

# Francis – an economic reformer and provocateur

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At a first glance one can be misled by noticing a sharp contrast in the way Benedict XVI viewed the market economy in the masterpiece encyclical “Caritas in Veritate” and the more fatalistic way that Francis comments on the economy and business in his exhortation “Evangelii Gaudium”. For all of us “Evangelii Gaudium” is Pope Francis’ mission statement addressing (as Francis does), “the man of good will”. More than a tinge of urgency can be detected in this Exhortation, and we can all understand the reason for this call for decision-taking and action.

Francis gives us a realistic look at humanity battered by the experience of a deep financial and economic crisis. A view from the ground upwards and not the other way round. These are the thoughts of someone who lived in Argentina and who has experienced the aches of society in Latin America with its experimentation in market economics (Milton Friedman in Chile) and the failure of worker participation models (Peru) and statism/socialism and centralisation (Venezuela). In the so-called advanced economies the financial crisis has left persons astray as a consequence of personal debt, loss of business and jobs. In London last year the number of homeless increased by not less than 65 percent.

The Apostolic Exhortation feeds from Pope Benedict’s “Caritas in Veritate” in placing the complete human person in the centre of economic decision making. “Business is a vocation and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life.” (203). It draws our attention to the resulting social and economic divergence between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, and stresses that impersonal globalisation and the advancements in science and technology are not enough, but we need to have a human face to development. It is at this stage that he raises his voice with four warnings: No to an economy of exclusion; No to the

new idolatry of money (consumerism/overspending on non-essentials/waste); No to a financial system which rules rather than saves; No to inequality which spawns violence. The message is absolutely clear – do not expect peace in society without seeking the Common Good.

There is indeed hope that entrepreneurs, workers, consumers and governments realise that they have to change the way they take decisions if this seismic shift towards an improved quality of life and peace in society would actually happen. The action-plan can be found in the Exhortation itself. Education which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values(64); the re-engineering of Catholic Church structures as a champion of Solidarity (65); the strengthening of the family which is a spontaneous and natural model of subsidiarity and solidarity; the need for social dialogue – “dialogue with cultures and society – and dialogue with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church”(238), “dialogue between faith, reason and science” (242); the transformation of business models that understand the value of seeking Common Good by creating constructive relationships with stakeholders.

The Exhortation provokes us to think – how can the structural cause of poverty be solved? The welfare state is only a temporary solution (202). What is needed is a re-thinking of economic and social policy based on the principles of self- responsibility and self-help. The key issue is who is taking the decisions? How are we developing this decision-taking “self” in a family environment and in a society that is being formed to take the right ethical decisions?

“The need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises.” (202).

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