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How Pope Francis Is Reviving Radical Catholic Economics

Some Catholics have been quietly practicing them all along.

By Nathan Schneider

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A few weeks before the release this summer of *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis's manifesto on ecology and poverty, I had a chance to see the pontiff, speck-size, in Rome. He is the first Third World pope, but the Old World church was very much in evidence. At an outdoor papal Mass, it seemed as if hundreds of variously costumed men stood between Francis and the nearest woman, their outfits representing dozens, if not hundreds, of medieval societies that refuse to go away. It was hard to know whether the pope at the center was in charge of it all or imprisoned inside.

What G.K. Chesterton called “the democracy of the dead” is alive and well, even in the fast times of Pope Francis—a system in which the mere fact of being corporeally alive does not confer on us the power to easily change what the dead have put in place. This can render the church flatfooted and even cruel as the world around it refuses to wait; former Roman Catholics outnumber most religious groups in the United States, a trend that even Francis's popularity has not reversed. But Americans are especially impatient. A more liberal, dexterous, and fashionable church would probably not long claim to represent, as one beloved community, over a billion of the poorest and richest people in the world.

Nor would Francis's broadsides against global capitalism hit so hard. “No one can accept the precepts of neoliberalism and consider themselves Christian,” he wrote in his days as Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires. As pope, he puts the matter more directly: “Such an economy kills.” In *Laudato si'*, he regards the environmental crisis as an economic-justice crisis as well: “The same mind-set which stands in the way of making radical decisions to reverse the trend of global warming also stands in the way of achieving the goal of eliminating poverty.”

This pope, like millions of Catholics, comes from the southern side of the equator, and it was

office, he made it a habit to hear confessions in impoverished districts. “He’s a person who comes from walking through the poor neighborhoods, from walking with those who are in very bad conditions, from being with the unions and all that,” says Néstor Escudero, a member of the Argentine NGO La Alameda, which opposes human trafficking and organizes cooperatives among victims. Bergoglio lent his presence and protection to La Alameda, along with other groups that faced danger because of their work.

Some of the most emphatic speeches of Francis’s papacy have come at gatherings of social movements, including one in Rome in 2014 and another this year in Bolivia. “You, the lowly, the exploited, the poor and underprivileged, can do, and are doing, a lot. I would even say that the future of humanity is in great measure in your own hands, through your ability to organize and carry out creative alternatives,” he told his listeners in Bolivia. “I want to unite my voice with yours in this fight,” he said in Rome. The early symbolic acts of his papacy —adopting simple vestments and apartments, washing the feet of a Muslim girl in juvenile detention—reflect a formidable and contradictory populism: Go to the margins, call attention to the poor, make headlines for yourself in the process.

Naomi Klein, the Canadian journalist, returned from a summit of climate activists over the summer impressed by how Vatican higher-ups seemed to be listening more than speaking. “They’re showing us what rapid institutional change looks like,” she told me. When it comes to putting economic justice at the center of environmental ethics, she adds, North American environmental organizations have a lot to learn from this pope. But “one has to be careful not to drink too much Kool-Aid.” Francis, after all, largely repeats his predecessor Benedict XVI’s teachings on gender as well as economics—except in being more strident about the latter and more gentle with the former.

So does the pope’s assault on the economic order represent continuity, or an actual break? Has the content of faith changed, or just its emphases? And how much can (or will) Francis really do? These are ever-recurring questions for papists like me. Having a pope means holding a posture of receptivity toward him—and yet the meek, not the powerful, will inherit the earth, and the poor will rule the coming kingdom. Preserved in the world’s most conservative institution is a body of radical notions about economic life: as *Catholic Worker* cofounder Peter Maurin put it, “a philosophy so old that it looks like new.”

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My friend Ryan Patricio, a doctoral student in history at Yale, noticed something curious while studying the German nuns whose convents wound up in Protestant regions in the early, bloody days of the Reformation. He focused on those nuns who refused the option of relocating to Catholic areas where they could practice their faith more freely. They

but to stewarding a certain plot of land and shepherding the surrounding economy. “Their Catholicism bound them to a place,” Patrico writes. They felt their salvation was tied up with caring for the land.

These nuns are a reminder that Pope Francis isn’t coming out of nowhere with his often perplexing “small is beautiful” form of ecological economics. He calls for urgency in confronting the climate crisis, while declining to put his trust in modern technology and markets for the solution. His sources of inspiration are seemingly lost causes: the remaining vestiges of indigenous agriculture, cooperative business models, and a call for the mass rejection of consumerism.

