

Freedom as the Call of Being: Restoring the Foundations of Ethical Enterprise

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This article confronts ideological thinking in the realm of political economy by exposing the centuries-old imprudence of abandoning authentic philosophical inquiry. The way forward beyond socialism and capitalism requires that the true meaning of freedom be reappropriated as the basis of all economic activity. Being calls us to loving fellowship with God and to the use of our gifts in service of the common good. Enterprise is a vocation to love. The good of others is to be willed in what is produced, in how it is made, and in the process by which it is exchanged.

Introduction

The central questions of economics are what to produce, for whom, and how to produce it. The matter is, of course, central to human affairs. As corporeal beings we must win our way in the world by provisioning for ourselves as any organism does. We are more than material or even living and conscious beings in nature, however. Human persons live not just by instinct but by rationality. We think ourselves through the question of political economy, as it were, and our enterprises (those organizations we charge with the “solving” of the provisioning problem), rest on, or originate from, these thoughts.

Because the exercise of freedom is at the core of being human, the formation of markets that allow buyers and sellers to freely engage in trade would surely seem to be an outworking or embodiment of right thinking in economic matters.

It is not unfounded to hope that well-functioning markets would deliver the outcomes desired of an effective provisioning system in the following ways:

- People have access to the goods they need to live a dignified existence.
- Decent work that uplifts the human personality is available to all people who need employment outside of the home.
- This work is done in a spirit of communal solidarity shaping institutions that will extend the work into the future.
- Surpluses are generated that are adequate to a continuation or reproduction of the effort of the society.
- The integrity of the life support systems of the planet is respected at every point in the economic process.

Yet we know that our current economic world suffers from a grossly uneven distribution of resources (hundreds of millions of people live in a state of utter deprivation while hundreds of millions of people contract physical ill-health from being in a state of overabundance), a paralyzing financial instability (untenable levels of indebtedness across much of the industrialized world), an immoral subjection of vulnerable people to indecent working conditions (preteen boys in Bangladesh endure hellish conditions to break apart the world's exhausted shipping fleet), and a senseless destruction of the natural world (fully one-quarter of the world's mammal species face extinction due to human takeover of their habitat). The political, economic, and environmental disorder being witnessed is preceded by disorder in our minds. What is imperative is to pinpoint the root cause of this failure in our thinking.

It is proposed that both the diagnosis of what has gone wrong in our thinking and the prescription of the way forward to sound thinking can be uncovered by examining the two competing concepts of freedom presented by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*: "We must appropriate the true meaning of freedom, which is not an intoxication with total autonomy, but a response to the call of being, beginning with our own personal being."¹

What is meant by the call of being and how would a renewal of this meaning restore the moral and cultural foundations of an ethical marketplace? What caused an erosion of this understanding and how does this lapse from authentic liberty into license stand in the way of the application of virtue in the conduct of enterprise? In sum, what is the basis of these two concepts of human freedom and how do these different understandings necessarily shape the conditions of economic life?

The Modern Mind: Political Economy in an Age of Ideology

No folly seems more characteristic of our time than the desire to establish a firm and meaningful temporal order, but without God, its necessary foundation.²

The modern world has chosen to go it alone without God. “Ideological rejection of God”³ characterizes our time but “without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is.”⁴ Little wonder then that the exclusion of God results in the “inhuman humanism.”⁵

It is not an accident, however, that the present age has landed in secularism. We flounder in “an illusion of our own omnipotence”⁶ because of a nearly four-century-cultural drift inaugurated by certain molders of the modern mind and sustained by many other intellectuals acting against reason. Understanding the disjunction in thought that put us on our current course is critical if a humane marketplace is going to be built.

It is the province of philosophy and, beyond philosophy, theology to take up the question of the ultimate grounding of our existence. From Aristotle, four centuries before Christ’s birth, to Aquinas in the thirteenth century, the greatest minds, operating from the basic assumption that through thought reality can be understood, devoted themselves to gaining metaphysical and moral insight.

In the sixteenth century, a momentous shift took place. Thinkers turned away from reason to the imagination.⁷ Philosophy was supplanted by artistic vision. Reflection would no longer be on the world of real existence that men have not made or constructed. The artist can make his canvas conform to the picture he holds in his mind and those working with ideas could do the same. Rather than having our thoughts answer to reality, the assumption was that we could will into being any concept we have about our lives and the universe we live in. Philosophy ceased to be true to its etymological roots; it ceased to be a love of wisdom. As a result, we live by schemas we invent whole cloth in our minds. We have given ourselves over to “popularized fancies” that do not “encompass man, whole and entire, nor affect his inner being.”⁸

Quite simply, we have lost touch with reality. The self, regarded as pure consciousness, is free to create its own reality. Thought becomes the warden of being. The only world left is the world we make with our ideas. Human beings take God’s place in determining value and the nature of being. There is no “meaning that is not of our own making” to discover.⁹

Ideological thinking empties the universe of ontological goodness, destroys the anthropological underpinnings of ethics, and plunges human culture into a state of nihilism.

If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which a person achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people.... If one does not acknowledge transcendent truth, then the force of power takes over.¹⁰

While the language of ethics remains in use in the culture, it does not bring about a moral renewal. This happens for a number of reasons. First, words such as *justice* no longer have the same meaning for everyone, thus making dialogue or joint exploration to uncover truth well nigh impossible. Second, rights talk, disguised as legitimate moral discourse, in the absence of a transcendental foundation is nothing more than the “unlimited and indiscriminate”¹¹ assertion of arbitrary demands. Nothing is *really* owed to anyone. Utilitarianism is another smokescreen that does nothing to salvage the situation. Our moral lives are not a mathematical problem to be solved. If rights are conferred and not discovered, then they can be taken away by the same body that grants them. Finally, respect for the rights of others can linger on from the moral capital that has been laid down by the earlier rejected worldview of metaphysical and moral realism, but once this heritage is spent, all that is left to guide us is pure desire. “*Mere license*” remains.¹²

In the realm of political economy, unbound freedom delivers totalitarian rule. Domination is sought through the power that wealth confers (capitalism) or through state power (socialism). Both regimes fail to properly order the world’s goods because neither of them starts out from an understanding of the real, whole nature of man.

In 1891 Pope Leo XIII wrote that “socialism ... is to be utterly rejected” and presciently foretold what would come about if socialism was adopted: “The equality conjured up by the Socialist imagination would, in reality, be nothing but uniform wretchedness and meanness for one and all without distinction.”¹³ Subsequent popes would continue to be scathing in their indictment of the ideology: “[Communism holds] doctrines which seek by violence and bloodshed the destruction of all society.... [Unopposed, the way is prepared] for the overthrow and ruin of the social order.”¹⁴ Compromise between Marxism and Christianity is “impossible.”¹⁵

To flesh out the basis for this unequivocal condemnation, it is necessary first of all to provide the definition of the phenomenon. Pope Leo XIII gives it as follows:

Socialists ... contend that it is necessary to do away with private possessions of goods and in its place to make the goods of individuals common to all, and that the men who preside over a municipality or who direct the entire state should act as administrators of these goods ... [thereby] dividing wealth and benefits equally among the citizens.¹⁶

The ideology fails because each person is unique and is given the gift of freedom. Radically unequal endowments between people will lead to unequal results. Forced equality of outcomes works against human nature itself and “all struggling against nature is in vain.”¹⁷ When human persons are not required to exercise economic initiative, the human personality is stunted in its growth and the wellsprings of wealth are dried up. Socialism leads to inefficiency and privation wherever it is practiced.

The functions of the state are also perverted when it steps in to do the work that only individuals, families, and private associations can do. The human person is not simply “an element, a molecule within the social organism.”¹⁸ Individuals have the right to something of their own. The seventh commandment prohibiting theft would make no sense if they did not. The state acts unjustly in violation of this commandment in abolishing private property. True wealth and prosperity cannot be built on injustice. Neither can they be built on social disharmony, yet this is what the promotion of class warfare leads to.

The deepest root causes of the ascendance of socialism are philosophical materialism and atheism. The human person is understood on the basis of material production alone. There is not a place for God because there are no higher goods than the production of wealth. People find it hard to accept the spiritual void left in the wake of these ideas so the ideology must be forcefully imposed. Such compulsion adds to the alienation people experience. Pope John Paul II offers a deep explanation of socialism’s failure: “Marxism had promised to uproot the need for God from the human heart, but the results have shown that it is not possible to succeed in this without throwing the human heart into turmoil.”¹⁹

Not unlike socialism, capitalism, the society that arises when capital accumulation is taken to be the ultimate end of the dominant institution of that social order,²⁰ is also materialistic, secularistic, and totalitarian. People who set out in business, as Milton Friedman says they ought to, “to make as much money as they can,” corrupt the economic ideal, pervert the right use of money.²¹ Catholic social doctrine is equally clear on this: “A theory that makes profit the exclusive norm and ultimate end of economic activity is morally unacceptable.”²²

What distinguishes capitalism as a ruling order is the place assigned to gain. Other regimes have been able to generate surpluses—that is, material goods

over and above that required for the maintenance and reproduction of society. In these regimes, the value of the surplus was seen in the use to which it could be put—for example, displaying the regime’s might, constructing religious edifices, consuming luxuries. In capitalism, the surplus is used to generate more surplus. Gain is sought as an end in itself. The means became the ultimate end. Money dislodges God as being of primary importance in men’s hearts.

