

The Economy and the Election

This is the fourth in a series of reflections related to the upcoming election offered by the leaders of the four dioceses in Kansas. The intention of this reflection is not to endorse or oppose a particular candidate or political party. Instead, it is to show how human reasoning enlightened by our Catholic faith shapes our participation in the political process.

Role of the Church While the Church does not endorse specific solutions to our economic challenges, she has much to offer when it comes to the necessary relationship between the economy and morality. The Church's duty is to articulate principles; it is the duty of the lay faithful in their mission to renew the face of the earth to put those principles into action.

Unlike issues involving intrinsic evils such as abortion, same-sex marriage, and threats to religious liberty and conscience rights, Catholics of good will may have legitimate disagreements about how to apply Church teaching in the economic sphere.

Stewardship and Solidarity Many people, including some Catholics, admit that they "vote their pocketbook." We all want our elected officials to foster a strong economy, but such a statement more typically relates to how governmental policies will directly affect us. For the wealthy, the question often becomes how much of my income is the government going to take from me. For the poor, it is often about how much is going to come back to me through government assistance.

While we have the right to look out for our own interests, Catholic teaching calls us to look also beyond our own needs to what is known as the *common good*, which takes into account the dignity and rights of every human person, the well-being of the community, and the pursuit of justice and peace. Economic prosperity must be pursued in a way that promotes the common good. Instead of a politics of self-interest, the Church proposes a politics of stewardship.

Universal Destination of Goods In the beginning, God created the earth and entrusted to the human family the stewardship or care of His creation. The goods of the created world are destined for all people spread throughout the world, for all of time. This is called the "universal destination of goods."

Because of this principle, we protect the environment, for example, not only for ourselves but for future generations. Similarly, as a wealthy nation, we rightly come to the support of poor nations, especially during times of crisis brought on by war, civil unrest, or natural disaster.

Private Property When it comes to individual wealth, the Church affirms the right to personal property acquired by work or received from others through gift or inheritance. At the same time, the Church calls us to view our personal property as not merely our exclusive possession, but as a blessing to be put at the service of others, beginning (but not ending) with one's family.

Safety Net for the Poor and Vulnerable Fostering and helping to fund a safety net for those unable to provide for themselves at a given moment is a proper responsibility of government. However, programs assisting the needy should always have as a primary goal, whenever possible, the empowerment of those receiving assistance that they may achieve the dignity that comes from work.

As Blessed John Paul II stated: "Work is a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being. Without this consideration it is impossible to understand the meaning of the virtue of industriousness, and more particularly it is impossible to understand why industriousness should be a virtue: for virtue as a moral habit, is something whereby man becomes good as man." [On Human Work #9] An expansion of the number of people dependent on government assistance is not necessarily a sign of success, but could be a sign of the failure to provide adequate opportunity for individuals to experience the sense of dignity that comes from the virtue of industriousness.

Solidarity and Charity The best expressions of Christian charity are direct and personal. Simply supporting economic policies that are intended to help the less fortunate does not fulfill adequately the obligation for Christian charity. The poor have a claim on the concern, compassion, and resources of the Christian.

Subsidiarity Catholic social teaching has long insisted on the principle of *subsidiarity*, which provides that the larger political community should not substitute itself for the initiative and responsibility of individuals or of local governing bodies. As the Catechism (#2431), quoting Pope Pius XI, teaches: "Another task of the state is that of overseeing and directing the exercise of human rights in the economic sector. However, primary responsibility in this area belongs not to the state but to individuals and to the various groups and associations which make up society."

Private Initiative Every nation's greatest resource is its people. In exercising appropriate stewardship over creation through their work, men and women give glory to God and collaborate in the redemptive work of Christ. Work is both a right and a duty. The Church therefore strongly promotes the right to economic initiative, which takes into account the decisive role of human creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the advancement of society. In keeping with the principle of *subsidiarity*, the government should especially value the economic and cultural contributions of small, private businesses as sources of new jobs that benefit everyone.

The Church's social doctrine also teaches that profitability is but one indicator of a well-functioning business, large or small. Businesses have a moral responsibility to undertake the legitimate pursuit of profit in a manner that serves the common good and respects the rights and dignity of all its workers, especially by paying a just wage.

Human Person The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy. As voters in the upcoming election, we must judge economic choices and institutions by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, and how they support or threaten the family as the basic building block of society.

A fundamental moral measure of any economic initiative is how the poor and vulnerable are provided for. We must always strive to be in solidarity with those among us with the greatest need, especially those unable to care for themselves. All people have the right to life and to have access to the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, healthcare, a safe environment, and economic security. People of good will may disagree as to *how* to address these concerns, but they may never overlook them.

National Debt The United States has become a debtor nation with an unsustainable national debt. Most of this debt burden is unjustly transferred from one generation to the next. The potential for a collapse of our economy, resulting from a failure to address our spiraling debt, imperils everyone but places the poor at the most serious risk.

As we expect individual households to live within their means, we have the right to expect that the government will also live within its means as an indispensable part of our nation's economic recovery. It is irresponsible for those elected to positions of political leadership to fail to address realistically and effectively government debt and unfunded obligations. Our nation, at all levels of government, is on an unsustainable fiscal path that, left unreformed, will eventually lead to an economic calamity with disastrous consequences for everyone.

Conclusion If the primary criteria in our evaluation of candidates for public office is, "*which person will help me get the biggest piece of the pie? (either because of their support for lower taxes or for programs that directly benefit me)*," we are failing to employ the principles of our Catholic social teaching. We end up adopting a politics of self-interest, not stewardship.

In his 1961 Inaugural Address, President John F. Kennedy famously posed the question, "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." Perhaps we can take this even further. Taking our cue from the saints, ask what you can do for your country, for your state, for your community, for your family. Ask what you can do for the poor and most vulnerable and needy in your midst. How you answer these questions should inform your vote.

When you think in those terms, you become drawn to the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, which have always been part of our Catholic tradition. You will also become drawn to what Pope Benedict XVI has called the “market of gratuitousness,” a culture governed by human solidarity, not the thirst for acquisition – a culture that looks first to the family, churches and the local community to provide for the needs of the poor and the vulnerable, and a culture that lives to serve and not be served (cf. Matthew 20:28).

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