

A Church view of socialism

Almost a century ago, many influential Americans became enamored with the socialistic programs being developed in Europe and wanted to apply them in this country. In the 1920s, Benito Mussolini was favorably depicted on the cover of Time magazine, and the efficiency he achieved through government control of Italy's economy was extolled on the pages of Forbes. About the same time, delegations of union leaders, academics and journalists traveled to Russia to tour collective farms, government-run factories and massive infrastructure projects being promoted by Joseph Stalin. A decade later, the totalitarian ambitions of these socialistic leaders would become evident in fascism and communism.

Today, Americans are once again expressing favor toward socialism. A May 2019 Gallup poll found that 43% of the people think socialism would be good for the country, although 51% think it would be bad. This is significantly more positive than a 1942 Roper poll in which 25% of Americans thought socialism would be "good" for the country and 40% thought it would be "bad"; the remainder at the time had no opinion.

In contrast to this favorable shift, every pope, from Pius IX in 1849 through Benedict XVI, has opposed socialism. Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* ("On Reconstruction of the Social Order"), went so far as to say that socialism is "irreconcilable with true Christianity," and thus "no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist."

What is it that merits such consistent and emphatic papal rebuke?

A look at socialism

Socialism refers to state ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange of wealth exercised

through the government and its officials. It aims for economic justice and the general welfare of all by having people contribute according to their ability and to receive benefits according to their needs. This worthy though idealistic goal has been tried many times and failed repeatedly.

Under socialism, government officials develop rules and regulations that dictate how others can or cannot operate, and thus impose their judgement for that of the individual. As a result, it discourages personal initiative, while introducing state control.

Catholic doctrine

From the perspective of Catholic doctrine, socialism has several significant flaws. Two of the most fundamental are its view of the person and its treatment of private property.

Socialism treats people as groups, not individuals. Pope John Paul II, in *Centesimus Annus* ("The Hundredth Year"), described this error as "anthropological in nature. Socialism considers the individual person simply as an element, a molecule within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism."

The collective nature of socialism violates an individual's freedom to decide matters that lie within that person's competence and reason. It usurps a person's natural, God-given rights, which are inalienable, and replaces them with class privileges, whether based on economics, race, color, gender or, more recently, sexual identity. In radical attempts to promote equality among classes, it fosters an unequal treatment of groups, bestowing benefits on some but not others.

Socialism also denies a man's natural-law right to private property and calls for redistributing wealth by taking from

the rich to give to the poor. It matters little whether the state directly confiscates a person's property or imposes overly high taxation; either way, an injustice is committed by denying a person his or her due. One congressional representative recently suggested a marginal income tax rate of 70% on the top earners, while another said rates could be "as high as 90%." As Pope Leo XIII wrote in *Rerum Novarum*, "The State would therefore be unjust and cruel if under the name of taxation it were to deprive the private owner of more than is fair."

As a philosophical construct, socialism substitutes government-provided security for personal freedom, state paternalism for self-initiative, government mandates for individual responsibility, and communal directives for personal conscience. In the extreme, socialism tends toward totalitarianism, for when people pursue their own interests in opposition to the state's aims, the power of the government is often used to equalize the inequalities. As Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen wrote, "If the sheep will not of themselves run together in the unity of the sheepfold, then dogs must be sent barking at their heels."

Democratic socialism

Some may argue that today's trend toward socialism in America is not totalitarian but democratic. Democratic socialism, however, is only a form of socialism and shares the same goal – to address social and economic inequalities through the collective ownership of the means of production. Democratic socialists work to transform society from an emphasis on capitalism to that of socialism, using elections and policy reforms achieved within a democratic form of political system. The adjective "democratic" is appended to distinguish it from the Soviet or Marxist-Leninist form of socialism, which calls for a violent overthrow of the existing system.

Socialism in any form, however, whether presented as

“democratic socialism,” or “moderate socialism,” or even “Christian socialism,” conflicts with Catholic teaching. Pope John XXIII stated in *Mater et Magistra* (“On Christianity and Social Progress”) that “no Catholic could subscribe even to moderate socialism.”

American understanding

While Americans have become more favorable toward socialism, they do not appear to know what it is. A September 2018 Gallup poll found that only 17% of Americans understand it as government ownership of the nation’s means of production – its traditional meaning and the one that excited the thought leaders of the 1920s. In contrast, 23% view it as equality in rights and benefits, while another 10% as free social services, such as medical care for all. The remaining half of the populace either have no opinion (23%), or a smattering of concepts such as getting along with people, social media, political liberalism, restrictions on freedom or a modified form of communism.

If Americans have such a wide diversity of ideas of what socialism means, how can so many intelligently say socialism would be good for the country? Without clarity of vision, how can the nation progress?

Church Leaders

Pope Francis speaks often about the Church’s social responsibilities. Although he has not rejected socialism, neither has he promoted it. Rather, in a recent letter addressed to young economists and entrepreneurs around the world, he suggested a new and different type of economic system: “one that brings life not death, one that is inclusive and not exclusive, humane and not dehumanizing, one that cares for the environment and does not despoil it.” How this is to be achieved, he does not say.

Pope Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* ("God Is Love") presented a key consideration in moving toward such lofty goals. "We do not need a State," he wrote, "which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need."

Catholic social doctrine, with its emphasis on human freedom, charity and love of neighbor, provides a way forward between socialism in its many guises and unfettered capitalism. The Church emphasizes the dual aspects of the right to own and the duty to share. The human person should use his God-given talents to the fullest and assist others with the fruits of his accomplishments.

Whether this nation moves toward or away from socialism will be determined by the people we elect to represent us. In the coming months of national campaigning, become informed, pray and then cast your ballot wisely.

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Catechism of the Catholic Church

The Church has rejected the totalitarian and atheistic ideologies associated in modern times with communism or socialism. She has likewise refused to accept, in the practice of capitalism, individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the marketplace over human labor.

Regulating the economy solely by centralized planning perverts the basis of social bonds; regulating it solely by the law of the marketplace fails social justice, for “there are many human needs which cannot be satisfied by the market.” Reasonable regulation of the marketplace and economic initiatives, in keeping with a just hierarchy of values and a view to the common good, is to be commended (No. 2425).