

Biblical Foundations of the American Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Economy¹

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Economic Justice for All,² the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy, is subtitled in such a way that something of the focus of the document becomes clear. It is an attempt to relate "Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy." In fact, it is precisely from the tradition of Catholic social doctrine that the central principle of the pastoral letter is taken: "The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured" [28].

The statement of this principle is taken directly from Pope John XXIII's classic encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, and from the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*.

Possibility for Dialogue

The bishops also make it very clear, in developing the fundamental vision which informs their effort, that they "turn first to Scripture" [29]. This enables them to address members of other Christian communities and "our Jewish brothers and sisters," as together we "quest for an economic life worthy of the divine revelation we share" [29].

This reflects the development of Catholic social thought beyond traditional reflection on the imperatives of natural law, to ground any such reflection in the revealed vision of human existence offered in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.³

Yet, by grounding their reflection specifically on the revealed vision of the human person, the bishops also open the possibility for dialogue with all members of the human community. The experience of personhood, after all, is universal.⁴

¹ Published in *The Priest* 45/6 (June 1989), pp. 12-17.

² *Origins* 16/24 (November 27, 1986). References to the pastoral letter in this essay are by section number, given in [brackets] in the text.

³ Gregory Baum argues that *Mater et Magistra* marked a fundamental shift in Catholic social teaching toward a more biblical and Christological foundation. "The Theology of the American Pastoral," *The Ecumenist* 24/2 (January/February 1986), p. 17.

⁴ Elaboration of religious truth grounded in the meaning and dignity of the human person is the fundamental method of Pope John Paul II, evidenced, e.g., in his allocutions on the meaning of sexuality, and in his social encyclicals, *Laborem Exercens* and *Sollicitudo in Rei Socialis*.

Is it not possible, the bishops seem to ask, that the richly textured biblical vision of human personhood might strike a responsive chord in the minds and hearts of even non-believing men and women, not because of the authority of the texts, but because of their uncanny power to disclose authentically appealing possibilities for human living?

Many are the voices which today warn that our cultural tradition is nearing the end of its resources in our common search for the authentically human. Might it not be possible that the religious symbols of our tradition can be retrieved in such fashion that they disclose new societal possibilities, to which believers and unbelievers can share some response of recognition?

This notion of retrieval is vitally important. We become accustomed, even as believers, to hear the proclamation of the biblical vision with minds profoundly shaped by our own culture; we have no other minds. "Whatever is received," goes the scholastic maxim, "is received according to the mode of the one receiving."

The content of our own imagination and understanding profoundly shapes our grasp of biblical truth. Yet, however much the activity of our minds and hearts is affected by the society and culture in which we have been socialized, it is important to insist that we are not utterly determined by that socialization.

Questions can emerge and insights can follow which are not simply a reflection of the "social fact." Oftentimes such questions will even be raised by unsettling images and stories which seem to crack open the limits of one's present understanding, judgment, and living. Biblical images and stories can confront us with the dangerous memory of alternative ways of living which seem jarringly at odds with the way of our society and culture. To allow oneself to truly hear such stories and see such images can involve profound risk; it can be truly dangerous. Because from that seeing and hearing there may emerge images that demand pondering, questions that demand thinking, insights that demand reflection, and judgments that demand practical implementation in personal and social living.

Confronting classic images and stories involves one in the risk of facing this alternative: either allowing one's way of feeling, thinking, and living to be transformed, or remaining in one's former "way," but no longer innocently.

Most Immediate Impact

Surrendering control and allowing biblical texts to "take over" our reading of them can lead to the experience of sensing a challenge to the authority of ways of feeling, thinking, and living taken for granted in our society and culture.

It is to the risk involved in such surrender that the bishops refer when they affirm that "we are always in need of conversion" [Introduction, 23]. We are always in need of hearing biblical stories and images anew, and of allowing the subsequent questions, insights, judgments, and decisions to "change how we act" [23].

Such conversion will clearly have its most immediate impact on how we conduct our individual lives, in those relationships which touch us most deeply. If any conversion is authentic, however, it will affect every dimension of life, including the economic.