The search for more in the regime of capitalism is relentless. New surpluses are continually put to use to generate more surplus. This is capitalism’s essential nature and it began working its way out as a social reality at the same time that the denial of a moral reality independent of our thoughts was taking hold. Avarice was given a free reign. A science of chrematistics would eventually arise to provide the warrant for this *never-ending* pursuit of more.

Because more can only ever be fulfilled by all, the will is to an unreachable economic totality. The real motives directing economic affairs must be discerned: “Free competition is dead: economic dictatorship has taken its place. Unbridled ambition for domination has succeeded the desire for gain.”²³

Other institutions are coerced by the power of commercial enterprises to do their bidding, to tailor their own practices and ideals to the aims and needs of business. Especially significant is the influence economic actors have on those holding political office since the state is charged with upholding justice and the common good. Pope Pius XI would go so far as to say that the state has become “a slave, bound over to the service of human passion and greed.”²⁴

Every single aspect of human life in society is examined for its potential as a profit-generating activity. Everything becomes a marketable commodity—even goods that by their nature ought never to be bought and sold. All the stops are pulled out to turn things that have always been received as gifts into items that must now be paid for.

Labor, too, is something to be bought and sold. The worker is a commodity like any other. Because the purpose of being in business is to maximize financial margins, however, and because labor is a cost against those margins, it becomes rational to reduce the money spent employing people to a bare minimum. This can be done by paying them as little as possible, a practice antithetical to the generosity of Jesus, or by reducing the need for a human presence through automation. This creates the intractable problem of technological unemployment. In the regime of capitalism, tens of millions of people lack access to productive resources or gainful employment. The technological system does not need them, indeed, it desires their absence. Even though unemployment causes “great psychological and spiritual suffering” modern industry has no answer for the scourge.²⁵

If the human person is merely a factor of production, a mere tool in the profit-making process, then it is not surprising that work is designed for them without any thought as to the “welfare of their souls” or “their higher interests.”²⁶ Capitalism is humanly inadequate because it holds things to be of more importance than people. Pope Pius XI summarizes the aberration: “Bodily labour . . . has everywhere been changed into an instrument of strange perversion: for dead matter leaves the factory ennobled and transformed, where men are corrupted and downgraded.”²⁷

Conflict is endemic. In what should be a harmonious endeavor, labor and ownership clash, like “two armies engaged in combat” over wages and working conditions.²⁸ The envy systematically cultivated by the commercial world to keep people unsatisfied with what they have also disrupts social unity. Everyone’s desire to have more runs into everyone else’s desire for the same.

The key criterion in deciding what to bring to market is *whatever* will sell, or more accurately, *whatever* can be *made* to sell. This need not be something useful to, or uplifting of, the purchaser. The mission is profitability. It is not answering “real needs.”²⁹ More money can often be made by preying on human frailty, by exploiting human weakness, so the “lowest human passions” are intentionally aroused as a business strategy.³⁰ Advertising bombards people with propaganda to keep them consuming what is produced.³¹

All means of wealth acquisition—speculation, rent seeking, financial shadiness—are held to be good. Competitive advantage can be gained by not accepting responsibility for negative externalities generated by the firm. Privatizing the profits and commonizing the costs in this way ignores “the social character of economic life, social justice and the common good.”³² Legitimate financial success is overstated. Another way this game is played is to dispose of costs onto future generations. In addition to this, the concentration of economic resources in gigantic corporations allows these economic entities to exclude others from entering the market in the hopes of monopoly profits. Competitors are bought up. The profit margins of suppliers are squeezed to nullity. Vexatious lawsuits are filed against would-be entrants. Patents are taken out not to protect one’s discoveries but to restrict the inventiveness of others. Yearly advertising budgets in the billions of dollars act as a significant barrier to entry.

All of this results in a moral ratcheting down. Those “who pay the least heed to the dictates of conscience” are able to crush “more cautious competitors.”³³ The anonymity offered by the limited liability corporation dulls a sense of responsibility. People have to struggle to retain their virtue within the “structures of sin” that develop in capitalism.³⁴

These structures are not easy to modify or overturn. A “devouring usury” is at the heart of the struggle for profits.³⁵ This means there is a commitment to an infinite expansion of production because the last money borrowed must be paid off. Unlimited economic growth consumes “the resources of the earth” in an “excessive and disordered way.”³⁶ The natural world is senselessly destroyed.

As with its ideological companion, socialism, what is missing in capitalism is a comprehensive picture of the human person and an acknowledgement of “God’s prior and original gift of the things that are.”³⁷ In the absence of a realistic metaphysics and philosophical psychology, objectively improper “consumer attitudes and lifestyles” are created.³⁸ People are “ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications.” In our provisioning system their “one solicitude” is to obtain their daily bread in any way they can.³⁹

There is an old joke about a drunk losing his keys at the door but looking for them under the streetlight some distance away “because the light is better over here.” This temptation must be avoided if an economic world worthy of what we are as human beings is to be created. Having more does not redeem the human condition because man is made for the supernatural and the eternal. Our economic striving and the resultant economic structures ought to reflect this fact. For this to happen, a sound metaphysical and moral foundation for enterprise must be restored. Undertaking a Christian reflection on the “meaning of man’s pilgrimage through history” can deliver the necessary ground for establishing free markets with solidarity and sustainability.⁴⁰

Christian Humanism: The Essential Elements⁴¹

I am the way, the truth, and the light. No one comes to the Father except through me.⁴²

The modern world and its economies are in trouble because of a “lack of thinking.”⁴³ Ideological commitments have destroyed rationality itself. If there is to be any progress, reality must once again become the measure of the human mind and not the other way around.⁴⁴ Because “faith builds upon and perfects reason,”⁴⁵ both these wings of the human spirit are called on to uncover the truth about our being and our actual position in the order of existence. A basic attitude of receptivity is needed⁴⁶ to appropriate the Christian understanding of being and of human personal being.

The Christian worldview is theocentric. At its heart is an acknowledgement that we are not the cause of our existence but that we were brought into being, as is all of creation, by the loving action of a Triune God.⁴⁷ The important distinction

to note is that God has necessary existence while our existence is contingent. It is out of sheer goodness that God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, chose to create.

Human beings are the crowning glory of God's creative work in the universe. We have been willed into existence by God, formed in the very likeness of God, and deliberately designed as male and female. The vocation of being human is to come to the fullest development of the distinctive human powers of intellect and will by knowing truth and loving goodness. The supreme truth is God and the supreme goodness is God.⁴⁸ Therefore, the ultimate purpose in life is to know God and to love God, because our "immortal soul"⁴⁹ destines us eternally, to enjoy God forever. God made human beings for loving fellowship with himself. Indeed, God created the universe to enter into this love relationship with humankind. The cosmos comes first in time but not in divine intention.

If God was to relate to us in love, however, he had to leave us free to reject our divine destiny. Catholic teaching says that our first parents tragically decided to do just this and that their fall from goodness has been transmitted to all subsequent generations.⁵⁰ God's purpose in creation was to have human beings share his inner life of self-giving love, but God could not compel this association. It had to be freely chosen.

Pride turns us away from God and the natural moral law "etched"⁵¹ on our hearts, but God does not leave us in this lapsed state. In another act of absolute love, God provides the way by which we can reach the ultimate end for which we were created. God sends his Son, the second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, as "Redeemer"⁵² and "Savior."⁵³ In Jesus, God puts himself into human hands and suffers a humiliating death on the Cross to bear humanity's transgressions. Jesus' resurrection completes God's saving plan. God's shocking response of love enduring to the end reveals his essence.⁵⁴

It remains for human beings to accept God's invitation to a new life of grace lived in intimacy with the Holy Spirit. It is this relationship to God in love that sustains the Christian in his existence and elevates his nature to a supernatural level.⁵⁵

What it means to be a human person takes on a deeper, fuller meaning. Freedom is participation in the very being of God through grace. We can look above the mundane to the divine to see what our personhood should be. Jesus realizes humanity perfectly. In doing so he explains our humanity to us; something we cannot do for ourselves because we did not create ourselves. The goal of the Christian life to be nothing less than Christlike becomes entirely understandable. Imitating Jesus brings us to the perfect freedom that was naturally his. God teaches us "through the Son what fraternal charity is."⁵⁶ This means that Christian

disciples must be prepared to take up the Cross because Jesus showed his love by laying down his life for others.

Catholic Social Thought: The Basic Principles

The Church's social doctrine ... is based on man's creation "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27), a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms.⁵⁷

The social teachings of the Church have their basis in natural moral law or in the law of our being. As a proximate endeavor, the fulfillment of political economic aims must abide by or build on the truths of metaphysics, philosophical psychology, and ethics. That is, human nature constituted by matter and spirit is "normative for culture."⁵⁸ A good social order "conforms to the moral order."⁵⁹

The prescription Catholic social doctrine gives for how the goods of the world ought to be ordered is predicated on the deeply social nature of our being. Human life is always life-in-community. A full human life requires material necessities and moral, social, intellectual, and spiritual progress that cannot be achieved in isolation. The social life is necessary for our perfection.

