I end my review with words from the author’s opening passage: “there is much hard work to be done before Catholic lay women and men universally recognize, accept, and carry out the role in the Church’s mission that is theirs by right and obligation—and before others truly recognize that they should. The aim here is to help in bringing these things about” (7). Russell Shaw has done his part. As for the rest of the Catholic laity? Buy the book and let’s get going!

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In a post-Soviet world, there is a temptation for classical liberals to bask in triumphalism. Alberto Piedra’s message is an antidote to this self-congratulatory mood. In *Natural Law: The Foundation of an Orderly Economic System*, he convincingly argues that liberalism has flaws in the way it views the moral law and the human person. Hence, like communism, liberalism can take us down the wrong path. The sixth book in the Acton Institute’s series in “Studies in Ethics and Economics,” *Natural Law* offers a historical, philosophical and theological overview of the subject. A former Catholic University of America professor and U.S. Ambassador, Piedra marshals both a scholarly and practical approach to this topic.

The book’s basic argument is straightforward. Natural law is a “participation in divine law,” a concept widely accepted in the West until a few centuries ago. When western philosophy severed the link between natural and divine law, human reason became the source of morality. The outcomes were the deification of man, denial of original sin, moral relativism and a misguided effort to create utopia. Piedra concludes that, in order for an economic system to be truly successful, it must be based on truth and firm ethical principles.

Piedra starts his historical survey of the rejection of the traditional concept of natural law with René Descartes, whose dictum “cogito ergo sum,” placed rational thought at the center of all sciences.
As the modern sciences developed, “natural law” became narrowly limited to the knowledge of the mechanical rules that govern nature. Many believed that by discovering these laws, they could reconstruct society in a way that would foster harmony. They also accepted the propositions that people are naturally good and will follow these laws if given the freedom to do so. Authority and religious institutions came to be seen as impediments to the exercise of this liberty. Further developments came with the acceptance of the principles of self-interest and utilitarianism. With divine law dismissed, policy became a matter of utilizing the correct technical relationships and ethics became irrelevant. Through the classical economists, the notion of an achievable natural social harmony was introduced into modern economic thinking.

Adam Smith, argues Piedra, contributed to the economism of his followers. An orderly economic system depends on the moral law. Smith held that “mutual assistance and sympathies,” together with the invisible hand, would correctly channel self-interest and guide the functioning of society toward the common good. However, such a mechanistic approach cannot work because original sin always finds a way to make its presence felt. Piedra contends that, “[t]he great error of liberalism was to believe that the free market system would, by its own inner mechanisms, create the necessary ‘moral’ conditions that would permit the system to operate efficiently for the benefit of all” (110).

The denial of divine law has had tragic consequences for the modern world. Personhood is turned into something endowed by the state rather than by God. This transforms human rights into mere civil rights. Liberty no longer means freedom from sin and the passions but license. It becomes difficult to protect individual rights in a society where moral relativism holds sway. Piedra asks the question, “On what basis can a person, seeking to protect his moral autonomy, expect others to renounce their principles and points of view in the world of practice in order to follow someone else’s generalized pattern of behavior?” (26) This internal contradiction of a society based on individual license can only result in chaos. Economic stability cannot exist in such a climate.

The praxis of Enlightenment liberal thought has had mixed results. The irony of Continental Enlightenment is that its philosophy for building a harmonious society was developed just prior to the miseries of the French Revolution. Two World Wars later and the continued demographic implosion of Western Europe make one wonder if the lesson was learned. Indeed, liberal thought contributed to the rise of the “social question,” giving fuel to dissenting schools of thought. Even the track record of organizations such as the United Nations in bringing about world harmony is inconsistent.
The liberal utopian thinking is not dead, as demonstrated by today's pro-globalization groups which clamor for minimal oversight of international trade. Likewise, policies to raise living standards by lowering fertility rates weaken the family, encourage the encroachment of the welfare state and put financial stress on governments. Furthermore, the neomalthusians' blame of environmental degradation over population is misplaced. The solution is respect for the environment, which is best taught in families.

Piedra gives a qualified approval to capitalism. On its technical dimension, there is no doubt it surpasses its competing systems. However, on the human dimension there is much left to be desired. He also argues that none of the major competing ideologies—such as socialism, the historical school, or institutionalism—correct the faulty anthropology of liberalism.

Although Piedra does not offer a detailed blueprint for the successful economy, he does discuss some of the characteristics such a society must have. In addition to a firm moral foundation, a truly successful economic system must be based on an understanding of labor having both subjective and objective dimensions. Work supports the development and attainment of the ultimate destiny of the worker. Hence, technological growth at the expense of the spiritual and cultural needs of people is not true success.

If there is a weakness to *Natural Law*, it is that it doesn't devote much space to the contributions of individuals such as Fr. Heinrich Pesch, S.J. or Msgr. John A. Ryan to the critique of liberalism. More attention to such writers would provide the reader with a greater appreciation of the richness the natural law approach brings to economics. On a related note, although globalization and population control are discussed in detail, one is left wishing that Piedra would delve into other important economic and social issues.

This book is a plea to re-examine how we look at economic systems. Economists dropped the person from their analysis in order to emulate the methodology of the physical sciences. As the quip goes, the quest for the rigor of physics gave economics rigor mortis. *Natural Law* points out precisely the reason why this quest is fundamentally misguided—the human being is a subject and not an object such as a molecule.

As the Israelites prepared to enter the Promised Land, Moses told them they could choose between obedience to God and prosperity or idolatry and doom. The same two paths lie before us today. Piedra's evaluation of the situation is that the "dynamics of liberalism, and its stress on freedom, undoubtedly had and still can have very positive
results as long as it does not separate reason from truth. However, if reason and freedom separate themselves from the principles and values on which their dynamism and proper exercise depend, freedom itself is jeopardized and, sooner or later, license inevitably takes its place” (50). The choice before us is whether to return to truth or risk turmoil.

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Readers of the CSSR will be delighted to find a hidden gem of Catholic social thinking in this top-rate book about early Christianity. Robert Louis Wilken, the eminent historian of early Christianity (University of Virginia), who is now in full communion with the Catholic Church, places in his eighth chapter (“Happy the People Whose God is the Lord”) a stunning discussion of Augustine’s *City of God*. Accessible apart from the rest of the book, it contains a clear depiction of what precisely constitutes that City in relation to the City of Man, and convincingly shows the implications of that distinction for the social lives of Christians. I will first discuss this important chapter of Wilken’s book, and then, confident that readers of that chapter will be lured into the rest of the book, I will take an all-too-quick look into some of the other chapters.

Wilken initially shows how Augustine’s work is a response of sorts to Plato’s *Republic*, wherein Plato set forth what an ideal city would look like. One would expect, in reply, that Augustine would present his own model city that Christians should strive to build, but the city of God is *an actual city*—“a social and religious fact”—into which one can enter and be in communion with God (as contrasted to the city of man, in which God as the highest good is missing). This city is “an ordered, purposeful gathering of human beings with a distinctive way of life, institutions, laws, beliefs, memory, and form of worship” (191), and its end is peace (193), a peace that comes from the enjoyment *in God* of one another (“Christianity is fundamentally social” [195]).