

Francis puts usury into mix of social justice concerns

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 29, 2014 The Francis Chronicles
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When you follow public figures long enough, you develop a sense of when they really care about what they're saying versus moments when they're just phoning it in. Pope Francis tends to be fairly clear about telegraphing his investment in a particular line or idea, which makes Wednesday's brief aside on usury during his general audience worthy of note.

Generally, one can tell when Francis is feeling it when he departs from his prepared text, makes direct eye contact with his audience, raises his voice and gesticulates with his hands -- all four of which were on display Wednesday morning in St. Peter's Square.

The pope's talk was ostensibly part of a series of reflections on the sacraments, with today's talk specifically devoted to confirmation. Along the way, however, he dropped in a reference to some of the problems experienced by families today, including what he called the "dramatic social wound" of usury, which he said "offends the inviolable dignity of the person."

In that context, Francis dropped in one of his signature extemporaneous touches, looking up and projecting real emotion.

"When a family doesn't have enough to eat because it has to pay off loans to usurers," the pope said, raising the volume level considerably, "this isn't Christian!"

He added for good measure, "It's not human!"

Francis already profiled as the pope of the social Gospel, dedicated to defending the poor, but Wednesday's aside suggests that within the galaxy of his social justice concerns, usury may occupy a surprising central spot.

Though sometimes thought of largely as a concern of medieval Catholic theologians struggling to reconcile new banking practices with the church's ancient ban on lending money at interest, experts in development and finance say usury is very much alive and well in the early 21st century.

A recent report by the European Network on Debt and Development charges that many European nations are actually profiting from their overseas aid programs by doling out assistance in the form of loans with high interest rates. According to the Jan. 16 report, developing countries face interest payments of almost \$1 billion on those European loans, draining resources needed for health, education and economic development.

In the United States, the New York attorney general recently compelled a cluster of payday loan services to pay refunds and penalties to borrowers after it was discovered they were charging compound annual interest rates of 89 to 355 percent. That's a clear violation of New York's usury law, which sets the maximum interest rate for most loans at 16 percent.

According to reports, the payday services in question had made 18,000 loans since 2010 with a net value of \$40 million.

For a pope who lived through Argentina's economic meltdown in the early 2000s, which saw the national economy shrink by almost 30 percent and seven out of 10 children end up below the poverty line, the specter of opportunists seeking to profit from the desperation of the poor probably raises a special kind of bile.

At least, that was the impression Francis left Wednesday morning. He may be a believer in the "joy of the Gospel," but that doesn't mean this pope is incapable of righteous indignation -- especially, it would seem, on matters such as usury.

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