As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance.⁶⁰

"*A metaphysical interpretation of the 'humanum'*" discloses that associations of greater to lesser intimacy are demanded by reality.⁶¹ The first form of communion between persons, instituted by God by design, is the partnership of man and woman. God is the author of marriage, which is the indissoluble union of a man and a woman ordered to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of children. It is the original cell of social life, existing prior to and above all other levels of social organization and is deserving of recognition as such. The family constitutes nothing less than the foundation of society.

Beyond the family is the local or civic community. This encompasses all the associations or groups intermediary between the family and the state. Business enterprises fit in at this level but so do unions, social and cultural organizations, and private societies, to name a few. A richly textured social life arises because man by nature seeks to associate.

The political community overarches all, ideally providing a stability that allows for harmonious living among citizens of the polis. In today’s globalized world, coordination among states is required. Pope Benedict advocates for a *reformed* United Nations organization to manage “the unrelenting growth of global interdependence” to achieve a good “international ordering” of the “family of nations.”⁶² Figure 1 captures this series of naturally nested communities.

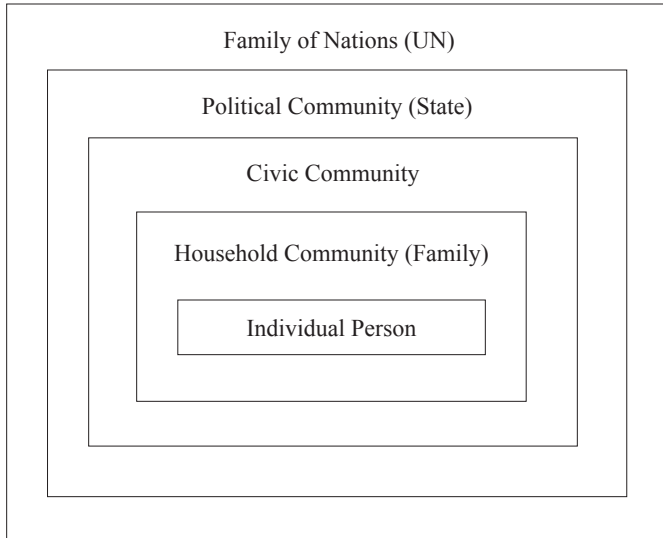


Figure 1
Basic Social Communities

The good of the human person as a citizen or a member of a community is the common good of the human society in which he lives, where the common good is understood to be the social order that facilitates every person to attain his or her perfection. The common good is not in opposition to any individual person’s good, for it is precisely in the social order that the individual develops. Virtue is not achieved in isolation but through participation in the ordered social whole. Far from there being an inherent incompatibility between the individual and the society, they can be seen to be complementary—that is, they exist for one another. The individual person develops in society or by contributing to society, and society exists for the development of the person. Pope Benedict XVI describes this beautifully and profoundly:

The human community does not absorb the individual, annihilating his autonomy, as happens in various forms of totalitarianism, but rather values him all the more because the relation between individual and community is a relation between one totality and another. Just as a family does not submerge the identities of its individual members . . . so too the unity of the human family does not submerge the identities of individuals, peoples, and cultures, but makes them more transparent to each other and links them in their legitimate diversity.⁶³

Self-sacrifice for the common good is not the denial of self but is self-fulfillment. Practicing *agape* love, willing the good of others, is not the diminishment of our selves but is the perfection of our personhood:⁶⁴ “It is through the free gift of self that man truly finds himself.”⁶⁵

Solidarity is the fundamental principle of the Catholic view of social and political organization that operationalizes charity or brings it to bear in creating social reality. Pope John Paul II defines the virtue of solidarity as “*a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good*; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are *all* really responsible for *all*.”⁶⁶ This expansiveness of our obligation to others can be understood if the profound depth at which human fellowship exists in the Christian worldview can be grasped. The human race forms a unity because of its common origin (created by God), its common nature (each person is an embodied spirit), its common dwelling place (life on earth), its common mission (salvation of souls), its supernatural end (God), and the common means for attaining this end (Christ’s redemption was for all people). The ultimate and unshakeable basis for human solidarity is God, made incarnate in the body of Christ. Practically, it means we can never be “indifferent to the lot of another member of the human family.”⁶⁷

The principle of subsidiarity is closely linked with solidarity and must remain so. The key idea of subsidiarity is that the internal life of each community should be respected—that is, a community or social body of a higher order should not do for a community of lower order what it should do for itself. Subsidiarity finds its justification in love. It is not an act of caring to do something for another person that the person should do for himself: “Subsidiarity respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others.”⁶⁸

Subsidiarity also ensures that solidarity, the moral-organic bond providing unity to the communities naturally formed by human beings will be realized. The two virtues must be taken together because the formation of community is not a technical problem to be solved once and for all but a moral struggle to be faced with as much equanimity as possible. Human community is only established if

it is desired, generated, and nourished by the people who form the community. Said another way, community can only thrive if the people of the community value it and are disposed morally to make it work. Subsidiarity leaves people to this essential work. Solidarity holds everyone's efforts together.

Justice must also be present. In its absence, a stable social order is simply not possible. If people are not rendered what is due them, social breakdown inevitably ensues. Justice is merely the "minimum measure" of charity and is completed by "gratuitousness, mercy, and communion."⁶⁹ Thus, while justice is the basic social virtue that enables us to shoulder the responsibilities of social life, we must go beyond desert if we are to emulate God's love.

The Catholic vision of the economy is not just for a better-regulated capitalism. Jesus' clear instruction in the Sermon on the Mount is that we "cannot serve God and wealth."⁷⁰ Jesus did not say that we should not, or that it would be difficult, but that we *could not*. It is an impossibility not unlike the impossibility of simultaneously taking both paths when reaching a fork in the road. Capitalism can only be healed by addressing the pathology of purpose that lies at its heart. Catholic social thought offers the remedy: "The perfect order which the Church preaches ... places God as the first and supreme end of all created activity, and regards all created goods as mere instruments under God, to be used only in so far as they help towards the attainment of our supreme end."⁷¹

Particular economic aims must be linked with this universal teleological order. If they were, then a "new order of economic productivity, socially responsible and human in scale"⁷² would result. Such an economic system would need to be renamed. We might speak of "a society of free work, of enterprise and of participation."⁷³

How can such a healthy socioeconomic order be built? How can the basic principles of Catholic social thought be implemented to bring about a system of responsible free enterprise?

The Conduct of Enterprise: A Vocation to Love

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.⁷⁴

Christian humanism holds that we were made in love and for love; that our lives are a vocation to divine charity. The twofold commandment to love, which "synthesizes the entire law,"⁷⁵ is to be fulfilled in enterprise as well. We are to

will the good of others in our organizational life just as we do in our personal life. Because a company is a community of human persons,⁷⁶ love must be extended in the practice of management and form the firm.

The subject and end of every social institution, including economic enterprise, is the human person. Institutions exist to elevate man because in the Catholic worldview man is a high and holy mystery, made in God's own image. As such, he is infinitely more worthy than any material goods that might be produced or the organizational entities created to generate that production. Benedict XVI explicitly states this: The "*primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity.*"⁷⁷

The justification of an enterprise is the correspondence of its economic activity with God's plan for man. Capital resources are to assist in the process of sanctification but are not to be thought of as an end in themselves: "Profit . . . [is] a means for achieving human and social ends."⁷⁸ The legitimate *telos* of every work community is the common good.

Of primary importance is what is being produced or supplied. Enterprises ought to make a contribution to human flourishing by what they bring into being. Material goods are meant to be a means to our development. What we have should help us to realize our destiny, which ultimately is spiritual not merely material. Although we are in the world, we are not of it, having been created for eternal happiness with God. Economic production should not deflect people from this end. The "material and instinctive" dimensions of our being should be subordinated to our "interior and spiritual"⁷⁹ ones. The goods and services provided by commerce should *really* be goods and services, not "bads" and disservices, when human wellbeing in its totality is considered.

The proper objective of marketing is to identify the people who would benefit from these goods and services and provide them with the information they need to make prudent decisions. If the truth about these products cannot be communicated honestly and openly, then the chances are good that the firm is treading on thin ice ethically. Promotional efforts need to do even more today. They need to encourage people to simplify their lives both to reduce the environmental impact of consumption and to help people find a place for leisure and prayer. Business should aid in the shift to lifestyles where consumer choices and financial decisions are determined by "the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth."⁸⁰ The pursuit of wisdom must replace acting on hedonistic impulses.

Goods and services are produced by people using material means. Labor takes precedence over capital in the process because of human dignity. To look on labor as another commodity to be bought and sold at the service of capital expansion

is a basic moral perversion. It is to give dead capital priority over living human personhood. Laborers must not be “treated like any other factor of production.”⁸¹

People ought to be given meaningful work that utilizes and develops their higher faculties. Responsibility for managing the enterprise would then be broadly diffused. Employees would rightly be seen as associates or partners in the venture. Proper attention should be paid to the work practices in place. The hours of work required, the physical demands put on the worker, and the safety conditions should be humane. Love can never countenance work environments that are harmful to the physical health and moral integrity of the people working in them.

