

'Economic Justice for All' Twenty Years Later

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My reflections on the U.S. Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All* twenty years after it was issued have been shaped by two experiences. First, from speaking about the pastoral letter to church audiences, secular academics, and those concerned with public policy I have been led to the conclusion that a central concept in the bishops' letter—the common good—is nearly incomprehensible to most people in the United States today. Americans know what liberty and equality mean, but they are largely in the dark concerning fraternity, the solidarity that leads to active commitment to the common good. This experience leads me to conclude that twenty years after the pastoral letter first appeared we still need a revitalized commitment to the common good if we are going to move closer to economic justice in American society. The second experience arose during four academic terms during the past dozen years spent teaching in Nairobi, Kenya, with students from all over sub-Saharan Africa. Dialogue with these students deepened my conviction that developing an understanding of the common good that is plausible in our diverse globalizing society is one of the greatest intellectual needs of our time. Indeed the many problems faced throughout Africa today make it essential that we move from the brute fact of the world's growing global interdependence to a greater sense of moral interdependence and solidarity.

Let me suggest, then, in briefest possible terms, how the idea of the common good present in *Economic Justice for All* is relevant to the challenges we face today. The notion of the common good has a deep history in both the philosophical and religious traditions of the West.

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Over two millennia ago, Aristotle argued that the good of the community should set the direction for the lives of individuals, for it is a higher or more "divine" good than the particular goods of private persons.² In a Christian context, St. Thomas Aquinas argued that a right relation to God requires commitment to the common good of our neighbors and of all creation.³ For Christians, the pursuit of the common good follows from the Bible's double commandment to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Unfortunately this ancient theme in the Western and Christian traditions is in serious trouble in our culture today. The pluralism of the contemporary scene, by definition, means we disagree about what makes a good life for individuals. Thus, many philosophers argue that agreement on a shared or common good is simply not possible.⁴ In fact, when groups of people diverge in their cultures, traditions, and ways of life, they can appear as threats to each other. Interaction with them can appear more like a "common bad" than a good to be shared in common. Defense of one's turf becomes the first requirement of the good life. Or less ominously, the research of my colleague Alan Wolfe suggests that the experience of pluralism is leading most Americans to place a high value on a form of live-and-let-live tolerance. We prefer what Wolfe calls "morality writ small" rather than the larger ideological goals of social justice and social equality that so easily lead to conflict.⁵ In light of the terrible bloodshed of past and present religious wars and ideological conflicts, this is encouraging.

But is it enough? I think not. For example, it cannot address the struggles of poor African-Americans in U.S. urban centers. For several reasons, we need a stronger vision of the common good than tolerance alone provides if we are going to address their deprivation.

First, most middle-class Americans live in neighborhoods that isolate them from people of significantly different social-economic backgrounds. In Robert Bellah's terms, they live in "lifestyle enclaves."⁶ This isolation is due to the apparently impersonal forces of the real

² ARISTOTLE, *NICHOMACHEAN ETHICS* 1094b.

³ THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES*, III, 17.

⁴ See JOHN RAWLS, *POLITICAL LIBERALISM* 201 (1993).

⁵ ALAN WOLFE, *ONE NATION AFTER ALL: WHAT MIDDLE-CLASS AMERICANS REALLY THINK ABOUT GOD, COUNTRY, FAMILY, RACISM, WELFARE, IMMIGRATION, HOMOSEXUALITY, WORK, THE RIGHT, THE LEFT, AND EACH OTHER* 54, 63, 309 (1998).

⁶ ROBERT BELLAH, RICHARD MADSEN, WILLIAM M. SULLIVAN, ANN SWIDLER, & STEVEN M. TIPTON, *HABITS OF THE HEART: INDIVIDUALISM AND COMMITMENT IN AMERICAN LIFE* 335 (1985).

estate market, but it is sustained by zoning laws and other boundaries that result from political choice rather than markets or geography alone. Such policies strengthen the locks on the growing number of gated communities that protect the privileged from the poor. To challenge these divisions requires an understanding of the common good that reaches beyond the boundaries between the suburban middle-class and the very poor in core cities to acknowledge that we share a common humanity and, on at least a basic level, share a common fate.

Second, though increased racial tolerance is surely needed in our society, it is not the master key that will unlock the doors that keep the poor of the inner-city from sharing in the national well-being. Class differences between suburb and inner city play a major role in sustaining these boundaries. To be sure, racial prejudice continues to be an operative force in American life. But it is also clear that overtly and explicitly racist attitudes have declined to some extent over recent decades. Nevertheless, a large group of African Americans in the United States—those who have not made it into the middle-class—have not benefited from somewhat increased racial tolerance. Such class division is a matter of incomes, but more fundamental are the differences in the availability of jobs that pay a living wage and in the quality of schools. This deprivation flows from what William Julius Wilson calls “social isolation.”⁷ The inner city poor are largely cut off from the possibility of participating in the social and civic life of middle class America. Addressing such poverty, therefore, means we need a vision of a life shared across social divides. We need to work to create a society not marred by the present divisions between privileged suburban enclaves and despairing inner city ghettos. Such divisions are bad (a “common bad”) and overcoming these divisions would be a good (a “common good” we could all share in together).

