

The Church's Message and the Financial World: Lost in Translation?

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Fondazione Centesimus Annus – *Pro Pontifice* International Conference

May 4, 2012

Although we are no longer in the penitential season of Lent, I begin tonight with a confession: I am not responsible for the title of this evening's presentation, "Lost in Translation", which was assigned to me by the organizers. I need to begin by admitting that, because it's such a spectacularly good choice I fear the risk of hubris!

The notion of "translation" for understanding the interaction between the Church and the world is near to my heart, a product of my professional activity over more than two decades. I am what the Italians call a *vaticanista*, covering the Vatican and the global Catholic Church for the American media market. That experience tells me there is a deep and abiding cultural gap between these two worlds - the thought-world of the Holy See, and of Main Street USA. As a result, much of my work is actually translation, trying to render statements from one of these cultural environments understandable to people in the other.

One of my most popular offerings on the lecture circuit in the United States is a presentation I call "Rome is from Mars, America from Venus," exploring precisely this cultural chasm. A simple example comes in our very different concepts of time. In a sound-bite, the United States is a microwave culture, while Rome is a crock-pot culture! Americans want things to happen immediately, and generally interpret delay in terms of denial, incompetence, or cover-up. Rome, to put the point charitably, is a culture that puts a high premium on patience, and often interprets "rapid response" as immaturity, superficiality, or going off half-cocked. The point is not that one of these instincts is right and the other wrong – frankly, each has its virtue and each its vice – but rather that they are clearly different.

This cultural gap creates a perennial risk of incomprehension. Disputes and controversies are often rooted not in substantive differences, but in mistaken assumptions about motives and meanings. That's true not just of the United States, of course, but most of the world's cultural environments.

Compounding this danger is the fact that the primary translator between Church and world is the secular media. Because many reporters and analysts don't have a deep familiarity with the Catholic Church, they often struggle to "speak Catholic." They also have growing difficulty speaking the language of the street, in the sense of speaking credibly and effectively to an entire culture, because of the fragmentation of the media marketplace. Many news outlets no longer aspire to speaking to whole cultures, but rather to tribes within those cultures, often by reinforcing their prejudices.

Let me offer a parable for the situation we face. Imagine a boat with a Russian, an Italian and an American, none of whom speaks the others' language. If the boat starts taking on water, they might be able to make one another grasp the emergency through a combination of shouting and gesticulation. Trying to come up with the design schematics to build a new boat, however,

would be an entirely different challenge. That's what it's like much of the time when the Church speaks on the economy; it can perhaps get across that there's a problem, but what to do about it is much more difficult to express.

Given these dynamics, the surprise is probably not that much of what the Catholic Church has to say gets lost in translation. The miracle may be that the Church ever manages to communicate at all!

In some ways, the financial world may seem a curious locus for this lament, since the Church's commentary on economic matters seems one of the few recent "success stories". By now it's common knowledge that the global economic crisis which erupted in 2007 was created in part by moral breakdowns, including dishonest lending practices and irrational derivatives markets. As a result, there's a strong receptivity to calls for moral reform. In Catholic argot, this is a classic "teaching moment." Hence when the Church speaks on economic affairs, the wider world tends to listen, and often to respond surprisingly well.

When Benedict XVI released *Caritas in Veritate* in 2009, Toronto's *Globe and Mail* heaped praise upon the encyclical, arguing that its "strength is in challenging all ordinary agendas, and in denying that business, politics and morality are separate, watertight compartments of human life". In a similar vein, *The Economist* – hardly a normal bastion of pro-papal sentiment – editorialized that "despite some lapses into trendy jargon," *Caritas in Veritate* is "is certainly not a banal or trivial document" and will "occupy a prominent place among religious leaders' competing attempts to explain and address the problems of an overheated, overcrowded planet." Such reactions amount to a rare example of recent papal commentary that played to positive notices in secular circles.

Yet the mere fact that people seem open to what the Church has to say does not automatically mean, of course, that they understand what they hear. Reaction to an October 2011 document from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on reform of the global economy illustrates the point. This was a complex 7,000 word meditation on markets, legal systems and the common good, yet basically the only thing the outside world heard, thanks in large part to overheated media coverage, was its call for "global government" – which led bloggers to declare that the Vatican had endorsed "Occupy Wall Street!", and conspiracy theorists to begin scanning the horizon for black helicopters bearing the Pope's coat of arms. It also sparked a ferocious round of ideological spin, with one prominent Catholic commentator in the United States insisting that the document placed the Vatican "to the left of Nancy Pelosi," a reference to the controversial Democratic Speaker of the House. In the end, a Vatican statement intended to spark an examination of conscience instead bred controversy and confusion.

