

# MANNA *in the wilderness*

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Pope ranks "materialistic consumerism" with Marxism, Nazism and fascism

## DO NOT DEFRAUD YOUR NEIGHBOR

by Gary Cavalier

In his annual World Peace Day message on January 1, 1999, the Pope made his most critical attack yet of "materialistic consumerism", equating it as an evil to rank with Marxism, Nazism and fascism. Pope John Paul II also criticized the free market system and its inadequacies; "Who is responsible for guaranteeing the global common good and the exercise of economic and social rights? The free market by itself cannot do this because in fact there are many human needs which have no place in the market." He denounced "materialistic consumerism" as an ideology in which the "exaltation of the individual and the selfish satisfaction of personal aspirations become the ultimate goal of life" creating a world-view in which "the negative aspects on others are considered completely irrelevant".

Our free market capitalist economy is based on trying to get all we can. A Christian economy is based on trying to give all we can. The first Christians lived much differently than we do today. Acts 3:44 states; "Now all the believers lived together and shared all their belongings. They would sell their property and all they had, and distribute the proceeds to others according to their need." Acts 4:34 states; "There was no needy person among them, for those who had acquired land or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of the sale. And they laid it at the feet of the apostles who distributed it according to each one's need. Throughout the centuries, Catholic religious orders have struggled to follow this model, living together, sharing their resources and helping the poor. St. Francis and Mother Teresa and many other Catholic saints provide us with alternative heroes to our economic system based on greed and its "heroes".

I gave a talk last year to a church group, and one of the people objected to the group giving us a donation because Catholic Worker foundress Dorothy Day was a "socialist". Have we forgotten we were living like third-world people before the hard-fought checks on pure free market capitalism such as Social Security, Worker's Compensation, child labor laws, Disability, Medicare and all the other "socialist" programs that monitor free market enterprise such as divisions which control worker safety, food standards and pollution?

Sixteen of Jesus' Twenty-eight parables are about money. The only person to ask Jesus how to inherit eternal life is the rich young man who went away sorrowful. Jesus tells him; "You know the commandments: You must not kill; You must not steal; You must not bring false witness;

changes with a clever twist the commandment "Do not covet what belongs to your neighbor" into "You shall not defraud your neighbor". In Jesus time wealth was in owning land, primarily acquired through the debt-default of the poor. Like today, poor farmers lost their land by placing



"You have made it a den of thieves"

Christ Drives the Moneychangers out of the Temple by Fritz Eichenberg

You must not defraud;". The rich young man said to Jesus; "Master, I have kept all these from my earliest days". Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him, and he said, "There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Jesus

loans with big landowners, then lost their property during a year of bad crops due to drought or other conditions. Jesus un-masks the young man's wealth as "defrauding his neighbor" by using his affluence and power to acquire property from

(continued on back page)

(Defraud, continued from front page) the defenseless who had next to nothing. When Jesus tells him to sell everything and give it to the poor he is calling for justice, telling this man that *he is in debt*-- to the poor he has defrauded. The gospel tells us the apostles were "astonished" at this teaching. They cannot imagine a world where justice is realized, with no rich or poor. Jesus answers; "with God all things are possible". The apostles could not imagine that in a few years early Christians would be laying all their possessions at their feet to distribute to the needy.

Today we also do not just "covet our neighbor's goods" but we go one step further and "defraud our neighbor". The homeless men we serve a simple breakfast to each morning are the victims of "free market fraud". Most are unskilled, and in years past could have worked in well-paid factory jobs. Today those factories have closed and gone overseas. My grandmother was a member of the Ladie's Garment Worker's union, and I remember how upset she would be when we bought something not made in this country, just because it was cheaper. But now it is thirty years later and almost too late. Almost everything is made overseas. So, instead of the unskilled homeless having a decent wage and benefits at a factory, they have to be served soup in our breakfast line. We have defrauded them by buying what is cheap instead of what is just. And it is worse than that. The factories in Mexico along our borders, and throughout the world defraud the workers by paying them a pittance. Under pressure from stockholders, Nike just announced a 6% pay raise to Indonesian workers, bringing their monthly pay to \$30, but inflation has been higher than 6%, so wages paid by Nike have actually gone down.