The tradition of Catholic social thought can make a significant contribution to this change of direction. Pope John Paul II has pointed out an essential component of a response in his frequent discussions of the moral basis of democracy. Democracy depends on participation by all citizens in the communal relationships that give people a measure of real power to shape their environment. It requires mutual cooperation, mutual responsibility, and what Aristotle called civic friendship.⁸ In more contemporary terms, it requires solidarity with others.

⁷ WILLIAM JULIUS WILSON, *THE TRULY DISADVANTAGED: THE INNER CITY, THE UNDERCLASS, AND PUBLIC POLICY* 60 (1987).

⁸ See NICOMACHEAN ETHICS, *supra* note 2, at 1167a, b.

Pope John Paul II defined solidarity as a moral virtue expressed in "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good."⁹ Such commitment to the common good is directly opposed to the deep divisions between our core cities and suburbs. These divisions exclude the poor in ways that are the very opposite of solidarity, for they "marginalize" persons and whole groups from participation in the common life of the larger community. There are so few decent jobs in many urban ghettos that people simply give up looking for work. As the bishops put it, they are effectively told by the community: "we don't need your talent, we don't need your initiative, we don't need *you*."¹⁰ This leads to what Cornel West has referred to as the "eclipse of hope"—a "profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair."¹¹ When human beings are told repeatedly that they are simply not needed, it takes extraordinary self-confidence to keep trying. Such messages, built into class structures of American life today, lead to the drugs and violence of many American urban centers.

When citizens "tolerate" such conditions when remedial steps could be taken, the common good is undermined and injustice is being done. One can hardly think of a more effective way to deny people active participation in the economic life of society than to leave them facing unemployment for years, even over generations. In a society as rich as ours, such people are effectively being told they don't count as members of our community at all. Their good is not part of any commonwealth. As the U.S. Bishops put it, "The extent of their suffering is a measure of how far we are from being a true community of persons."¹² If we are to begin the task of securing minimal justice, therefore, we need work to overcome these divisions. The urban poor are citizens of the American republic and we have a duty to treat them as such. To begin doing so, we need a renewed commitment to a good that must be there for us all if it is to be there for any of us—the common good. When we begin to take steps toward this shared good, we will on a path marked out for us by the deepest traditions of Western and Christian thought. We will be on the path toward an American public life healed of some of its deepest wounds and on the way to a new realization of the good that is common.

⁹ POPE JOHN PAUL II, SOLLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS, ¶ 38, in *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT: THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE* (David J. O'Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., 1992).

¹⁰ See NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL*, in *CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT*, *supra* note 9, at 141. Consult also the documentation provided in the bishops' letter, chapter 3. Their data are for 1986, but the situation is very similar today.

¹¹ CORNEL WEST, *RACE MATTERS* 5, 12-13 (1994).

¹² *ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL*, *supra* note 10, at 88.

The challenge of solidarity and the common good also arises on the international level. The much discussed phenomenon of globalization points to new links among nations and peoples that are developing today on multiple levels—the political, the economic (including trade, finance, investment, production, and consumption), the social-cultural (through mass media and the internet), and the environmental.¹³ From the standpoint of Catholic social thought and the bishops pastoral letter, some aspects of this thickening web of interdependence must be judged negative, others are positive. The negative face of globalization is evident in the continuing reality of massive poverty in some developing countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, despite the growth of the overall global economy. To be sure, markets and trade can be engines of improved well-being. But many people, perhaps the majority in the poor countries of sub-Saharan Africa, lack all access to these markets and so do not benefit from them. Social exclusion and marginalization again appear as the markers of the injustice that causes poverty.

In the face of African poverty, the key question is how to move from patterns of global interaction that leave out whole peoples and large parts of a whole continent to patterns based on inclusion and reciprocity. Pope John Paul II called this “globalization in solidarity, globalization without marginalization.”¹⁴ This is a form of interdependence shaped by what the United States Catholic Bishops called “basic justice.” In the bishops’ words, basic justice “*demand[s] the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons.*” Put negatively, “The ultimate injustice is for a person or group to be treated actively or abandoned passively as if they were nonmembers of the human race.”¹⁵ Inclusion and participation based on equality are the fundamental marks that should be shaping the social, economic, and political institutions of our globalizing world.

This vision of solidarity also calls for the development of institutions that will enable economically or culturally marginalized people to have

¹³ For an in-depth analysis of the diverse dimensions of globalization, see DAVID HELD, ANTHONY MCGREW, DAVID GOLDBLATT, & JONATHAN PERRATON, *GLOBAL TRANSFORMATIONS: POLITICS, ECONOMICS AND CULTURE* (1999). Similar though not identical dimensions of globalization are distinguished and analyzed in *GOVERNANCE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD* (Joseph S. Nye & John D. Donahue eds., 2000), at Part One, “Trends in Globalization.”

