the wherewithal to build a home and buy seed and farm tools. During lengthy periods of unemployment, they would

have to shift from an urban middle-class lifestyle to the poverty of subsistence farmers, waiting to find a job to return to middle-class life again back in the city.

Santelli often uses the very Catholic term *human flourishing*, and he talks of “the minimum of meeting their basic needs—physical, social, and spiritual,” but his fallback position—urban workers becoming subsistence farmers during unemployment—seems to define the minimum of human flourishing as having some food to eat, perhaps without shelter, education, or medical care (none of which a plot of land can guarantee). Furthermore, what of the elderly, orphans, or the mentally handicapped who have no one to care for them? It is a right-wing illusion that private charity would step in for government; currently Catholic Charities and Lutheran Social Services in the United States receive more than half of their annual income from government sources. Santelli’s system would seem to leave many groups of people with unmet needs.

It certainly seems that Santelli fails in his effort to erect a position that is both Catholic and libertarian. He hopes to squeeze the expansive Catholic notion of human flourishing into the pigeonhole of the libertarian prohibition against harm to others. Life’s dynamism (both market dynamics and natural chance) will continually generate conditions of extreme need for some, and this has led all modern popes and national bishops’ conferences and the vast majority of Catholic scholars to call for some degree of ongoing governmental redistribution to meet human needs. Santelli rejects this fundamental building block of Catholic social thought.

John D. Mueller declares that his aim is to deal with “the substance of Finn’s controversy” but spends only about one quarter of his essay directly engaging my work. Nearly half of that deals not with the article at hand but with a book I wrote several years ago. Apparently out of his own intense interest in economic theory, he mistakes a subordinate element in that book (its treatment of “the four problems of economic life”) as “its core,” and he inexplicably asserts that “Finn explains that he adapted his broader conceptual framework” from Frank Knight, even though I referred to Knight’s list of the problems of economic life only to reject it as inadequate.

Mueller says three things directly about my article. First, he dismissively claims that there are not nine heresies, but only one, because they “all boil down to adopting Adam Smith’s assumption that ‘every individual . . . intends only his own gain.’” This is a mysterious assertion. He does not explain how complex moral arguments among philosophers and theologians about methodological individualism, the character of justice, the extent of property rights, and the proper role of governments in markets can be properly subsumed under a single

empirical generalization about individual intentions. His lack of interest in ethical questions would not seem to be sufficient warrant for calling them “needlessly obfuscatory.”

Second, Mueller takes me to task for my description of commutative justice as not encompassing the giving of gifts. As evidence, he quotes from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Contracts are subject to commutative justice which regulates exchanges between persons in accordance with a strict respect for their rights.” However, in this he assumes that gift-giving is “an exchange,” while a pure gift is given with no expectation of anything in return.

Third, Mueller also asserts that I misunderstand distributive justice because I identify it with the traditional Christian principle that owning and using the goods of the earth must ensure that the needs of all are met. He objects that this “would logically require that God did not intend all mankind to enjoy the earth’s goods but rather that *all goods be common goods*.” He offers no evidence for this deductive leap and implicitly ignores the views of his most respected authority, Thomas Aquinas, who taught (ST II-II, q. 66) that God “ordained material things to meet human needs” and so a legal system of personal ownership must be structured so everyone’s needs are met, a test Santelli hopes to pass with his grand redistribution followed by a libertarian refusal to redistribute further. Thomas needed no such grand redistribution, and yet he rejected common property—because he relied on both individual sharing and a civil government that collected taxes. The Catholic tradition since has continuously endorsed a role for government in this meeting of needs. For example, Pope Benedict XVI, following his predecessors, warns against “abandoning mechanisms of wealth redistribution” that governments currently have at their disposal (*Caritas in Veritate*, 32). Mueller seems unaware of such official teaching, or else he is actively practicing the sort of cafeteria Catholicism that I criticize in the article.

I have great appreciation for the economic insights of Thomas Aquinas, but that is not what my article addressed. It criticized arguments by many neoconservative Catholic scholars who often describe their moral positions as Catholic in spite of their dependence on libertarian assumptions that are in basic conflict with Catholic modes of analysis. For some reason, Mueller interprets my article as a discussion about economic theory. The conversation he wants to have is a good one. It is just not the one to which he was asked to respond. Perhaps he and I can have that conversation over lunch some day.

In sum, I see two basic problems in our interchange. First, while there is no shame in holding positions that are not Catholic, both Santelli and Mueller claim their positions are Catholic when some of them are not. Santelli does not provide references to official Catholic statements to justify his claim, and Mueller’s



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limited use of them would seem to be faulty. In my article, I frequently referred to papal statements, but not because only popes can speak for this tradition and not because I think the principles involved “are inaccessible to reason alone.” Testing controversial views against authorities in a tradition may not tell you whether the views are true but will tell whether the views fit in that tradition. The modern popes are, in the Catholic intellectual world, the most authoritative voices on what that tradition means for economic life today.

Second, I regret that neither scholar said much about whether I was right or wrong in applying this same critique to several Catholic scholars, explicitly named in the article. Perhaps others can engage that question in future issues of the *Journal of Markets & Morality*.