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## WHEN ECONOMIC MORALISM CLASHES WITH REALITY

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With the November 26 publication of Pope Francis's [apostolic exhortation \*Evangelii Gaudium\*](#), we have the first teaching document that is truly his own. And it very much shows, both in style and content, compared to the [encyclical \*Lumen Fidei\*](#), which was mostly written by Pope Benedict XVI. *Evangelii Gaudium* is full of the home-spun expressions of faith that have made Francis the most popular public figure on the planet, and the exhortation is certain to succeed in challenging all of us to live in more sincere, compassionate, and self-giving ways. It has also provided some much-needed clarification of the Pope's previous statements on abortion and marriage that had a few wondering, with only slight exaggeration, whether the Pope was actually Catholic.

By now it is obvious that, in his words and deeds, Pope Francis has a remarkable ability to speak to the heart of the common man, someone who may not know much about or regularly practice his faith but wants to be on good terms with God and other people. It is equally obvious that Francis has made the "new evangelization," i.e. bringing back fallen-away or secularized Catholics, central to his pontificate. By making the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus his number one priority, the Holy Father is fulfilling his God-given mandate to feed Christ's sheep. Like nearly everyone else who has been closely watching him in action, I have been moved and inspired to live my faith more intensely, all the while recognizing the inadequacy of my efforts if it weren't for God's grace and untiring mercy.

How can we account for Francis's popularity? Some in the media sense possible changes in Church teaching on all kinds of (mostly sexual) matters, but I think there's more to it. Pope Benedict's intellectual approach to explaining Christianity has been followed by Pope Francis's commonsensical one. Each undoubtedly has its strengths and weaknesses and will carry greater appeal to different sorts of people. It may not be certain how the Holy Spirit selects and inspires any particular pontiff, but one can hazard a guess and say Francis's style and tone may be exactly what the Church needs at this moment in history.

There are instances, however, when a more considered understanding of technical matters would be preferable; the exhortation's tirades against the market economy are one. My Acton colleague Sam Gregg does an excellent job of [refuting some of the facile and plainly false accusations](#) made against global capitalism in the document, but these words of the Pope in particular grabbed my attention:

[S]ome people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase; and in the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us. (n. 54)



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What do we at Acton make of this? No one I know at Acton thinks economic growth inevitably brings greater justice and inclusiveness. Nor do any of us trust in the goodness of those with economic power or “sacralize” the workings of the market. We do recognize that commerce brings all kinds of people together in “networks of knowledge and intercommunication” (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 33) and that such networks promote rather than hinder interdependence and solidarity. As Francis himself notes, marginalization is the biggest threat to the poor and the global economy is one way of bringing into the fold. This is central theme in the [PovertyCure DVD series](#) which Acton [recently presented to Pope Francis](#).

It is additionally difficult to attribute a “globalization of indifference” to the market economy. How many people in America give money and time to the poor and those suffering from natural disasters such as the typhoon in the Philippines? Doesn’t it take great amounts of wealth to be so generous and doesn’t this argue against the Pope’s description? If anything, globalization has made us more aware of and therefore more compassionate towards the sufferings of others, at least compared to previous times when our scope of compassion would have extended only to those closest to and most like us, as [Clifford Orwin](#) has written. How many NGOs vie for our attention to help the less fortunate (which is not limited to humans)? Isn’t this also due to globalization? Has this expansion of compassion been a net gain or loss for humanity?

The Pope is right to call leaders to task for their responsibility to the poor, but it is unclear why his critiques of welfare (n. 202 and n. 204) do not apply to politicians rather than bankers. It’s also hard to square Francis’s extreme statements on the socioeconomic system (“unjust at its root” n. 59) and money (n. 55) while also praising the “noble vocation” of business (n. 203). What indeed is so noble about business if it takes place in such an unjust setting? How much equality is required in a free society and how much prosperity is “deadening”? No one really knows.

