Image: Catholic historian and Distributist Hilaire Belloc (left) and Adam Smith, the father of Capitalism

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I have noticed that two subjects cause the most immediate, most visceral debates among those who disagree: economics and music. If I offer a critique of rock, pop, rap, praise & worship, or any other type of modern music, the floodgates of wrath open and the cataracts of indignation pour out. Similarly, if I say so much as one negative word about American capitalism, or the Austrian fantasy of a self-regulating free market that maximizes goods and services while minimizing vice and exploitation, I can expect lightning and thunder to fall on my head.

So it has proved with articles in which I have presented various arguments against capitalism *as an ideal, a mentality, and an ideology*. Nowhere did I speak a word against initiative, profit, or investment as such. As earlier columns in this series have shown, the properly *political* question is always about how the exercise of individual liberty pertains to, works with, or undermines the common good of the society, which in fact is the chief good even of individuals. If we do not guard the common good, we are injuring ourselves, since we are fundamentally not atoms but social animals. If we are Christians, we have a still more compelling reason to care about the fate of our neighbor.

The Root of Distributism

The economic philosophy known as *distributism*—the most famous proponents of which are Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953) and G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936), of whom Thomas Storck and John Médaille are well-known disciples today—is named from its most essential principle: that a society is successful in meeting the elementary needs of citizens in direct proportion to the equity and breadth of property ownership among them, and that it pertains to government's responsibility to implement policies that aim at widespread distribution of property. In other words, it is premised on the assumption that the world's goods are intended by the Creator for the benefit of all men, and that this benefit is realized chiefly through the well-ordered ownership, care, and use of those goods by families (my column last month was devoted to expounding this point). While there will always be corporate giants with considerable wealth and landlords renting to tenants, an economy is imbalanced to the extent that it is dominated by them.

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Distributism is not as far-fetched as some people make it sound. For example, the incentives given in the United States to first-time homeowners, various tax breaks for larger families and for farmers, and tax write-offs for donations to charities are well-appreciated ways to encourage obtaining or preserving private property or, in complementary fashion, to see that it reaches as many of the needy as it can, without the inefficient and impersonal intervention of the State.

The most common charge made against distributists is actually a double charge: on the one hand, that they are not serious students of "scientific economics"; on the other hand, that they advocate solving the world's economic problems by socialist executive *fiat*. If ever there has been a caricature, this is it, for distributism is abundantly clear about its eternal enmity towards socialism as a system, and its solutions are far more nuanced and practical, as can be seen in the success of distributist enterprises like Mondragon. Storck and Médaille have demonstrated in many articles that economics is not a science; it is rather a set of assumptions and predictions that rest on beliefs about human nature and the human good. Far from being value-neutral, it is as biased as neo-Darwinian evolutionism.

The Charge of Statism

The aforementioned double charge nevertheless points to a deeper source of disagreement. Distributism says, for example, that it is immoral for a CEO to be earning $35 million a year when his company is laying off workers at the same time. It will be enough if he earns a modest, let's say, $2 million. Lovers of American enterprise will cry out: "You'll destroy the entrepreneurial spirit! You'll gum up investments! Brilliance and risk deserve more pay!" These are the cries of men trapped in a profane market mentality who fail to acknowledge the moral devastation wrought by centuries of materialism and hedonism promoted by that very same mentality.

I once heard someone blame the guild system for never making men rich. Apparently this person saw it as a fault in the system that if you belonged to a guild, you were "held back" by the standards to which the members agreed, and even as admittedly nobody would starve to death even if he had lost his hands in an accident, so nobody could ever rise above the ranks to dominate the field. But it was precisely the Catholic genius of guilds that they *never* made their members rich—at least by modern capitalist standards. They were *designed* not to make anyone disproportionately wealthy over his peers.

The truth of the matter is harsh and few are willing to hear it: for most people, getting rich would be the first step to hell. Any system that "makes people rich" or even makes them *want* to get rich is a system that paves a broad way to the underworld. The guilds, in contrast, brought artisans *together into a Catholic community* and kept the larger society

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cohesive. Rather than competing with and fighting against one another, artisans banded together and produced some of the greatest art—both utilitarian and fine—that the world has ever known. They did so, moreover, in an explicitly Catholic, Eucharistic, Marian context. They supported their sick members, buried the dead, had Masses said for the dead, prayed to their patron saints and went to Mass together. It was genuinely Catholic, inherently social, and *modestly* successful, which, according to the Gospel, is the most we should deliberately *aim* for. To go beyond that is to dance the tango with the devil.

