

The Pope, the President, and Social Doctrine

by RUSSELL SHAW on JANUARY 29, 2014

“Universal destination” may sound like a fancy way of saying where we’re all headed, but this odd expression happens to be the name for a central principle of Catholic social teaching. It follows therefore that it is also central to Pope Francis’ much-discussed apostolic exhortation, [*Evangeli Gaudium*](#) (The Joy of the Gospel).

The point is important particularly in light of the announcement that the Pope and President Obama will meet in late March in Rome to talk—according to the president—about their shared concern over economic inequality. It’s a matter on which they see eye to eye. Or do they?

Even friendly critics of the apostolic exhortation have seemed often to miss its central thrust, with perhaps some reason. The document is long, rambling, and studded with overly broad generalizations, and the flaws make it easy for well-disposed readers to become distracted and lose track of what its economic sections are actually saying.

Begin with the crucial fact that, like other social justice documents of the Magisterium, *Evangeli Gaudium* doesn’t deal in policies and programs but principles. The most important of these is the universal destination of goods, understood as an existential basis for an equitable sharing of the world’s wealth. (Worth recalling as America marks the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty.)

Pope Francis, looking at the global scene, puts it like this: “We must never forget that the planet belongs to all mankind and is meant for all mankind; the mere fact that some people are born in places with fewer resource or less development does not justify the fact that they are living with less dignity” (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 190). With necessary adjustments, that applies to the national and local levels too.

The Pope isn’t saying anything new. Other popes have made the same point. But apparently it’s new to some. In conversation with several well-educated Catholic laymen a while back, I mentioned the universal destination of goods and

was met with blank disbelief: Surely the Church never said anything like that. Evidently there’s work to do getting the word around.

It’s a simple enough principle. God created the world for everyone to live in and cultivate and enjoy, and that should govern the distribution of its fruits. The right to private ownership, also affirmed by the Church, remains undisturbed in this view. But it isn’t absolute, and the principle shaping its exercise is “universal destination.” Francis says: “The private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good” (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 189).

This points to the moral imperative of some form of redistribution of wealth. Here many critics lose their cool, assuming this means heavy-handed statist intervention in the

economy, ruinous taxation of individuals and private enterprises that discourages initiative, and the rest of the neo-liberal chamber of horrors. Francis’ remedy is different: it’s moral change—conversion.

Activists of the left and the right commonly proceed as if structures—government programs, free markets, or some combination of both—were sufficient to ensure justice and prosperity for all. But structures must be supported by change of heart. One without the other won’t do the job. Structural changes are needed, Francis says, but also more: “We are called to find Christ in [the poor], to lend our voice to their causes...to be their friends” (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 198).

Some people will reasonably ask: Is that realistic? To which the answer is: Maybe not, but the Church must keep saying it, or it never will be.



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