Still less does openness to the Church's teaching on economic virtue mean that people necessarily translate it into practice. It is now three years since the release of *Caritas in Veritate*, and despite the positive notices it inspired on editorial pages, it's difficult to detect the stirrings of a real moral revolution in business life or the architecture of the global economy.

My plan tonight is the following. I will sketch six obstacles to effective communication between the Church and the financial world. Some arise when the Church speaks on any subject, while others are more specific to its messages on the economy and business. I'll then consider a compelling recent example of a message from the Church on business matters which offers a way around many of these difficulties. I'll end with a pastoral note about a preliminary challenge we must face in attempting to bring a unified Catholic witness to bear on matters of economic justice.

Section One: Obstacles to Translation

1. *Religious Illiteracy*

In secular milieu, ordinary people don't acquire a great deal of basic knowledge about religion, and they don't experience the reality of life inside the Catholic Church. As a result, the communications problem often isn't so much text but context. People outside the Church can often grasp the face-value meaning of individual statements or actions, but they lack the context in which those individual utterances take on meaning.

The October 2011 document from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace offers a classic example. Anyone familiar with Catholic social teaching knows that "subsidiarity", the idea that higher levels of authority should not usurp the proper role of lower levels, is among its pillars. Anyone familiar with Catholic history in the 20th century also knows that millions of believers were martyred for their resistance to totalitarian regimes, and hence the Catholic bloodstream carries powerful anti-bodies against fascism. Knowing all that, anyone who saw news headlines about a Vatican call for "global government" instinctively understood that this wasn't about endorsing a planetary police state. Alas, much mischief was bred by the fact that these are precisely the bits of context that cannot be taken for granted.

Bottom line: In Church communications in the 21st century, context – not just content – is king.

2. *Principles versus Policy*

Business people tend to be keen pragmatists, interested not in grand flights of theory but in concrete application and best practices. Given that predisposition, there's a perpetual risk of a "category mistake" when it comes to anything the Church has to say on economics. The Church wants to speak primarily in terms of principles, while the financial world wants concrete policy prescriptions: What precise dollar amount per hour constitutes a "just wage"? What level of taxation on global capital transfers would be enough to constitute an acceptable contribution to poverty relief? What exactly would "global governance" look like? The risk is that the Church is forever being pressed to sound like a policy think tank rather than a spiritual enterprise.

If we are to be honest, sometimes Church officials themselves foster this category mistake by exceeding the limits of their competence, wading into policy debates where they don't really belong.

I once interviewed a senior official with the International Monetary Fund who had overseen the implementation of an austerity plan in an African nation. This official faced withering criticism from the local Catholic bishops, and he finally invited the president of the episcopal conference to a meeting and said: "Okay, you have my attention. What exactly do you want us to do?" The bishop tossed out a couple of concrete measures, and when the IMF official explained the difficulties with each, the bishop had to admit he was in over his head. The official came away thinking that the Church means well, but frankly has little helpful to contribute. One wonders what might have happened if the bishop had told the IMF official that his role as a pastor is to give voice to the anguish of his people, not to enter into the details of how those cries translate into policy measures, and had sent along a couple of articulate lay Catholic economists to take the conversation from there.

The danger is that in the commendable effort to translate its economic message for the financial world, the Church can be drawn into a level of inappropriate specificity. That's a bad idea for at least three reasons:

- Most Church leaders aren't financial experts, and sooner or later they'll discredit the Church's moral message if they try to sound as if they are.
- Offering concrete policy proposals risks blurring the proper boundaries between church and state, which are essential to what Benedict XVI has described as a "healthy secularism".
- It's a fruitless enterprise anyway, because markets these days move much too fast for the Church's tendency to "think in centuries" to ever keep pace.

3. Media Dynamics

Efforts by the media to translate the Church's economic teaching are hamstrung by at least three interrelated forces – none of which have much to do with conscious anti-Catholic bias, but rather the dynamics of the post-modern media business.

First, religion is not considered a serious news beat on par with politics or finance, or even sports and entertainment. As a result, much religion coverage is produced by non-experts who reflect the same cultural gaps and deficiencies in religious literacy sketched above.

