POPE FRANCIS AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

+Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.
Napa Institute, 7.26.14

I’m a Capuchin Franciscan, and I’ve often found that people think of Francis of Assisi as a kind of 13th-century flower child. St. Francis was certainly “counter-cultural,” but only in his radical obedience to the Church, and his radical insistence on living the Gospel fully -- including poverty and all of its other uncomfortable demands. Jesus, speaking to him from the cross of San Damiano, said “Repair my house.” I think Pope Francis believes God has called him to do that as pope, as God calls every pope. And he plans to do it in the way St. Francis did it.

Pope Francis took the name of the saint of Christian simplicity and poverty. As he’s said, he wants “a Church that is poor and for the poor.” In his apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium, he grounded this goal in Jesus Christ, “who became poor, and was always close to the poor and the outcast.”1 That's a very Franciscan idea.

The Holy Father knows poverty and violence. He knows the plague of corrupt politics and oppressive governments. He's seen the cruelty of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. He's seen elites who rig the political system in their favor and keep the poor in poverty. When we Americans think about economics, we think in terms of efficiency and production. When Francis thinks about economics, he thinks in terms of human suffering. We're blessed to live in a rich, free, stable country. We can't always see what Francis sees.

I think it would be a mistake to describe him as a “liberal” -- much less a “Marxist.” As I told the Italian newspaper La Stampa in an interview some weeks ago, words like "liberal" and "conservative" don't describe Catholic belief. They divide what shouldn’t be divided. We should love the poor and love the unborn child. Service to the oppressed and service to the family; defense of the weak and defense of the unborn child; belief in the value of business and belief in restraints on predatory business practices -- all these things spring from the same Catholic commitment to human dignity. There’s nothing "progressive" about killing an unborn human child or allowing it to happen. And there’s nothing "conservative" about ignoring the cries of the poor.

Before we go on, I should make a couple of obvious points about Francis. The first is that not everyone’s happy with him. G. K. Chesterton said that every age gets the saint it needs.2 Not the saint people want, but the saint they need; the saint who's the medicine for their illness. The same may be true of popes.

John Paul II revived the spirit of a Church that felt fractured, and even irrelevant, in the years after the council. Benedict revived the mind of a Church that felt, even after John Paul II’s intellectual leadership, outgunned by the world in the public square. Francis has already started to revive the witness of a Church that, even after John Paul II's and Benedict's example, feels as if we can’t get a hearing and that we're telling a story no one will believe.
Again, not everyone is pleased with Francis. Chesterton said that saints are so often martyrs because they’re the kind of antidote the world mistakes for poison. The website Salon recently ran an article complaining about the good press Francis has gotten. It argued that “The new sexist, nun-hating, poverty-perpetuating, pedophile-protecting homophobe is the same as the old sexist, nun-hating, poverty-perpetuating, pedophile-protecting homophobe . . . [I]t is ludicrous to suggest that a man who denies comprehensive reproductive health care (including all forms of birth control including condoms and abortion) and comprehensive family planning is a man who cares about the poor of this world.”

Some on the political right have attacked him in words almost as strong, though for different reasons.

What Francis says about economic justice may be hard for some of us to hear. So we need to read the Holy Father’s writings for ourselves, without the filter of the mass media. Then we need to open our hearts to what God is telling us through his words.

Here’s my second point. In matters of economic justice, Francis' concerns are the same as Benedict's and John Paul II's, and Pius XI's and Leo XIII's. He understands economic matters through the lens of Church teaching in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Like his predecessors, he defends human dignity in a world that consistently threatens it. But Francis stresses more directly than they did that human *solidarity* is a necessary dimension of human *dignity*. We need both. Human dignity requires not just the protection of individuals, as in our prolife work, but an on-going commitment to the common good.

Solidarity, he says in *Evangelii Gaudium*, is a relationship of love and reconciliation. It’s a mutual concern for the other's good. He finds this modeled for us in the Mass and in Mary's great yes to God. Defined economically, it puts “the community and the priority of the life of all, over the appropriation of goods by the few.” To put it negatively, “what satisfies one at the expense of the other, ends up destroying both.” We need to live in solidarity with one another because we can’t change our social structures if we don't. Without learning solidarity, any new political or economic structure will become as corrupt as the old.

