

October 2017

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### Recommended Citation

CHOI, YOUNG BACK (2017) "On Evangelii Gaudium: An Asia/Pacific Perspective," *Journal of Vincentian Social Action*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa/vol2/iss2/8>

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# On *Evangelii Gaudium*: An Asia/Pacific Perspective

Young Back Choi

This paper is in response to an invitation by father Patrick Griffin CM, Executive Director of the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John's University, to comment on Francis' 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* from different geographical perspectives. In this paper, I offer an Asian/Pacific perspective. As an economist, I cannot avoid offering an economist's perspective, as well.

*Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, is largely divided into two parts: one is on evangelism and the other concerns the social and economic conditions of the time in which evangelism is to take place. When Pope Francis says that "I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy (of the Gospel)", he speaks with certain authority and all Christians should gladly respond to his call to spread the good news (Francis, 2013, para. 1). However, when Pope Francis offers his views/diagnoses on the social and economic conditions of the time (and even on climate changes), he does so with less authority and as a lay-person, not as an expert.

What Pope Francis offers as perspectives on challenges to evangelism today include the following: excessive consumerism, increasing inequality, financial speculations, exclusion of the poor, lack of respect for the poor, people living with fear and desperation, increasing violence, the spreading of diseases, environmental degradation, global warming, human trafficking, corruption, and the injustice of free market economy. He calls for government programs to redress inequality, which he views as the root of all social ills.

Many of Pope Francis' views on the socio-economic conditions of the time reflect the popular views of the liberal-progressives in the American context. Popularity, however, is no certification for the truth. Pope Francis himself cautions against dogmatically claiming for "attractive but not sufficiently verified" views (Francis, 2013, para. 243). Moreover, Pope Francis is well aware that his views on socio-economic conditions of the time differ considerably from those of his predecessors (Francis, 2013, para. 51). Given this, I believe that

Pope Francis would be open to critical examination of his views on matters other than faith.

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to critically examine some of the observations/claims of Pope Francis concerning socio-economic conditions of the time that may not be fully consistent with reason and science. They

include: the structural causes of poverty, the injustice of inequality, competition as the process of the powerful feed upon the powerless, the injustice of the socio-economic system, and the state as the guarantor of common good in society.

## Poverty: Absolute vs. Relative

Pope Francis declares that "Inequality is the root of social ills" (Francis, 2013, para. 202). It is a rather debatable statement in light of the following two questions: Can there be a society without inequality? If perfect equality is somehow achieved, would there be no social ills? To make sense of Pope Francis' statement, we should recognize the common conflation of the word, poverty.

The common use of the word poverty conflates two distinct senses of the word—absolute and

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relative. Absolute poverty refers to a living condition of bare subsistence. Relative poverty, a phenomenon of inequality, is consistent with a standard of living far above minimal subsistence. For example, a poor household in the U.S. may be a whole lot better off, in material terms, than even a middle class household in Bangladesh (Choi, 2002). Even so, people often equate increasing inequality with increasing absolute poverty, as can be seen from Pope Francis' observation, "the majority of our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences" (Francis, 2013, para. 51).

Absolute poverty has been the general condition of the vast majority of the human race everywhere throughout history, until an explosion of entrepreneurial innovations lifted the boat and improved the standard of living for the majority of people. The process of great enrichment started in Western Europe in the 18th Century and gradually spread to the rest of Europe and North America. Subsequently, the process of modern economic development, the process of massive escape from absolute poverty, has continued to spread to other areas of the world, albeit at an uneven pace.

The most recent example is the Chinese economic development which has lifted billions of people out of abject poverty. For example, between 1978 and 2015, the average income in China, adjusted for inflation, has increased by 21 fold. This great enrichment began when China reformed to encourage economic activities based on profit motives. This process of great enrichment has brought about greater inequality, not because some people are made poorer, but because others have become richer. Before Deng's reforms of 1978, the vast majority of Chinese barely eked out a living and many did not even manage, as in the case of the great famine of 1959-1961, where 35-45 million people died of starvation (Dikötter, 2011). Under the communist rule the majority was equally poor (the only exceptions were high ranking communist party members). Increasing inequality brought about in the process of economic development means some people are made relatively poorer, but for the majority of the

poor, in the relative sense, the specter of starvation is a thing of the past.

The processes of economic development that have lifted billions of people out of abject poverty, however, is denounced by Pope Francis as unfounded trickle-down theories (Francis, 2013, para. 54). Though popular, the characterization of the process of modern economic development as a trickle-down process is not only inconsistent with facts, but reflects a profound misunderstanding of the process of great enrichment.

### **The Process of Economic Development in a Free Enterprise Economy**

There is a fundamental difference between the pre-modern and modern economic systems. Before the modern era, wealth derived mostly from the ownership of land (which in turn depended on successful conquests or inheritances). If the ownership of land in a country is concentrated in few families, the rest of the population become peons and are kept as peons through various structural restrictions. In such a society, the saying "one man's gain is another man's loss" is not far from the truth and economic development was extremely slow. The vast majority of population in the pre-modern era remained poor.