Francis speaks from a tradition that goes back to the Catholic Church’s ban on usury, or predatory lending, which has been all but forgotten today. Early theologians insisted that the common good trumps any privilege of private property. For all the Vatican’s authority over the church (which Francis is at once employing and rolling back), Catholic social teaching proclaims the concept of subsidiarity, meaning that economic and political power should remain as local and as participatory as possible. The basic sites of production should be the household and the community, not some faraway, intrinsically usurious corporation. Catholic tradition helped create certain engines of capitalism, but it throws a wrench into others.

There’s no comprehensive school of economics to describe all this. One attempt, championed by G.K. Chesterton and others a century ago, was dubbed “distributism.” Italian economist Stefano Zamagni, a leading contributor to the economic teaching of Benedict XVI, tells me the reading lists at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences have lately included Elinor Ostrom, the Nobel Prize–winning theorist of the commons. Rather than the market or the state per se, Catholic economics often attends to those common treasures in between that we manage for ourselves.

Zamagni belongs to the school of “civil economics,” which regards the notions of a utility-maximizing *Homo economicus* and an impersonal “invisible hand” ruling the market as impoverished visions of economic life. “If all you do is increase growth, you destroy social relations, family relations, and the environment,” he says. Civil economics, by contrast, seeks to evaluate companies according to more humane metrics than just profit and loss, and to identify ways that people can shape the economy with their values.

For more than a century (or nearly two millennia, if you include monasticism), Catholics have been the leading developers of cooperative enterprise. The first credit union in the United States was founded by French-speaking Catholics in New Hampshire in 1908. The world’s largest network of worker cooperatives, the Mondragon Corporation in Spain’s

Development is among our chief funders of democratic, cooperative businesses. Around the world, Catholic Relief Services does the same.

Pope Francis credits his father, an overworked accountant, with imparting to him “a great allergy to economic things.” But from the same source he also remembers hearing, as a teenager, about the virtues of cooperativism: “It goes forward slowly,” his father said, “but it is sure.” In an address to members of Italian cooperatives last February, Francis championed what he called “an authentic, true cooperative...where capital does not have command over men, but men over capital.” In *Laudato si'*, he proposes cooperatives as a means of correcting our distorted relationships to technology and energy grids.

Cooperativism is neither capitalist nor communist, and the same is true of Francis. He's a leader formed in the skirmishes between the First and Second worlds—accepting neither, and turning to Catholic tradition for older and wiser alternatives to them both. He came of age in the heyday of Peronism in Argentina, and he learned from the Peróns how to walk a kind of both-and line between a Marxist's identification with the masses and a conservative's savvy among the powers that be. He identified with “God's holy faithful people,” both to needle politicians into concern for the poor and to chasten priests tempted to trade their faith for secular revolution.

Laudato si' was drafted by a cardinal from Ghana and cites bishops' conferences from all over the world. It calls for international institutions to address the climate crisis and for governments to act. But mainly it calls for a widespread conversion to local economic resistance, following the lead of the poorest and most vulnerable. There's that papal contradiction again: the most eminent religious figure in the world trying to claim that the real power lies with the rest of us. And it's true that the best exemplars of Catholic economics have little to do with the pope himself—let alone the Vatican and its scandal-ridden finances—and much more to do with far less visible people putting their values to work where they are every day.

The last time I drove through Kentucky's bourbon district, for example, there were signs everywhere from the Sisters of Loretto campaign against a natural-gas pipeline slated to run through parts of their land, which they consider a “sacred trust.” Thanks to the sisters' determination to protect both their property and the planet from extractive industries, the pipeline has been put on an indefinite hold. These are the successors to the German nuns in enemy territory, shepherding their common resources regardless of the inconvenience they pose to the powerful. Another is Corinne Florek, a Dominican nun with an MBA who directs a fund with capital from some 20 Catholic congregations—generating healthy returns, financial and otherwise, from cooperatives and other forms of community enterprise. © 2015 09:14 AM

first bit of investment advice: “Stop listening to the Dow Jones going up and down.”

