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

The right blasts Francis (again)!

Michael Sean Winters | May. 12, 2014 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, the Holy Father addressed leaders of United Nations who called on him in Rome. He gave a short talk, which included these words calling for "the legitimate redistribution of economic benefits by the State." Then, America's conservative chattering classes went ballistic.

John Moody, executive vice president at Fox News and a former Vatican correspondent, might be expected from his time covering the Holy See to have rendered a nuanced appraisal of what Pope Francis said. Nah. The title of the piece -- and I know writers do not usually choose their own titles -- is: "Pope Francis should stick to doctrine, stay away from economic 'redistribution.' [1] " Of course, Pope Francis was speaking from the social doctrine of the Church. The Church's teachings on social justice are as firmly rooted in our theological doctrines as are the teachings on any other issues. If the pope fills out a bracket for the playoffs, that can be discounted as lacking doctrinal import. When he draws on hundreds of years of teaching about human society and the demands of justice, it is doctrine.

Moody then, strangely, adopts one of the oldest and hoariest objections, "[Pope Francis] also exposed his Church, one of the wealthiest institutions in the world, to inevitable charges of hypocrisy," and he speculates why the Church should not voluntarily give up its tax-exempt status. "There is no doubt that the addition of tax revenue from the Church would be considerable, if hard to estimate. The 17,000-plus parishes may not all measure up to architectural wonders like St. Patrick's in New York or the newer Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. But few Catholic churches have absolutely no value. What would 39.5% of that be?"

Setting aside that the Church's real estate is not income and the 39.5 percent rate applies to income -- confirming that Moody knows nothing about economic policy, either -- surely all that time in Rome made him aware that the "wealth of the Church" is a canard. When Moody suggests the Church sell its priceless art treasures, he, of course, seems oblivious to the idea that "priceless" is a word with a meaning, that it is offensive to reduce certain great works of art to their market value and that the Church has not only a right but a duty to preserve the cultural patrimony of humankind. The operating budget of the Holy See is a pittance compared to most governments. Take any Catholic school, any Catholic ministry, and see how much we Catholics do on a shoestring budget. But hey, if you just want to keep people from grappling with the Holy Father's call for a more just economy, this line of attack has a certain value.

Not to be outdone, at Breitbart News [2], Austin Ruse, former head of the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute, was asked if Pope Francis is a commie. Ruse replied: "I know he is a Jesuit." Nice. He added that he thinks the pope is misunderstood. The interviewer then replied that he never remembered Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI being misunderstood, but "every time Pope Francis comes out with another outrageous statement on income inequality the main response we get is 'Oh it's not the right translation.' " Here is more evidence of the right's successful hijacking of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, both of whom said things very similar to what Pope Francis says on the subject of social justice. But the left did not like those two popes, so they let conservatives convince themselves that John Paul II and Benedict XVI didn't really mean it, or it wasn't really binding, or some such dismissal. In the event, it is precisely the fact that Pope Francis does not

need a translator, that his meaning is quite clear, that it cannot be explained away, is what has the right all concerned. And nervous: You can only run to the "what the pope meant to say" dismissal a couple of times before people are no longer convinced.

The Rev. Shane Kastler, pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Lake Charles, La., and a popular radio host on Christian radio, must have failed to take his ecumenical pills in the morning. He said the pope's call for redistribution [3] was no different from supporting "government endorsed thievery." He provided line and verse from the Good Book to justify his claim that "this is odd behavior for a so-called 'man of the cloth' yet this type of socialistic chicanery is sadly all too common in some religious circles. The strange fact is that it flies in the face of the Biblical teaching that 'if a man will not work, neither shall he eat.' (2 Thessalonians 3:10) Not to mention the universal command of 'thou shalt not steal.' (Exodus 20:15) If the Pope would like to delve into the incredibly lucrative resources of the Catholic church to help the poor he is more than welcome to do so. Yet, this is not a suggestion he has made. Like a good liberal, he wants to slip his hand in your pocket and seize your assets against your will, in the name of 'redistribution.' " If Pope Francis keeps at it, one can expect an anti-popery riot in Lake Charles sometime soon.

