



Pope Francis and the Injustice of Social Justice

Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio is now Pope Francis.

This son of Italians who emigrated to Argentina became all the rage on Wednesday when he was elected pope. To be sure, for as ardently as its enemies wish its demise, the eagerness with which the world greeted Pope Francis proves that the Catholic Church, with its 1.2 billion members, shows zero signs of going anywhere anytime soon.

The pope's namesake is the 13th century Italian saint, Francis of Assisi. The latter was a wealthy young man who turned his back on worldly success and made a vow of poverty. He founded his own religious order and demanded of his sizable (and ever growing) following that they too do the same. For the remainder of his natural existence, the saint, wearing no more than rags, lived among the most impoverished of the impoverished, ministering to their material and — more importantly — spiritual needs. St. Francis didn't lament his poverty: He revered it. In so doing, he inspired hope and faith in the poor.



The saint has been widely heralded as “the Second Christ,” such was his humility, compassion, and love for all of God's creation. The world, it was Francis' conviction, has a sacramental character, for it reflects the glory, the beauty, and the goodness of the God Who created it. It should be revered, yes, but because divine activity everywhere pervades its parts, each provides cause for delight as well.

St. Francis referred to animals as well as the sun and the moon as his siblings. When he became sick near the end of his life, he even referred to his illnesses as his “sisters.”

For sure, he was a great and devout man. Equally certain, the Catholic world's new pope took the name of the saint precisely in order to signify that he shares his namesake's vision.

This sounds all fine and good. However, while it may very well be too soon to say much in the way of criticism of Pope Francis, some initial reports of his views on “social justice” most definitely do not sound fine and good. Compounding my concern is the optimism on the part of many in the media, as well as many Catholics, that his “Latin American” background makes him just the man to “reform” the Catholic Church.

Whether used by so-called secular “progressives” or Catholic clerics, the call for social justice is the call



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for a larger, more powerful, more intrusive government. That is, it is the demand for a government that is capable of and willing to confiscate the legally owned resources of some citizens so as to “redistribute” them to others. When social justice is the order of the day, anything other than a robust, activist government is not an option.

It is crucial for everyone, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, to grasp this: Social justice and liberty are mutually antithetical. Liberty, at least the liberty that those of us in the Anglo-sphere have traditionally prized, consists in a decentralization of power of a kind that the American Constitution guarantees. Liberty presupposes a resolutely non-activist, even anti-activist government, a government that is like an umpire or a referee, one made “of laws, not men,” as we say. A government fitted for social justice, on the other hand, is of a fundamentally different breed.

Yet it isn’t just that the call for social justice is a call to undermine liberty. Social justice is actually a great injustice to the poor and the non-poor.

Charity is a Christian excellence that consists in human beings voluntarily expending their time, energies, and treasure on helping their fellows in need. Social justice, in stark contrast, coerces the better off to relinquish their resources to an omnipresent, alien, impersonal bureaucracy. Worse, it makes this demand upon them for the ostensible purpose of benefiting others — “the poor” — who claim to have a “right” to their goods.

By leading them to believe that their misfortunes are attributable solely to others who must now give them their just desserts, the concept of social justice engenders resentment in the poor while discouraging them from working to improve their plight. At the same time, social justice provokes the same bitterness in the non-poor who are compelled to work longer and harder for a bunch of ingrates who claim to be entitled to it. As a consequence, real charity diminishes.

Social justice destroys the only thing that enriches lives both spiritually and materially: community. The omnipotent government that it requires and the adversarial attitudes that this government in turn generates make sure of this.

To be fair to Pope Francis, he is not at all atypical of the church in promoting social justice. A lifelong Catholic like me can only hope, and pray, that among the ways in which he will “reform” the church will be to recognize the error of his — and its — ways and call out social justice for the injustice that it is.



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