

Resolved: No one can at the same time be a good Catholic and a true socialist.

Negative Case

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Catholic Answers Debate with Trent Horn
June 11, 2020

Introduction

Thank you, Catholic Answers and Trent Horn, for generously hosting this debate. Thanks to everyone watching, now and later. Horn has affirmed that someone who is at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist cannot be, that it is impossible for this to be the case. I will negate his affirmation by showing that it can be, that it is possible.

First Contention: Three Catholic Socialists

Here are three people who at the same time are good Catholics and real socialists:

1. Blessed Pier Giorgio Frassati joined a radical Catholic Action group (Italian Catholic University Federation) committed to anti-fascism in 1919. He also joined the anti-fascist Partito Popolare Italiano. He was on the left-wing of the party which favoured an alliance with the Socialist Party. In 1921, he was arrested at the Congress of Catholic Youth in Rome for his socialist sympathies. ([Source](#).) In 1923, he helped to create *Il Pensiero Popolare*, a Left-wing journal. ([Source](#).) According to Cristina Sicardi, in her book *Pier Giorgio Frassati: A Hero for Our Times*, “in Pier Giorgio’s opinion, it was no longer enough to employ *caritas*; *justicia* was necessary, the justice pursued both by socialism and by Catholic social teaching.” ([Source](#).) Saint John Paul II beatified Frassati in Saint Peter’s Square on May 20, 1990. ([Source](#).)

2. Servant of God Hélder Pessoa Câmara was made archbishop of Olinda e Recife in 1964. ([Source](#).) He was a mentor to Paulo Freire, another Catholic Socialist. ([Source](#).) Camara and Freire were among the earliest to articulate what became (at the second and third General

Bishop's Conferences in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 and Puebla, Mexico in 1979) Liberation Theology in Latin America. ([Source](#).) Camara is most famous for a quote sometimes attributed to Saint Oscar Romero: "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist." Camara identified as a Catholic socialist saying, "My socialism is special, it's a socialism that respects the human person and goes back to the Gospels. My socialism it is justice." Camara was declared the Servant of God on April 7, 2015, by Pope Francis. ([Source](#).)

3. Servant of God Julius Kambarage Nyerere served two terms as Prime Minister of Tanganyika and was the first President of its successor state, Tanzania, from 1961 to 1985. He was a lifelong African Nationalist and African Socialist. ([Source](#).) His Christian socialism sought to rid itself of Western capitalism and Eastern communism through the African concept of *ujamaa*. ([Source](#).) "Ujamaa', then, or 'Familyhood'," Nyerere writes, "describes our socialism. It is opposed to capitalism, which seeks to build a happy society on the basis of the exploitation of man by man; and it is equally opposed to doctrinaire socialism which seeks to build its happy society on a philosophy of inevitable conflict between man and man." ([Source](#).) On May 13, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI declared Nyerere the Servant of God. ([Source](#).)

Second Contention: The Meaning of Socialism

In *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI writes, "With great precision, albeit with a certain onesided bias, Marx described the situation of his time... His promise, owing to the acuteness of his analysis and his clear indication of the means for radical change, was and still remains an endless source of fascination." ([Source](#).) In an article looking back at his *Introduction to Christianity*, then-Cardinal Ratzinger supplies a measured historical critique of both Marxism and Liberation Theology while nonetheless noting that "Marx appeared to be the great guidebook. He was said to be playing now the role that had fallen to Aristotle in the thirteenth century." Benedict disputes this analogy but not entirely. He confesses, "It must be admitted: by means of this remarkable synthesis Christianity had stepped once more onto the world stage and had become an 'epoch making' message." ([Source](#).) These selected remarks by Pope Benedict XVI show us

that his famous lines in *First Things* from 2006 (i.e., “In many respects, democratic socialism was and is close to Catholic social doctrine and has, in any case, made a remarkable contribution to the formation of a social consciousness”) are on sign among many of his healthy but critical intellectual relation to Marxian thought. ([Source](#).)

