NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Why it's OK to criticize capitalism

Bill Tammeus | May. 15, 2013 A small c catholic

A few years ago, I was visiting The Land Institute [1] in Salina, Kan., speaking with Wes Jackson [2], its prophetic and fascinating founder, over dinner.

Wes was telling me about going to small towns in rural America and eating with farmers and others in diners. Almost any subject was open for discussion, he said, except the flaws of capitalism. Say a word against capitalism, Wes said, and you were likely to get invited out of town.

I don't know how much that attitude might have changed along America's blue highways in the intervening decade-plus, but if it hasn't changed much, I doubt Pope Francis would be very welcome there to hold forth about his views of capitalism -- at least based on some things he's said since being elected earlier this year.

In early May, he tweeted this from his @Pontifex account [3]: "My thoughts turn to all who are unemployed, often as a result of a self-centred mindset bent on profit at any cost."

And after a factory collapsed in Bangladesh in April, killing more than 1,100, the pope offered another critique [4] that did not contain much praise for capitalism's profit motive. In response to reports that workers at that factory made only about $50 a month, he said: "This was the payment of these people who have died. And this is called 'slave labor!' "

I'm not arguing that capitalism is an evil system that the pope and others should work to overthrow. In fact, I think capitalism is a flawed but workable economic system. It works better than many other systems despite its deplorable penchant for encouraging greed. In other words, no economic system, including capitalism, is perfect, and thus, no economic system deserves the uncritical allegiance of any Christian whose first allegiance must necessarily be to God.

But to suggest -- as many Americans seem to -- that capitalism is some kind of gift from heaven and far better than any other economic system is to speak drivel and tommyrot.

So I'm pleased Pope Francis seems unafraid to point out the flaws of capitalism, a lack of fear shared by several previous popes.

Even to label our economic system capitalism is to mislead people into thinking the term always and everywhere means the same thing. The truth is that capitalism as practiced in the United States has evolved over the years with various levels of government regulation and other factors changing the practice of it.

The result is that whatever economic system operates today on Wall Street and Main Street is not your father's capitalism. Whether that's good or bad depends on your politics (and maybe your mother's).

I think we Protestants need more reform on this matter than do you Catholics, but clearly it's time for Americans to stop imagining that criticism of capitalism is somehow unpatriotic. The most extreme economic rival of

capitalism, communism, has collapsed of its own corrupt weight and wildly inconsistent implementation. Now the primary rival is some form of soft socialism that varies from country to country. And because there is no pure socialism and no pure capitalism anywhere, we are left to critique whatever jury-rigged system is operating.

Indeed, we Christians might do well to follow the pope's lead and avoid labeling any operative economic system while we point out where all such systems seem to fall short of living up to the universal human rights and values our faith promotes.

The farmers in rural Kansas who have coffee with Wes Jackson might be willing to recognize flaws in the free-market economic system if they didn't think they had to defend Capitalism with a capital C as the economic system God created for this God-blessed land of America.

And then, like the talking heads on CNBC who recently reacted admiringly to the pope's words, they might think about the flaws themselves and what could be done to fix them.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [5] for the *Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust [6]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com [7].]

Editor's note: We can send you an email alert every time Bill Tammeus' column, "A small c catholic," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow directions: Email alert sign-up [8].

Source URL (retrieved on *09/14/2014 - 23:16*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/small-c-catholic/why-its-ok-criticize-capitalism

Links:
[1] http://www.landinstitute.org/
[2] http://www.landinstitute.org/vnews/display.v/ART/2000/08/03/378254723
[3] https://twitter.com/Pontifex/status/329913658857639937
[4] http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/05/01/180406283/pope-compares-bangladesh-factory-workers-to-slave-labor
[5] http://billtammeus.typepad.com/
[6] http://www.amazon.com/They-Were-Just-People-Holocaust/dp/0826218601/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1299296756&sr=1-1
[7] mailto:wtammeus@kc.rr.com
[8] http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup