

Has the Pope Gone Socialist?



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Pope Francis denounced capitalism in his *Evangelii Gaudium* letter to Catholics worldwide, and his statement was a shocker to some laissez-faire economists.

by Thomas R. Eddlem

Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel") explicitly condemned free market economics with an epithet against "trickle-down" economics that caught global headlines, even though the Pope's "apostolic exhortation" wasn't really about economics. The following quote cheered leftists across the world:

Some 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.

"Trickle-down economics" has never been a term used by supporters of a free market to describe their views, but rather it has always been an insult deployed by opponents of free markets. The Pope's document, primarily about expanding the reach

of the Catholic Church, drew choruses of amens from the *Washington Post's* leftist Eugene Robinson and huzzahs from the far-left ThinkProgress website, while *The Atlantic* magazine cheered the "Vatican's journey from anti-communism to anti-capitalism."

The November 24 "apostolic exhortation" is a non-binding teaching document issued by the Pope, addressed to Catholics, not an "infallible" *ex cathedra* pronouncement. In practice, however, many Catholics will be persuaded by the mainstream media that they must follow this non-binding teaching.

Francis does not go so far as to call for abolition of private property, as private property is a principle enshrined in two of the Bible's 10 commandments ("thou shall not steal" and "thou shall not covet") and in the Catholic Church's non-binding social teaching documents such as the 1891 *Rerum Novarum* (which Francis quotes). In fact, Francis confirmed the idea of rights to private property, writing that "the private ownership of goods is justified by the need to protect and increase them, so that they can better serve the common good."

But was Pope Francis correct in his condemnation of a free market when he wrote

that "we can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market"? Those countries that have followed a relatively free market have historically been rewarded with wealth and all of its attendant progress — better healthcare, higher living standards, etc. — in every country where it has been tried, and to the extent that it has been tried. All one has to do is look at the contrast between the open-market West Germany versus the socialist market East Germany, the open-market South Korea versus the socialist North Korea, Hong Kong versus mainland China (before the most recent market-based reforms), and on and on. If the Pope was claiming that free markets don't bring more consumer goods to a larger number of people, there's plenty of historical evidence to prove him wrong.

An economic commentary was not the main point of *Evangelii Gaudium*, nor even the crux of the small part devoted to human need. Pope Francis primarily condemned materialism — the "new idolatry of money" — in the economic portion of his letter, a condemnation which all but the most extreme secular libertarians would second. Indeed, a purely selfish capitalism — as envisioned by radical libertar-