



Pope Francis and the Caring Society

Edited by Robert M. Whaples, Ph.D.

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Reviewed by
Peggy Eastman

Pope Francis has made it very clear that a key theme of his papacy is care for the poor. The pope has openly criticized the consumerism, selfishness, indifference to the underprivileged and environmental harm that mark an increasingly secular western society.

This provocative book is a response to the challenge the pope has issued to all caring people to eliminate poverty. Grinding poverty, in the pope's view, can lead to hunger, abuse, lack of education, disease, religious persecution, illiteracy and hopelessness. Poverty stunts human well-being and achievement and thus prevents people from fulfilling their God-given potential. In a call for those who have more to give to those who have less, the pope has stated, "There is a lot of poverty in the world, and that's a scandal when we have so many riches and resources to give to everyone."

Pope Francis and the Caring Society contains thoughtful essays by different authors that span the fields of theology, economics, history and ethics to show how a free-market economy can help to accomplish the pope's goal of defeating poverty and enhancing human endeavor. The book grew out of a symposium hosted by the Independent Institute, a non-profit, non-partisan public policy research and educational organization. The book has been widely praised, and endorsed by people in many walks of life, including theologians.

"We are all called to serve and care humbly for others, especially those most in need, but how we do so is crucial in guiding our moral responsibility," said Bishop Michael C. Barber, S.J., of the Diocese of Oakland, California. "Firmly rooted in our Christian tradition, the incisive and timely book Pope Francis and the Caring Society carefully examines this vital issue by applying natural-law ethical and economic principles." Father Robert A. Sirico, pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and president and co-founder of the Acton Institute, said the book provides a "non-polemical, serious and accessible set of commentaries with which anyone, regardless of religious or political orientation, will want to be acquainted."

The book makes it clear that capitalism per se is not the big, bad enemy when it comes to eliminating poverty. In his foreword to the book, the late Catholic philosopher Michael Novak – who received the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in

1994 – asks whether capitalism is "the victorious social system," and might be "the goal of countries now making efforts to rebuild their economy and society?" In his introduction, editor Whaples, a research fellow at the Independent Institute, enumerates the strengths and weaknesses of free-market capitalism.

On the plus side, he notes that capitalism accelerates technological advances and generates rising standards of living, life expectancy, education and leisure. As such, it can eliminate absolute poverty. "Capitalism gives people the incentive to be more virtuous and to serve each other," Whaples writes. "There is a payoff to acting kind, caring, decent, and prudent – and practicing these virtues in the market can actually help turn us into better persons." He adds, "Capitalism unleashes creativity – it is the essence of creativity." But on the down side, notes Whaples, capitalism at its worst "can generate high levels of economic inequality" and "can lure people into focusing on crass material things and 'frenetic activity' rather than on more important things, especially spiritual matters and personal relationships."

I was especially interested in the chapter titled "Pope Francis, Capitalism, and Private Charitable Giving," by Lawrence J. McQuillan, PhD, and Hayeon Carol Park. McQuillan is a senior fellow and director of the Center on Entrepreneurial Innovation at the Independent Institute, and Park is a research associate at the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation. "Numerous studies confirm the positive relationship between economic freedom and private charitable giving," they write. They also cite the biblical example of the Good Samaritan who spent his own money to help a man he did not know who was desperately in need. Think about business entrepreneurs and philanthropists Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett and the millions they give away to charity every year.

This book made me think about charitable giving in biblical terms. No one forces us to give to charity. We give because we care about helping to build up God's kingdom on earth, and because we want to alleviate suffering. Inequality is not God's plan, for He cherishes each one of us. Ultimately this is a book of hope, and a timely one. Its wide-ranging, intelligent essays show that religion and economics need not be at odds, and that creative, caring, entrepreneurial individuals who give from generous hearts can help to lift people out of the bonds of poverty that enslave and marginalize them.

