

PERSONALLY SPEAKING

Number 10

April 2005

JOHN PAUL II SPEAKS ON ECONOMIC AFFAIRS

Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.

Mayo Research Institute

John Paul speaks to a wide range of issues and questions central to economics and economic affairs. This brief paper is not a thorough examination of everything that John Paul has said, written, and means in this regard. What follows are several comments that attempt to highlight some of the key arguments that he has set forth on the eight topics: consumption, distribution, capital investment, work as such, leisure, labor, development, and the market economy versus the command economy.

To John Paul human beings are “materialized spirits” and as workers are resources to be applied to the production of goods and services. However, humans have worth not because they are useful toward some economic purpose but because every human is made in the image and likeness of God and is redeemed by the sacrifice of His Son, signifying that each has a dignity and worth beyond human measure. In mainstream economics and modern economic affairs, human value commonly is determined instrumentally. One’s own worth is determined by the value attached to one’s work.

Men and women alike are called to become all that they were meant to be by their Heavenly Father. In mainstream economics and everyday economic affairs, men and women are encouraged to link their personal development to the things they possess. In other words, to John Paul *being* is more important than *having*. The dominant view especially in modern western culture is *having* is all that matters.

Labor is more important than capital or, put more generally, humans are more important than things. Indeed, humans alone have rights because they are persons, because they are endowed with an intelligence and free will that differentiate them from all other creatures. Aquinas calls them “the crown of creation,” and no doubt John Paul concurs. In the world of economic affairs and conventional economics, intentionally and otherwise humans often are reduced from persons to things, objectified more and more in both the workplace and the marketplace.

To John Paul humans are more than the one-dimensional self-interested and self-absorbed individuals of conventional economics and contemporary western culture. They are two-dimensional persons with an identity as separate and unique individuals never to be taken simply as a cog in a machine or as totally subordinate to the whole, and at the same time united in solidarity with family, company, neighborhood, region, nation, and all

humankind. To John Paul human existence *always* is coexistence. He replaces the modern world's individualism and collectivism with personalism.

Materiality matters importantly to human nature, and material means are necessary to meet human material needs. To a large extent, mainstream economics and modern culture agree. However, John Paul warns that material means will not satisfy the nonmaterial needs of humans, and condemns the "consumerism" of advanced western economies for perpetuating that false and dangerous value. Consumption is good, he says, unless it leads to a life spent in the enjoyment of material things as ends in themselves.

Work has two main purposes: the objective purpose of transforming resources into goods and services and the subjective purpose of transforming the laborers who perform the work into more fully human persons. Further, he insists that it is the subjective aspect of work that is more important. Conventional economists and worldly humans affirm only the objective purpose of work.

To John Paul human work is the continuation of God's Act of Creation that lasted six days and was followed by a day of rest. In like fashion, humans require a seventh day of rest to contemplate what they have done. Put differently, humans require both work and leisure to become more fully who they were meant to be; leisure has the positive connotation of input to that development. To the modern world, including the world of economics, leisure has only the negative connotation of time spent not working.

Human beings have a right to private property on grounds that a person has a right to what he/she creates with his/her own hands. This right is necessary to assure greater production, and in this regard John Paul is in agreement with mainstream economists and men and women of commerce and industry.

The material goods of the world are intended for the use of all humankind because all human life is precious and material goods are necessary to sustaining that life. Thus human beings have a natural right to the material goods of the world and, just as means is subordinate to end, the right of private property is subordinate to that right. Here, John Paul is not in agreement with mainstream economics and the modern world of economic affairs.

To John Paul workers have rights in order to assure the preservation of their fundamental human dignity and access to the means necessary for their material survival, such as the right to associate, the right to strike, the right to a safe workplace, the right to a day of rest. To some extent, mainstream economics and others engaged in economic affairs also affirm these rights but more likely as *legal* rights rather than *natural* rights. In other instances, the two parties are much further apart as for example with regard to the workers' right of ownership of the means of production, the right to suitable employment, the rights of the migrant workers, and the rights of mothers who work, all of that John Paul forcefully affirms and defends.

Respect for human rights is critically important to the economic development process. Further, more than justice is required to achieve development. Christian charity must be brought to bear by according preference to those most in need of help so that they are better able to acquire the material goods they need. To mainstreamers along with men and women of the world, economic development too often is construed as a problem to be resolved by the invisible hand of the market system with no mind to justice or charity.

Companies are established not just for the sake of their owners but for the whole of human society -- a corollary to his view that the world's material goods are intended for all human beings. Profits are necessary for the viability of the company, but provisioning human material need is not to be sacrificed to maximum profits. Clearly, there is a wide breach between John Paul on this matter and conventional economics and modern western economies.

Finally, John Paul agrees that the market system allocates resources efficiently and responds to needs effectively, but only for the few with the financial resources to command the goods required to meet their needs. For the many, the market system has afforded little opportunity to provision their material needs. He is much more critical of the market system for this failure than are persons in business and mainstream economists. John Paul insists that the Church proposes no economic system *per se*, meaning no system apart from its performance record, and rates the performance of the market system as superior to the performance of the command system. If, however, the market system continues to prove unable to provision the material needs of the masses of the world's poor as in the southern hemisphere, it is certain that John Paul would not hesitate to denounce that performance as unacceptable.

Edward J. O'Boyle is Senior Research Associate with Mayo Research Institute. Since he completed his doctorate in economics from Saint Louis University in 1972, Dr. O'Boyle has been specializing in economic research and analysis increasingly from the perspective of the human person engaged in everyday activities both as a unique individual and as a community member. In January 2004 the Association for Social Economics conferred on Dr. O'Boyle its prestigious Thomas Divine Award for lifetime contributions to social economics and the social economy.