Let’s remember what Francis said in his famous *America* interview. Bearing witness to Jesus Christ in a missionary style, he said, “[should focus] on the essentials, on the necessary things: This is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the Church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel . . . . The proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.”

Many people worried that the Holy Father was saying those “moral and religious imperatives” don't matter anymore. Other people wanted to believe he was saying that. But of course they do matter. Pope Francis believes they matter. What he was saying is that, in the task of bringing the world to Jesus Christ, we witness best when we save the unborn and when we feed their mothers, when we help immigrants, when we serve the poor, when we stand against division and exploitation, when we speak for a more just social order.

When we don't witness that way, a society as broken as ours won't pay attention to our moral and religious convictions. And that's fair enough. Why should anyone believe that the
Gospel is good news when we live as if it weren't? When we do witness in the way Francis describes, people more easily listen. And then their hearts may burn for Jesus Christ as the disciples did on the road to Emmaus.

Human solidarity begins in a shared respect for human dignity. And human dignity expresses itself in shared works of human solidarity. In his encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei*, Francis notes that our faith teaches us the unique dignity of each person, something the pagan world never saw clearly. If we don't grasp this reality of God’s personal love for every individual, we have no way to understand what makes human life so precious. And we have no grounds for believing in human dignity and solidarity.

But if we do grasp this fact of God’s personal love, Francis says in a paper on “social debt,” which he wrote while a cardinal, we’ll see that “man is the subject, beginning, and end of all political, economic, and social activity -- each man, all of man, and all men. . . . [T]here is something due to man because he is man, by reason of his lofty dignity. This something due is inseparable from the opportunity to survive and participate actively in the common good of humanity.” For Francis, “every man and woman represents a blessing for me; that the light of God's face shines on me through the faces of my brothers and sisters.”

What concretely does Francis believe about economic justice? He’s never offered his systematic thoughts about it or the policies that promote it. And frankly we can sense some ambiguity in his thinking. When he calls for a better distribution of wealth among social classes, he doesn’t say how this should be done and what a proper distribution would look like, or who will decide who gets what. But he’d probably say that he’s giving us the principles of a rightly ordered social and economic life as the Catholic Church understands them, and that the Church gives to laypeople, and especially those called to public service, the job of best applying those principles in each nation.

Francis is classically Catholic in his social concerns. He stresses that the social doctrine of the Church “maintains that one can live authentically human relations of friendship and sociability, of solidarity and reciprocity within economic activity.” Business is a proper activity of man. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he calls it “a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life . . . striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all.” He does place “the social function of property and the universal destination of goods” before private property. We’re given private ownership of goods because they need to be protected and increased, so the goods we have will better serve the common good.

He often speaks about the importance of work for human dignity. The Church, he says, “has always maintained that the key to the social question is work” and that government “should cultivate a culture of work, not charity.” Welfare programs are needed to meet urgent social needs. But they should be temporary responses to those needs. To ensure people’s welfare means providing access to education and basic health care, but “above all, employment, for it is through free, creative, participatory, and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives.”

Francis rejects the idea that helping the poor is a government duty alone. It’s our job too. And he warns that when Jesus returns, he’ll judge us harshly if we blame the government for poverty rather than doing something about it ourselves.
Francis would also dispute that the market, left to itself, can ever solve most of our problems. He rejects the “neo-liberal” belief — “liberal” in the classic European sense — in “the absolute autonomy of markets and financial speculation.”

There is, he says, “no 'automatic' mechanism for ensuring fairness and justice. Only an ethical choice transformed into specific practices, with effective means, is capable of preventing man falling prey to man.”

Economic life separated from a politics of social responsibility creates “grave inequalities,” and “unbridled capitalism fragments economic and social life.”

Government has a necessary role. “Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic,” Francis writes. “It has to be ordered to the attainment of the common good, which is the responsibility above all of the political community.” In Evangelii Gaudium he calls politics “a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good.”

The Catholic faith “teaches us to create just forms of government, in the realization that authority comes from God and is meant for the service of the common good,” he wrote in Lumen Fidei. In Evangelii Gaudium, he added that “The dignity of each individual person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies.”

