

Timely note reflects Catholic vision

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Vatican documents on matters of social justice, unlike their counterparts on sexual matters, generally land at the bottom of news budgets, marginalized as esoteric and idealistic with little hope of achieving relevance in the real world.

So it was good fortune, or misfortune, depending on one's point of view, that the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace happened to release its call for reform of the global financial system at a time of intense anxiety over global economics and as the Occupy Wall Street movement was spreading from city to city ([see story](#) [1]).

The Vatican, often woefully inept at achieving timeliness and relevance, was, intentionally or not, dead on the mark in this instance. This document had relevance on arrival and a made-to-order news hook. Who could resist a Vatican call for overturning the era's financial order?

The reactions were immediate, with those disposed to view American capitalism as an adjunct to American Catholicism strongly opposed. In those quarters, the document was dismissed as an insignificant piece from an insignificant Vatican office.

Both claims are duly noted. Even if, however, one dismisses the document's general prescriptions for economic reform, it is impossible to avoid inferring that such a document, based on a view of the world far different from anything in the mainstream secular culture, is indeed in the mainstream of thinking that has issued from the Vatican since the end of the 19th century.

The document represents the church's intense concern for the dignity of the individual, so often expressed in a passionate way only for the tiniest manifestations of humanity, writ large and embracing all. This is care for humanity beyond the womb and beyond one's cultural, ethnic and national horizons.

Putting aside, for a moment, the document's vision for an international monetary system that would somehow be accountable to a central authority and that would require a willing turnover of some national authority to a global body, it still outlines a jarringly radical approach to the world.

Christian/Catholic belief in this construct has real consequences and requires, as the document states at one point, the "forward-looking imagination" advanced by Pope Paul VI. Such an imagination, the writers argue, "can perceive the possibilities inscribed in the present and guide people towards a new future. ... Through an effort of community imagination, it is possible to transform not only institutions but also lifestyles and encourage a better future for all peoples."

The document is highly communitarian in tone, using the phrase "common good" 22 times in 11 pages of text. It draws from a long and rich vein of papal pronouncements and Second Vatican Council documents to construct a vision of universal brotherhood and a transition from the warring between today's nation-states to "a new model of a more cohesive, polyarchic international society that respects every people's identity within the multifaceted riches of a single humanity."

If such language seems an idealistic stretch, verging on the naive, it is well to note that such language has been issuing from the heart of the church for a long time. In the current iteration, it is also important to note the context out of which the document emerges. This is a document of the Southern Hemisphere, of the church that has borne the brunt of the North's successes and excesses. And no matter how small the office of origin might be, one can reasonably presume that such a call for global reform does not escape the walls of the tiny city-state without scrutiny and an understanding that no one of importance is going to issue an immediate rebuttal of its content. It would be difficult to do, since the logic of the document, anchored firmly in the heart of our sacred texts, otherwise steps firmly from one papal proclamation to the next.

The vision projected in the document is not an empty exercise in idealism. It is one that grows out of necessity, a matter of life and death. It speaks of humanity and its unity with an appreciation -- as only one who has been at the brink of extinction can understand -- that human connections are essential to human survival. Being human is not a solo enterprise, even for rugged individualists.

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