

Divine Mercy Sunday April 19, 2009

Readings: Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 5:1-6; John 20:19-31

Charity not Socialism

In our first reading this morning we heard: *“There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.”* At first blush, this might sound a little like socialism.

There was a recent poll in the news that surprised me, and many others. The results stated that only 53% of American adults think that capitalism is better than socialism. It’s not quite as bad as the headline sounds, however, because of the remaining 47%, only 20% think socialism is better; the other 27% don’t have an opinion whether one is better than the other. Probably many of those don’t know what socialism even is.

Capitalism often goes awry due to greed and selfishness; it is obviously not a perfect system when proper checks and balances are not put into place as we have seen recently. And when capitalism is abused, there is a tendency to over-react and implement socialistic principles, to redistribute the wealth. It’s not a new phenomenon. Listen to these words from one of our popes:

“In any case we clearly see, and on this there is general agreement, that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class [I]t has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. ... To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.

“To remedy these wrongs the socialists, working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies. They hold that by thus transferring property from private individuals to the community, the present mischievous state of things will be set to rights, inasmuch as each citizen will then get his fair share of whatever there is to enjoy. But their contentions are so clearly powerless to end the controversy that were they carried into effect the working man himself would be among the first to suffer. They are, moreover, emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community.”

This was written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, almost 120 years ago, in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. The Church has always taught about the importance of the freedom of the individual and the right to own property and possessions. It has always cautioned against socialism and communism which lead to oppression of the people and to atheistic societies. Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, as a 100 year follow-

up to Pope Leo's. Socialism and communism had proven to be failures in the ensuing years. He comments on capitalism and whether it should be the replacement system. He says that the answer is complex and requires certain qualifications:

“If by "capitalism" is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative,”

The key focus of the Church is again on protecting individual freedoms which are given to us by God. Capitalism, to be a good system, also requires personal responsibility. As Christians, we must be free to make good choices, and bad choices; we must be responsible for our actions. And this freedom is the reason why the early Christian Church encouraged selling property and using the proceeds to help the needy. When you voluntarily give your property to the poor and needy, this is called charity, the greatest of all virtues. But, if your property is taken away from you involuntarily and given to the poor, what merit is there to you?

If the early Christians weren't forced to give up their possessions, but did so willingly, we can ask what was their motivation. And the reason is that they had great faith in the gospel message; they believed that their earthly possessions were of little importance; they believed in following Jesus' commandment to love their neighbor. And St. John tells us in the second reading this morning: *“And the victory that conquers the world is our faith. Who indeed is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”*

We are not victors over the world because we amass large stores of wealth. We are victors over this world when we have faith that there is something beyond this world that is even greater; when we are truly free to give up the things of this world for the treasures of heaven. We are victors when we forgive others, because then God will forgive us. We are victors when we have mercy on others, because then God will be merciful with us. We are victors, we are blessed, when we have faith in Jesus and His message even though we have not seen Him.

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