



Too often in the U.S. today, the public face of the Catholic Church wears a neo-conservative smirk. George Weigel, Michael Novak, Robert George, these are the people the networks call to get the “Catholic view” on important issues. Funny, they never seem to discuss Pope Benedict’s prophetic and powerful statements about the economy. Fred Rotondaro fills them in on the best kept secret in the Church today: Pope Benedict XVI is no neo-con!

Benedict XVI v. Bain Capital

“The world of finance, while necessary, no longer represents an instrument that favours our well-being or the life of mankind, instead it has become an oppressive power, that almost demands our adoration, mammon, the false divinity that truly dominates the world.”

Who said that? Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, a socialist? A number of the Occupy Movement? An economic advisor to President Obama?

It's none of the above.

The words are those of Pope Benedict XVI, in an address given to the seminarians at Rome’s major seminary on February 15. And those words do not stand alone but are rather the latest in a series of strong statements over the last century by the Vatican in support of social and economic justice which means in concrete terms, the right of every human being to lead a decent and humane life.

These statements come in different forms. They may be letters or speeches, pronouncements from Papal Institutes, or encyclicals, the most powerful form of a Papal pronouncement. But, they keep coming, and despite their frequency, many Catholics seem oblivious of the Church’s teachings on the economy.

Pope Benedict is viewed by many as a profound conservative. Indeed, he is conservative in many aspects of church theology. We should not forget, however, that a then very young priest, Joseph Ratzinger, was an official theologian at Vatican II. He advised but he also absorbed the spirit of openness of the Council and of Pope John. He absorbed the continuing desire of the Church to be a champion of the poor and vulnerable--a desire and goal that of course stems from the words and actions of Christ when He walked upon the earth. Jesus not only spoke about the poor and the vulnerable, he sought them out. He dined with societal outcasts. He told His followers that they would be judged based on how they clothed the naked and fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger and visited those in prison.

In the few years of his papacy, Pope Benedict has promulgated this spirit in powerful ways. The encyclical, *Charity in Truth*, issued in 2009, was the first and most powerful document after the international recession of 2008, to call for an international economic system based on morality and ethical principles. Pope Benedict saw, and clearly articulated, the devastating effects of rampant capitalism on the millions of innocent victims who had done nothing wrong but who now saw their homes lost, their jobs gone,

their future endangered. The Jesuit scholar Father Thomas Reese, S.J., wrote that the pope was economically to the left of President Obama and indeed of Nancy Pelosi! Indeed, given his latest remarks, he might be too far to the left to even make an appearance on MSNBC, although the “Ed Show” might make room for him.

The appeal to an economic morality was echoed in the fall out 2011 by the Pontifical Institute for Justice and Peace headed by Cardinal Peter Turkson. The Institute promoted the creative idea of a multi-country approach to financial procedures. Interestingly, conservative American Catholics instead of examining the idea on its merits pounced on the Institute, claiming Catholics did not have to pay attention, saying the Institute was a minor office in the Vatican, and that the Institute’s staff were not economists and so their recommendations could be safely ignored. These attacks made this writer wonder what exactly far-right Catholics think the teachings of Jesus are all about.

It's important to note that the Institute's suggestions are now being examined in Europe as a way to avoid future economic meltdowns.

Sadly, the substantive role of the Roman Catholic Church in social justice has fallen from public view in America. It has been replaced by the decade-plus scandal of child abuse and now by the ongoing debate over "religious liberty." We are not allergic to concerns about religious liberty, but we know that Catholics in America are capable of pursuing liberty and justice at the same time. We have been doing it for decades. Indeed, one of the principal benefits from the recent debate over religious liberty was to remind all Americans that the Catholic Church is hugely engaged in providing social services, running hospitals, and educating the young. For us, Church is not just something we do on Sunday. The Gospel compels to help the poor all week long.

Catholics of a certain age are familiar with the Church's role in helping the poor. We grew up reading Pope Leo XIII’s “Rerum Novarum” and Pope Pius XI’s “Quadragesimo Anno” and Blessed Pope John XXIII’s “Mater et Magistra.” We remember Vatican II and its call for justice for all humankind. We remember the powerful statement the U.S. bishops issued on economic matters 25 years ago and, even more, the broad consultative process that led to the final draft of that document. We know the many ways the Church continues to help the poor through its Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Catholic Charities and Catholic Relief Services. We should all work to ensure that younger Catholics and all Americans know of this work and how it conforms to the consistent appeals of our popes.

Pope Benedict XVI does not merely challenge the modern financial sector in terms of morals and justice. He accuses it of being Mammon, demanding idolatry, a threat not only to our Christian commitment to justice but also to our most profound beliefs about humankind’s relationship to God: “I am the Lord your God, Thou shalt not have strange gods before me.” Today’s financial sector, in its reckless efforts to downsize corporations and increase profits, fires workers as if they were commodities, it demands that the sovereign nation of Greece embark on an austerity program that will harm the poor and stifle economic growth, it destroys whole communities by closing plants and moving them overseas. All in pursuit of profit, not justice, and clothed in the protective garb of some faux-priesthood of economists, today’s financial titans are, indeed, false gods preaching

a false gospel of profiteering at all costs and encouraging a false worship of themselves as masters of the fiscal universe.

Benedict XVI may be a conservative but when it comes to his acute understanding that today's financial sector and economic structures are oppressive in the extreme, an affront to God and man, an insult to justice and an invitation to the grave sin of idolatry, the pope is the kind of conservative CACG loves.

This article first appeared as a Common Good Forum in the Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good website. Distribution and reproduction of this article is permitted where the source is credited. For more Common Good Forums, visit www.catholicsinalliance.org