Second, given the proliferation of both platforms and outlets in the early 21st century, the media marketplace is extraordinarily crowded. As a result, news agencies face pressure to "break through the noise" by producing sensational reports capable of galvanizing attention. Coverage of ecclesiastical statements will generally emphasize their most "blockbuster" elements, even inventing those blockbusters if necessary, distorting the overall thrust of the teaching.

Third, given the ideological fragmentation of the media, Church statements are rarely presented on their own terms. Instead, the angle tends to be whose political agenda is being served. Coverage of *Caritas in Veritate* on Fox News in the United States, for instance, asked whether Benedict XVI and Obama were in an alliance to destroy Capitalism, the way John Paul II and Ronald Reagan had brought down Communism. In general, it's tough to find coverage of Church statements which doesn't betray a clear ideological bias.

3. Poor Church Communications

Whatever the problems of the modern media, the risk of getting lost in translation is also abetted on the Church side by what might be charitably be called an "under-developed" degree of sophistication about media relations. Perceptions of the papacy of Benedict XVI illustrate the toxic residue of uneven communications efforts.

Benedict's encyclicals, catechetical addresses, speeches during his foreign trips, and other writings will probably still be read 200 years from now, when we will think of him as one of the great teaching popes of the modern era. Yet in the court of popular opinion, Benedict's papacy is defined at least as much by its meltdowns as its triumphs. Over the past seven years, we have lived through the Regensburg controversy, the cause célèbre over a Holocaust-denying bishop, sensational accusations regarding the pope's role in the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the surreal Boffo case, and most recently the Vatican leaks scandal. The common denominator is that these were largely avoidable and unnecessary distractions. Quite honestly, if a cabal of communications gurus had assembled in April 2005 and tried to devise a strategy for keeping

good news about this papacy under wraps, it's hard to imagine they could have imagined anything more effective than what we've actually witnessed.

Of course, the problem isn't just in the Vatican. Too often at every level, the Church comes off as slow and defensive, and too often Church officials say and do clumsy things destined to cause a media train-wreck. There are many towering exceptions, but these patterns apply enough to constitute a serious problem.

4. *Perceptions of Hypocrisy*

Whenever the Catholic Church talks about economic justice, it's difficult for some people to hear its message without tripping over perceptions of hypocrisy both ancient and new. Popularly, the Catholic Church is regarded as a phenomenally wealthy institution, so one natural instinct when faced with its calls to justice goes like this: "If the Pope really cares about the poor, why doesn't he just sell off the Vatican and use the money to feed the hungry?" Moreover, recent financial scandals, such as the seizure of \$30 billion in assets belonging to the Institute for the Works of Religion in 2010, and the civil investigations which followed, have reinforced impressions that the Catholic Church doesn't walk its own talk about accountability, transparency, and the common good.

Some of this, of course, is simple mythology that dissolves upon examination. For instance, the entire annual budget for the Holy See is roughly \$300 million, while the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, all by itself, had a budget in 2011 in excess of \$1.2 billion. By the conventional standards of non-profit institutions, in other words, the Vatican just isn't rich.

Yet financial operations undeniably remain an area where John Paul's famous 1984 injunction, that the Catholic Church should be a "house of glass", remains a work in progress. In this regard, the financial glasnost launched by Pope Benedict XVI, currently embodied in efforts by the Holy See to meet the anti-money laundering standards of the Financial Action Task Force, is a service not merely to good internal governance, but to the wider credibility of the Church's economic message.

5. *Catholic Tribalism*

Finally, ideological splintering is not simply a feature of the media or the broader culture. It's also found inside the Church. This situation is conventionally referred to as "polarization," meaning the clash between left and right. In truth, Catholicism may be less polarized than it is "tribalized," since the sociological situation is defined by clustering into a variety of ecclesiastical tribes: *Communio* Catholics, peace-and-justice Catholics, liturgical traditionalists, church reformers, and on and on. In principle such diversity is a blessing, but it becomes dysfunctional when these tribes begin seeing one another as the enemy.

That dynamic was on display, for instance, in Catholic reaction to *Caritas in Veritate* three years ago.

The Catholic left approached the encyclical like the Kennedy administration approached communications from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis – responding to what they liked, and just disregarding the rest. Hence liberal commentators hailed what Benedict had to say about labor unions, redistribution of wealth and a planetary form of governance, but largely glossed over his treatment of the "life issues," including abortion, birth

control, gay marriage, and population control. That's especially remarkable given the point Archbishop Giampaolo Crepaldi made in presenting the encyclical to the press: Benedict's integration of anthropology and social ethics – i.e., his integration of *Humanae Vitae* and *Populorum Progressio* – is arguably the single most distinctive element of *Caritas in Veritate*.

