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Vatican note on economy the first ripple of a southern wave

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 25, 2011

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A woman carries bananas to market in Nyei, South Sudan, in this 2009 file photo. (CNS photo/Paul Jeffrey)

Commentary

Whenever the Vatican appears to lurch in a given direction, there's a tendency in Catholic circles to become obsessed with how much ecclesiastical authority the gesture or text in question carries. For the most part, it's a legitimate question; when Benedict XVI uses kneelers during Communion, for instance, people have good reasons for wondering if it's a harbinger of a policy move or simply a matter of personal taste.

Sometimes, however, fussing about the authority behind something misses the bigger picture. Reaction to Monday's note from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, titled "Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Political Authority," offers a classic case in point. (Read the document [1].)

To recap, the note expressed a clear rejection of "neo-liberal" economic policies (in American argot, "neo-conservative") and an equally clear endorsement of a "true world political authority" to regulate a globalized economy, one not dominated by major powers such as the United States. As a preliminary step, the document called for the creation of an institution, or several institutions, that would play the role of a "central world bank." It also offered a plug for the "Tobin Tax" on financial transactions, public recapitalization of banks and greater regulation of "shadow markets."

"The primacy of the spiritual and of ethics needs to be restored, and, with them, the primacy of politics -- which is responsible for the common good -- over the economy and finance," the note reads. "We should not be afraid to try new ideas, even if they might destabilize pre-existing balances of power that prevail over the weakest."

Critics, dismayed by the note's content, rather predictably have challenged its Vatican standing. George Weigel dismissed it as the product of a "rather small office in the Roman Curia" while Bill Donohue said it contains "neologisms" not found in the thought of Pope Benedict XVI. To be fair, there's merit to these points. The note is hardly a dogmatic definition, and on matters outside the Catechism, the Vatican rarely speaks with one voice.

Focusing on how much papal muscle the note can flex, however, risks ignoring what is at least an equally revealing question: Whatever you make of it, does the note seem to reflect important currents in Catholic social and political thought anywhere in the world?

The answer is yes, and it happens to be where two-thirds of the Catholics on the planet today live: the southern hemisphere, also known as the developing world.

It's fitting that the Vatican official responsible for the document is an African, Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana,

because it articulates key elements of what almost might be called a "southern consensus." One way of sizing up the note's significance, therefore, is as an indication that the demographic transition long under way in Catholicism, with the center of gravity shifting from north to south, is being felt in Rome.

There are almost 750 million Catholics scattered across Africa, Asia and Latin America, and generalizations about such a vast pool of people are always hazardous. Nonetheless, on matters of sexual morality and the "culture wars," Catholics in the south generally strike Europeans and Americans as remarkably conservative -- opposed to gay marriage, anti-abortion, devoted to the traditional family. When the conversation shifts to economic policy and geopolitics, however, Catholic opinion in the developing world often comes off in the West as strikingly progressive.

To be specific, Southern bishops, priests, religious and laity often are:

- Skeptical of free-market capitalism and unregulated globalization;
- Wary about the global influence of the United States;
- Pro-United Nations and pro-global governance;
- In favor of a robust role for the state in the economy.

A few examples flesh out that picture.

In a 2002 issue of *Theological Studies*, the late Dean Brackley and Thomas Schubeck outlined a "Latin consensus" on the economy, expressed not just by avant-garde theologians in Latin America but in official church documents. They described it this way: "The market is a useful, even necessary means for stimulating production and allocating resources. However, in the 'new economy,' overreliance on the market has aggravated social inequality, further concentrated wealth and income, and left millions mired in misery."

Catholic leaders in other parts of the global south hold similar views. For instance, in a 127-page report issued in 2004, the Catholic bishops of Asia declared that "neoliberal economic globalization" destroys Asian families and is the primary cause of poverty on the continent.

In June 2005, a group of Catholic bishops from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Somalia and Djibouti declared, "We are particularly horrified by the ravages of unbridled capitalism, which has taken away and stifled local ownership of economic initiatives and is leading to a dangerous gap between the rich few and the poor majority."

Now consider the language of the Vatican note, which breathes much the same air: "What has driven the world in such a problematic direction for its economy and also for peace? First and foremost, an economic liberalism that spurns rules and controls ... an economic system of thought that sets down *a priori* the laws of market functioning and economic development, without measuring them against reality, runs the risk of becoming an instrument subordinated to the interests of the countries that effectively enjoy a position of economic and financial advantage."

One can certainly debate the merits of those perceptions, or the policy moves that might flow from them. Yet to dismiss all this as nothing more than the rogue perceptions of an isolated Vatican department ignores the demographic and cultural realities of the church in the 21st century.

This is not the dying echo of warmed-over European socialism. For better or worse, it's the first ripple of a southern wave.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR*'s senior correspondent.]

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