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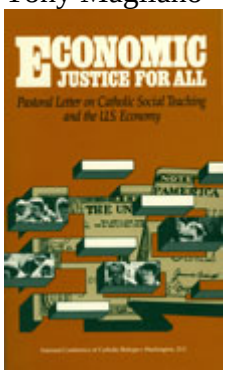
A silver anniversary message for the economy

Tony Magliano | Jan. 10, 2012



VIEWPOINT

Twenty-five years ago, 33 million Americans -- including one out of every four children -- were poor. About 7 percent of workers were unemployed. And approximately 28 percent of the nation?s wealth was held by the richest 2 percent of the population.

In response to those economic ills, the U.S. bishops unveiled one of the most insightful, challenging and controversial documents ever written by the leaders of the Catholic church in the United States.

Their pastoral letter, titled ?Economic Justice for All: A Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy,? prescribed justice for a sick economy.

Unfortunately, the federal government and the corporate world largely refused to take its medicine. And consequently, the patient -- the economy -- is now in serious condition.

With more than 46 million Americans (including 16 million children) poor, 9 percent of workers unemployed, 50 million citizens and residents medically uninsured, and 40 percent of the nation?s wealth controlled by the richest 1 percent of the population, the medicine of ?Economic Justice for All? is needed more now than ever.

Its very first paragraph sets the challenging tone for the whole document. The bishops proclaimed that ?every perspective on economic life that is human, moral and Christian must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do for people? What does it do to people? And how do people participate in it??

For the rich -- especially the top 1 percent -- the economy is working better than ever. But for those who own only 2 percent of the country?s wealth -- the bottom 50 percent -- the economy is doing precious little for them.

The bottom half of the U.S. population is struggling to put food on the table, to hold onto their jobs, save their houses, acquire health care and remain one step ahead of poverty. But, sadly, millions have already lost the struggle.

And yet, Congress is in the process of cutting huge holes in the nation?s safety net. Everything from the

supplemental food program for Women, Infants and Children to Medicare to poverty-focused international assistance is on the chopping block.

And adding insult to injury, huge tax cuts for the rich continue to remain in place. And many of the richest corporations, such as General Electric and Wells Fargo, reportedly continue to pay no taxes -- three years running.

And it gets worse.

According to the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights, corporations are in a race to the bottom. Many wealthy U.S. companies such as Walmart, Target and Macy?s outsource their work to sweatshops in poor countries such as Bangladesh and El Salvador, where oppressed workers labor very long hours in harsh conditions for pennies an hour.

There is something very morally wrong with this economic picture. And the bishops? pastoral letter ?Economic Justice for All? has a lot to say about it.

The bishops insist that ?the common good demands justice for all, the protection of the human rights of all.?

The bishops quote Blessed Pope John Paul II, who proclaimed: ?The needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich; the rights of workers over the maximization of profits; the preservation of the environment over uncontrolled industrial expansion; production to meet social needs over production for military purposes.?

?The time has come,? wrote the bishops, ?for a new American experiment -- to implement economic rights, to broaden the sharing of economic power and to make economic decisions more accountable to the common good.?

Although it?s 25 years late, a new morally-based economic American experiment is needed now more than ever.

[Tony Magliano writes on social justice concerns for Catholic News Service. He is a pastoral associate at the Shrine of the Little Flower Parish in Baltimore.]

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