
CHURCH AND ECONOMICS - POPE FRANCIS SAYS IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO EASE POVERTY BY THE CRUMBS OF "NON-INTENTIONAL" EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS: HE CALLS THE ENTIRE BANQUET INTO QUESTION THE WORN-OUT CAPITALISM OF THE RICH MAN

By Luigino Bruni

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There is no better definition for Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* than “*apostolic exhortation*”. Exhortation comes from the Latin verb *exhortari* which has the double meaning of “*induce, incite to do something*”, and “*console, raise again*” (the root is the same as that of comfort). *Evangelii Gaudium* is in fact a document that strongly encourages us to change direction, and it does so with the same power as the apostles when they

turned to their Churches (let's just think of Paul): they, too, used strong words and harsh registers when necessary. At the same time, and still imitating the apostolic attitude, while **this exhortation incites and pushes us to get back on the right track, it also comforts us and helps us in the act of rising to our feet again.**

Pope Francis gave us a reading that is powerful and comforting at the same time, it strongly encourages us to change, but in between the powerful words you can smell the good shepherd whose first, heartfelt concern is the welfare of the flock, especially when - like now - it seems dangerously close to a ravine, which is very dangerous because it is preceded by green pastures, but there are steep and deadly cliffs hiding behind the leaves. It follows then that the first serious mistake not to commit while reading this exhortation is to reduce its message to false consolation that's pleasing to all, thereby cutting off the strongest argument by normalising and reducing its prophetic message encouraging us to change course.

Taking an illustrious and influential example, if we say that *Evangelii Gaudium* should be read “*through the eyes of the professor-bishop-pope who was born and raised in Argentina*” (Michael Novak, “*Corriere della Sera*”, 12 December 2013), it means that we want to disempower the universal cultural and general significance of the exhortation, and classify it as actually irrelevant. I am, however, convinced that **the only way to honour the exhortation** and receive it as a gift for the common good is if we **do not dampen its severe criticism** (comforting for those who understand it) **of the current phase of the capitalist system**. Which capitalism does the Pope criticise? We all know that there have been many different capitalisms in the past, but we also know that the current phase of development of the world economy, the capitalism labelled as individualist that placed finance as its helmsman is becoming the only capitalism: it makes us forget all the cultural and economic biodiversity of the twentieth century, when there were many forms of capitalism that could be ascribed to many different anthropologies and worldviews.

So the criticism that **Pope Bergoglio issues** on the current version of individualistic and financial capitalism is a **critique of general relevance** that touches a key idea of the ideology which is the basis of our model of development. It is articulated in two points: **the excluding nature of our economic system** (no. 53), and **the idea that he calls “trickle-down theories”** (no. 54). Market economy has achieved an ethical statute for itself, and was therefore morally accepted by the mediaeval Franciscans and (with some major reserves) by the Dominicans and the Christian community (albeit with different variations and accents in passing from the Catholic to the Protestant world), exactly for its **capability to include the excluded**, and not only for the creation of wealth. In fact, if we contrast the origins of market economy with feudalism, that is, the only historically available alternative, it is undeniable that the historical development of the market economy has brought with it the productive inclusion of millions of soil-bound servants first, then farmers and even women a few decades ago, who - forced to stay on the margins of civilized life for millennia - have become citizens and free, working and consuming people, too.

The development of the **free market** was the **other side of the coin**, inseparable from the **development of democracy**, human rights and all kinds of freedom. This is history. And today? Let's not forget that the Pope writes in 2013, in a historical period in which market economy (if we wish we can call it capitalism as well, although it is not necessary: it's enough to say market economy) is struck by a serious illness, which has two major symptoms: the drift of individuals towards loneliness, unhappiness and consumerism (*"The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience."* no. 2), and the financialisation of the economy.

We cannot forget that when speculative finance takes ownership and control of banks, businesses and therefore jobs and families, there are at least **two serious civilian pathologies**: **income dominates the profits of employers and workers**, and relationships between agents become increasingly similar to the so-called **"zero-sum games"**. An increasing number of financial transactions (not all) are configured just like gamble where the winnings of one party correspond exactly to the loss of the other (as in every betting game). **When the economy takes this "slot-machine" turn** - a turn that's very visible today, and hopefully not irreversible - the market betrays its inclusive nature and is no longer based on the golden rule of "mutual benefit" (of **Smith** or **Genovesi**). And so it should be criticized. The *"trickle-down theories"* are, beyond exegesis and linguistic translations, a pillar of the capitalist ideology, according to which when the tide comes and raises all boats, even the smallest will be lifted up: the wealth of the rich is good for poor, too, as they collect the crumbs that accidentally fall from the table of the powerful.

This is a **version of capitalism that might be called that of the "rich man"** (of the *Biblical parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus"*, cf: *Lk 16:19-31*, the translator) who, while eating plentifully lets random crumbs fall to the dogs under the table - unintentionally. For **Pope Francis** it is not enough to leave justice and the care for poverty and exclusions to the effects of "unintentional" actions that are only intentional when it comes to individual interests. The crumbs will not do; **he wants to call the entire banquet into question**: who gets to eat and how, who is left outside and away from the table and the tables, as well as social relations that are hidden behind the people. His is a legitimate and necessary criticism of the idea of market solidarity and the common good being mainly entrusted to indirect effects.

The social virtues (and justice is always the queen of the social virtues) **arise from the individual virtues**, which are very intentional, the virtues of those who can see the new embodiments of the poor Lazarus and do not leave them under the tables where they are not even accompanied by the dogs any more (as dogs are finally treated with increasing respect and dignity). So the *Evangelii Gaudium* is a document that **should be read within the great classical, humanist and Christian tradition of the common good** - as in **Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas** and the Franciscans up till **Genovesi** or **Toniolo**. In fact they never thought of the **common good** as a **matter** of unintended positive effects of actions towards their own respective interests, but **associated it with the private and public virtues**. This tradition considers the common good as the result of public actions and civil remedies, designed to mitigate the passions, especially through the appropriate institutions, and does not see it as an indirect effect of *"natural"* and spontaneous actions of individuals - so would say **Amyntor Fanfani** or **Federico Caffé**. Not all forms of the search for personal interests are good, fair and equitable.

The idea of the market that is born of this tradition - of which Francis is an interpreter and creative pursuer - is in fact a great undertaking of intentional cooperation and the exercising of the social virtues, a community and personal affair: *"We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market."* (no. 204). **Let's take it seriously**, and give birth to a new era of economic thought, worthy of Pope Francis' exhortation.