

Catholic Social Teaching and the Consequences of Income Inequality:

A Message for American Catholics?

by

William L. Pickett

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of

St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry

In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts (Theological Studies)

Rochester, New York

July 2010

APPROVAL SHEET

Date

Nancy Hawkins, Ph.D.

Date

David Stosur, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT OF
CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF INCOME
INEQUALITY:
A MESSAGE FOR AMERICAN CATHOLICS?

By William L. Pickett

Catholic social teaching is the application of Christian belief to the social, economic, and political contexts in which Christians live out their call to discipleship. As such a “contextual” theology, this social teaching can only be pertinent to contemporary Americans if it takes into account the specific context of 21st Century America. This thesis proceeds by creating a conversation between the most recent comprehensive statement by the American bishops (*Economic Justice for All* 1986) and Pope Benedict XVI’s social justice teaching in *Charity in Truth* issued in 2009. Benedict’s thoughts update and in some instances advance positions taken by the American bishops.

In order to consider the economic and social context of Catholic social teaching, two significant developments are considered and analyzed: the rise of an “Economy of Communion” as a result of critiques of mainline economic science and developments in Christian religious experience, and recent applied social science research on the negative impact of affluence and especially income inequality. All these strains of thoughts—Catholic social teaching, critiques of economic science, and the debilitating impact of affluence and inequality—arrive at essentially the same

conclusion: Modifications and even reforms of the current economic system operative in the United States are insufficient to deal with the negative consequences of the affluence of American culture. What is needed is a change at the level of values and, even more fundamentally, at the level of understanding the nature of human existence.

The Christian theological tradition provides helpful insights which can be useful to a more effective articulation of Catholic social teaching in this new context. Specifically it is important to reclaim the value of egalitarianism that was part of the teaching of Jesus and of the early Church. The final chapter presents some recommendations regarding Catholic social teaching, for the ways in which the Catholic Church in the United States could change its operation in light of the results of this research, and for individual Catholics in the United States.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER		
1.	CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING IN THE AMERICAN CONTEXT	1
2.	THE ECONOMY OF COMMUNION	35
3.	CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ECONOMY: DYSFUNCTIONS AND INEQUALITY	57
4.	SOME RELEVANT ASPECTS OF THE CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS	83
5.	IMPLICATIONS FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING, CHURCH LIFE, AND INDIVIDUAL CATHOLICS	115
	SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	142