Our heartless free market economy allows us to buy a product from a factory a few hundred miles away on the Mexican border where the worker is paid \$30 a month, with none of the "socialist" benefits we take for granted; no disability, no worker's compensation and toxic waste from the factory running into their river. If she/he is injured making us our shoes or clothes, she is out on the street with no job or coverage. And yet, on Sunday, that factory worker and ourselves go to the Catholic church in our respective cities to gather and celebrate the eucharist together as one family, as members together of the Mystical Body of Christ. This arrange-

ment is certainly profitable for our American corporations and for us, since we receive cheaper goods, but is it worth the cost?

We are realizing every financial decision is a spiritual decision. Julia & I struggle with many financial decisions, especially now that we have children; do we buy it cheaper with our limited resources, or do we spend more to buy a just product, or do we need it at all?

One small step we have taken is buying coffee for our soupline from Equal Exchange, a non-profit group which pays Central American coffee farmers a just wage for their product. It costs more than free market coffee, but we hope it is a better use of the precious donations we receive.

Affluence rather than poverty is the major challenge of the American Catholic church today. The shopping mall has become the temple, the center of our community. More Americans visit a shopping mall each week than attend church or synagogue. Compared to the 1950's we have twice as much stuff in our home, and homes are twice as large as the average 900 square foot home of the 50's. On average we will spend one whole year of our life watching TV commercials. Since 1950 North Americans have consumed more resources than everyone who has ever lived before us. Each U.S. citizen on average uses up 20 tons of raw materials annually. Much of our time is spent working to pay for our things and then taking care of them. We believe the hope for our culture is found in the Gospels of Jesus Christ, another way to live.

I John 3:17 states: "If you are rich and see that your neighbors are in need yet close your heart to them, how can the love of God be living in you? My children, our love should not be simply words or mere talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action and truth".

The rich young man turned away from Jesus' call to discipleship, justice and healing. Jesus is also calling us to healing, to "true love". Jesus tells us if we want to be his disciple, a first step is justice in the use of money and property. We are challenged by the Gospels, by Pope John Paul's words, and by our brothers and sisters who live in Christian community and serve the poor. We are challenged to reform the system by which we derive such privilege and restore to the poor what has been taken from them through our own individual acts of self-sacrifice, conscience, faith and love.

## ● GOOD NEWS ●

- Catholic Worker Volunteer Tim Wertzberger has been awarded "1998 Nurses Assistant of the Year, State of Nevada". Tim has a college degree but chooses to work at a convalescent center as an aide for close to minimum wage.
- Valley High School teacher Stevi Carroll asked each of her students to contribute one dime for our Christmas breakfast. The teenagers contributed enough to buy 36 pounds of ham!
- The Women's Volleyball Team of San Jose State were in Las Vegas for a tournament and helped us serve our Thanksgiving meal.
- Hats & Hands gave us hundreds of scarves, gloves, socks and hats to give out this cold winter. Hats & Hands is a Las Vegas network of men and women who knit hand-made "warm fuzzies" all year for the homeless, for Aids patients, cancer patients and newborn babies in need.
- Christ the King Catholic Community has been chopping and bringing ingredients for beef stew every week of Lent.

### EASY ESSAY by Peter Maurin

In the first centuries of Christianity the hungry were fed at a personal sacrifice, the naked were clothed at a personal sacrifice, the homeless were sheltered at a personal sacrifice. And because the poor were fed, clothed and sheltered at a personal sacrifice, the pagans used to say about the Christians "See how they love each other".  
(Peter Maurin is co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement.)

Loyal volunteer Francis Strabala passed on in December 1998. For twelve years Frank came twice weekly to help serve our breakfast meal to the homeless.

## PLEASE JOIN US:

- Wednesday-Saturday, 6:00 a.m.:** Morning prayer at Catholic Worker.
  - Wednesday-Saturday, 6:30 a.m.:** Serve breakfast at Ethel Pearson Park (E & Washington St.) to the homeless.
  - Tuesday, 5:30 p.m.:** Mass or Liturgy at Catholic Worker, potluck following.
  - Seven Days a Week:** Hospitality (IHN) to 3 to 5 homeless families.
  - Last Saturday each month; 9:00 a.m.:** Deliver food to homes in need, gather for reflection & prayer, call for info.
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