Surely, a Catholic could be expected to defend the Holy Father's comments and not to rob them of their meaning or condemn them as spiritualized Marxism. Here comes Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, an organization dedicated to defending the Church from the slings and arrows thrown at her. Appearing on Sean Hannity's show on Fox News, [4] however, Mr. Donohue drew a distinction between social justice issues and "moral issues" like abortion. Donohue said the pope was sound on moral issues but conditioned by his Latin American experience when it came to teachings about economic justice. Donohue later said, correctly, that this statement was not "infallible" -- and indeed it is not -- but then again made the point that the Church's teaching on abortion is unequivocal while we can all disagree on economic matters. This harkens back to the debate we all had when Rep. Paul Ryan ran for the vice presidency when conservative Catholics tried to turn prudential judgment into a get-out-of-jail-free card. No, no, no. Donohue unhelpfully brought up the distinction between intrinsic and other forms of evil, which has no relevance whatsoever to discussions of public policy. The show's host, Mr. Hannity, then also questioned the Church's wealth and suggested we start selling our art. Ugh.

If we can't count on a prominent Catholic layman who runs an organization with the stated purpose of defending the Church, I suppose we must resort to a bit of clericalism and seek a defense of the Holy Father from the clergy. Here comes Father Zuhlsdorf [5], who runs a popular conservative blog. "I wonder how many people are still listening to him seriously on this issue," opines Reverend Father. Not content to take a swipe at the pope, he goes after a few cardinals, adding, "I suspect other people might have the same reaction that I have when hearing/reading this stuff. It comes across as naive, out of step with history. Has any nation successfully dealt with poverty through redistribution? I don't think so. Moreover, who would supervise this process of global redistribution? Angels? EU bureaucrats? The UN? Card. Rodriguez Maradiaga? Card. Kasper?" And if we are going to throw the pope and some cardinals under the bus, why not a whole country? Fr. Zuhlsdorf writes: "Finally, and I don't mean this to be snarky, though I realize it could come off that way, given Argentina's track record, should anyone from Argentina tell anyone else anything about how to deal with economic issues?"

Where to begin? Yes, Fr. Zuhlsdorf, many of us continue to take the Holy Father seriously on this and every topic. And, yes, Fr. Zuhlsdorf, many nations have dealt successfully with poverty through redistribution including ours. Social Security has both largely eliminated poverty among the elderly and achieved that by redistributing tax receipts from workers to elderly retirees. Medicare and Medicaid also redistribute wealth from those who have it to those who need it, and need it at a crucial and fragile moment, when they need medical care. And, yes, Fr. Zuhlsdorf, there is much to learn from the Argentine experience about the immorality of economic structures, and the problem there was not only crony capitalism.

Pope Francis looks at the world's socioeconomic landscape and he sees human suffering alongside unimaginable

wealth. He gives hope to the poor and warning to the wealthy. He himself associates with the poor, loves the poor, reaches out to them and not in a paternalistic way, but with real love, and he calls the rest of us to do the same. I do not think this has much to do with the pope's lineage in Argentina. I think he is showing himself to be a follower of Jesus who also gave hope to the poor and warning to the rich, loved the poor and walked with them, and urged us to do the same. The measure of conservative anxiety about, and even hostility toward, the Holy Father's comments is the *exact* measure of the degree to which a large swath of, well, not exactly informed Catholic opinion but prominent Catholic opinion in the United States has been infected by an unholy trinity of theological Jansenism, economic libertarianism and Americanism. That is something for our bishops to ponder and to address.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/12/2016 - 03:22*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/right-blasts-francis-again

Links:
[1] http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/05/09/pope-francis-should-stick-to-doctrine-stay-away-from-economic-redistribution/
[2] http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2014/05/10/Breitbart-News-Saturday-Is-Pope-Francis-a-Tea-Party-Catholic-or-a-Commie
[3] http://www.economicpolicyjournal.com/2014/05/the-pope-is-displaying-hypocrisy-on.html
[4] http://video.foxnews.com/v/3551623232001/popes-comments-on-redistribution-of-wealth-raising-eyebrows/#sp=show-clips
[5] http://wdtprs.com/blog/2014/05/pope-francis-to-un-delegation-legitimate-redistribution-of-economic-benefits-by-the-state/