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Making Words Count

Ken Briggs | Dec. 4, 2013 NCR Today

When Jesus famously stormed into the temple to rout the money changers, his words blended with his action. The "den of thieves" was sent packing.

Pope Francis has recalled that prophetic intention in his recent denunciation of the abuses and exploitations of capitalism and the delusion called "trickle down" economics. To complete a worthy imitation of Christ, he needs to convert those words into an assault on the offending machinery of finances. He needs a plan.

Such a plan would face impossible odds, given the stout resistance of American Catholics who are enamored of wide open free markets. Over the past century, as a steady stream of similar papal critiques of economic injustice have focused on capitalism, such defensiveness has hardened. Only days after American bishops had issued a major pastoral letter reflecting many of these appeals for entrepreneurial restraint for the sake of the common good, a coterie of noted American Catholic neo-conservatives headed by William Simon and Michael Novak publicly rejected it as unworthy of their allegiance. Scores of similar defenders of the free market system as the best system available to provide for human needs have virtually guaranteed that any papal document that sounds to them like a vestige of European socialism will be dead on arrival.

Any serious effort at reforming the world's dominant economic system would have to put its own house under examination and that may not be what Francis has in mind. The church in general and the Vatican specifically have reaped huge rewards from the profits of Catholic moguls, many of whose business ethics might be supposed to be at least marked by the kinds of oppressive behavior condemned by Francis' exhortation. Though that indictment wouldn't necessarily include everyone, real world competition makes practices such as wretched working conditions and inadequate pay scales all but assured as facts of life.

The history and legend of the church sketches a pattern of close ties between big money Catholics and big-city archbishops and cardinals. Presumably, Francis also has them in mind in his passionate call for an end to exploitation and the turn toward greater material well being for more of the earth's people. Such a development would be unimaginable without sacrifices by the ruling financial class. Tradition teaches that "haves" aren't prone to give up any of their treasure voluntarily.

If Francis is to follow Jesus example in cleansing the temple, he would have to go after those in the church who play by economic rules he considers alien to the Gospel. The words would require a plan -- an institutional instrument -- to challenge church and non-church forces on every level that has fostered and perpetuated the misery of billions on this planet (though many Catholic maintain that capitalism is already reversing that). Capitalism and its unbridled practice captured the loyalties of many Catholics in the Reagan era and still does. it would mean seeing the church -- a wealthy church no matter how simple the trappings of Francis himself -- as part of the problem that itself needs solution. Summoning the courage and organizational commitment to achieve that is impossible to conceive, but this is the tradition that speaks of ffaith moving mountains.

Perhaps Francis is content with words and seeks nothing more than to persuade individuals to heed the moral principles of the Gospel in whatever manner they wish. If that's the extent of it, without a means to shape the

church inself more closely into a model of compassion and sacrificial distribution of the basic goods of life through structures built around the common good, then the words will likrly soon be forgotten.

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