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John Paul Come Lately

A Book Review by Lawrence Harrison

THE CATHOLIC ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

By Michael Novak
New York: The Free Press
200 pp., \$25

Michael Novak is one of my favorite thinkers and writers, although we come at issues from quite different directions: he is a committed Catholic, I an agnostic; he usually votes Republican (I think), I Democratic; he is opposed to abortion, I'm not; he thinks population growth generally a good thing, I don't. But we often agree, and that is particularly true of one of the central themes of his new book, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* — his belief in democratic capitalism as the most effective and equitable system for ordering human societies, while stressing that even democratic capitalist institutions will not work well if they don't operate in a cultural/moral environment that respects and nurtures creativity — the engine of human progress — fair play, trust and community.

But I find the principal theme, flowing from the title, much less compelling. Novak argues that the pronouncements of Pope John Paul II — above all the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* — stake out a new direction for democratic capitalism that is likely to lead the way for human progress into the twenty-first century. We might label the papal initiative as "capitalism with a heart," a "new" society that, in the Pope's words, "is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole society are satisfied." I don't think that's either new or particularly Catholic.

Novak traces Catholicism's acceptance of the "free market" (he notes that even John Paul II is uncomfortable with the word "capitalism") to Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903). In the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Leo XIII asserted the right of private property — "[t]o own goods privately is a right natural to man" — and attacked socialism — "[w]hile justice does not oppose our striving for better things, it does forbid anyone to take from another what is his and, in the name of absurd equality, to seize forcibly the property of others..." Leo XIII goes on to say, "[t]hus it is clear that the main tenet of Socialism, the community of goods, must be utterly rejected; for it

would injure those whom it is intended to benefit, it would be contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and it would introduce confusion and disorder into the commonwealth."

Although *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* focuses principally on John Paul II, Leo XIII's words are a more forthright endorsement of private initiative and have turned out to be prophetic: "If incentives to ingenuity and skill in individual persons were to be abolished, the very fountains of wealth would ... dry up; and the equality conjured up by the socialist imagination would, in reality, be nothing but uniform wretchedness and meanness for one and all..."

"...even democratic capitalist institutions will not work well if they don't operate in a cultural/moral environment that respects and nurtures creativity ... fair play, trust and community."

But, sadly, Leo XIII was a maverick. His successors returned to the traditional Catholic emphasis on the afterlife, charity, and utopian definitions of equality. Novak does highlight Pius XI's encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) in which the Pope addressed the question of social justice, and stressed the need to avoid utopianism. While John Paul II wove the thread of social justice together with Leo XIII's thread of economic liberalism in his *Centesimus Annus*, the social justice thread was also adapted by John XXIII in his *Pacem in Terris* (1963), setting the stage for the Liberation Theology wing of Catholicism that views capitalism as evil.

There is almost a quality of whistling in the dark in the title of Novak's new book. The right-left debate continues unresolved within the Roman Catholic Church (the U.S. Council of Bishops is particularly unhappy with the pro-capitalist currents in *Centesimus Annus*). Swarthmore's Frederic L. Pryor says, "*Centesimus Annus* is such an open-ended document and it contains so many conflicting criteria and arguments that it can be used as a support for, or a rejection of, most minor or major changes in the economic system that might be considered." Novak himself observes, "if Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* did not give two cheers for democracy and capitalism, he did give at least one cheer." (Novak may have intended to start this metaphor with three cheers and end with two.)

"...the future, work, education, excellence, frugality, community — are the forces that have produced economic and political success wherever they have operated."

It is a moral/cultural dimension exercised through "civil society" and its associations, not through government, that Novak sees as the important new ingredient that justifies the title of his book. I chose the title for this review believing that the moral/cultural underpinnings for democratic capitalism are not a new Catholic concept but a well-established Protestant, Jewish, to some extent Confucian, and also secular set of values and attitudes that were first suggested by Max Weber early in this century. Those values — the future, work, education, excellence, frugality, community — are the forces that have produced economic and political success wherever they have operated. They form what we might call a universal culture of progress, in contrast with the culture of poverty that Oscar Lewis identified in traditional societies, many of them Catholic.

Having cribbed from the title of Weber's best known work, Novak makes some very important points about Weber, above all the limits of Weber's focus on the Calvinist institutions of "grace," "calling," and "election," the combination of which, in Weber's words, "must have been the most powerful conceivable lever for the expansion of that attitude toward life which we have called the spirit of capitalism." Novak is on the mark when he observes that Weber's greatness lies in his identification of the cultural dimension of capitalism, not the link to Calvinism. But he loses track of some important broader dimensions of Weber's study, and I mention them here because they are highly relevant to my belief that Novak's "Catholic Ethic" has existed for hundreds of millions of non-Catholics for a long time.

For starters: in Weber's study of differences in prosperity and achievement between Protestants and Catholics in the German city of Baden that led to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, he noted not only that Protestants were more successful than Catholics but that Jews were more successful than both. He pointed to some Protestant — and Jewish — values that were not peculiar to Calvinists: good works as a way of life (in contrast to "the very human Catholic cycle of sin, repentance, atonement, release, followed by renewed sin"); the less paternalistic relationship between the Protestant and Jewish clergy and their followers than between Catholic priests and their flocks; the higher premium that attaches to literacy for Protestants and Jews, if for no other reason than to be able to read the bible; and the greater

Protestant and Jewish emphasis on *this* life — and the future in this world — in contrast to the traditional Catholic emphasis on the afterlife and the past.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, written almost a century ago, thus sets a broader stage than Novak acknowledges. But he does note that, in most cases, the success of Protestant societies was not limited to economic dynamism, that what he describes as "spiritual" (I'd prefer "cultural") forces came into play "where ... democratic institutions were powerful, the law was held in high respect, and the religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and a certain ethical humanism remained strong. Over the years, the original capitalist countries ... undertook many forms of social reorganization." We should note that Confucian east Asia has followed a similar path in the second half of this century — and that Confucius was probably an agnostic.

In sum, Novak's "Catholic ethic" is not new. But it is a useful reminder that the Protestant ethic is in disrepair and that the United States is a society in decline. Novak makes some important points:

...the only wise and healing path of social justice is to stress those movements, reforms, associations and actions that bring us together, and to avoid encasing in concrete those accidental differences, such as color, that divide us.

[of the Los Angeles riots] *The young criminals who selectively burned down the successful shops in their own neighborhoods were not merely expressing blind rage, or whatever degree of greed, but also envy. And no other vice is more suited to destroying a free republic!*

The makers of mass media entertainment bear an enormous moral responsibility for the deterioration of human spirit during the present generation...

[quoting John Paul II] *A given culture reveals its understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption.*

But in *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Novak adds to my disappointment with his treatment of population, race/ethnicity, and immigration. Consistent with Catholic doctrine, he evinces no concern about population growth anywhere, implying that the earth's carrying capacity is virtually unlimited. He correctly notes the vast strides towards racial equality in the United States in the past forty years but also makes a case for cultural pluralism and a salad bowl view of our society. And, while he points to the displacement of blacks by immigrants in the workplace, he is apparently unconcerned about high levels of legal and illegal immigration.

This is not Michael Novak at his best, as he was in the *Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* and in *Will it Liberate?* ■