The Conservative Weakness and the Solution: Catholic Social Teaching
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This article was one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason’s online “Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic” columns. It appeared on May 1, 2012. There is a link to Krason’s monthly column at the SCSS website (www.catholicsocialscientists.org). Since August 2012, his column also appears at Crisismagazine.com. This article considers weaknesses in present-day conservatism, and how embracing certain principles of Catholic social teaching could rectify those weaknesses.

In my article on “Roman Catholicism” in American Conservatism: An Encyclopedia, I wrote that, “Conservative thought parallels Roman Catholic teaching in many respects.” I also pointed out, however, that the Church “does not fully embrace it or any particular socio-politico-economic perspective.” I especially pointed to the problem of the classical liberal economic perspective in certain branches of what is today called “conservatism,” which is probably the predominant view in varying degrees of most of the political right.

In my book Liberalism, Conservatism, and Catholicism in the 1990s, I evaluated these American political ideologies in light of Catholic social teaching. There have been different schools in American conservative thought since World War II, and some have been closer to the Church than others. Conservatism most departs from that teaching on economics and the role of government. While the social encyclicals clearly accept and even commend the market economy that is so strongly emphasized by conservatism, they also make clear that it must be appropriately limited by morality, cultural norms, and the state. While the Church, of course, always stresses the principle of subsidiarity—that a necessary function should be accomplished by the lowest unit of society that can do it adequately, efficiently, and with benefit to the welfare of the whole—she makes it clear that government has an economic regulatory and social welfare role. Government should be especially assertive in trying to curtail unemployment and to insure that no sector of the economy badly lags behind (which has often been the situation, say, of agriculture in the U.S.). Encyclicals such as Laborem Exercens even say that government, in conjunction with the private sector, should undertake overall economic planning. While private
property is a natural right, the principle of social use goes along with it. The state has a role, within limits, of regulating property use. Also, Catholic social teaching does not reject outright the redistribution of wealth. After all, the universal destination of created goods is one of its central principles: All should have a sufficiency of temporal goods so as to live becomingly. The Church also insists that there are some human needs that simply cannot be met, or met adequately, by the market or for-profit entities. The rights of workers are also a long-time concern of the Church. A number of these themes make most conservatives uneasy.

While conservatism has a laissez faire tilt on economics, post-1960s liberalism wants inordinate governmental control of the economy but is laissez faire—much more than conservatives are on economics—on sex and culture. Conservatives’ views on economics and the role of government—in spite of their acceptance of some kind of “safety net”—have probably been the main reasons why lower-class and even many working-class citizens are persistently suspicious of them. This is so even apart from the convoluted thinking in the lower class spawned by decades of entitlements, government dependency, and abdication of personal responsibility.

What should conservatism do about this? The answer lies in embracing more completely the principles put forth by Catholic social teaching. Conservatives should not be worried about the dreaded “sectarian” label. These are not sectarian principles, but human ones. When not confused by ideology, people can recognize in Catholic social teaching and in the thought that has sprung from it a realism, balance, and reasonableness. Indeed, some of the most fervent promoters of Catholic social teaching in recent decades have been non-Catholics (they have discovered that great treasure, while most Catholics seem hardly aware of it). In fact, as I show in my book *The Transformation of the American Democratic Republic*, many of these principles that we identify with Catholic social teaching today animated socio-economic thinking in America’s Founding Era. To be sure, in an intemperate time one should not believe that a refashioned conservatism that embraces these principles is simply going to carry the day. It needs to show itself truly committed to them, work to instantiate them into both policy and social practice, constantly explain them, and develop a rhetorical approach that will help people to see their value.

What, in brief, would this mean in terms of general policy approaches? First, on economics conservatives should follow the mid-twentieth-century Catholic scholars and writers who called for a kind of “enlightened self-regulation” in place of governmental micromanagement. This would be done by codes of conduct that different industries would be nudged by government to adopt on matters such as a wages, treatment of employees,
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quality of goods and services, and even—treading carefully here—pricing. This was attempted during FDR’s First New Deal.

Second, conservatives have to “get real” in how they understand big corporations. The standards applied to small business cannot also be applied to them. As some Catholic writers used to say, big economic enterprises are for all practical purposes quasi-public entities. The common good is often profoundly affected by their actions. When a company decides to move a factory to keep their stock prices high and causes economic dislocations for a community and a substantial number of people, conservatives can hardly just look the other way in the name of “the laws of the market.” Nor should they hold that government should permit easy consolidation and mergers, when this is likely to lead to the dangers of monopoly. Instead of laissez faire, conservatives should embrace something like economic populism.

Third, while conservatives need to constantly continue to emphasize that self-initiative is central—as Pope Paul VI said, we should not encourage the indolent—they must also show in both their rhetoric and practice that they believe that some people need help. While they must—in the best educative tradition of politics—intensify their efforts to explain why massive, Great Society-type government programs have proven to be inadequate and ineffective and are financially unsustainable, they also must stop believing that people can just be left to fend for themselves. Men are not isolated individuals adrift from community in some kind of Hobbesian state of nature. Rather, conservatives should use government to encourage and make as easy as possible the building up of civil society—networks of voluntary organizations, many of which would probably be religious-based—to help those in need. The conservative approach, then, should be one of calling for decisively scaling down the governmental role, but with something solid and reliable to replace it. They should also continue to stress that there always has to be a government safety net as a back up.

Fourth, conservatives also need to scale down their unrealistic expectations of the market and to recognize, as the Church does, that it cannot supply all needs. In other words, they need to be more attentive to the traditional economic notion of “merit goods.” This basic belief is crucial to building up a vigorous civil society. Conservatives should realize that such things as health care and education do not work well in the for-profit sector. By not opposing such developments, conservatives are easily viewed by the public as for corporate advantage and “against the people.”

Fifth, while conservatives must forcefully reject the increasing leftist and pro-social-democracy tilt of the national labor leadership and the excessive demands of public employee unions, they must aggressively advo-
cate for the legitimate cause of workers. They must show by their actions, again, that they have abandoned laissez faire. As Pope Leo XIII said way back in *Rerum Novarum*, legislation is needed to avoid the possibilities of labor-management conflict. The statist, quasi-socialist agenda of the left reflects an abstract, ideologically-driven way of thinking that is out of sync with the situation of most workers, but so does the lingering laissez faire, classical-liberal thinking of many conservatives.

Finally, conservatives need to understand—as Aristotle did—that mal-distribution of wealth is not something to be ignored. They need to think more of how it can be mitigated without conducting a “war on the rich” like the left does.

Liberal economics and too minimal a view about government have been obstacles to conservatism’s having the realism and balance it shows in other areas of its thought, and stymies broader popular appeal. It should turn to Catholic social teaching to rectify its deficiencies.