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Comment

MISSING THE MARK: THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS' PASTORAL MESSAGE

The U.S. Catholic Bishops have released a final draft of their pastoral message on economic matters, entitled "Economic Justice for All: Catholic Teaching and the U.S. Economy." Much of the stance of this message has evolved from Catholic social teachings: the dignity of the human person, concern for the poor, social responsibility. A high-minded ethical concern is seen throughout this statement. While they do not profess to offer a comprehensive program, they do call on government to adopt measures that will alleviate poverty, encourage full employment and spread the benefits of the U.S. economy so that all may share.

This message has roused the criticism of conservative Catholics such as William E. Simon and Michael Novak who point out that private enterprise has accomplished more than any other system in raising the standard of living, and that the Bishops are calling for too much meddling by the government which is not good for the economy.

The conservatives have raised valid points - but they are ignoring the prevalence of economic problems: poverty, homelessness, farm distress, a growing inequality which has rather increased than decreased as the economy has in recent years moved away from liberal and toward conservative programs.

The Bishops in turn are not offering much that differs from the liberal programs of the past that have led to rising taxes, high inflation, growing welfare costs that have in many cases perpetuated the problems. There also seems to be a tendency to accept "the poor" as a permanent class.

The missing ingredient on both sides is an appreciation of the major role of land and its rent in the economy. When the Bishops issued their first draft they were contacted by several Georgists who brought to their attention that all production begins on the land; that every one is entitled to his production; that the surplus - the rent - due to society ought to be returned to society; that failure to do this results in the basic inequalities and problems we have today; and that we must solve, not ignore or alleviate, these problems.

Whether the above lesson was understood is difficult to say. There is mention of land in the pastoral message - but it is mostly perceived as relating to farms and ecology. The larger significance of land in the entire economy is missed.

The Catholic Bishops and their conservative critics need not be singled out. They reflect attitudes that prevail today - the liberals for more government programs, the conservatives for less. It remains for Georgists to continue pointing out the more basic analysis and remedy offered by their philosophy.

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