

From the Chapel – June 15: Coming to grips with the past



[“From the Chapel”](#) is a series of short, daily reflections on life and faith in a time of uncertainty. As people across the world cope with the effects of the coronavirus – including the social isolation necessary to combat its spread – these reflections remind us of the hope that lies at the heart of the Gospel.

One of the reasons why my discussions with Catholic libertarians ([which I mentioned yesterday](#)) could never really go anywhere is because we had very different understandings of history. It wasn't that we necessarily disagreed about what had happened; rather, they simultaneously dismissed the importance of all that had gone before and argued that everything that has happened has led us to this point in history. This, they believed, was self-evident: Capitalism is the pinnacle of human achievement, and the rest of man's time on this earth will consist of the progressive expansion of capitalism to all nations. Of course, there will be those who resist, but in the end the superiority of capitalism (as they defined it) will be clear for all to see.

I have no desire to argue against capitalism. As I made clear yesterday, I believe that the Church's social teaching provides a moral compass for our economic actions, and what we colloquially call capitalism – private property, the free market – is an essential part of that teaching.

But it is important to recognize that capitalism – indeed, economics as a whole – like everything else has a history. [John Lukacs](#), the great Catholic historian who passed away a year ago at the age of 95, constantly reminded his readers of this reality. Science, philosophy, theology, mathematics – we

tend to think of these bodies of knowledge as static at any given point in time. After all, two plus two has always equaled four, right? And yet there hasn't always been the concept of zero, and dinosaurs didn't always have feathers (and they didn't always die from a meteor impact), and the earth didn't always revolve around the sun, and there was a reason why charging interest was regarded for centuries by the Church as a grave sin.

There's a lot to be learned from examining not just the history of the natural world or the history of human civilization, but the history of what people thought they knew about the natural world and about human civilization. Lukacs' masterwork "Historical Consciousness" and José Ortega y Gasset's "Historical Reason" are both great places to start to understand how thinking historically allows us to rise above the present moment and examine our own preconceptions and prejudices. And Bill Bryson's "A Short History of Nearly Everything" does an admirable job of providing examples of how science (in particular) has changed over time, including in our very lifetime.

Understanding the history of economics can help us recognize the limits of economic "laws"; understanding the history of medicine and virology can help us understand why medical and scientific experts have struggled to come to grips with COVID-19; understanding the history of race as a concept, and the history of racial relations in the United States and the Western world generally, can help us grasp the enormity of the wound that must first be acknowledged before it can be bandaged, much less healed.

([As I wrote a few days ago](#)), every writer knows that the hardest words to write are always the next ones. So what do we do as we struggle to find the right words? We go back and read what we've already written.

We can't understand the present, much less write a better

future, until we come to grips with the past.

Scott P. Richert is publisher for OSV.