Several years of working in the Holy See and living in Rome have made it evident to me that many Western European and Latin American bishops, priests and religious have a much more negative view of the market economy than their counterparts in the rest of the world. Western Europe and Latin America are also home to increasing government regulation and increasing secularization, confirming Tocqueville’s fears about the incompatibility of the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty outside of America. I hope, for the rest of the world’s sake and especially the poor, that this need not be the case. If inclusion is the goal, we need more reflection on how wealth creation takes place and what it takes to allow the poor to succeed, while allowing for the sane redistribution of wealth the Pope calls for to those who cannot help themselves.

It should be noted that Francis’s predecessors also criticized the idolatry of material progress brought about by the expansion of freedom, i.e. when it is accompanied by a lack of ethics and concern for human dignity. In this regard, Francis said nothing new, but he has said it more broadly and stridently. Religious and moral leaders are supposed to call us to account for neglecting the spiritual side of life and those whom progress had left behind. Yet these leaders also need to appreciate the new opportunities progress gives us to live a more humane, dignified life, especially for those of us who would have been traditionally excluded from it in other times and places. It’s no small achievement to lift billions of people out of absolute poverty in the last three decades, as has happened in China and India.

[As I’ve written before](#), much of what the Pope says is akin to an economic examination of conscience. This current exhortation goes beyond that, however, and would have been more in tune with economic reality if he heeded then-Cardinal Ratzinger’s warnings about moralism in his [1985 talk on “Church and Economy in Dialogue.”](#) Here is the concluding paragraph:



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These realms [private Christian belief and public business conduct] have come to appear mutually exclusive in the modern context of the separation of the subjective and objective realms. But the whole point is precisely that they should meet, preserving their own integrity and yet inseparable. It is becoming an increasingly obvious fact of economic history that the development of economic systems which concentrate on the common good depends on a determinate ethical system, which in turn can be born and sustained only by strong religious convictions. Conversely, it has also become obvious that the decline of such discipline can actually cause the laws of the market to collapse. An economic policy that is ordered not only to the good of the group — indeed, not only to the common good of a determinate state — but to the common good of the family of man demands a maximum of ethical discipline and thus a maximum of religious strength. The political formation of a will that employs the inherent economic laws towards this goal appears, in spite of all humanitarian protestations, almost impossible today. It can only be realized if new ethical powers are completely set free. A morality that believes itself able to dispense with the technical knowledge of economic laws is not morality but moralism. As such it is the antithesis of morality. A scientific approach that believes itself capable of managing without an ethos misunderstands the reality of man. Therefore it is not scientific. Today we need a maximum of specialized economic understanding, but also a maximum of ethos so that specialized economic understanding may enter the service of the right goals. Only in this way will its knowledge be both politically practicable and socially tolerable.

Taking the technical knowledge of economics seriously means giving economic freedom and the desire to better one's condition their due and not reducing them to the "absolute autonomy" of markets and finance. (A good place to start would be [these lectures on human capital](#) by Nobel Laureate Gary Becker, referred to me by Luanne Zurlo, a speaker we recently hosted and who has extensive experience on Wall Street and in Latin America.) Moral leaders need to show awareness of the necessities and workings of the human endeavor they are critiquing if they hope to have any influence among those responsible for making decisions, which in a market economy means billions of people making billions of choices each and every day.

*Evangelii Gaudium* is making headlines for laying out Francis's roadmap for his pontificate, but I'm not so sure that's what it is. Firstly, as a post-synodal exhortation, it covers the many, often disparate topics the Synod participants discussed. Secondly, the exhortation seems to be mainly a collection and expansion on themes that Francis has already discussed on different occasions and has been published before the conclusion of the various consultations on the reforms of the Church and the Holy See. Finally, and perhaps most notable, Pope Francis has already shown an ability to re-consider and re-formulate previous statements that may have created confusion and even consternation among the faithful. Far from dismissing their concerns, he has taken a paternal, generous approach to all his spiritual children. For those of us involved in the teaching of economics to the religious-minded, we hope that these types of humble corrections have not ended with *Evangelii Gaudium*.