

ECONOMY AND MORALITY

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1. From what point of view does the Church deal with the economy?

During the long history of Christianity, both in the field of the theology and the disciplines, and also in the lives of the Christian communities, often appeared such kind of questions, those we now call 'economical' ones. Among these, the problem of interest or of the prohibition of taking it, were, as such, recurrent, outstanding and disputed questions. At the same time, there's no point to search for in its details elaborated economic theories within the inner history of the Church. Jesus Christ himself has not preached the method of economic success, and the Church has never been about this kind of economic science. These problems have always come up in *moral* sense. The question has always been the same: how could human action meet the will of our Creating and Redeeming God. These days, theologians deal with economic problems mostly within the framework of social doctrine of the Church. This doctrine belongs to the area of moral theology, and, by now – regarding its particularly complicated subject –, became a rather independent part of it.

To make easier to understand the ecclesiastical presentation of economy we normally distinguish three different sense of the word 'economy'. "Economics as *science* examines the attitudes aiming at enrichment, and their integration into an entire system; economy as *activity* of certain subjects (individuals, companies, organizations, state); and the economy as *economical system*, namely the institutions and regulations, within those the activity of the subject goes on."¹ These three senses of economy mentioned above mark realities intrinsically linked to each other, but, in order to our investigation, we should better separate them. The second and third meaning better belong to the facts not to the theory. That is why the social discipline of the Church reacts basically on these.

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¹ DUCHINI, FRANCESCA, *Economia in Dizionario di Dottrina Sociale della Chiesa. Scienze sociali e Magistero*, a cura del Centro di ricerche per lo studio della dottrina sociale della Chiesa, Milano 2004, 280.

The precondition of the presence of the economy itself is the fact that human life goes on under social conditions, we live in groups. In the common sense economic activity becomes problematic mostly when a conflict occurs regarding to producing and sharing goods and services, or when the institutions related to these operations attract the attention.

2. Economics as science in the light of the social doctrines of the Church

Until the middle of the 19th century there was some kind of distrust to be observed in the doctrines of the Church against the entire economics, since the way of thinking prevailing in economy seemed to be devastating, deceptive and dangerous.² So the Christian thinkers felt the urge to make the social-economic reality and its operation into the perspective of building a just society.³

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum novarum* however formulated such references as well (§44. and 45.), which encouraged the academic exchange of views even in the field of social and economic sciences, notably with admittance of the independence of these particular disciplines.⁴ Still, the catholic economic experts quite soon detected some certain ideological preconditions, which they found to be criticized. First of all, they judged the extremely individualistic understanding of *man*, furthermore the materialistic concept of society, which identifies or defines the goods from a hedonistic point of view. They also noticed that they can't find the right tools to justify both their own philosophical starting point, and, especially, those above mentioned biases.⁵ Between the (two) world wars, the Christian reflection – admitting the significant results of economic sciences – focused on highlighting the goal of the entire economic activity as such. As Pope Pius XI emphasized in his encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (§43.), human freedom works in the economy as well; we make decisions, which should be directed on a purpose designated by the Creating God. They should ultimately serve a common good based on a more comprehensive image of man.⁶

The Second Vatican Council in its provision *Gaudium et Spes* (§36.) already emphasizes that the decent scientific research can never have any controversy with faith, because both the secular reality and the one captioned in faith come from God. The created things and also the society itself have their own laws. Man should discover and use them, in a given way, with correspondence of the will of the Creating God. (cf. *ibid.*) And here we come to the basic foundation of the relation of economy and morality, namely recognizing that someone working in economic life is doing a real activity as well, so this person is conscious and free. This person is not only a lifeless screw in a machine, which works according to an abstract, kind of mathematical logic, which is regardless of us, but he has the potential and task to choose his targets and the tools needed responsibly. As well in politics, in economy too, the truth is the opposite of all the illusions: we are responsible for our acts; morality is also valid in these areas. We can neither hand over the politics to the logic of a power which is abstracted from people, nor the economy to mere operation of abstract mathematical rules. If it still happens, that will sooner or later effectuate estrangement in a classical sense, which could be followed by a social cataclysm. The social doctrines of the Church highlights, that the market which ignores social utility, and only focuses on the contractor's profit, „ allows the establishment of an inhuman and estranged arrangement” (The compendium of the social doctrines of the Church, §348.).

3. Economy as activity in the social doctrines of the Church

When examining the relation between economy and morality, we mostly think on the economic activity, considering it not as a merely social reality, to which we can have different moral attitudes, like we have to the material goods, but we do consider it as the sum of human activities. Even though we might sometimes feel as the economic activity was an autonomous reality, becoming more and more independent from the individual decisions of particular people, it is actually constituted by conscious and free human acts. That's why responsibility does have a place regarding economic activity, and that is why we can't just see economy as an autonomous technique, where moralizing can seem to be bizarre and sentimental. Economy can only be subjected to a moral judgement inasmuch it consists of human acts - namely entirely.