On the right, another game was afoot – finding a cabal of “Blue Meanies” in the Vatican to blame for the sections of *Caritas in Veritate* that many conservatives found troubling. The clearest example came from George Weigel, who distinguished between “gold passages” in the encyclical, which he believes come from the Pope himself, and “red passages,” which Weigel ascribes to a “social justice” crowd concentrated in the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which he believes is still smarting from the blow their anti-capitalist agenda took with *Centesimus Annus*. The point of that reading, of course, was to suggest that only the “gold passages” actually merit what canon law describes as “religious submission of mind.”

Based on this example, the broad point should be clear: Internal Catholic commentary on the Church's economic messages sometimes isn't a reliable means of translation, because those messages are forced through competing filters of ideological and partisan prejudice.

A Success Story: “Vocation of the Business Leader”

Yet there is still hope to break through the noise, and providentially we have a promising new model to consider. On March 30, Cardinal Peter Turkson unveiled a new document during an international assembly of business leaders gathered in Lyon, France. The 32-page text, titled “Vocation of the Business Leader,” is designed as a *vade-mecum*, or practical handbook, for business leaders trying to integrate their faith with their work. In effect, it amounts to a Catholic version of the “Sullivan Principles,” meaning an ethical code of conduct for business practice. Though issued under the aegis of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the text was presented as a “reflection” by scholars and experts rather than a formal note or document. The editorial team was led by Michael Naughton, director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and Dominican Sr. Helen Alford at the Angelicum University in Rome. It also included Italian economist Stefano Zamagni and several other contributors.

In the galaxy of recent Vatican attempts to say something about the world of finance, this document stands out – not only for its content, but the broader communications approach it embodies, which manages to avoid triggering many of the landmines listed above. In a soundbite, the secret is to be didactic on principle but interrogatory on policy. You might think of it as a Socratic version of Catholic social teaching.

First, the document rejects the condescending view of business activity that sometimes courses through clerical commentary on economic life, as if business is an essentially grubby and materialistic domain while higher order spiritual goods are the concern of the clerical caste.

“When businesses and market economies function properly and focus on serving the common good,” it says, “they contribute greatly to the material and even the spiritual well-being of society.” In other words, business doesn't just fill bellies or line coffers; properly practiced, it cultivates virtue and promotes holiness.

That insight has, of course, been expressed on other occasions in official Catholic teaching, perhaps nowhere as forcefully as the great social encyclical of Blessed John Paul II for which this foundation is named, *Centesimus Annus*. Yet this positive vision of business life is not always characteristic of Catholic commentary, especially as it's expressed at the retail level – in

homilies, catechetical teaching, and so on. It's a critical point of departure, because successful communication is rarely premised on an assumption of moral and spiritual superiority.

Second, the document is more concerned with outlining a method for moral discernment than with dictating specific conclusions on matters of policy. It endorses the "See-Judge-Act" approach to moral discernment pioneered by Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and his Young Christian Workers movement in the early 20th century. "See-Judge-Act" was, of course, embraced by Pope John XXIII in his 1961 social encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, and has been a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching ever since. By holding up this time-honored approach, the document implies that the Church is more concerned with helping business professionals understand *how* to reason in a moral key, rather than telling them *what* they must think. By steering clear of specific policy prescriptions, the document also largely short-circuited the ideological blowback that often surrounds other Vatican pronouncements.

Third, the document's appendix presents a "Discernment Checklist for the Business Leader," composed of thirty questions which amount to an examination of conscience informed by Catholic social teaching. Some are fairly broad, yet still packing a punch, while others are far more concrete and with real bite. Human nature being what it is, not every business professional is likely to take these questions seriously, or to answer them honestly. Yet if even a handful were to do so, the result could be a new moral depth in what has long been regarded as a basically amoral realm.

"Vocation of the Business Leader" may thus be that rarest of Vatican texts: Something that isn't just dissected by *vaticanisti* and other denizens of the church's chattering classes, but actually used out in the field. One can imagine, for instance, retreats for business leaders organized around the document, culminating in the examination of conscience it invites. One also hopes it becomes a cornerstone of business education, especially in Catholic venues. There are some 1,800 church-affiliated colleges and universities worldwide, roughly 800 of which have business programs, and this text would be a compelling addition to their curricula.

