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THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS FOR THE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETY

Summary: This article affirms the importance of family relationships for the economic development of society. The first part shows that, in many aspects, the global economic system is devoid of relational goods. Assuming that the human family “is the first and most important school of mercy”, it is underlined, in the second part, that, also in the economic field, we need to put into practice that kind of merciful relationships that privilege being over having and do not appeal to an invisible hand to justify the indifference towards humans and nature. The third part presents some current initiatives that show the importance of family relationships for an integral development.

Keywords: Economics, Family, Development, Relationships, Franciscanism.

This article will illustrate the importance of family relationships for the economic development of society. Pope Francis says that the human family “is the first and most important school of mercy.” (Francis 2016, p. 4)¹ Also in the economic field, we need to put into practice this kind of merciful relationships which privilege being over having, and do not appeal to an invisible hand to justify the indifference towards humans and nature.

The first part will show that, in many aspects, the global current economic system is devoid of family relationships. Having assumed a negative anthropological vision, the market is considered a battlefield of selfish interests, in which everything is subordinated to efficiency. In contrast with this technocratic and conflictual paradigm, Catholic Social Teaching stresses the importance of fraternity in the economic realm. The third part will present some current initiatives that show the importance of relational goods for an integral development.

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¹ “Family life is the first and irreplaceable school of social virtues, such as respect for persons, gratuitousness, trust, responsibility, solidarity, cooperation.” (Benedict XVI, pope, 2012, p. 695)

1. A merciless world, devoid of relational goods

The global economic system sacrifices everything to efficiency and praises selfish interest as the engine of progress. The war of all against all would be the most effective way to foster creativity and raise funds to attend the victims of that battlefield. Oddly enough, it justifies the fact of hurting first in order to healing later. In the economic field, only interest counts (“Business is business”). The neighbour is not a brother but an antagonist who must be defeated or left aside (social Darwinism). Hobbes’ phrase sums up this attitude concisely: “Your death is my life.”²

1.1. A dialectic of perpetual conflict

Global indifference is a manifestation of the negative anthropological conception (*homo homini lupus*)³ which is at the basis of modern culture. It is assumed that man cannot be trusted and that his actions would always respond to the self-preservation instinct.⁴ Consequently, a dialectic of perennial conflict is justified at all levels: in economics, the war of interests is considered the most effective way to foster progress. In politics, a clash of civilizations (Huntington 1997) and a perpetual arms race would be inevitable to secure peace (*Si vis pacem para bellum.*) In medicine, a direct fight against harmful agents prevails over holistic medical treatments. At the socio-cultural level, the homogenization is used to get rid of any unpleasant diversity. The elimination of the diverse, at any level, would be a necessary pruning for the social tree to revitalize and grow.

1.2. A restrictive view of economic development

Our capitalist world claims to have increased material goods, but is more reticent at recognizing that it has also caused an alarming decline of relational goods, which are indispensable for people to obtain wellbeing and public happiness. It often ignores that development, to be fully human, must cover three fundamental dimensions: material, social and spiritual (or expressive). The first one refers to material goods and services (“well-having”) and it is usually measured by the Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁵ In 1968, US Senator Robert

² «Mors tua vita mea». (Hobbes 1642, c. 1,12)

³ This statement by Plautus (*Asinaria*, act II) is also assumed by T. Hobbes (1651, p. 98–102).

⁴ This would be the basic principle of Western civilization. (Adorno, Horkheimer 1998, p. 29)

⁵ Gross domestic product (GDP) “is defined as the monetary value of all goods and services produced in a nation during a given period, usually one year, whether by domestic or foreign-owned enterprises.” Gross national product (GNP) “reflects the output of domestically owned enterprises, both within and beyond national borders.” (Brezina 2012, p. 10, 12)

Kennedy stated that the GDP measures everything “except that which makes life worthwhile.”⁶

The social dimension of development indicates the level of integration and solidarity among social classes. The overall macroeconomic wealth can be of little or no use if it is accompanied by inequalities and a declining quality of life (Francis 2015 no. 43–47). A genuine integral development is not possible without equity and fraternal relationships.

The spiritual dimension (expressiveness, *eudaimonia*⁷) is measured by the so-called “happiness index.”⁸ Economic assets are fully such when they guarantee a good life, that is to say when they enable public happiness.

2. CST underlines the importance of family relationships

Catholic Social Teaching affirms that the principles of fraternity and gratuitousness are key factors for economic and social organization. Efficiency is only a means, not an end in itself, while charity is the main force of development. (Benedict 2009, no. 13)

Economic practice cannot be reduced to “giving to get more” (*do ut des*), proper to the neoliberal logic, or to “giving as a duty,” typical of a neo-statist system. The encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* asserts the importance of non-capitalist organizations, such as cooperatives, ethical finance, microcredit, and the Economy of Communion.

Today it is necessary to make room for gratuitousness in the public sphere, emphasizing the importance of personal relationships over material goods; i.e., we need “forms of economic activity marked by quotas of gratuitousness and communion.” (Benedict 2009, no. 39).

2.1. The market open to reciprocal gift

The Franciscan tradition has been especially relevant in indicating that the market is not a battlefield, but a place where people meet and help each other, exchanging what is superfluous for what is needed. Everyone benefits. The competition (*cum-petere*) is striving to innovate; i.e., to seek together the best solution, the most appropriate answer, so that well-being and happiness may grow.

⁶ Gross domestic product “measures neither our courage, nor our wisdom, not our devotion to our country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.” (Gans et al. 2012, p. 559)

⁷ Aristotle, 2012.

⁸ Cf. New Economics Foundation [online].