



Impoverished consumers, Catholic social teaching, and distributive justice



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 August 2011
Received in revised form 1 May 2012
Accepted 1 July 2012
Available online 12 April 2013

Keywords:

Catholic social teaching
Distributive justice
Consumption
Poverty
United Nations

ABSTRACT

Consistent with the goals of the special issue of *Journal of Business Research*, this paper examines the 1986 pastoral letter of the U.S. Catholic bishops titled, *Economic Justice for All*, and its impact on marketing practice for the last 25 years. The brief literature review places this text within the larger context of Catholic Social Teaching and marketing practice, teasing out four testable propositions for examining social and distributive justice. The evidence presented from a variety of secondary sources reveals a lack of sustained progress to meet the goals inherent in the bishops' appeal. To advance their arguments, modifications to the ways marketers are educated, incentivized, and reviewed are posited, with a final secular way of considering these principles.

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Catholic teaching proclaims that a basic moral test is how our most vulnerable members are faring. In a society marred by deepening divisions between rich and poor, our tradition recalls the story of the Last Judgment (Mt. 25) and instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first.

[Office for Social Justice, 2011]

1. Introduction

The idea that marketers and public policy makers could or should be held accountable for their impact on the marketplace using ethical principles derived from Catholic Social Teaching (CST) was introduced by Gene Laczniak (e.g., Laczniak & Klein, 2010; Santos & Laczniak, 2009). Consistent with the opening quote, this author specifies that socially and economically disadvantaged consumers must receive special moral treatment from marketers that is derived from the overarching principles of CST including: human dignity, common good, solidarity, and subsidiarity; from these, subordinate principles are derived including worker rights and the preferential option for the poor (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1994). The last sub-principle recognizes the inherent vulnerability associated with poverty and demands a revised schema in order to address issues of inequity as well as advance distributive justice that favors them.

Although the canons of distributive justice are complex, they are part of a larger philosophy known as social justice, which involves Christ's self-imposed duty towards all of humankind. Specifically, the Catholic tradition of distributive justice recognizes the need to distribute the largess of society so that all can enjoy the minimum of goods necessary for living a decent life (Curran, 1988). Consistent with CST principles, good governments and economic systems must find ways to foster a correct understanding of the human person by creating favorable conditions and abundant opportunities for employment and by defending the poor. Notably, CST suggests that the current social system of free market economies offers the best potential for promoting such development (Nalewajek, 2010).

The CST tradition is rooted in scriptural writings as well as papal encyclicals that begin with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, a document which examines the rights of laborers during the Industrial Revolution. Leo XIII voices concern for impoverished working classes, highlighting the grinding poverty generated by industrial capitalism. He calls for the wealthy to respond with charity and for employers and the state to address injustices. Next, Pope Pius XI writes *Quadragesimo Anno* ("After Forty Years") in the midst of the Great Depression, when the many poverty-creating effects of market collapse were most evident. Pius XI continues with a basic defense of workers and their rights, but his reflection on the signs of the times lays the groundwork for a very different stance — a preferential option for the poor and powerless. For example, Pope John XXIII, recognizing the urgent need to resolve world poverty, brings attention to human rights and the disastrous arms race and war. Pope Paul VI, who builds on such prior teachings, calls in *Progressio Populorum* for the development of each person and all peoples. Further, in each of his four social encyclicals, Pope John Paul II continually stresses that respect for basic human rights, especially for the poorest, is the litmus test for justice in a society.

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Also, the U.S. bishops continue to develop this theme of responsibility through their 1986 letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy titled, *Economic Justice for All* (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). This document reflects on the “social and moral scandal” of U.S. and world poverty and gives the greatest moral urgency to the needs of the poor. The treatise is written to challenge the faithful to live their personal and professional lives with the same moral compass, and to avoid separating sacred beliefs from secular activities. To this end, economic life is viewed as another context in which we express our love for God and neighbor, avoid selfish temptations, and seek redemption. More recently, Pope Benedict XVI weighs in with his encyclical letter titled *Caritas in Veritate* (“Love in Truth”), which describes how the wealth of the world is growing in absolute terms, but vast inequalities are still increasing. He reiterates that the social doctrine of the Church has unceasingly highlighted the importance of distributive justice in an effort to alleviate the “scandal of glaring inequalities” both within a single country and between the populations of different countries.

The 25th anniversary of the pastoral letter and the special call of this journal suggest that this is an opportune time to examine whether the U.S. economy/business has lived up to its capabilities to reduce marketplace vulnerability and poverty both here and abroad. The next section teases out the expectations for economic and distributive justice from the original document. While all precepts are not discussed, focus on consumer welfare is an important component that is central to the bishops’ intentions (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986). The data that follow are provided in the simplest term, and inform each underlying tenet, and reveal our progress or the lack thereof since the document’s publication. The paper closes with suggestions for the integration of CST principles into the education, expectation, and evaluation of marketers to create a more just future.