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *From the Justice of Each Comes the Peace of All*, World Day of Peace Message (Jan. 1, 1998), available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_08121997_xxxi-world-day-for-peace_en.html.

¹⁵ *ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL*, *supra* note 10, at 77.

greater voice in the decisions that affect them. For example, the venues where decisions about indebtedness, trade, and other global economic issues are made presently look like clubs whose members are limited to political and economic elites. This has been called "globalization's democratic deficit."¹⁶ Influence in these international organizations by many people whose well-being they affect is at best attenuated and at worst non-existent. Overcoming this deficit is essential. Transnational nongovernmental organizations can play an important role in pressing for action on these issues.¹⁷ The church can surely be one of the key transnational actors on this front. The same is true of the academic community of universities that have an extraordinary capacity for global reflection and communication. Indeed, pursuit of a global solidarity and justice raises intellectual challenges that only universities are capable of addressing. I think this puts a big agenda before all of us in the university world, especially those in the university who take the Catholic intellectual tradition seriously. It calls us to develop new understanding that reaches across cultures through listening as well as speaking in a genuine dialogue with those who are different. It requires intellectual commitment to understanding the way the institutions of our globalizing world are actually working and what they are doing to the most vulnerable. And it calls for developing well grounded proposals on how to transform the institutional centers of decision-making in our increasingly interconnected globe so they serve all members of the human race. In short, it calls for academic work that takes commitment to the common good as its guiding north star.

This brings me to a final point I want to address briefly. Twenty years ago, the U.S. Catholic bishops were in a position to address these issues creatively and to have their voices heard with considerable respect in our country. Both the pastoral letter they issued on strategic nuclear weapons in 1983 and the one on economic justice issued in 1986 received considerable notice in the media, the university, and government-

¹⁶ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Globalization's Democratic Deficit: How to Make International Institutions More Accountable*, FOREIGN AFFAIRS 80, no. 4, 2-6 (July/Aug., 2001). See also Robert O. Keohane, *International Institutions: Can Interdependence Work?*, FOREIGN POLICY 110, 92 (Spring 1998). Keohane and Nye, Jr. develop the "club" characterization somewhat more fully in their *Introduction to GOVERNANCE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD* 26-36 (2000).

¹⁷ MARGARET E. KECK & KATHRYN SIKKINK, *ACTIVISTS BEYOND BORDERS: ADVOCACY NETWORKS IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS* 2-3, 16-25 (1998). For a similar breakdown of the roles played by transnational NGOs see L. David Brown, Sanjeev Khagram, Mark H. Moore, & Peter Frumkin, *Globalization, NGOs, and Multisectoral Relations*, in *GOVERNANCE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD*, *supra* note 16, at 271-296, 283.

tal policy worlds. Sad to say, the U.S. bishops have, in my judgment, lost much of their credibility in the domains of social justice and peace in the past few years. This is due, in large part, to the scandal of clerical sexual abuse and the way a number of bishops responded to it, including the bishop in the city where I live, Boston. It is hard to imagine a more blatant violation of justice than the sexual abuse of young people. The fact that this has been done by priests and that some bishops have tried to cover it up threatens to make all talk of the church's mission of justice sound like gross hypocrisy.

In addition, a small number of U.S. bishops have recently so stressed a narrow set of moral issues related to sexuality in their engagement with political life that they have threatened to overshadow other initiatives of church leaders in the domain of social justice and peace. Both the sexual abuse crisis and the issue of single-issue intervention in the political sphere raise very basic questions about the governance of Catholic church today. Indeed, if active participation by all citizens is seen as essential to good civic governance in Catholic social thought, one can ask whether the crisis of church credibility today may not be a result of the lack of such participation in church governance. Indeed there are good reasons to believe that the present crisis would be considerably less acute if more laypeople had been directly involved in shaping the church's response to the abuse crisis and to public affairs more generally.

Crisis, of course, can be a very negative reality. But it can also be an opportunity for growth. The Second Vatican Council made much of the image of the church as the whole people of God, laity as well as priests and bishops. Indeed I think the bishops' recent loss of credibility means that the contribution of the Catholic intellectual tradition to the issue of economic justice must come from laypeople engaged in discussions like those taking place at this conference. The Catholic university will always have a key role to play in addressing complex issues like the relation of Catholic social thought, the market, the state, and the law. But the importance of this role is increased today by the decline in the bishops' ability to speak to these issues with credibility. My hope is that the solidarity and commitment to the common good that the tradition calls for will become a guide for our discussions today and your own work in the years ahead. Our country, our world, and the Catholic church itself very much need your contributions on these issues.