In the modern era, at least in countries where people are free, wealth is primarily generated through entrepreneurial innovations. Free people with drive and imagination would not be content to remain a peon in a hacienda. Instead, they can chart their own courses of life through entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial success depends not on the will of the powerful, but on how well entrepreneurs serve consumers, by offering new and better products at a lower price. Entrepreneurial successes render society richer. The free enterprise economy where entrepreneurs can freely compete for buyers is popularly, but misleadingly, called capitalism, as the term was coined by Karl Marx (McCloskey, 2016).

Competition is intense in a free enterprise economy, mainly because anyone can compete and no one is exempted from competition. The overall

effect of free market competition is beneficent in the sense that the standard of living in a free society has steadily, and rather rapidly, increased. All the advances in the modern civilization have been the direct results of entrepreneurial innovations.

Competition can be very stressful for those who face unceasing competition, however. Many come to feel that there is too much competition, a sentiment reflected in Pope Francis' observation: "...under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest... the powerful feed upon the powerless" (Francis, 2013, para. 53). Also, competition that generates inequality and relative poverty is often viewed as structurally unjust. Pope Francis seems to share this view when he says: "...the socioeconomic system is unjust at its root" (Francis, 2013, para. 59). These popular but mistaken views are based on the suspicion that those who come to have more than others did so unjustly. But in the absence of concrete evidence that unjust acts are committed, the suspicion is groundless (if there is concrete evidence of unjust acts, perpetrators should be punished, whether they are rich or poor). Most successful entrepreneurs become wealthy not by ripping off others or by cheating but by producing goods and services that benefit others. Inequality is unjust only from the point of view of egalitarianism (Choi, 2002).

Nevertheless, the popular misunderstanding of the nature of a free enterprise system and a distaste for relentless competition in it often generate calls for a more centrally managed system. Pope Francis calls for state involvement in redressing the root causes of the social ills: "Growth in justice ... requires ... mechanisms ... specifically geared to a better distribution of income... and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare ..." (Francis, 2013, para. 204). In case there is any ambiguity, he states that, "It is the responsibility of the State to safeguard and promote the common good of society" (Francis, 2013, para. 240).

## The Plight of the Poor

Pope Francis seems to be very concerned with the plight of the poor when he quotes the bishops of Brazil at length: "... the difficulties and sorrows of the Brazilian people, especially of those living in the barrios and the countryside – landless, homeless, lacking food and health care... Seeing their poverty... we are scandalized because we know... that hunger is the result of a poor distribution of goods and income..." (Francis, 2013, para. 191). Pope Francis deplores the fact that the poor are ignored and treated as expendable, or as "leftovers" (Francis, 2013, para. 53) and cautions that "Inequality eventually engenders a violence..." (Francis, 2013, para. 60).

**"All the advances in the modern civilization have been the direct results of entrepreneurial innovations."**

Given the perception of the plight of the poor, a natural inclination of the people of good will is trying to help the poor. Many often go beyond helping them personally, however, and advocate that the state should get involved in correcting what they perceive to be a systematic wrong. It is in this spirit Pope Francis approvingly quotes Pope Benedict XVI: "the Church cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice" (Francis, 2013, para. 183). Pope Francis argues that "It is the responsibility of the State to safeguard and promote the common good of society" (Francis, 2013, para. 240) and "... the Church... supports those programmes which best respond to the dignity of each person and the common good" (Francis, 2013, para. 241).

Well-intentioned programs, however, are not likely to bring about the desired effects of a more harmonious and inclusive society. Attempts at a substantial transfer of wealth is likely to be resisted through tax evasion. Pope Francis' own exhortation, "...the rich must help, respect and promote the poor" (Francis, 2013, para. 58) will not persuade enough rich people to voluntarily share their wealth with the poor. Nor would Saint John Chrysostom's motto, quoted by Pope Francis, "Not to share one's wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood" (Francis, 2013, para. 57), or the enticing Marxist

slogan: “From each according to his ability and to each according to his needs.” Eventually, the state (whether it is a massive welfare state or a socialist state) can only accomplish the massive and continuous transfers needed for equalization by force. Not only is the use of force dehumanizing, but massive and continuous transfers and attendant restrictions and policing would destroy entrepreneurial incentives, the main drive for economic development. As a consequence, the process of enrichment will be retarded, and the average standard of living may actually decline. Samuel Johnson famously said: “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

But in what sense are the poor excluded in a free enterprise economy? The poor in a free market economy, unlike in a pre-modern economy, are not structurally excluded from society as long as they can compete freely as soon as they are inspired by ideas of how to better their conditions, or how to make profit.