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The existence of a pope has never squared well with how we do business in the United States. Principal architects of the US imagination, from Mark Twain to the Ku Klux Klan, railed against papism as a foreign lesion. For a country that calls itself democratic, the notion of a foreign dictator-for-life holding keys to the eternal souls of millions of its citizens disturbs precious longings for sovereignty and the integrity of borders. For a country that identifies perhaps more fully than any other with capitalism, it's awkward that since the late 19th century, popes have called capital out on the miseries it permits and have asserted worker organizing as an essential outgrowth of human dignity. For a country that prizes choice and individual liberty, it's baffling that the Catholic Church preaches freedom through constraint and salvation by community.

Explicit anti-Catholicism is mostly dormant in the United States now, but Pope Francis poses no small danger to the American dream. He denounces our beloved trickle-down economics in the same breath that he refuses to reduce abortion to simply one more personal choice; each manifests what he calls a “throw-away culture,” the definition of which overlaps considerably with US culture as such. Francis's outspokenness rubs in our face the fact that the Vatican is one of the few global institutions not designed to adhere to the strictures of acceptability within US political discourse. Catholics aligned with big business and the religious right, who tended to thrive under the last two popes, have found themselves squirming under Francis. Many local bishops and priests have simply chosen not to highlight *Laudato si'* in their preaching or programs.

Diego Alonso-Lasheras, a Spanish Jesuit priest who teaches social ethics at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, points out: “A lot of Americans, whether they are Catholic or not, wonder: ‘How can he say that to us?’ Well, you're not the average person he has in mind.” This pope is thinking, more likely, of the confessions he heard for years among the poor in Buenos Aires.

In any event, Catholic social teaching has long proved adaptable across the US political spectrum. Congressman Paul Ryan defends his efforts to cut federal social programs on the basis of subsidiarity; some Catholic sisters lobbied for the Affordable Care Act on the basis of the common good, while others filed lawsuits against it. This is a discourse that no single party can lay claim to for long.

Liberal Catholics in the United States have breathed more easily under Francis than they have for decades, but they also know that little has changed in church teaching or practice, especially on matters of gender and sexuality. They want to see Francis, during his

look to the apparent miracle of the Vatican's recent role in brokering a rollback of US sanctions against Cuba—though Francis, for his part, denies that he did much of anything.

The real miracle for the Vatican's shadow diplomacy would be in a breakthrough at the UN climate summit in Paris this December. Zamagni hopes that Francis can somehow resolve the prisoners' dilemma of the negotiations, in which each party refuses to reduce emissions out of fear the others won't. Such a *deus ex machina*, sadly, seems more plausible than the possibility that our secular representatives will opt to steward the atmospheric commons on their own.

The Catholic Church has always involved itself in the unholy business of global politics. There is an irony in the institution's determination to survive so as to spread the message of a savior who allowed himself to be executed. Three hundred years after his death, his followers conquered Rome and the empire fell, but the compromises of power also seeped into their church. Survival has involved collaborating with unsavory regimes. The chief controversy of Jorge Bergoglio's pre-papal life was over his actions, or lack thereof, during Argentina's Dirty War, when he would not go so far as to pit the church as a whole against the ruthless regime. One of his own mentors, a priest who chose to live among slum dwellers, spent years resenting Bergoglio for allowing him to be captured and tortured. But during those years, Bergoglio was able to use his position and influence to help many others.

The Roman Catholic Church is an economy of many sectors, a commons of many corners. This is a lesson I first learned one morning in northeast Guatemala, not long after my teenage conversion to the faith. There was an old, small colonial church at the top of a hill near where I was staying. I climbed the steps, crossed myself at the doorway, and sat in a pew, watching as people came and went, going about the work of prayer. I noticed that they would go behind the altar as they did—not a usual place for laypeople to be. So eventually I got up and went there too. The back of the conventional, European-style altar, I realized, was covered in wax and chicken feathers. I'd never seen such a thing in a church, and probably wasn't supposed to; within this ostensibly Romish building, a bit of Mayan culture—an ancient spiritual economy—was insistently preserving itself.

The pope, like him or not, is not the church. The word for "church" in Greek is *ekklesia*, or assembly, the same thing ancient Athenians had in their noisy democracy. The world's ultimate theocrat presides over an assembly of humans as multitudinous and subversive as the feathers in Guatemala, joined in the foolhardy gamble that an institution can accumulate wealth and power for the sake of the poor without losing its soul. The gamble may yet pay off. ●

0 COMMENTS

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