It will also affect both economic practice and theory. It will affect, that is, both the complex network of systems of production and exchange which constitute any “economy,” and the theoretical reflection on these systems which we term “economics.”

It is in this sense that the bishops insist that “serious economic choices go beyond purely technical issues to fundamental questions of value and human purpose” [8].

At the level of economic theory, this would seem to involve something of a paradigm shift. A paradigm is a controlling model, within which any theory attempts to explain phenomena.

For example, the “Copernican revolution” of modern science was not simply the introduction of a new theory, or the adjustment of an old theory. Rather, it presented an entirely new model.

Pre-Copernican theories of the relationship of heavenly bodies made sense within the context of a geocentric model of the universe; the progress of pre-Copernican science involved the development and correction of various theories within that overarching context.

Removing the earth from the center of the universe meant envisioning everything in a new way. This was not just a change of theory, it was a change of the context within which theories would have meaning. To common sense, everything looked the same pre-and post-Copernicus, yet, in fact, everything was different.

To introduce “fundamental questions of value and human purpose” into economic theory is to suggest the need for something of a paradigm shift. Classical capitalist economic thought

Has been dominated by a paradigm which had its origins in the modern political philosophies of Machiavelli, Hobbes and Locke. It is a paradigm which conceives of nature as ruled by iron laws of necessity and of human nature as irredeemably corrupt. Within this paradigm, the economic problem has been taken to be the discovery and implementation of conditions under which a society can prosper, regardless of the state of its social soul.⁵

As in the other human sciences, economics developed in the shadow of the “successful” natural sciences and tended to copy their methodologies. Questions of meaning and values were bracketed.

Supporting such an approach was a vision of human nature as corrupt. In Thomas Hobbes’ classic statement, “the state of nature is the war of all against all,” capitalist economic theory developed within the context of a presumption that the primary human motivation is self-interest.

⁵ Patrick H. Byrne, “Economic Transformation: The Role of Conversions and Culture in the Transformation of Economics,” in *Religion and Culture*, edited by Timothy Fallow and Philip Riley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 327.

Created by Values

A new paradigm is needed which recognizes more clearly that “people shape the economy and in turn are shaped by it” [5]. That is, we must recognize that any economic system is a set of human meanings; it both results from human insights, judgments, and decisions, and, in turn, profoundly influences the insights, judgments, and decisions we make. In short, any economy, and therefore any economics, is inescapably value laden.

“People shape the economy.” An economic system is created by the values which inform the insights, judgments, and decisions of economic actors. This insistence leads the bishops to oppose the Marxist position that ideas and values are simply the reflection of economic reality which has been internalized.

Indeed, it is important to remember, as I once heard Gregory Baum remark, that “Karl Marx was a German egghead who spent much of his life sitting on his ass in the British Museum, thinking!” The ideas which followed upon that thinking have profoundly shaped the course of human history. Ideas and values, when acted upon, can become “embodied in economic institutions” [21].

To acknowledge that people are also “shaped by” the economy is to accept a key dimension of the Marxist critique. Many of our insights and judgments, and many of the values which guide our decisions are profoundly influenced by the economic structures into which we are socialized and which we come to take for granted. Religious values are not immune from this critique.

Many virtues taught under the guise of religion are little more than an attempt to legitimate an existing economic structure, and to secure it against meaningful questions. How often has the Gospel been preached in such a way that it announces to oppressed peoples that ‘God wants you just where you are’?

More subtly but close to home, how deeply has the notion of religion as a fundamentally private matter been instilled in our consciousness, so that never would religious values be brought to bear in critical fashion against ‘the way things are’?

In *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops are concerned with both directions of this mutual influence between ideas/values and economics. They perceive clearly the danger of ignoring the impact which our economic system has on shaping our values. To ignore this impact is to condemn ourselves to hear in God’s revelation only what we want to hear, or better, only what our socio-economic system wants us to hear.

To allow a total separation of church and marketplace will render our time in church a harmless diversion from our real lives in the market.

While recognizing the need for such a critique of the ways in which the economy shapes our ideas/values, the bishops’ focus is on the other direction of influence, that is, on the ways in which the insights and values of our Catholic/Christian tradition can contribute to shaping an economy that respects and nurtures the dignity of human persons.