The *Quadragesimo anno* stresses that economic activity is not the highest good or the only purpose, but a subordinated tool, which only gets a reason and a value in benefiting salvation in God's plan (§ 43.). So

² cf. *ibid.*

³ cf. *ibid.*

⁴ cf. *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ cf. *ibid.*

economic activity should be done according to its own regulations and methods, but within the framework of morality, in such a manner which meets the plan which God made of us (*Gaudium et spes*, 64.). As so often, the central question is the definition and reality of man. Since we didn't answer it, we are only able to decide, what's good for us, or what do we mean under developing our living conditions. Whilst someone is working for his own, and also for his family's living, he should aspire to benefit the society at the same time. This way he contributes to unfold God's plan in human history (ibid. p. 34.). In behind of this noble idea, announced by the Second Vatican Council, there are some clearly theological considerations. It is though undoubtedly nuanced by the ideological background of the sixties. That public mood optimistically believed in progress, and thought, that the scientific and technical improvement will warrant the highest happiness for everyone here, in our earthly life. This illusion of limitless progress, and also the identification of this progress with the quantitative growth lead though quite soon to a disillusion. We can perceive the possibility of running out of raw materials and energy sources, and the problem of environmental pollution ever deeper. At the same time it's also becoming even better known, that the conscious human activity affects natural systems and operations which we only partially know. We can again feel the scare of an apprentice of a wizard, who accidentally emancipates energies which he can't dominate afterwards. The experience of complexity mixed up the feeling of responsibility inside us. In terms of moral reflection many take the position of agnosticism, not in a religious or a philosophical, but in a scientific sense, saying: we just can't get to know perfectly all the relations of the world, each and every invention raises tones of new questions. We aren't able to comprehend the true, entire connectional system of our activities, nor can we take full responsibility for them.

This depressing feeling is often accompanied by the experience of inability. Not only in terms of validating higher aspects, but regarding, for example, the environmental pollution, the problems could be, in most cases, clearly and in agreement demarcated, and many times we can even identify the method of managing or solving them. Still, from time to time we must face that the operation of economy doesn't adapt to this kind of necessity that the logic of taking profit in a given time obstructs to avert these dangers. As humanity were drifted by some kind of whirlwind.

This kind of distressful experience, especially under the influence of some crisis, affects the general thinking as well. The common man feels even the operation of economy – in no small part because of the globalization – so complicated that makes him to get into the habit of irresponsible, short-term thinking.

The social doctrines of the Church focus on the single man's and the humanities benefit at the very same time. That's why it speaks about human dignity, especially in context of the labour, as, for example Pope John Paul II says in his encyclical *Laborem exercens* (§ 15.). He stresses, that the human labour is not only important in terms of the economy, but also indicates personal values. And, in the same way, neither in the economy is enough to strive for increasing the financial profit and for expanding the provision and power over the products, but we must also respect the dignity of the human being. This again needs a more complete image of the man. These days it's become popular to speak about human dignity in a sense in which it means painless condition, or clear circumstances. But originally, this word has biblical meaning. It's based on the statement in the story of creation, which says that God created us in his image and likeness. The human reason, the human freedom and the calling for the entire life are the manifestations of this dignity. In that sense the unilateral enhancement of economic pressure can hardly be justified. Also we can't justify the manipulation in order to economic or political purposes, which manipulates our consciousness through bypassing, or excluding the free consideration. The aggressive advertising for example appears at some places as the central formal language of culture, and affects not only the customer behaviour, but the political or philosophical as well. These and many other similar experiences are capable to produce the feeling of inability, which again means kind of absolution from the moral requirements. The catholic theology has already raised up in this context the question of the category '*structural sin*' decades ago. According to this, the structures which are built into the operation of the society, and which are controversial to the moral and obstruct its enforcement, together form a structural sin, that weighs on the person and on the society. Some offer to solve the situation the revolutionary theology, according to which the forced conversion of relations, the revolution, could be the social synonym of the conversion. However this wasn't officially accepted by the Church, not only because of its questionable political consequences, but first of all because the literal meaning of the word 'sin' is a personal, individual act, not the collective reality. At the same time it's still doubtless that it can heavily affectionate the operation of the community. That's why the compendium of the social doctrines of the Church, released in 2004, speaks in details about the „structures of sin” (119, 193, 232, 446, 566.). About the drama of sin this holy document says: „The mystery of sin causes two types of wound: the first one appears in the sinner, the other appears in his relation to his neighbour. That's why we can speak about personal and about social sin: in some ways every sin is personal, but in another respect they

are all social, inasmuch as it has social consequences as well” (117). Mentioning the neighbour in this context also highlights a particularly recent problem. The person of our age, obviously also effected by the new forms of communication and the virtual reality is more and more individualized, we just have started to live next to each other as anonymous individuals. Only the smallest part of our everyday lives goes on in a living community. That’s the reason why some authors say that the neighbour appeared from the side of the man our times. We can hardly perceive, who and how should we love around us, who needs what and what is helpful for someone. It’s much easier to transfer money to an account which appears on the screen, or to do the same through a phone call.

