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Exhortation sparks political, economic debates

Michael Sean Winters | Jan. 3, 2014
Column

Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* is not a political or economic document, but it clearly has generated a great deal of debate among politicians and economists. You knew that the second President Barack Obama quoted the text, conservative critics like Rush Limbaugh would go ballistic, and go ballistic Limbaugh did, saying that the pope did not know what he was talking about and that he was spewing "pure Marxism."

Catholic critics raised an interesting objection: They said there was no such thing as an autonomous market, no such thing as unbridled consumerism. In the text, Francis stated, "While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few. This imbalance is the result of ideologies which defend the absolute autonomy of the marketplace and financial speculation." And although the timing is likely coincidental, these words of the pope seem especially challenging for a culture like ours that was heading into the holiday shopping season when *Evangelii Gaudium* was published on Nov. 24: "Today's economic mechanisms promote inordinate consumption, yet it is evident that unbridled consumerism combined with inequality proves doubly damaging to the social fabric."

To be clear, the pope was not speaking of economic theory in the abstract. He was describing the world he sees and knows. Francis has never had the pleasure of attending a lecture at the pro-market Acton Institute, but he knows the slums. He was president of the Argentine Episcopal Conference during that country's sovereign debt crisis. It may be true that there is no thoroughly unfettered market economy, but he has seen enough unfettering to garner what can only be deemed a stern, insistent and humanely sophisticated condemnation: "The socioeconomic system is unjust at its root," he states.

Theologians will discuss and debate *Evangelii Gaudium* for a long time. Bishops' conferences will wrestle with its different parts. But what does it mean for the political landscape in the United States?

First, while conservative Catholics have been arguing for years that there are only five "nonnegotiable" issues for Catholics in the political arena -- abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research and human cloning -- I think we can safely say that poverty has now been added to the list. I have never liked the idea of isolating "nonnegotiable" issues from the rest. In a sense, all the church's teachings are "nonnegotiable." But, clearly, Francis has put concern for the poor at the heart of the church's engagement with politics and society in a way that no one can deny. Indeed, he has placed concern for the poor not only at the top of the list of issues for the church in the public realm, but at the heart of evangelization itself. You can't wash that off no matter how much you admire Paul Ryan for other reasons.

Second, when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops turns to its quadrennial rewrite of its voting guide, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," this focus on poverty will require the bishops to recalibrate their use of the concept of intrinsic evil in evaluating political choices. The concept was never particularly applicable: There are a host of things, such as lying and masturbation, that are intrinsically evil but do not seem susceptible to legislative remedy. Poverty is not an intrinsic evil, but it is a grave evil, and one the bishops will

need to give renewed emphasis to combat. Bishop Robert McElroy's much-discussed article in *America* magazine in October 2013 pointed the way forward for the bishops: Get away from an overreliance on the concept of intrinsic evil and prioritize poverty and abortion as those issues that are most salient for Catholics in the public square. This strategy has the added advantage of making it clear to all that the church is not an arm of either party, that our concern for the poor and our concern to end the scourge of abortion are both rooted in the same foundational concern for human dignity.

Third, while *Evangelii Gaudium* has no specific policy proposals, the text invites Catholic politicians and economists to suggest specific policy ideas that embody the pope's vision. Here is where Catholics of both left and right should engage in serious reflection and collaboration. I think even the most lefty of liberals would concede a role for markets and even the most paleo of conservatives would admit that markets are insufficient to meet the needs of the poor. Nor has anyone suggested that Francis has it in for mom-and-pop corner stores. What would a political and economic culture that reflected human dignity look like?

Markets presume that there will be winners and losers, and one of the pope's most trenchant themes is that, in the eyes of God, and therefore in the eyes of the church, no human being is a loser. I would suggest that a few policy ideas might address some of the pope's concern that human dignity be shielded from market forces even while human beings are encouraged to enter the market to pursue their livelihoods. First, no one who loses in the market, no one who gets fired or whose business closes should lose everything. Each and every society must provide for basic human necessities like shelter and health care and education, to each and to all, no matter how any of that society's members fare in the market. Second, those who participate in the market must be able to make a decent living. Efforts to enact a living wage, rather than the poverty-level minimum wage we have today, would help raise the floor for all. Third, the winners should be allowed to win, but do they have to win by so much? The pope clearly worries about growing income inequality in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and a more progressive tax structure could certainly help ameliorate that inequality. Lastly, globalization must not become a new form of colonialism, dictated by market interests rather than royal satraps.

These four policy objectives would not bring about the eschaton. But they would make ours a more decent and more humane society and that is precisely what Francis is calling for, a society that is humane.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog [1].]

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