They want, in other words, to make a contribution toward the emergence of a value-conscious economic paradigm

Biblical Vision

There certainly is no effort in the pastoral to present anything like an exhaustive consideration of the multidimensional biblical vision of human existence which could provide resources for reshaping the U.S. economy. Rather, the letter's second chapter simply begins with a selective review of certain key themes which seem foundational to all dimensions of the biblical vision.

This review of the Hebrew Scriptures has a dual focus: (1) on the creation narratives in which the dignity of the human person as being created in God's image is affirmed, and (2) on covenant texts embodying Israelite concern for the poor and oppressed.

From a seemingly off-hand comment in the letter, I take a clue for understanding the presentation of these creation and covenant texts. The bishops note that Israel's oral traditions were combined into the written Torah "after the exile" [31]. The clue presented in this comment is the explicit placing of the creation/covenant texts in relationship to a historical event.

I suggest here that "the two c's" (creation and covenant) can be understood only in the context of "the two e's" (exodus and exile). There two "historical events constitute the key for understanding the vision expressed in the texts which affirm human dignity as being created in the image of God and which express in legal codes the Israelite concern for vulnerable members of the community.

To speak of the exodus as "historical" is to speak generally. No claim is made that it is possible to reconstruct "what happened." To speak of the exodus as an "event," however, is to affirm that "something happened," and that this happening was understood and affirmed by Israel as providing the central meanings and values of her very existence.

The liturgical reaffirmation of those meanings and values is evident in the liturgical text [Dt 26.5-9] which Gerhard von Rad has identified⁶ as the basic creed of Israelite faith.

My father was a homeless Aramaean who went down to Egypt with a small company and lived there until they became a great, powerful, and numerous nation. But the Egyptians ill-treated us, humiliated us and imposed cruel slavery upon us. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers for help, and he listened to us and saw our humiliation, our hardship and distress; and so the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and outstretched arm, with terrifying deeds, and with signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Of primary significance for our present concern is to note what Israel did upon entering that land. The texts which narrate the exodus and the conquest of Canaan make it clear that the formation of Israel as a federation of tribes was a response to the previous situations in Egypt and Canaan in which they had found themselves. From the reaction that followed, the prior situation can be reconstructed as

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Volume I (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), pp. 121-126.

having been a rigidly hierarchical society with a feudal economy strongly oriented toward the benefit of the ruling class.

The response to that situation was the formation of an egalitarian, decentralized society based on a federation between various tribes, with an economy marked by equality, with land ownership and enjoyment of the fruits of production shared widely.

Revealing Structures

The creation and covenant texts express in story and in law the meanings and values which had motivated and constituted that response. These texts, though, will only be understood if it is grasped that these meanings and values were expressed not primarily in texts, but in a people.

The exodus and the conquest were social, economic, and political events, in which religious meanings and values were embodied in social, economic, and political structures. The way the people structured their common life was to reveal something of the way God had worked with and for them. One of the pivotal affirmations which followed upon this is the recognition that creation is a gift, and that at the summit of creation is man and woman made in God's image.

Religiously and theologically this divine image means many things, but one of its primary meanings – stated clearly in the text itself – is that men and women are to be fruitful, to care for the earth, and to exercise dominion. By their labor, men and women are unfolding the Creator's work. Human labor, accordingly, ought to be able to be experienced, understood, and affirmed as a genuinely religious act. Further, creation belongs to God, and, the bishops note, quoting St. Cyprian, "whatever belongs to God belongs to all" [34].

The creation stories in Genesis 1-2 express the meanings and values which Israel sought to embody in its social, economic, and political life. Creative engagement with the resources of creation -- "especially the land" -- is a primary means in-and-through which human persons enact their dignity as living in the image of God. To deny access to these resources, accordingly, to any person, is to distort the image of the Creator, and that distortion is what we call sin.

Genesis 3-11 proceeds to narrate the intertwined rupturing which comes to constitute the sinfulness of the world. These ruptures are alienations of the human person from harmony with creation, from the solidarity of human community, and from grateful dependence on God. This is the radical meaning of sin.