People are owed a living wage for their work. It is only in families that the human race perpetuates itself, so families must at a minimum have their material needs met. Parental requests ought to be accommodated to the greatest extent possible. Management should work flexibly with each individual and family, fostering personal and professional relationships that make a good life for employees and their families possible, thereby contributing to the building up of the basic social structures of our existence. That is, love is to be expressed *in* our families but also *to* all families. Firms have an obligation to put in place policies under which the family can more easily fulfill its mission.

Ethics inheres in all economic decisions. Those owning and managing commercial undertakings, the decision makers in an enterprise, have an obligation to consider the impact their decisions have on the broader social whole encompassing their operations: “*Business management cannot concern itself only with the interest of the proprietors, but must assume responsibility for all the other stakeholders who contribute to the life of the business: the workers, the clients, the suppliers of various elements of production, the community of reference.*”⁸²

Today, the environment presents itself as a particularly salient community of reference. Our love is to extend to the natural world as well. We have an obligation to be good stewards of God-given creation, maintaining it in its integrity, and protecting it by opening it up to God through our own sanctification. Our covenant with the environment should mirror the creative love of God.

As demanding as the sum of these responsibilities is, it really comprises a moral minimum. Christianity goes the “second mile.”⁸³ God’s love seeks and suffers in order to save and this is the love that Christians are called to “pour forth.”⁸⁴

Good employment opportunities can be provided to the disabled or hard to employ. Information can be volunteered to legislators if it would aid them in making regulations, even if this is not required by law. Leadership can be shown in building an industry consensus around abolishing unjust practices or achieving positive social change. Human ingenuity and capital resources can be applied to

address pressing environmental problems and thereby help to bequeath to future generations a world not depleted of its resources.

A life in business is a “ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs.”⁸⁵ The work of enterprise is to continually will one’s greatest contribution to the common good. God’s original gift of the earth was to the whole of mankind. Private property rights are not absolute, therefore, but serve this more primordial reality. There is room on this earth “for everybody to live with dignity.”⁸⁶ It is our duty, our obligation in friendship, to use the gift of our lives to ensure that all God’s children have a place at the “table of the common banquet.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

The vocation of business can be entered into in good conscience. In *Centesimus Annus* John Paul II gives a paean to entrepreneurship. The important virtues of industriousness, diligence, prudence, reliability, foresight, courage, patience, trustworthiness, and truthfulness, he stresses among others, are apt to be called upon in initiating any substantial economic undertaking. Our being calls us to be enterprising in providing for ourselves and our loved ones and neighbors. When private initiative is lacking, political tyranny and stagnation prevail. These are the stakes of not accepting the burden of freedom.

The proper place of material development in the Christian life must also be kept uppermost in our consciousness. We ought to heed the words of Jesus: “For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”⁸⁸ Generating a vast amount of goods does not justify an economic system. The more important matter is what happens to people in the process. Is there growth in holiness? Is a civilization animated by love being built?

Notes

1. Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), 70. Hereinafter, *CV*.
2. Pope John XXIII, encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961), 217. Hereinafter, *MM*.
3. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 34.
4. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 78.
5. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 78.
6. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 74.
7. Pope John Paul II emphasizes the role played by Rene Descartes (1596–1650) in initiating “a great anthropocentric shift in philosophy.” See John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 51. Pope Benedict XVI looks to Sir Francis Bacon (1561–1626) as the person who inspired “the intellectual current of modernity.” See Pope Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Spe Salvi* (November 30, 2007), 25. Hereinafter *SS*.
8. John XXIII, *MM*, 213.
9. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 70.
10. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), 44. Hereinafter, *CA*.
11. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 43.
12. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 43, emphasis in original.
13. Pope Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (May 15, 1891), 23; 22. Hereinafter *RN*.
14. Pope Pius XI, encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), 112. Hereinafter *QA*.
15. John Paul II, *CA*, 26.
16. Leo XIII, *RN*, 7.
17. Leo XIII, *RN*, 26.
18. John Paul II, *CA*, 13.
19. John Paul II, *CA*, 24.