Opposition Between Love of God and Love of This World

On this verse of St. Paul, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of sobriety" (2 Tim. 1:7), St. Thomas Aquinas offers the following comment:

> "Spirit" signifies love, for the term "spirit" implies impulsion, and love impels. Now there is a twofold love, namely, the love of God, which is through the Spirit of God, and the love of the world, which is through the spirit of the world: "For we received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit that is of God" (1 Cor. 2:12).

What, for Aquinas, is the practical upshot of the difference between these two spirits? It has everything to do with our affections, with what and how we love *all* that we love:

> Now the spirit of the world makes us love the goods of this world and fear temporal ills, and so the Apostle says: "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of sobriety" (2 Tim 1:7) … There is another spirit, the spirit of the fear of the Lord, the Holy Spirit, and this makes us fear God. […] We are likewise guided [by this Spirit] in the midst of good things, because, as regards affection, we are ordered through the love that is charity when we refer to God everything we love. Hence he says: "of love" … We are likewise ordered as regards external goods, and so he says: "and of sobriety," that is, of all temperance, by observing a due mode and measure, so that we use the goods of this world in a temperate way.

These comments prompt us to reflect on what it means, not just in theory but in everyday practice, to order our affections aright and thus to observe a "due mode and measure" in our use of worldly goods. We can be confident that the answer will be countercultural. We

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can also be confident that capitalism, a system designed to increase our treasures here below and to multiply desires for them and access to them, is after all "conservative": it conserves, for the devil's profit, the selfish inclinations of fallen human nature rather than challenging and uprooting them to liberate man for the kingdom of Heaven.

Every Christian must make up his mind about *whom* or *what* he will serve: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). "Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:33-34). "Artificial wealth," says Thomas, "has the power to engender an infinite craving—and that means: an illusory specter of the desire for happiness."[1]

Overcoming the Spirit of Possessiveness

On the one hand, therefore, the policies suggested by distributism seek to foster the universal destination (or common use) of goods for the *natural* good of mankind. On the other hand, it recognizes that possessions when multiplied and coveted lead to possessiveness, which is sinful and self-destructive, contrary to both the natural and supernatural good of mankind. Christianity itself offers a strange paradox. It brought into the world a spirit of concern for the poor, of care for the newborn, the enslaved, the handicapped and the sick, which had never been seen in paganism—and which is evidently evaporating in our neo-pagan society. Yet it simultaneously preached the relative value, indeed the comparatively minor value, of earthly goods compared to spiritual goods and our heavenly inheritance in Christ. For this reason, it required fasting and abstinence and encouraged voluntary poverty, such as became famous in the "mendicant" or begging orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans.

The fact that real voluntary poverty is extremely rare in the modern Church, comfortably settled in a Western world overrun with more material wealth and more spiritual indigence than history has ever seen, seems not to trouble the consciences of many shepherds or religious orders, including the mendicants. It is not to our credit that the subject troubled the medieval Church so much that it prompted mass movements of heresy and sanctity alike.

It is very hard to become truly poor in spirit *or* in body if one is not already there. When do you get a new pair of pants—when your old pair is fraying at the seams and no longer wearable in public, or before that stage? How many pants, shoes, shirts, ties, etc., should you have? Do you buy the best quality because you know it will last, or a cheap brand

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because it's a much smaller expenditure? Do you *insist* on American-made goods, although they are more expensive, versus "Made in China" or some other ignominious label? Is it even realistic to try to avoid the Third World products? When is a "structure of sin" something to accept with a shrug of the shoulders? Globalization has meant fewer and fewer choices: chances are the things I buy have been manufactured by wage slaves in sweatshops.