The covenant texts move us from the genre of story to law. They express the fact that the foundation of Israel's existence as a people lay in an experience, understanding, and affirmation of who God is, with and for that people. Thus, the social, economic, and political structures were to manifest something of God and of what God enables human persons and communities to be.

The collection of Israelite law is preserved in different codes⁷ which reflect different stages of the development of Israelite society. Throughout the codes, with differing emphases, are found at least the following dimensions of the people's life structured into law: egalitarianism and social decentralization; concern for the poor and the most vulnerable members of society; and the importance of gratitude for, and festive celebration of, the gift character of creation.

The initially decentralized nature of Israelite society is evident in the stories of the "judges." The association of tribes was clearly a loose federation, in which there appears to have been no permanent centralized socio-political authority. The exercise of authority within the tribes was experienced as loyalty to the law of the liberating Lord. Within the tight communal bonds of tribal existence, every man⁸ had immediate access to the resources of the community.

Dangerous Memory

How important this legacy of decentralization was is evident in the obvious ambivalence experienced with the emergence of the monarchy.⁹ In the "Rise of David Story" [1 Sam 16 to 2 Sam 8], the monarchy is celebrated as the intervention of Yahweh anointing David as dynastic head of Israel.

Immediately beside this story, however, the canon has placed the "Succession Narrative" [2 Sam 9-20, 1 Kgs 1-2], in which the hand of Yahweh is conspicuously absent. David is presented as morally weak, politically devious, and, at times, hypocritically vicious.

Placing these traditions side by side, the Deuteronomic editor has insisted on maintaining a dangerous memory from Israel's past. While celebrating the monarchy, he also conveys the sense that something has been lost. It is the "lost something" that energized the outcry of the prophets against the loss of egalitarianism, as power came to be centralized in the monarchy and as wealth became concentrated in the hands of a smaller number.

Interestingly, the pastoral letter's presentation of the biblical vision is not focused on the message of the prophets, despite the bishops' stated desire to speak "as heirs of the biblical prophets" [Introduction, 4]. In my reading, for example, I find no citation from the book of Amos, prophet of economic justice *par excellence*. There is no sounding the thunder of his outcry.

Listen to this,
you fat cows of Bashan who live on the hill of Samaria,
you who oppress the poor and crush the destitute,
who say to your lords, "Bring us to drink:"
the Lord God has sworn by his holiness
that your time is coming
when men shall carry you away on their shields
and your children in fish baskets.
You shall each be carried straight out

⁷ A brief but helpful discussion of the three major legal codes in the Pentateuch is given by Michael Wensing, "The 'Torah' and Socially Unfortunate Groups," *The Priest* (December, 1986), pp. 29-35.

⁸ The use of exclusive language here is deliberate.

⁹ See Sean McEvenue, "The Rise of David Story and the Search for a Story to Live By," in *Creativity and Method*, edited by Matthew Lamb (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press), pp. 185-196.

through the breaches in the walls
and pitched on a dunghill.
This is the very word of the Lord. [Amos 4.1-3]

Such prophetic vehemence, however, serves to underscore the remembered importance of the Torah traditions which the bishops' pastoral letter highlights. The legislation with regard to debt release and the Jubilee Year in which property is redistributed on an equal basis embody the concern for equality¹⁰ present at the beginning of Israel's existence. The prophets decry the loss of this concern. They highlight the ambiguity of the monarchy, recalling the request made to Samuel: "Give us a king, so that we shall be like the other nations" [1 Sam 8.19]. Indeed, the prophets mourn, Israel had become like other nations, forgetful of the experience, understanding and affirmation of divine liberation which had constituted its very beginning. The prophets announced a dangerous memory of that liberation.

Intimately related to this concern for the egalitarian quality of Israelite social and economic life is the manifest concern for the poor and vulnerable.¹¹ Indeed, the recital of Israel's basic creed, recalling God's liberating act on Israel's behalf, is immediately followed by this instruction:

When you have finished taking a tithe of your produce in the third year, the tithe-year, you shall give it to the Levites and to the aliens, the orphans, and the widows [Dt 28.12].

As Israel once had been poor sojourners, now they were to manifest special concern for the vulnerable members of the community. As Yahweh had delivered them, so was Israel "to imitate God by treating the alien and the slave in their midst as God had treated them" [35].