20. This definition of capitalism and the level of analysis used follows the work done on the subject by the economic historian Robert L. Heilbroner. See Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Nature and Logic of Capitalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985). Michael Novak by contrast stresses that capitalism is “the system oriented to the human mind: *caput* (L. “head”) wit, invention, discovery, enterprise.” See Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 81. Adopting different meanings of the term and emphasizing individual over structural characteristics or vice versa results in essentially different phenomenon being studied.
21. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), 20.
22. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2424. Hereinafter, *CCC*.
23. Pius XI, *QA*, 109.
24. Pius XI, *QA*, 109.
25. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 25.
26. Pius XI, *QA*, 135.
27. Pius XI, *QA*, 135.
28. Pius XI, *QA*, 83.
29. Pius XI, *QA*, 132.
30. Pius XI, *QA*, 132.
31. See John Paul II, *CA*, 41: “growth can be hindered as a result of manipulation by the means of mass communication, which impose fashions and trends of opinion through carefully orchestrated repetition, without its being possible to subject to critical scrutiny the premises upon which these fashions and trends are based.”
32. Pius XI, *QA*, 101.
33. Pius XI, *QA*, 107, 134.
34. John Paul II, *CA*, 38
35. Leo XIII, *RN*, 6.
36. John Paul II, *CA*, 37.
37. John Paul II, *CA*, 37.
38. John Paul II, *CA*, 36.
39. John Paul II, *CA*, 41; Pius XI, *QA*, 135.
40. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 16.

41. The term *Catholic social thought* hangs together. The basic contours of a Christian humanism must be sketched to avoid the temptation to offer principles of social organization independent of the Catholic worldview that provides their foundation.
42. John 14:6.
43. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 53.
44. “Truth consists in the equation of the mind to the thing.” See St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1948), I. Q. 21, A. 4.
45. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio* (September 14, 1998), 43.
46. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 52, emphasis in original:

Truth and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love. This principle is extremely important for society and development, since neither can be a purely human product: the vocation to development on the part of individuals and peoples is not based simply on human choice, but is an intrinsic part of a plan that is prior to us and constitutes for all of us a duty to be freely accepted. That which is prior to us and constitutes us—subsistent Love and Truth—shows us what goodness is, and in what our true happiness consists. *It shows us the road to true development.*
47. Natural theology can yield an understanding of God’s existence but Christian Scriptures reveal the mystery of the Trinity—three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in one divine substance. The inner Trinitarian life, marked by perfect love, is the model for human relations. Relationality characterizes divine reality and is found at the very heart of human existence. Human life is always a being-from, a being-with, and a being-for others.
48. “God ... is both *Agape and Logos*: Charity and Truth, Love and Word” (Benedict XVI, *CV*, 3).
49. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 29.
50. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 34:

Sometimes modern man is wrongly convinced that he is the sole author of himself, his life and society. This is a presumption that follows from being selfishly closed in upon himself, and it is a consequence—to express it in faith terms—of *original sin*. The Church’s wisdom has always pointed to the presence of original sin in social conditions and in the structure of society: ‘Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action, and morals’ (CCC, 407) ... [and] the economy.
51. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 59.

52. See Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis* (March 4, 1979).
53. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 12.
54. “God, who encompasses the whole of reality ... is the foundation of hope: not any god, but the God who has a human face and who loved us to the end, each one of us and humanity in its entirety” (Benedict XVI, *SS*, 31).
55. God’s grace is absolutely needed. “‘Hearts of stone’ have to be transformed into ‘hearts of flesh’ (Ezek. 36:26)” (Benedict XVI, *CV*, 79).
56. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 19.
57. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 45.
58. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 48.
59. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 67.
60. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 53.
61. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 55, emphasis in original.
62. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 67, emphasis added.
63. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 53.
64. The argument for this goes back into the very being of God. God lacks no perfection. Therefore his life can only be one of giving, of sharing his goodness. Human beings do not possess the perfection of God. They can only move toward it by unselfish acts of self-sacrificing love. This is the deep explanation for why we experience joy when we truly give without expecting anything in return. Such existential gifts of ourselves should be welcomed in all human institutions.
65. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 41.
66. Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (December 30, 1987), 38, emphasis in original. Hereinafter, *SRS*.
67. John Paul II, *CA*, 51.
68. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 57.
69. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 6.
70. Matthew 6:24.
71. Pius XI, *QA*, 136.
72. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 41.
73. John Paul II, *CA*, 35.

74. Matthew 22:37–40.
75. John Paul II, *CA*, 35.
76. John XXIII, *MM*, 91: “It is of utmost importance that productive enterprises assume the character of a true human fellowship whose spirit suffuses the dealings, activities, and standing of all its members.”
77. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 25, emphasis in original.
78. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 46.
79. John Paul II, *CA*, 36.
80. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 51.
81. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 62.
82. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 40, emphasis in original.
83. Matthew 5:41.
84. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 5.
85. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 78.
86. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 50.
87. John Paul II, *SRS*, 33.
88. Matthew 16:26.