

People read morning stock prices the way they once read the gospel

Third Sunday of Advent
Luke 3:10-18
"Baptize an Economic System?"

Not according to Pope John Paul II.

Not even if that economic system has vanquished communism.

Six months ago, John Paul issued a social encyclical titled *Centesimus Annus* (The 100th Year) on the anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (The New Things) issued by Pope Leo XIII.

I wrote about this encyclical in a column in July, but it bears reconsideration, chiefly because of this week's gospel.

John the Baptist is approached by different people representing different functions in his culture: the taxpayer, the tax collector and the soldier.

They want to be baptized, and ask how they should prepare.

John suggests an ethical change as good preparation.

He advises:

1. If you have two coats, give one to the person who has none.

2. Don't take off more tax than is permitted.

3. Don't intimidate or extort in order to get more pay.

John Paul gives similar advice.

Like the Baptist, the Pope is concerned in *Centesimus Annus* with how our world's cultures and systems measure up ethically.

Whereas he might not baptize any particular culture, the Pope does distinguish a better from a lesser culture. He writes, "Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence. At the heart of every



Religion and Reality
by
Jim Ryan

culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. When this question (of God and of man's existence) is eliminated, the culture and the moral life of nations are corrupted."

Systems are less complete than cultures. The economic system for example, determines how we organize production and consumption. Unfortunately, in our culture, the economic system has overtaken every other consideration. Men and women read the morning stock prices the way people of another time and place read the gospel.

John Paul blames consumerism for blighting the human spirit in our culture. He fears that with the failure of the communist system, that our system, flawed as it is, will become universal.

He writes that the extent to which we are both decadent and alienated. We are decadent because we "... perpetuate obsolete ways of living and reject any exchange or debate with regard to the truth about man." We are alienated because we "...

do not recognize in (ourselves) and in others the value and grandeur of the human person."

It is on this latter point that the Pope really shines. He writes, "It is through the free gift of self that man truly finds himself. This gift is made possible by the human person's essential 'capacity for transcendence.' Man cannot give himself to a purely human plan for reality, to an abstract ideal or to a false utopia. As a person, he can give himself to another person or to other persons, and ultimately to God, who is the author of his being and who alone can fully accept his gift." (Note: Don't excuse the sexist language.)

He notes, "... the loss of the authentic meaning of life is a reality in Western societies. This happens in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratification rather than being helped to experience their personhood in an authentic and concrete way." That's pretty clear.

As far as business is concerned, (Has Robert Scully read this document?) "... the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavoring to satisfy their basic needs and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Profit is a regulator of the life of a business, but it is not the only one; other human and moral factors must also be considered."

God will only offer forgiveness to those who forgive others

By TIM LUIMES
Christian Reformed Church

There once was a king whom everyone knew who was really quite strict (and tight) when it came to money. One day, the king called in one of his loans which he had made to one of the people in the kingdom. The loan was for \$70,000. The man came to the king and pleaded with the king, "Please, give me some more time to pay off the loan. I know I can do it, I just need more time." (The truth of the matter was that he would never be able to pay it back, and the king knew it.) Then the king did a most amazing thing. He said, "The debt is cancelled. You may go."

The man didn't know what to say, so he left. On the way home, he came across a friend of his who owed him \$100. The man demanded the money back from his friend. "Another three weeks; I'll have it for you in three weeks," promised the friend. "That's what you said three weeks ago!" the man said angrily. "Get yourself a lawyer, buddy. See you in small claims court!"

Word got back to the king and he was furious. The king had the man thrown into prison and reinstated the debt of \$70,000.

That little story may be quite familiar to some people. You may have read a version of it in the Bible (Matthew 18:21-35). So what is the point? God has given us a way to be forgiven; all we have to do is believe that Jesus died for our sins and be willing to turn away from our sins and we will be forgiven. God is the king in the story. He's forgiven us an enormous debt. Can we forgive others their debt?

Have you ever been hurt by somebody? So hurt that you felt that there was no way that you could forgive them? Maybe it wasn't just one person. Maybe you've been hurt by a whole group of people. People hurt us more often than we are willing to admit sometimes. The world is



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full of hurting people. Georgetown is full of hurting people - people who have been hurt by words and actions.

It is time to forgive. "Get serious! After what they've done... there is no way that I am going to forgive them." If we are not willing to forgive, then God will not forgive us.

Have you forgiven those people who have hurt you? Have you forgiven them from your heart? Really forgiven them? God has given us new life. It is our responsibility to live that forgiveness.

But wouldn't it be a lot easier to forgive those people if they would come up to you and apologize first? Of course it would be. But how can you tell someone, "Excuse me, would you please apologize so that I can forgive you?"

There was a little sign in the Zellers store yesterday which said "I am never wrong. Once I thought I was, but I was mistaken." There is an element to that small statement which we tend to laugh at, but when we are involved in a conflict, we are often all too ready to blame the other person.

"I'm right. I never hurt anybody with my words. I never hurt anybody with my actions. I'm always doing the right thing." Another way of saying "I'm always right" is "I am never wrong".

If we can begin to accept the fact that we ought to forgive other people for the things that have hurt us and if we can begin to understand that we may also have done some hurting of others, there is a need for us also to ask for the forgiveness of others. We must ask others for their

forgiveness.

There are basically two things that will keep us from asking someone else for forgiveness. The first thing is pride. "It is beneath me to ask someone else for forgiveness." Isn't that really a failure to recognize your sins against others?

Have you humiliated anyone? Have you ignored certain people? Have you hurt anyone? Stop reading for a moment and consider those questions. I mean it, stop reading. It is time to ask that person for forgiveness.

I said there are two things that can keep us from asking someone else for forgiveness. The first was pride: not being willing to admit that you might be wrong. The second is shame: being so ashamed of the mistake that you can't bring yourself to ask for forgiveness.

Quite recently, I became convinced of a sin that I had done against a fellow Christian. I felt terrible about the sin, but I didn't think I could fact the person. So I wrote a letter to this person telling about how I felt and that I was truly sorry. A little while later, I received a telephone call from this person to whom I had apologized and asked for forgiveness. In the short conversation that followed, this person said that the letter was appreciated and that all was forgiven.

There is a speech in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* that is quite well known. "The quality of mercy is not strained. It falleth as a gentle dew from heaven upon the place beneath. 'Tis twice blest. It blesseth him that gives and him that doth receive."

I don't know if the person to whom I wrote the letter was blessed because of the forgiveness which was given me, but I do know that I certainly was blessed. A weight was lifted off my shoulders. I became at peace with myself and with God.

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