In terms of the structure of sin the compendium of social doctrines of the Church particularly refers on the economic aspects, saying: „the acts and attitudes, controversial to God’s will and the benefit of the fellow human, and the structures generated by these, are these day basically two: ’The one is the exclusive ambition on taking profit, and the other is the lust for power, which tries to force its own will onto the others, namely (...) at any cost (...)’” (§ 119; cf. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, § 37.).

In the light of all these it looks it’s not simply an economic activity which follows a particularly professional logic against a need for an ethical valuation which respects the higher needs of the man too, but a human attitude that sets the economical rationality to serve human instincts (e.g. possessiveness, lust to power), and separates it from the other parts of reality and another kind of human behaviour, that focuses on a much wider horizon of both the man as such and of the reality. The difference between these two types of approaches can also be seen when choosing the purpose and the tools of the economic activity.

4. Economic systems in the light of the social doctrines of the Church

The margin to help to effectuate the primary purposes of human act is the one whose practical frames are marked by the particular economic systems. That is precisely the criteria; in regard the social doctrine of the Church qualifies these systems. Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo anno*, among many others, speaks about the social Christian reconstruction of the society in spirit of the Gospel (§ 149).⁷ As we can see, until the middle 20th century they saw the guarantee of validating moral requirements in the rules of the economic life. Pope Pius XII though, in the name of the principle of freedom stressed, that the Church does not reject categorically certain types of governance, provided, that they’re able to serve the benefit of citizens, and give the person both the respect and the possibility for life which is required by the dignity of that person.⁸ Pope John XXIII in *Mater et magistra* (§ 39.) calls the economical world a creature comes from the single citizens individual or associated initiatives.

Not even in this optimistic approach fell into oblivion, that salvation and the liberation in whole won’t come in this world but only in the future (*Gaudium et spes*, 40-45.). Pope John Paul II goes even further with this thought. He thinks that the Church doesn’t prefer one or another economic system, provided that those sufficiently respect the human dignity and give the chance to fulfil our mission in the world (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 41; cf. *Centesimus annus*, 43.). Thus the religious social doctrine doesn’t want to ignore the results of economics and social sciences, although it has it makes its own sentences and calls the single man to search for the possibility to forward the common good; as the efficient economical systems born within the framework of different historic circumstances, but not automatically, better in result of acts of responsible people, who investigate and want to solve these problems in their social, economic and cultural relations (cf. *Centesimus annus*, 43.). This statement, within the present circumstances, emphasizes taking into account the entire impact system even in the web of mutual correlations.

At this point we return again to the problem of happiness. It is true, that due to the extremely quickly developing informatics now we’re able to quickly handle such a huge amount of data, of which previously we could never even dream about, still the answers given by the system depend on the questions we ask. Therefore we, people, should again and again fight for the appearance of those new standpoints within the context, which are related to human dignity, freedom, and common good in a most complete and noblest sense. Building these questions and answers into the economic decision-making, and even into the structures of economic systems, seems to be a task, on whose solution the moral quality of economical operation, and, after all, the possibility of dignified life on Earth – or of the life in general – could depend. That’s the reason why the Africa-synod in 2009 stresses, that the best globalization is the globalization of solidarity.⁹

⁷ cf. *ibid.* 283.

⁸ cf. *ibid.* 283.

⁹ SINODO DEI VESCOVI (II. ASSEMBLEA SPECIALE PER L’AFRICA), *Elenco finale delle proposizioni*, Roma, 24. ottobre 2009, prop. 31.; ed. *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 26, Bologna 2012, nr. 1146.

The seriousness of this challenge is boosted by the effects of the revolution of IT on the human consciousness and human activity. It's a doubtless fact that with the World Wide Web there's not only another tool of mass communication or information-gaining has appeared, but also a completely new layer, a new level of reality. If Arnold Gehlen could write, that human speech responded to the improvement of conceptual thinking, and therefore helped us to navigate within the sea of our impressions, when the abstraction taking place in terms discharged our thinking, then today the contours of a similarly important change are unfolding. About the special type of being of terms, after the Greek philosophers' doctrines of ideas, in the medieval philosophy, the kind of moderated realism of Thomas Aquinas outlined a particular vision. According to him, the terms are not only names, but they have some particular reality. This particular type of conceptual reality and its systematic handling gave a great stimulus the modern improvement of natural sciences. If the world of terms carries a particular level of reality, than the virtual reality showed by the World Wide Web, with its new type of discharging function also comes up as a reality in a particular sense. If the previous ethical thinking grabbed the value of the possible human reactions in certain situations according to a logic based on the pillars of term-judgement-conclusion, then in the world of this newer level of informatics release also inheres the possibility of the symbolic moral reflection on the more complicated reality. And the system administrator is the man himself. We are those, who should search for the possibility of the right connection to the human completeness, and ultimately, to God's will.

There is probably no one and final solution of this huge problem. A permanent, dedicated and determined intention is needed from all participants of economy, from every factor of society, namely from all morally conscious human being.

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