AN AUTHORITY OVER GLOBALIZATION? CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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Introduction

In late October, 2011, the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace issued a document that addresses the global financial crisis, which continues to impact negatively the economic well-being of nations, communities, and families. The writers of the document note that their task is not to involve the Church directly in the political affairs of any nation, but rather to safeguard human dignity and point towards the common good. The document views the financial crisis as a kind of Kairos – a moment of crisis and opportunity – for the global community “to shape a new vision for the future,” which ought to be characterized by “sustainable global economic activity grounded in responsibility.” The Pontifical Council avers that the role of the believers in the midst of the financial crisis is to ask “whether the human family has adequate means at its disposal to achieve the global common good,” and the Church must encourage all those who seek to enhance the quality of their lives to do so in accordance with the will of God.

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5 Ibid. Presupposition.
The document begins with a description and analysis of how the global financial crisis came about. The crisis is rooted "first and foremost," the council declares, in "an economic liberalism that spurns rules and controls." The document notes a particular dearth of financial regulation when it comes to the process of economic globalization, which at present includes the spread of market capitalism across the globe. Economic globalization has generated immense wealth, but the institutions that promote it contain no substantive mechanism, nor rules or regulations, for distributing that wealth fairly. Indeed, lacking in any such regulations, the current forces of economic globalization contribute to a growing gap between rich and poor. Thus, in addition to creating wealth, this process also exacerbates poverty. Decrying these economic inequalities and the resistance to regulations that would promote ethical globalization, the council argues for the necessity of "an authority over globalization.

The task of this essay is to provide a simple response to the Pontifical Council’s call for such a global authority. I will begin with a brief description of the authority over globalization that the document envisions. Next, I will situate this call for a global authority in the wider context of Catholic social teaching and

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6 Ibid. Section 1. North American readers in particular ought not confuse the council’s use of "liberalism" here with its common usage in Western, especially U.S., politics. The council refers to liberalism in the classic philosophical sense of total freedom and autonomy. This classic philosophical meaning of liberalism is in fact closer to what in U.S. politics would normally be characterized as "conservative." That is, lack of government restraints on individual behaviour and/or corporate activities.

7 Ibid. See also Robert J. Schreiter’s similar analysis in The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 7.

8 “Ethical globalization” is a term coined by theological ethicist David Hollenbach to describe how the processes of globalization ought to be used to create a more just socio-political global environment. See David Hollenbach, “Ethical Globalization and the Rights of Refugees,” Grace and Truth: A Journal of Catholic Reflection for Southern Africa 27, no. 2 (August, 2010): 29-42.

9 The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Section 3.
thought. Finally, I will draw out several strengths and weaknesses of this proposed solution for the global financial crisis and the prospects for global economic equality.

"An Authority over Globalization"\textsuperscript{10} and Catholic Social Teaching

A global public authority is necessary, the council argues, not only to regulate financial institutions, but also to consider a broad array of questions which affect the world community. Questions of "peace and security; disarmament and arms control; promotion and protection of fundamental human rights...management of migratory flows and food security; and protection of the environment" along with "economic and development policies" all require the attention of a global public authority.\textsuperscript{11} This authority is presented in the document as the ideal servant of the common good in the midst of ever-growing interdependence throughout the world. The authority ought to be "the outcome of a free and shared agreement and a reflection of the permanent and historic needs of the world common good. It ought to arise from a process of progressive maturation of consciences and advances in freedoms as well as awareness of growing responsibilities."\textsuperscript{12} The authority should protect "minority opinions rather than marginalizing them" and "consistently involve all peoples in a collaboration in which they are called to contribute, bringing to it the heritage of their virtues and their civilizations."\textsuperscript{13} A transformation is necessary from the cold realism of nations acting in their own self-interest towards the integration of "respective sovereignties for the common good of all peoples."\textsuperscript{14} Implemented gradually, perhaps

\textsuperscript{10} This is the title of Section 3 of the Pontifical Council’s document.
\textsuperscript{11} The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Section 3.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. Section 3.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. Section 3.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. Section 4.
as an evolution of the United Nations, this document contends that a global authority has become a necessary solution to global crises.\textsuperscript{15}

The vision of a global authority is certainly an ideal, but that does not necessarily make it unhelpful. Indeed, the description of an ideal global authority within an ideal society is somewhat typical of Catholic social teaching because, as theological ethicists Thomas Massaro points out, the task of the Church’s social teaching is to “contribut[e] to a world of greater peace and justice.”\textsuperscript{16} As Pope John Paul II notes in the social encyclical \textit{Solicitudo Rei Socialis}, “the Church does not propose economic and political systems or programs,” which would be outside of its purview of expertise. Rather, the Church is an “expert in humanity” such that it is called to reflect upon “whatever affects the dignity of individuals and peoples.”\textsuperscript{17} Catholic social thought thus often presents ideals in an effort to call humankind to strive towards greater peace, justice, and respect for the dignity of persons and all creation.