The poor can be structurally excluded in societies with severe limits on freedom, as in a pre-modern economy with all sorts of social and legal restrictions. Unfortunately, many of today’s poor countries have not, in terms of freedom, advanced far beyond the pre-modern economy and remained poor. Some countries adopted legal restrictions that hampered the freedom of certain targeted people (as in the South African Apartheid or Jim Crow laws of the southern states). Injustice of these systems, of limiting freedom of people, must be overturned by political means.

When artificial restrictions on freedom are lifted, however, there is no longer any formal exclusion. Some formerly poor countries, especially many in Asia, managed to permit greater freedom (at least in the economic sphere) and proceeded to embark on a path to economic development and escaped mass poverty.

Let me use the case of two Koreas, North and South, to illustrate how it is relative freedom of people, not good intentions or fancy social

programs, which matter when it comes to the question of lifting the masses out of absolute poverty. I grew up in South Korea in the 1950s when it was one of the poorest countries in the world, often on the verge of famine. The Philippines was then viewed as a much richer country. In the mid-1950s school children marveled at the opulence of Argentina they read about in textbooks (Argentina, Pope Francis’ home country, then was one of the richest countries in the world).

Even in 1962, after several years of recovery from the destructive Korean War, the average income of South Korea was less than a half that of Brazil and less than a tenth that of Argentina, (even though by this time the Argentinian

economy had lost much of its luster under Peronism and the subsequent political turmoil). Since then, the South Korean economy has grown tremendously through the encouragement of entrepreneurship in a relatively open international trade regime. By 2015, the average income of South Korea was more than nine times that of the Philippines,

three times that of Brazil, and more than twice that of Argentina. Abject poverty has become an unfamiliar word in South Korea (though plenty of people complain about inequality and demand that something be done along the lines advocated by Pope Francis).

In contrast, the socialist North Korea, that seemed to have recovered quickly from the devastation of war through the soviet-style mass mobilizations, devolved into a country ruled by a self-anointed god-king over the population that practically became slaves. Chronic decline in productivity rendered the majority of North Korea poorer and poorer with each passing year, to the point where upward of 2 million people starved to death in the famine of 1992-1995. Even more than two decades later, wide-spread mal-nutrition and stunted growths are visible in the general population. Started with socialist ideals, presumably with good

**"Unfortunately, many of today's poor countries have not, in terms of freedom, advanced far beyond the pre-modern economy and remained poor."**

intentions, North Korea has become a country where the majority of the population ended up at the unprecedented level of poverty (Choi, 2015).

## Financial Speculations and Cronyism

Pope Francis observes that financial speculation is one of the most important causes of the world's problem (Francis, 2013, para. 202). I would like to point out the real issue is not speculation, financial or otherwise, but how people respond to the results of speculation.

We all speculate, insofar as uncertainty is the fundamental human condition. To the extent that people can only act based on what they believe, people cannot help but speculate, for example, on career choices, location of homes, choice of spouses and friends, whether to take out a loan, whether to make an investment, etc. The results of our decisions, of our speculations, are our own making, whether or not we like them. Human weakness is the tendency to take credit for successful outcomes but blame others for undesirable outcomes. Taking responsibility for one's own action is necessary for a stable and prosperous society.

The problem with speculations leading up the financial crisis of 2007-8 was not so much that speculations turned out to be wrong, on a large scale, but that many of the politically connected speculators got bailed out, enabling them to avoid the consequences of their speculations. This great theft was accomplished by politicians suggesting two alternatives—bailouts or a doom from the total collapse of the financial system. What is at issue is not speculation, but cronyism. Cronyism is a symptom of illicit marriage between politics and business; it is inconsistent with the free enterprise system which admits no privileges. Remedy is not to be sought by banning speculation (which is impossible), but to force people (and businesses) to bear the consequences of their actions, good or ill.

## Dignity of the Poor

The chief aim of *Evangelii Gaudium* is to restore, as an integral part of sharing the joy of the Gospel, the dignity of the poor,

which is presumably lost because of inequality in the modern society (Francis, 2013, para. 52). But will the poor become more dignified if they are given more material goods through massive redistribution? Is dignity something that government can confer on the poor through social policies of equalization? Though Pope Francis seems to so argue affirmatively and emphatically in many places, he also states that “No one can strip us of the dignity bestowed upon us by this boundless and unfailing love [of Christ]” (Francis, 2013, para. 3).

Pope Francis is entirely right to appeal to Christians to spread the joy of the gospel, to be compassionate toward the poor and to respect their dignity as human beings. However, this is quite separate and inconsistent with advocating certain political programs based on a questionable understanding of how the economy works (or how the earth changes over time). These are scientific subjects on which the Church cannot claim expertise. Pope Francis admits that “... neither the Pope nor the Church have a monopoly on the interpretation of social realities or the proposal of solutions to contemporary problems” (Francis, 2013, para. 184). When in doubt (about social reality), I believe that it is more prudent to commit errors of omission than to commit errors of commission.

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