In terms of approach, the novelty of "Vocation of the Business Leader" is that it manages to bring Catholic social teaching down to earth without actually floating a single concrete policy proposal. Instead, it asks hard questions and trusts people of intelligence and good will to figure out the right answers. That, I would submit, is a promising model for presenting Church teaching in a way that's both relevant and appropriately restrained. To be clear, the document does not falsely suggest that one policy response or business strategy is as good as another, which would risk a form of moral relativism. It clearly suggests that "rent-seeking behavior," for instance, is a less morally commendable way of pursuing wealth than creating products of real value. Yet it allows plenty of room for prudential reason to operate, which is the proper approach to rapidly shifting and contingent social questions.

The final insight suggested by "Vocation of the Business Leader" is this: If we want good translation of the Church's message to the financial world, then we must have good translators. This is truly a realm where personnel is policy. The trick is to form a cohort of people fluent in the three distinct languages we've been considering tonight: the language of the Catholic Church, the language of the financial world, and the language of 21st century social communications. Further, this cohort must have reflected deeply on the intersection of these three worlds, in order to translate not just words but context and intended meaning. One cannot assume such competencies spring naturally into being merely by virtue of sacramental ordination, or by conferral of a doctorate in economics. We are, in effect, talking about the emergence of an entirely new professional field.

“Vocation of a Business Leader” is a good first step, but cultivating this new field will require considerable time and treasure – from clerics, from academics, and from communications experts – all of whom must begin by accepting that their own perspective and authority, even at its very best, supplies only a partial solution.

On a related note, I would also suggest that it’s a serious mistake to expect this new professional field to take shape primarily in Rome. The action, so to speak, is elsewhere. It’s in New York, and Milan, and Nairobi, and Hong Kong, and the world’s other financial and media centers. It’s in the marketplace and in the street, where Church leaders at the retail level are pressed to bring Catholic teaching and tradition into conversation with the fiscal and economic challenges of the day, at an utterly new pace and level of complexity. That’s where Church leaders need help, beginning with precisely the sorts of people in this room. The burning question isn’t really what “the Church” is doing to get its message out, in the sense of officialdom, and certainly not the Vatican; the real issue is what the rest of us can and should be doing to raise up good translators for Church teaching in our own spheres of influence.

A Concluding Pastoral Note

Church discourse on the economy doesn’t occur in a vacuum, and hence any translation strategy must take account of the broader ecclesial context in the early 21st century. As I noted above, one distressing feature of this context is that the Church is too often tribalized, splintered into competing factions. In our time, ideological and theological divisions are being turbocharged by accelerating cultural, geographic, and ethnic diversity. Today, two-thirds of the global Catholic population of almost 1.2 billion lives in the southern hemisphere, a share that will reach three-quarters by 2050. If we are not careful, the centrifugal energies in Catholicism created by these wildly different perspectives will become ungovernable.

As a result, I have come to believe the single most urgent pastoral priority in the Catholic Church today is promotion of a deeper Spirituality of Communion, rooted in the understanding of the Church as a “community of communities.” What’s required is *metanoia*, a conversion away from tribal warfare and toward building new zones of friendship across tribal lines. We must learn anew to emphasize those things that unite us as Catholics rather than those which divide us, because if we don’t, we will not rise to the occasion of the challenges of our time. We will instead be steamrolled by them.

If I may offer a concluding *fervorino* tonight, it is this: In your reflection on how the Church engages economic questions, I invite you to give a pride of place to doing so in a genuinely inclusive fashion. To be concrete, try to ensure that differing Catholic voices on economic life have a place at the table – that both the Acton Institute and the Catholic Worker, for instance, both Sant’Egidio and Comunione e Liberazione, and all the points of the compass in between, are in the mix. In a 2007 session with the clergy of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso, Pope Benedict XVI observed: “Catholicism, somewhat simplistically, has always been considered the religion of the great *et et*, not of exclusivity but of synthesis.” Let that be the spirit of your enterprise, which would be a powerful contribution to building a “post-tribal” ethos for 21st century Catholicism.

In so doing, you will not merely be contributing to a more balanced and unified Catholic witness on the economy, although that is certainly a worthy objective in itself. You will also be performing a pastoral service to the whole Church, one for which Catholics everywhere will be in your debt.