Benedict’s consistently careful appreciation of Marx is important because the meaning of socialism does owe some debt to Marxian thought. The meaning of socialism, then, naturally begins with the concept of alienation. In *Centesimus Annos* John Paul II carefully accepts this idea, taking in the meat and spitting out the bone. He writes: “The historical experience of the West, for its part, shows that even if the Marxist analysis and its foundation of alienation are false, nevertheless alienation... is a reality in Western societies too.” He concludes that “[t]he concept of alienation needs to be led back to the Christian vision of reality, by recognizing in alienation a reversal of means and ends.” ([Source](#).)

We find the second concept of socialism in this reversal of alienation. Socialism seeks to remedy the alienating reversal of means and ends. This is a matter of priority and order. John Paul II, again in *Centesimus Annos*, cites the “Instruction on certain aspects of the Theology of Liberation,” as follows: “The priority of work over capital places an obligation in justice upon employers to consider the welfare of the workers before the increase of profits.” ([Source](#).) When we take these three points together, (1) a healthy but critical intellectual relationship to Marxian thought, (2) the concept of alienation, and (3) the priority of work over capital, then, we begin to understand the meaning of socialism in the light of Catholic Social Teaching and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

From this meaning of socialism, one can also appreciate and understand Catholic teaching on property and theft. In *Rerum Novarum* (section 22) Pope Leo XIII reaches back to Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, Question 66, Article 3, Objection 2) where Aquinas reaches back to the sermons of Ambrose, the great teacher of Augustine, repeating the Church’s radical teaching on property. ([Source](#).) “It is no less a crime to take from him that has, than to refuse to

succour the needy when you can and are well off.” Aquinas summarizes Ambrose as follows: “Therefore just as theft consists in taking another’s thing, so does it consist in keeping it back.” (Source.) In Catholic Social Teaching, this is known as the Universal Destination of Goods. Pope Francis reaffirms this teaching in *Laudato Si* (93) when he writes: “The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property...” He clarifies that “the Church does indeed defend the legitimate right to private property, but,” he again insists, “she also teaches no less clearly that there is always a social mortgage on all private property, in order that goods may serve the general purpose that God gave them.” (Source.) These teachings on theft and property also illuminate the Church’s teaching on the positive and even justly forceful role of the state such as when Pope Pius XI, in *Quadragesimo Anno* (49) teaches that “when the State brings private ownership into harmony with the needs of the common good, it does not commit a hostile act against private owners but rather does them a friendly service.” (Source.) When you pay taxes to the state for the sake of the common good, you are not being robbed; you are being *served*.

Third Contention: A Final Story

I want to tell you a bit about who I am and how I came to the views I have shared thus far. I was born and raised in a lay missionary Catholic family. I attended Franciscan University of Steubenville, graduating in 2005. I met my wife there. We have three beautiful children and are active parishioners at our local parish. I hold a valid *mandatum* from my Archdiocese. I say all this simply to note that none of my sympathies for Catholic socialism come from a place outside the Church. When I attended Franciscan, I studied the works of Max Scheler (John Paul II’s favourite philosopher), Gabriel Marcel, and Emanuel Mounier under personalist philosophers John Crosby and John White. Mounier, a French personalist who also identified (and inspired others to identify as) a Catholic socialist followed me into my graduate studies all the way to my present scholarship because of his immense influence through his journal *Esprit* upon the French Resistance, Freire’s Brazilian literacy movements, Servant of God Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker movement and Cesar Chavez’s United Farmworkers of America, the rise of Solidarity in

Poland and the Orange Revolutions across Central Europe. The latter movements were, like all the others, forms of socialism that were deeply democratic and opposed to communism, fascism, and capitalism. As we know, democratic forms of socialism have also been central to a number of recent social causes and civic movements the Catholic Church rightly supports, from Civil Rights to labour issues to Climate Change. This is the Catholic Left.

Closing

It is therefore my claim that the voice of the magisterium, from Basil and Chrysostom to Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome, to Aquinas and all the papal encyclicals that comprise the nearly 130 years of Catholic Social Teaching, with the social and historical context of their meaning and intent in full view, plus the wider work of the Catholic Intellectual tradition on Christianity and Marxism in thinkers heretofore unmentioned like Jacques Maritain, Charles Taylor, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Alasdair MacIntyre, combine to powerfully reveal that today's resolution, notwithstanding its own magisterial origins, has been severely distorted by an overdetermined assertion of *impossibility* where there is, in fact, for the numerous reasons I have demonstrated, immense *possibility*. "For God all things are possible." (Matt. 19:26)