

Economy and Society International Award Ceremony

May 29, 2019

Reception Speech by Professor Mary L. Hirschfeld

Eminences, Excellences, most honorable members and guests of the Fondazione Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice, it is a great honor to be here among you, and humbling to be the recipient of such an award. To say one is humbled is usually a figure of speech used on an occasion such as this. But for me, it really is the best word to capture the moment. I am a convert, and although I have been Catholic for over twenty years now, I still feel something like a foreigner who can speak the language, but who has not mastered the idioms and fluency that comes naturally to native speakers. To absorb the traditions and wisdom of a Church that has flourished for over two millennia would seem to require being born into it.

But the Church is regularly replenished with converts like me, and perhaps this is providential. Like Dante, I found myself lost in the woods in mid-life. For my first 37 years, I tried to navigate the world armed with the sensibilities of an educated secular agnostic from America. I had earned a Ph.D. in economics with the idea that the best path to promoting happiness lay in economic development, seeking policies and institutions that would spread material prosperity to all. Yet in my own life, I had found that my own prosperity did little to help me find meaning or happiness. I was hungry for something, but I did not know what I was hungry for. I suffered from anxiety, and I flirted with despair. In all that struggling, I somehow stumbled into the Church, really not knowing why I was there or what it would mean when I knocked on her doors. But what I found was a banquet.

The Church offered me what my soul had been hungering for all those years, and I have never looked back.

So what was it that I found, that was so fulfilling? Above all I found that it was true that I did indeed hunger for an infinite good, but that this infinite good was not the sort that could be found by an accumulation of finite goods. No amount of money or prestige was going to alleviate that hunger. Instead, I found that my true hunger was for God. And although I found that my hunger for God would not be fully satisfied in this life, I also found a new way of seeing the world, one that reflected that goodness that I yearned for – again not by an accumulation of many things, but rather through a vision that could see the depth of the goodness that things represent. I learned to see as if for the first time the wonder of the good of the people in my life. I learned to see as if for the first time the importance of community. I learned to see as if for the first time the goodness of becoming a better version of myself by cultivating the virtues, something I could not have done apart from the grace of God. This, I think, is the gift of the convert. Cradle Catholics often take this abundance for granted. They do not recognize how profoundly starved people in the secular world can be for meaning and fulfillment. The ability to see the goods of the world in their proper order, as a sacramental reflection of the goodness of God is a tremendous gift. It is a bit of an irony. To truly love the world and be nourished by it, you have to begin with the knowledge that our ultimate love is for something that lies beyond it.

I was so overwhelmed by this banquet I found on my conversion, I decided to give up my job as a tenured professor of economics. I went back to school to study theology. Theology, I thought, had much more to say about how to find genuine happiness than did economics. I intended to leave economics behind. But I found that I could not. When I started my theological studies, people would ask me for insight into questions about economics – things like whether usury is licit, or what

it would mean for wages to be just. At first, I did not know how to reply. If I thought about those subjects as an economist, I had to use a way of thinking that denied the banquet I had found in the Church. And on a practical level, it was not at all obvious how to reconcile Christian sensibilities about virtue and justice, with the logic of markets. To give a quick example, it seems obvious that wages should be just – people should be able to lead dignified lives on the basis of the work that they do. But if the market dictates that wages should be lower than that, efforts to raise the wage to a just level could produce unemployment, thereby harming the very people the just wage is meant to help. I did not know how to reconcile the two approaches.

My path forward came when I worked on a paper about Aquinas's teachings on private property. I felt like I knew Aquinas pretty well by that point, and I thought as an economist I understood private property. So I expected the paper to be an easy one to write. Indeed, I put off writing it until the night before it was due! But as I read Aquinas's text closely I fell into an abyss. He was arguing that private property is, indeed, a fitting institution, and not simply as a concession to sin. But his argument was strange. On the one hand, he seemed to be saying that private property is fitting because it channels our propensity to work for ourselves in socially useful ways. That, by the way, is exactly what an economist would say. But then he said we are also to hold private property as if it is in common, that is ready to share with others the fruits of our labors. That read to me, as an economist, as a pure contradiction. On the one hand, private property is good because it gives us an incentive to work hard. On the other hand, we are supposed to turn around and give it all away. What sort of incentive is that? I stayed up all night in despair. I had to call my professor and ask for an extension on the paper.

Around six in the morning, though, it came to me. Aquinas's idea that private property allows us to pursue our proper desire to care for ourselves and our family

is not the same idea economists have when they talk about incentives. The crucial difference lies in how we understand the role of material wealth in a good human life. For Aquinas, the “incentive” is that we want to provide ourselves with what is reasonably necessary. But once our needs are secured, we would naturally wish to look to help others. Anything above what is necessary to us is, for Aquinas, superfluous. For economists, the incentive is that we want more. However much we have, we think a bit more would be helpful and so we work hard. But that same logic means we would not experience our wealth as abundance, and so we would find it hard to give to others. Aquinas’s conception of incentives and his understanding of private property end up being radically different from those of economists, precisely because Aquinas is thinking about happiness in the way I discussed above, as something that is found in the higher goods of God, family, community and virtue. In such a world, wealth is good, but it is an instrumental good. That was the root of the vision of a humane economy I lay out in my book.

This ends up being the kernel of the book that is most important to me, the message I most want to share. We cannot think well about economic life, or the challenges to economic justice and the environment that we confront, if we do not first think hard about the shape of human happiness and the proper role of wealth. There is an immediate consequence to this insight: when we dialogue with people who have different ideas about the shape of human happiness and the proper role of wealth, we are likely to have misunderstandings. The Church has much wisdom to share with the world through the body of her social thought. But because many read the Church’s encyclicals using a different understanding of happiness, and a different conception of the role of wealth in a good life, they will not fully understand what is being said. That is why the Church’s tradition of social thought has not had as much impact as it should. My book is meant for both worlds – it is meant to show the secular world that its habits of thought about the relationship between wealth and happiness is not the only possible way to think about it. And

it is meant to alert the Church to the difficulties of sharing her wisdom to a world that does not share her language.

It is good for the Church to work with everyone in thinking through the economic and environmental challenges of our day. But the Church's deepest gift to the world lies in calling attention to our mistaken ideas about the value of wealth, and what that implies for how we should enter into the market. She does this in her encyclicals. Pope Francis's critique of the technocratic paradigm in *Laudato Si'* comes to mind. But I hope to have contributed to these conversations by making it clearer that the Church's vision of the relationship between wealth and happiness, and what that means for creation and the economy is not easily understood by those who were formed with the secular understanding of the world.

Perhaps this is the gift of the convert... to see what cradle Catholics may take for granted, and to build a bridge to bring the gifts of the Church to a world that desperately needs them.