Positive Renunciation for the Kingdom

It's easy to settle down and settle for compromises, thinking all the while that we are simply being "prudent and responsible" by seeking stability in this world. It is all too easy, especially for theologians (may God help me!), to speak grandly of solidarity, social justice, and preferential options when we are quite comfortably ensconced in a home of which we own about 5% ("do we own the windows yet, darling, or just the lintel?"), well dressed, well fed, and not at all desperate or denuded.

But "we have here no lasting city, we seek one that is to come" (Heb. 13:14). As Christians, we can never put down our true roots here, and it is better to live in such a way that we are *conscious* of our state of alienation in and from this world, and our destiny in the life to come. For this reason, laity, priests, and religious should all make a point of asking regularly: *Do I have things I don't really need? Can my possessions be put to a better use? How am I responding to the spiritual and physical poverty around me in the world?*

Speaking of the "positive choice" that accompanies the renunciation of worldly goods among the saints, Fr. Maximilian Herraiz, OCD—an expert in the thought of St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila—observed: "It is the radical option for life, truth, freedom and, very concretely, the option for love, for God. When we opt for love, we find that there is too much extra furniture in our homes. Mysticism tells us that love is the essential dimension of life." Joseph Ratzinger said something similar: "In these times we really ought to make an effort to get out of this overfurnished, crammed world into an inner freedom and vigilance. It means, too, that we need penance, without which there can be no new beginning."[2]

We tend to think in big terms, about reforming the world or the monastery or the government or the local school—or, perhaps more commonly nowadays, we focus on the seeming impossibility of ever doing so—but we don't think about what is within our power: examining, cleaning up, and uncluttering our daily lives, our rooms, the desk we work at, the closet full of stuff. It can be more painful to throw away a bunch of papers, or give away clothes or other possessions, than to write a check for a charitable organization. We fail to take note of what is around us, having grown accustomed to it; it contributes to our sense of identity, well-being, and comfort. This is the "familiar," it is our native environment, it is

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nicely cluttered and diversified, my personality is at home here.

This can be dangerous in a small but subtle way. As we heard from the Epistle to the Hebrews, we have here no lasting home, and we should take pains to remind ourselves of that fact. We need to keep *un-domesticating* ourselves by a simplification of surroundings, by keeping alert to excessive comfort and clutter, by stirring oneself to be more disciplined in prayer and work—in a word, not to "settle down" in spirit. It is not a question of courting flux or rags or starvation, but a question of habituating the whole family in the freedom that comes with detachment, the power that comes from simplification and resourcefulness.

Examining Our Consciences

Easy to say; not easy to do. Often enough, it is God Who has to do it for us. In his commentary on Psalm 43, St. Thomas explains why God allows Christians to be overtaken with hardship, defeated, despoiled, impoverished, put to the test: "He does this in order to draw us away from earthly goods, because if we always had prosperity in temporal things, man would serve God for their sake; and if this *were* our intention, it would be frustrated by such things as defeats. In order that our love may not be mercenary, and our intention not be fixed on bodily things, He takes these goods away from His friends."[3]

This might make a good point on which to examine our conscience. When I lose, when life is hard, when things get tough, when the tide turns against me, when I experience resistance, misunderstanding, even rejection—is my faith strong and mature enough to make me say: "Thank You, Lord. You have just taught me once again that my only home is in You—that I have no treasure but Your grace and Your love"? If we find we cannot say it sincerely, then we are humbled and challenged to ask for the grace to have in us the mind that was in Christ Jesus (cf. Philip. 2:5). If we *can* say it to one degree or another, it is no grounds for boasting; our boast is in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 6:14). He is the One Who can detach us from this passing world and glue us to eternal life, which is Himself.

In case this article has been too abstract, here are eight things we can do to live the spirit of poverty better, according to the first of Our Lord's Eight Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3). Some of these ideas are pretty obvious, but the point of this list is not to be innovative or profound, but rather to suggest helpful and attainable means.

1. Tithe 10% of your income, prior to any further calculations or savings. Do it spontaneously and without argument, as a fundamental sign of trust in Divine Providence, and as a concrete way of thanking Him for His provision. Give this tithe to the poor, to the Church, to religious orders.Although tithing is no longer a matter of divine precept, it is a

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powerful symbol and practice of economic discipleship. It is a way of confessing that giving aid to God's people and building up His kingdom takes precedence over the building up of my own little domain. The only situation in which tithing would be inappropriate is if a man is receiving a wage manifestly lower than suits the local economy (e.g., Catholic teachers are often volunteering half their time or more). In such cases, a man is already tithing his time and effort. Catholics should donate to traditional causes only.