Francis has strong ideas about what this understanding requires of the economy. People must “avoid letting the employment of financial resources be motivated by speculation, giving in to the temptation of seeking only immediate benefits, instead of [seeking] the sustainability of the enterprise in the long run, its proper service to the real economy.” He warns that a business should not be moved solely because conditions are better somewhere else, and that it’s wrong to exploit a community without contributing to the creation of a stable social and economic system. He calls the practice of trying to raise profits by laying off workers “a new poison.” And businesses must provide a just wage.

Wealth, he insists, should “be distributed among each of the people and social classes.” A society must care for the vulnerable. This care must include helping pregnant women and mothers, making sure children have enough to eat and basic health care throughout life. He calls providing children with an inadequate education “a kind of killing.”

So these are a few ways Francis believes human solidarity, linked to human dignity, should be expressed in practice. But again, he never lets us off the hook as individuals. He won’t let us point at “them” — big government and big corporations — as the people mainly responsible for creating a just society. Francis is always the pastor, the shepherd of families and individual believers, even in his more theoretical writings.

What he calls “the political project of inclusion” belongs not only to governments and the wealthy, but to everyone. Speaking in Argentina to a congress on the social doctrine of the Church, the then-Cardinal Bergoglio asked us to draw near to each other, and especially to the poor, as the Father is near to the Son and both are near to us. We discover Jesus, he said, “in the flesh of our poorer brethren -- those who are neediest and most unfairly treated. Only when we approach and care for the suffering flesh of Christ can hope shine in our hearts; the hope that our disillusioned world asks of us as Christians.”
The suffering of the world's poor reminds us of the parable of the Good Samaritan and the story of Jesus' walk with the discouraged disciples on the road to Emmaus. “The two situations are similar,” he said:

first, the pain of the wounded man lying semiconscious with no possibility of escape, giving the impression that nothing effective can be done; second, the self-conscious and reason-filled disappointment of Cleophas. In both lies the same lack of hope. And that is precisely what moves the tender mercy of Jesus, who is on the road leading them, who lowers himself, becomes a companion full of tenderness, hidden in those small gestures of nearness, where the whole world is made flesh: flesh that approaches and embraces, hands that touch and bandage, that anoint with oil and clean the wounds with wine; flesh that approaches and accompanies, listening; hands that break bread.32

It’s fitting that for this “man from a far country,” this Latin American pope, the task of economic justice -- the work of incarnating human dignity and solidarity in the structures of our economic life -- seems so ultimately and intimately linked to the Eucharist itself. God incarnated himself in a sinful world to redeem it with his love. His Son incarnates himself in our lives at every Liturgy -- again, out of love. We now have the task of incarnating that same love in the structures of the world around us through the witness of our lives.

“Go in peace to love and serve the Lord:” We hear those words at the end of every Mass. We serve the Lord best by serving the needs of others. We love the Lord best by showing his love to others. At the heart of this pope’s thoughts about economic justice is not a theory or an ideology, but the person of Jesus Christ. And all of us who call ourselves Christians should see in that a reason to hope.

1 Evangelii Gaudium, section 186.
2 G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas (Dover Publications, 2009)
4 Evangelii Gaudium, section 229 and others.
5 See Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, editors, Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words (G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2013) page 253.
6 Evangelii Gaudium, section 188-189.
7 “A Big Heart Open to God,” America, September 30, 2013 (http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview).
8 Lumen Fidei, section 54.
10 Lumen Fidei, section 54.
11 “Social Debt,” page 147.
12 Evangelii Gaudium, section 203.
14 Ibid., pages 21 & 18.
15 Evangelii Gaudium, section 202.
16 Ibid., section 192.
17 Ambrogetti and Rubin, pages 130-131.
18 Evangelii Gaudium, section 202. See also “Social Debt,” page 144.
19 Ambrogetti and Rubin, pages 254-255.
20 “Social Debt,” page 147.
21 Ambrogetti and Rubin, page 138. See “Social Debt,” page 148, for his brief description of the good government as “an active, transparent, effective, and efficient state that promotes public policies.”
22 Evangelii Gaudium, section 204.
23 Lumen Fidei, section 55.
24 Evangelii Gaudium, section 203.
26 Ibid., page 148.
27 Evangelii Gaudium, section 204.
28 Evangelii Gaudium, section 192.
30 Ibid., page 248.
31 “Bringing the Nearness of Christ to a Disillusioned World” in Encountering Christ, page 154-155.
32 Ibid., page 153.