2. Economic justice for all

After a brief introduction, the pastoral letter turns to its central theme that is captured in the following statement: “Every economic decision and institution must be judged in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person” (p. 2). This statement is grounded in the obligation to love our neighbor and serve the common good, with a special emphasis given to the poor and vulnerable. While few metrics are provided as a guide to the evaluation of our relative success or failure in this regard, the bishops ultimately turn to the words of Pope John XXIII: “All people have a right to life, food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, education, and employment.” Using a single data point that one-in-seven Americans lived in poverty at that time, they conclude that business and government as primary drivers of the economy have failed in their moral duty to the larger society.

The document begins with a general look at the economy, its successes and failures, and derives a guiding principle for marketers/managers. The bishops ponder what the economy does *for* people and *to* people, listing several (somewhat) positive and negative consequences. U.S. values of economic freedom and individualism are viewed as mixed blessings, allowing for great opportunities that simultaneously exacerbate differences between rich and poor and manifest along racial and gender dimensions. Economic progress is also blamed for dislocation of workers and the continual rise in unemployment during the previous two decades. Another problem is misallocation of resources away from serving humanity that include disproportionate spending on weaponry, which should be redirected to solving intractable social problems. In the final analysis, marketers and policy makers should adhere to a single moral precept: decisions must serve all people but most importantly the poor.

Then, the document presents a Christ-centered perspective of economic life. The section begins with a biblical approach to this connection, which states that “human life is fulfilled in the knowledge and love of the living God in communion with others” (p. 10). Each person also is created in the image of God, and the denial of that inherent

dignity to anyone is the same as denying Him. As a consequence, a refined criterion for faithful service to neighbor broadly construed shows that justice can be assessed by virtue of the positive and negative impact of a multitude of decisions on the powerless in a society, especially the poor. Thus, humanity is defined as the global community, and the widespread failure to meet basic material needs of consumers across impoverished regions of the world is a clear violation of the principle of distributive justice.

The same dialog is continued by presenting additional cases of injustice across a variety of domains. For example, subsequent discussions concentrate much attention on the issue of unemployment that occurs after economic upheavals or due to discrimination. The bishops also argue that beyond the benefits of guaranteed participation in economic life, CST does not require equality in material rewards greater than ability to meet essential needs of impoverished consumers as well as the generations that follow. Next, the document recognizes complexity and political roadblocks to creation of a just world, and the bishops call for much greater support of “institutional mechanisms for accountability that also preserve the flexibility needed to respond quickly to a rapidly changing business environment” (p. 53). Finally, the letter closes extolling the obligation to imitate Christ’s compassion by giving up our egoistic desires and selfishness and placing the dignity and needs of others above our material aspirations.

Taken together, this pastoral letter examines the U.S. economic system at the time and finds a lack of justice and Christian morality here and abroad. There are specific concerns articulated that allow researchers to tease out a number of testable criteria to see if our economy has advanced over the last 25 years in order to deal with these problems. Given the focus of this research project, determination is made regarding whether:

1. The amount of material poverty and inequity in access to goods and services has decreased within the United States.
2. The amount of material poverty and inequity in access to goods and services has decreased in the most impoverished sections of the world.
3. Spending on military armaments has decreased and shifted towards support for vulnerable citizens in the most impoverished sections of the world.
4. Institutions that seek to advance the material and human rights of citizens around the world have received significant support from the United States.

3. Data-driven responses

Most of these research propositions are informed by data assimilated and reported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), which has annually published the extensive *Human Development Report* since 1990. Each volume presents the most up-to-date statistics across a number of consumption variables that are revised over time and demonstrate the level of progress of the human community (UNDP, 2010). The centerpiece of these data is the Human Development Index (HDI), which is a composite of healthcare, education, and income as a surrogate of minimal access to the marketplace (Hill, Felice, & Ainscough, 2007). The latest report provides a series of innovative new measures that better capture possible inequalities in consumption opportunities that include Inequality-Adjusted HDI and Gender Inequality Index, and also provides an interactive map of extreme poverty defined as the percentage of the population living on less than one dollar-per-day. The original HDI and the alternative indices and poverty statistics provide answers to research questions 1 and 2. See Appendix A for more on these measures.

The first question asks whether the U.S. economy has advanced in distributive justice over the 25 years since the bishops’ letter, as well as the extent to which any gains may have served the best interests of the poor. The primary data points reveal trends in HDI from 1990 (four years after the original publication) to 2010 in five-year intervals,

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