Covenant Link

What the various socially unfortunate groups had in common was "their vulnerability and lack of power" [38]. God hears their cries, however, as God had heard the cries of Israel, and Israel is to hear their cries as well, and respond as God had responded to them.

Finally, the covenant is linked with creation in the socio-religious institution of the Sabbath, which insists on the importance of rest, as well as gratitude grounded in recognition of the gift-character of all creation. The Sabbath reminded Israel always that all is given by God, and that what is given by God is given for all.

The pastoral letter continues to present fundamental dimensions of the ministry and person of Jesus which understand Him as standing in continuity with concerns of the Hebrew Scriptures that have been considered. At the heart of Jesus' message is His announcement of the nearness of the reign of God. What He announces in His message, He enacts in His ministry [42]. The word and work of Jesus, then, reveals both the approach of God to humankind and the required response of humankind to the God whose reign approaches.

¹⁰ Wensing (cf. note 5 above) cites an excavation of a 10th century B.C. town in Israel by De Vaux which revealed an utterly egalitarian standard of housing throughout the city.

¹¹ Wensing (*ibid.*) summarizes different categories of "socially unfortunate groups."

Poignant Vision

Primary focus is placed on the Synoptic Gospels, with special consideration of the Gospel of Luke. It is in Luke's Gospel that Mary sings of "a God who scatters the proud, brings down the mighty and raises up the poor and lowly" [1.51-53]. It is here that Jesus identifies His mission with the prophetic task of "preaching good news to the poor" [4.18]. And it is in Luke's Gospel alone that we hear Jesus tell the stories of the man piling up his wealth only to die [12.13-21], and of the rich man who fails to see Lazarus at his gate [18.19-31]. Finally, it is here that Jesus adds curse to blessing: "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" [8.24].

The Lucan portrayal of Jesus is of a poor man in the tradition of the prophets, who consistently sides with the poor and warns of the dangers incumbent upon wealth. But if this emphasis is most evident in Luke, it is surely not absent from the portraits painted by the other evangelists.

In Mark, Jesus attacks the use of religion to avoid the demands of justice [7.9-13], and insists that "love of God" can never be separated from "love of neighbor" [12.30-31].

Finally, it is in Matthew that Jesus, near the end of His ministry, offers a poignant vision of God's criteria for judgment: as long as we have cared for the little ones, we have cared for their Lord [25.31-48].

"Without a vision, the people perish," the Book of Proverbs announces [29.18]. The U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on the economy attempts to retrieve a vision of what is possible for the lives of human persons in community. It is a vision that will be seen and heard in different ways by different persons, dependent on the commitments which guide their lives.

To confessing Christians, it is a vision of revealed truth that makes demands on the totality of our lives. It is a vision for us to ponder, so that its incongruity with the social and economic facts we experience might become profoundly troubling.

To non-believing persons of good will, it can be a vision of human possibilities, the attractiveness of which can itself make demands.

To whomever addressed, however, it is a vision charged with urgency. The concrete proposals of *Economic Justice for All* are an attempt to dwell on this vision in the context of our social and economic situation. They are attempts to risk real engagement with the realities of creation and covenant, imagining how the meanings and values which guided the foundation of a people in a far different time and place might continue to guide the insights, judgments, and decisions which today continue to shape our economy which, in turn, continues to shape us.

Whatever adequacy these concrete proposals might finally prove to have, they stand as an insistence that the faith of Israel and of Jesus is a concrete faith, not a faith to be lived in abstraction from the realities of social and economic life. Far too often, and for far too long, persons of faith have allowed the decisions which shape the world to be made in isolation from the meanings and values of

religious truth, contenting themselves with the solace and solemnity of a consoling word and a reassuring ritual.

Such religion recalls the remark of a defeated La Pasionara at the end of the Spanish Civil War: "They took the cities, but we had the better songs."¹² It is a consoling thought, but consolation is not necessarily what faith is about.

In Christian faith it is our conviction that we do, indeed, have the better songs, but in our day it is also time to try again to take the cities.

¹² The image is taken from David Tracy, "Defending the Public Character of Theology," *The Christian Century* 98 (April 1, 1981), p. 356.