

REVIEW

Pope Francis and the Caring Society

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I. INTRODUCTION

Each generation is converted by the saint who contradicts it most.

—G. K. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 1933

This is good news for a pope and a book that contradicts many current trends of thought, though in quite different ways. From its genesis in 1891 with *Rerum Novarum*, Catholic social teaching (CST) has in fact always been a sign of contradiction. Its successive voices, building up from the shared foundation of human dignity, emphasize different aspects of the relationship between its two central principles: subsidiarity and solidarity. Subsidiarity calls for the decisions to be made as locally as possible (beginning with the individual), while solidarity points to the intrinsic equality between all members of society and celebrates their interdependence. The overarching goal of CST is always referred to as “the common good.” This concept continues to be rather nebulous, thus, individuals often interpret it with respect to the two previous principles. How are subsidiarity and solidarity balanced in practice? Does one precede the other? The way these questions are answered reveals a formidable gulf in CST thinkers. Pope Francis has assuredly staked his camp in the land of solidarity; “We require a new and universal solidarity” (2015, p. 14). In fact, the word “solidarity” appears 14 times in *Laudato si’* and 19 in *Evangelii Gaudium*, while “subsidiarity” is used just two times in the former and once in the latter. Meanwhile, economists naturally see all of the world’s problems through the lens of subsidiarity (or to use its formal name, microeconomics). A certain school in economics that comes up in the book, the

Austrian school, takes subsidiarity particularly seriously as illuminated in F. A. Hayek’s (1945) classic work “The Use of Knowledge in Society.” *Pope Francis and the Caring Society* makes of itself a bridge. The genius of this new text is that it breaks apart the lively complexity of Francis’s social teaching (and beyond) into manageable portions, allowing the relative expertise of authors to illuminate ways in which the pope might better understand economics, economists might better understand the pope, and champions of solidarity and subsidiarity might take steps toward one another. Its author, Robert Whaples, should count this amongst his proudest life accomplishments, for history repeatedly reveals that ideas about economics often matter more than we can foresee.

The next few sections will go into more depth by illustrating three arenas in which the authors, mostly economists, have argued that increased subsidiarity is actually the way to achieve more solidarity. Taking Francis’s end as given, they propose the most efficient means. They are as follows: level playing fields in the market, polycentric governance for natural resources, and the economic role of the family. The penultimate section covers the other four chapters of the book, which do not enter into the subsidiarity-solidarity debate so much as add much substantial context and unique insight. The conclusion covers strengths and weaknesses of the text as a whole and contains a note on promising avenues for future research. By merely opening up these discussions, the axis of the world’s *caritas et veritate* has been tilted favorably. While the work is far from accomplished, a surprising amount of value—some might say mutual benefit—has already emerged from the trade in ideas. The fact that the first ten pages of the book are filled with the praise of well-known scholars, archbishops, philosophers, and professors attests to this. While detailed, empirical, and technical in parts, nothing in *Pope Francis and the Caring*

Society is beyond the reach of readers who want to know more about the interplay between morality and economics. In fact, the readership will no doubt find themselves edified, equipped, and welcomed into the immemorial conversation about man as profit-maximizer and political-actor (and perhaps even, God-seeker).

II. LEVEL PLAYING FIELDS

The biblical accounts of creation invite us to see each human being as a subject who can never be reduced to the status of an object... This vision of “might is right” has engendered immense inequality, injustice and acts of violence against the majority of humanity, since resources end up in the hands of the first comer or the most powerful: the winner takes all.

– Pope Francis, *Laudato si’*, 2015

Economic inequality has been a serious concern of politicians, religious leaders, and those living next to “the Joneses” in the past decade. Gabriel Martinez centers his contribution around the question of whether or not the global economy is home to uneven playing fields, which would mean that the pope is correct in decrying the exclusion of marginalized groups. For Martinez, the answer is in the affirmative, although the problem is not inherent to capitalism; “Rather, what Francis is addressing is our lack of concern: our indifference towards very large concentrations of economic and political resources with a limited group of powerful individuals” (p. 70). This kind of response is right in line with ancient Catholic tradition. The chapter follows Francis as he paints a picture of two societies, one that is favorably caught up in a virtuous circle of knowledge, exchange, and wealth creation, and another that is trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, despair, and destruction. The first group of people (or nations) seems to be successfully pursuing the common good, though Francis argues that there can be no true solidarity, thus no common good, until the marginalized societies are welcomed into the market. Martinez declares that what separates the two is the lack of a level playing field.

