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A bishop named Marx takes on neo-cons, capitalism

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 9, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

One of Europe?s most influential prelates, and someone widely viewed as close to the thinking of Pope Benedict XVI, has come out swinging against American ?neo-cons? and in defense of a strong social welfare state.

Ironically, this critique of laissez faire capitalism comes from a bishop named Marx.

Archbishop Reinhard Marx of Munich and Freising made the comments in an interview with the prestigious Catholic journal *30 Giorni*, published in its September issue. Marx, 56, is widely expected to become a cardinal in the near future. He was appointed by Benedict XVI in 2007 to head the archdiocese once led by the pope, while he was still Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

In the new interview, Marx reflects on the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, arguing that what was needed after the collapse of Communism was a ?morally alert market economy, oriented towards global welfare,? but that instead what has prevailed is ?radical capitalist ideology.?

Marx charges that what he calls ?turbo-capitalism? has led ?to a deterioration in the daily situation of millions of people.?

Asked about neo-conservatives in the United States opposed to state intervention in the economy, Marx says that while the Catholic church supports ?freedom, democracy, and pluralism,? that position ?has nothing to do with reducing Christianity to religious ideology propping up the market economy.?

?On some issues, such as the defense of life and the family, the so-called neo-cons are fully in line with the church,? Marx says. ?But I don?t understand how one can define oneself ?neo-conservative? and put all one?s trust in the capitalist model.?

In fact, Marx says, capitalism is not at all conservative.

?It doesn?t conserve social and cultural situations as it found them, it changes them and often distorts them by introducing new paradigms and clichés,? he says.

In truth, Marx argues, the kind of ?conservatism? to which a Catholic should be committed and capitalism sometimes ?don?t go well together.?

Marx complained that in some conservative political circles the European model of the social welfare state has ?become an embarrassment and a problem,? whereas in truth, he said, ?it?s part of the solution to the problem.?

What saved Germany during the recent global economic crisis, Marx argues, is ?a welfare state that works: insurance for the unemployed, benefits for those laid off, support for those with odd jobs, public health care.?

Asked if all that means his famous namesake, Karl Marx, the father of Communism, was right in his analysis of capitalism, the archbishop offered a nuanced reply.

?In the same period there were also representatives of Christian social doctrine who reached the same level of critical examination of the mechanisms of capitalism, and where these mechanisms lead if left uncurbed,? he said.

?But certainly, where Marx is right, we must acknowledge it.?

This is not the first time that the Catholic Marx has waded into economic debates.

Last year, Marx published a book offering a moral analysis of the economy, titled (slightly tongue in cheek) Das Kapital, playing off the name of Karl Marx?s most famous work. The sound-bite splashed on the cover summed up Archbishop Marx?s argument: ?Capitalism without humanity, solidarity and the rule of law has no morality and no future,? it read.

In the book, Mark argued that what he calls ?turbo-capitalism,? meaning an essentially unregulated form of capitalism with limited social protections, has been a bad deal for a substantial majority of the world?s population. He cited the eclipse of trade unions, the erosion of the real value of wages, the disappearance of retail trade, and the yawning gap between a super-rich elite and the vast pools of ?working poor.?

Marx argues that left unchecked, globalization will necessarily widen these imbalances in favor of the rich, because capital is global whereas labor is often necessarily local.

?In this way the possibilities for investors, speculators and the conjurors of finance increase, while those who can count only on the work of their hands are worsted,? Marx wrote.

30 Giorni can be found on-line here: http://www.30giorni.it/it/default.asp

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