2. If you are married, talk to your wife and children on a regular basis about what poverty (spiritual and material) is, why Jesus asks us to practice it, and how we can practice it according to our state in life. Ask their advice. Sometimes others in the family can see, much better than we, the clutter that we should thin out. And, although we may not think so, children need adults to help them simplify, focus, and remain above worldly things, rather than being entangled in them. Older children need to be prodded to examine their spending habits: paintball parks, sodas and candy bars, movies, and so on can add up to a colossal waste of time and money. It might seem innocent at their age, but grown men and women only shift to bigger toys and stimulants. The right habits have to be planted early on.

3. Firmly resolve to devote more time to prayer, and then do it. American men on average spend far too much time working and far too little time praying—or, for that matter, too little time doing anything intrinsically worthwhile. To "go to one's room, shut the door, and pray in secret," as Jesus says, is the first and most important step towards that "poverty of spirit" which is the hallmark of Christ's true disciples; it is the sovereign remedy for materialism, for preoccupation with the ephemeral.

4. Before any purchase, ask yourself pointedly (and answer honestly): Do I really *need* this? Do I need it *right now*? Moreover, buy things used or second-hand if possible. Practically all clothing can be found used in a condition as good as new, but at a fraction of the cost. To insist that one should only wear new things can be a form of self-indulgence.

5. Be content with less or little in areas of life where abundance is costly. Examples: cut back on alcoholic drinks and/or tobacco products, at least during Advent and Lent; avoid spending money on trifles such as prepared beverages of the Starbucks type. Pack your lunch instead of eating out at work—at least sometimes. Cut back on luxuries—cosmetics, jewelry, clothes, lattes, etc. Some Catholics would be amazed to discover how many hundreds of dollars they spend a year on such things, which from week to week seem trivial.

6. In honor of an anniversary or other special occasion, make a donation to a monastery or the pro-life cause rather than giving jewelry, taking a vacation, or going out for a fancy dinner. It is an incredible example of the decline of Christian charity that most people, including practicing Catholics, are totally self-centered (or family-centered) when it comes

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to how they spend their surplus wealth. That is, we do not spontaneously want to *give away* what remains after our necessities are taken care of; we would rather find new and more exciting ways to spend it on ourselves. And, of course, all advertising in a capitalist society is premised on this bent desire. There is matter here for a serious examination of conscience.

7. In keeping with stewardship of the earth and of your household, buy higher quality things that will last longer; if possible, buy permanent things rather than disposable ones. When things break, try to fix them or have them fixed; do not surrender to the consumerist "throw-away" culture.

8. Grow a garden with the family; even a container garden is better than nothing. We spend gobs of money on mass-marketed, often flavorless and pesticide-coated produce, when we could grow some of it in our own backyards, with benefit to ourselves: sun and fresh air, exercise, organic food, chores for the kids, homeschooling science lessons! In general, whenever possible, "do it yourself" rather than buying ready-made or paying other people to do it for you. This often requires a subtle sacrifice of self-will: I may not *feel* like repairing something, even if I can do it. Yet this is exactly when poverty of spirit enters in: you are beginning to be poor when you do not think yourself too important or busy to take care of little things. Distributism takes small things seriously: the dignity of the individual; the family as the basic unit of society; the centrality of the local economy; the value of the here and now over bloodless concepts or global causes. In this respect, it is profoundly Christian. We could call it "economic incarnationalism," or "incarnational economics." For this very reason, it is something we can all begin practicing immediately, and with tangible results—including a better and more consistent welcome in our lives for the many goods that are intangible.

To be continued. See here for Part I, here for Part II, here for Part III, and here for Part IV.

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[1] Josef Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation,* trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 35-36, citing *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 2, a. 1, ad 3.

[2] *Salt of the Earth*, p. 281.

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[3] *Super Psalmos 43*.

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