What causes an uneven playing field? Skillfully, Martinez utilizes a range of sources (from the Psalms to an article by Charles Koch) to make his point that what Francis sees as a lack of solidarity is indeed symptomatic of unsustainable growth caused by *false* subsidiarity. An economy filled with political rent-seekers rather than real entrepreneurs will

necessarily have people falling through the cracks. The easiest way to see the difference is that true subsidiarity would empower the decision-makers closest to the problem to seek out solutions themselves, while false subsidiarity consists of local decision-makers who capture higher levels of authority to solve their problems for them (i.e. prohibitively high industry regulations). An uneven playing field is of further concern since the growth it generates is inherently unsustainable. Political favors are unavoidably scarce; human ingenuity is not. As Julian Simon (1996) pointed out in his magnum opus, the unfathomable human mind is itself the ultimate resource. A healthy, inclusive, and flourishing economy is structured so that all human beings can make full use of their ultimate resource and thus become co-creators. In such a way, the *natural inequality* between each person can be a basis for mutual benefit, rather than something to be diminished. Martinez acknowledges that Francis levies a deep critique, though he locates a large portion of the problem in state rules that pick winners and losers. Rather, a thriving market structure based upon true subsidiarity will arise only when the playing field is level. As Hayek wrote in *The Fatal Conceit*: “The insight that general rules must prevail for spontaneity to flourish, as reaped by Hume and Kant, has never been refuted, merely neglected or forgotten” (1988, p. 73).

While both Francis and Martinez see improved (or diminished) political action as part of the solution, both agree that the center of any change will arise at the personal level. “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either - but right through every human heart - and through all human hearts” (Solzhenitsyn 1973, p. 615). All men, women, and children are perpetually free when it comes to that choice; the very closest level of subsidiarity is in fact the basis of our most basic solidarity.

III. POLYCENTRIC GOVERNANCE OF COMMON-POOL RESOURCES

We are all responsible for the protection and care of the environment. This responsibility knows no boundaries. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity it is important for everyone to be committed at his or her proper level, working to overcome the prevalence of particular interests.

– Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 2010

A pioneering chapter of the book was Phillip Booth's essay on "Property Rights and Conservation," culminating with a compelling argument for the symbiosis of Elinor Ostrom's work on common-pool resources (CPR) and Catholic social teaching. Beginning with the ancient Church's exultation of communal property and modest living, he leads the reader through Aquinas and the late Scholastics whom explicitly encourage private property rights – not as an absolute right, but for similar reasons that one would insist upon the wearing of clothes. Although religious and scholars quibble about whether personal property existed pre-Fall, our loss of innocence requires guards so that we might learn to respect one another again. Thus, clothing and private property exist as barriers to eyes that can easily slip into lust and greed. Not only do these encourage peace and proper upkeep of the goods of this earth, but the right to private property is also recognized (primarily by Leo XIII) as aligning the common good with the grain of self-interested, creative behavior.

The driving thesis of Booth's chapter is that *Laudato si'* missed a remarkable opportunity to build upon research regarding the efficacy of property rights, quasi-property rights, and polycentric governance to handle environmental dilemmas. The work of Elinor Ostrom on common-pool resources is important for researchers with concerns similar to those of the pope; her framework is not simply private vs. public, rather, it fills in the gaps between the theory of the firm and the theory of the state by producing something like *a theory of civil society*. Contrary to the prevailing thought of her time, Ostrom refused to believe that humans, endowed with reason and ingenuity, could be irreversibly trapped in "the tragedy of the commons." Booth adds a fascinating historical note; the quintessential journal article on environmental protection, "The Tragedy of the Commons," was actually about compulsory population control. Hardin's own epigraph: "The population problem has no technical solution; it requires a fundamental extension in morality." The tragedy of the commons was simply a metaphor for his argument in favor of governing "human breeding." Alternatives to the tragedy of the commons seem to be of Catholic interest through and through.

In her classic text, *Governing the Commons*, Ostrom (1990) echoes the themes of CST. Her work begins from an integral view of human dignity, identifies how subsidiari-

ty can build solidarity, and is oriented toward the common good:

Both centralization advocates and privatization advocates accept as a central tenet that institutional change must come from outside and be imposed on the individuals affected... Instead of basing policy on the presumption that the individuals involved are helpless, I wish to learn more from the experience of individuals in field settings. Why have some efforts to solve commons problems failed, while others have succeeded? What can we learn from experience that will help stimulate the development and use of a better theory of collective action—one that will identify the key variables that can enhance or detract from the capabilities of individuals to solve problems? (p. 14).

This is not to mention her intellectual humility, a role model for religious and lay scholars alike.

What Benedict XVI, the "Green Pope," attributed to subsidiarity, Francis might consider as he approaches with his comparative advantage of a solidarity-focused framework. The enormous amount of case studies produced by Elinor Ostrom and her Workshop provide the perfect playing ground to unearth the ways in which these two principles may be respected in practice. Trusting local communities with the responsibility to craft and enforce the conservation of their own common resources will revive their performance and once again place human closeness at the foreground of human life. Economic necessity begets voluntary association, "closeness," getting "dirty," and befriending our neighbor, "with his or her familiar face, story, and personality," to borrow the words of Francis (2015a; 2015b). Again, a respect for subsidiarity provides fertile ground for solidarity to grow.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Looking at [the family] in such a way as to reach its very roots, we must say that the essence and the role of the family are in the final analysis specified by love. Hence the family has as its mission to guard, reveal and communicate love...

– Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981

Allan Carlson's chapter, the seventh and final, takes up the concrete link the Catholic social teaching principles of hu-

man dignity, subsidiarity, solidarity and the common good. That link is Love, for which the family is the earthly, God-given sign. What has this familial love to do with economic concerns? Carlson points to three places where familial love restores right order within our economic lives: the necessary harmony between “having” and “being,” the natural harmony between labor and leisure, and the “profound harmony” between man and woman (p. 190). Through each of these relationships, familial love is portrayed as the linchpin between subsidiarity and solidarity; it channels spontaneity that it might be oriented toward the common good.

Ever-present in the rhetoric of Francis are warnings regarding inordinate consumption. John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus*, was the first to articulate consumerism as this essential tension:

It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards ‘having’ rather than ‘being’, and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself (p. 36).

Both Pope Francis and Carlson identify the family as the great antidote to the emptiness of consumerism—a rebalancing of *having* and *being*. Francis (2016) explicitly locates this power in the genesis of family life, mothers, who serve as “the strongest antidote to the spread of self-serving individualism...It is they who testify to the beauty of life” (p. 174). In fact, the cultural decay brought on by material gorging is well accounted for in the words of every pope, not to mention almost any religious leader in the last century. Subsidiarity in economic and political life empowers stable, strong families to use their time, talents, and possessions in the service of God and one another, thus increasing solidarity.

True to orthodoxy, Francis rejoices in the fact that man and woman are different and equal in dignity—each with his or her comparative advantage in contributing to the common flourishing of the family. This plays an important role in his vision of a properly functioning economy, because, like John Paul II, Francis hopes for a greater reverence to be submitted to women who desire to fully devote themselves to motherhood, rather than a society of mothers who are compelled (or culturally pressured) to work full-time. This will enable husbands and wives to wholeheartedly welcome children into their lives, who enable us “to appreciate the utterly gratuitous dimension of love... it is the

beauty of being loved first: children are loved even before they arrive” (2016, p. 166). Every parent would agree that it takes an enormous amount of individual responsibility and hard work to bring a new person into the world and to help them grow (and what could be more social than that?).

Francis and Carlson also see the family as playing a crucial part in rediscovering a more balanced life of labor and leisure. The physical structures that surround us increasingly glorify business over peace; “Neighbourhoods, even those recently built, are congested, chaotic and lacking in sufficient green space. We were not meant to be inundated by cement, asphalt, glass and metal, and deprived of physical contact with nature” (Francis 2015b). It might be good to ask, what exactly is lost when leisure is lost? Josef Pieper (1952) defines leisure in his work, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*:

Against the exclusiveness of the paradigm of work as effort, leisure is the condition of considering things in a celebrating spirit... Leisure is only possible in the assumption that man is not only in harmony with himself... but also he is in agreement with the world and its meaning. Leisure lives on affirmation. It is not the same as the absence of activity; it is not the same thing as quiet, or even as an inner quiet. It is rather like the stillness in the conversation of lovers, which is fed by their oneness (pp. 31-33).

This seems to be exactly what Francis exhorts his readers to reclaim, writing extensively about pursuing the simple life, which engenders the understanding that “everything is interconnected” (2016, p. 70). Furthermore, Carlson poses the simplified, minimalist lifestyle as a unique “response to the Malthusian challenge.” However, he argues that Francis could potentially find a great ally in the Distributists, Chesterton and Belloc, who instead “place their strongest emphasis on the widest possible distribution of *property*: the ownership by each family of a house, a few acres of land, and small scale tools” (pp. 193-194). Again arises the theme of greater subsidiarity making room for greater solidarity.

Interestingly, Francis writes that marriage amplifies the differences between men and women: “wherein the husband helps his wife to become ever more a woman and wherein the woman... [helps] her husband to become ever more a man” (2016, p. 221). All economists know the simple formula that specialization begets trade, which in turn begets mutual gains. We might picture this becoming “ever more” as an increase in resources available to the man and

woman, which shifts out the production possibilities frontier and creates greater value for society. Perhaps the spontaneous order of love is what helps *homo economicus* to become ever more human as his activities extend from hearth to city. Pope Francis and Carlson certainly believe so.

V. CONTEXT, CHARITY, AND COMMENTARY

There remain four more essays to comment upon: Andrew Yuengert's "Pope Francis, His Predecessors, and the Market," Samuel Gregg's "Understanding Pope Francis: Argentina, Economic Failure, and the *Teología del Pueblo*," Lawrence McQuillan and Hayeon Carol Park's "Pope Francis, Capitalism, and Private Charitable Giving," and A. M. Waterman's "Pope Francis on the Environmental Crisis." Yuengert and Gregg complement one another well in laying the groundwork of a fuller context for Francis by displaying the consistency of his thought with past popes and the contemporary experience of Argentinians. However, it is unfortunate that Yuengert's analysis did not reach far enough back to explore the rich economic traditions of Aquinas, the Late Scholastics, or even Pope Leo XIII.

McQuillan and Park take Francis very seriously as they lay out exactly how the reforms he is endorsing would lead to lower amounts and lower quality of charitable giving to the poor. "When politicians around the world undercut the institutions of capitalism by raising taxes or assaulting private-property rights, they attack the heart of private charity" (p. 102). They then take the opportunity to dispel many prevalent misconceptions about welfare and foreign aid by compiling an impressive line-up of evidence showing the unfortunate unintended consequences of these well-intended policies. Waterman's essay yields a much deeper, technical understanding of *Laudato si'* by analyzing Francis's economics, biology, and theology. Though he connects Julian Simon with the optimistic and "pronatalist" Catholic belief about the creative capacity of the human mind, Waterman concludes that the message of *Laudato si'* was weakened by its inability to give up its "pre-Malthusian view of nature" and to see how "in public policy human sin makes it necessary to supplement virtue by an appeal to self-interest" (pp. 144, 149). Finally, I have not yet applauded the foreword of Michael Novak, introduction of Robert Whaples, and conclusion of Robert Murphy. Their shared counsel was that economists and Pope Francis have a great amount to learn from each other, and if we are humble enough to listen, both sides will gain greater insight.

V. CONCLUSION

Before moving beyond the work, there is much low-hanging fruit to be found directly in the essays, whether as extensions or repeated testing of the hypotheses. Future avenues for research could investigate such questions: policy that causes uneven playing fields, the efficacy of different kinds of private charitable giving, polycentric governance structures for civil society, the responsibility of churches for business ethics, the impact of advertising on economic growth, theories of leisure and labor, the economic complementarity of men and women... and the list goes on. As mentioned at the genesis of this article, there is a particularly robust symbiosis between Austrian economics and Catholic social teaching. Not only do the works of Mises and Hayek still contain much to be applied through the lens of CST principles, but modern thinkers like Elinor Ostrom and Julian Simon have produced work that sheds further light on the relationship between subsidiarity and solidarity. Francis and the economists may not agree on the theory of non-satiation of present wants, but it can be safely assumed that the desire for these sorts of conversations is still unsatisfied.

Pope Francis and the Caring Economy addresses many important economic and political questions, but future arguments may need to take place on deeper levels in order to persuade Francis and those who agree with him. In a way, Pope Francis and economists are still speaking two different languages. This is not a reference to any monetary jargon or theological parlance, rather, Francis is speaking to souls and economists to economic agents. Though both are interested in a type of "utility maximization" for every individual, their analyses take place over drastically different time-horizons (i.e. eternal beatific vision). Former popes have been much more favorable in their estimation of capitalism, however, it came because they were convinced of the morality of the enterprise, not purely its ability to enrich the lives of so many. The point that Pope Francis continually makes is this: there is no Christ of economics. Technical knowledge is not man's savior, it is his tool. However, a perfect starting place for this next conversation is the underlying point of the economists in this volume: *it befits the dignity of man* that he is allowed to freely partake in and build up the market. Their thoughtful scholarship illustrates that, in order for solidarity to flourish, society needs to be organized around subsidiarity as responsibility is the lifeblood of institutions closer to home (or home itself). They ask: Is not this the common good?

Like all good books, the reader is left resting with more questions in his head than answers in his lap. Through conversation and shared experience, we each have the invaluable opportunity to allow others to illuminate our blind-spots, and to do the same for them. As a blueprint for how multiple voices can help to bring about a more complete picture reality, *Pope Francis and the Caring Society* will be a handbook for those wishing to engage unique tension and symbiosis between economic and religious thought for years to come. At the end of the day, Chesterton might be exactly right in the opening quote. The most convincing contradictors are those who become saints.

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