Indeed, the ideal of a public global authority is a recurrent one in Catholic social teaching. As the Pontifical Council’s document itself notes, the call for a global public authority originates in Pope John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical \textit{Pacem in Terris}. Since the United Nations, which bears in some features a resemblance to the suggested global public authority, was formed in 1945, \textit{Pacem in Terris} has been viewed in part as Catholic support for strengthening of the UN. Since the papacy of John XXIII, support for an entity that would be a kind of stronger and more authoritative version of the United Nations has been present in the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., Section 3.
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writings and speeches of all Roman Catholic popes. It has been a consistent feature throughout several social encyclicals.

The most recent encyclical to call for a robust global authority is Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate*, and it is helpful to understand the Pontifical Council's call for a global public authority to oversee international monetary and financial systems in the light of this encyclical. As North American theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill rightly points out, "the immediate precipitating cause and focal concern of *Caritas* is global economic meltdown."\(^{18}\) The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace takes its cue in placing front and centre the idea of a global public authority from this first and, thus far, only social encyclical by Pope Benedict. In the context of support for strengthening the UN, *Caritas* declares an urgent need for a "world political authority" that would "be universally recognized and...vested with the effective power to ensure security for all, regard for justice, and respect for rights."\(^{19}\) Cahill also sees this as the presentation of an ideal, remarking that Benedict has "remarkable expectations for the United Nations" and that "the very premise of global UN control – universal global recognition of and compliance with its ultimate authority – is highly unrealistic."\(^{20}\)

**Strengths: Setting Standards for International Institutions**

Despite the fact that the global public authority described by the Pontifical Council represents a model and even utopian vision of international justice, it can nevertheless be a helpful tool for evaluating and suggesting solutions for the global economic crisis.

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20 Cahill, 306.
Specifically, the ideal they present can provide a set of standards by which to judge existing or emerging global institutions. Based on the description which the document provides of the global public authority, we might judge international financial institutions by the ways in which they promote or harm subsidiarity, solidarity, and the common good.

With regard to subsidiarity, the document argues that the global authority “should put itself at the service of the various member countries...by creating socio-economic and legal conditions for the existence of markets that are efficient and efficacious precisely because they are not over-protected by paternalistic national policies...”21 In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, the public authority should be set up such that it “can allow each country to express and pursue its own particular good.”22 This illustrates the document’s sense that, even in the midst of a global public authority, local cultures and communities must be respected. Cultural diversity is prized over cultural hegemony. The more global institutions conform to this standard of subsidiarity in such a way that “guarantees both democratic legitimacy and the efficacy of the decisions of those called to make them,”23 the more such institutions can be judged to be morally good. By emphasizing subsidiarity, the council seeks to allay concerns that a global authority would really turn into a global authoritarianism. Decisions must be made in a way that the interests of local peoples are protected and promoted. At the same time, it also highlights a moral weakness within the forces of economic globalization, which often times do not operate under a principle of subsidiarity. As Todd Whitmore argues, subsidiarity is not only concerned with the intervention of the state into other spheres of life, but also with “the excessive intervention of any sphere in another” and “the excessive intervention of large and

21 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Section 3.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
remote institutions within a particular sphere.” Economic globalization tends to prefer the financial interests of large institutions over the political and economic concerns of smaller localities. Hence the council’s focus on a global authority marked by subsidiarity actually serves as a critique of international forces shaping globalization, which do not guarantee “democratic legitimacy.”

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace also connects the vision of a global authority to the principles of solidarity and the common good. “Thanks to the principle of solidarity, a lasting and fruitful relationship would build up between global and civil society and a world public Authority as States, intermediate bodies, various institutions – including economic and financial ones – and citizens make their decisions with a view to the global common good, which transcends national goods.” In accordance with these two principles, the ideal global public authority should encourage “policies aimed at achieving free and stable markets and a fair distribution of world wealth, which may also derive from unprecedented forms of global fiscal solidarity…” Solidarity and a commitment to the international common good thus become two additional criteria by which to measure the moral content of global financial institutions.

Weaknesses: Taking Sin into Account

Broadly speaking, Catholic social thought has a robust understanding of structural sin. Solicitude rei socialis makes reference to social sin or structures of evil over a dozen times. Here, structural sin is described as “linked to concrete acts of

26 Ibid.
individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove. And thus they grow stronger, spread, and become the source of other sins, and so influence people's behavior." Given the strong tradition in Catholic social thought of seeking to make visible structures of sin, alongside the reality that global financial authorities such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have consistently fallen short of the ideal, it would seem to be a flaw not to take seriously the idea of structural sin when suggesting the creation of a world authority over globalization. Ignoring or downplaying concerns about structural sin in suggesting a global public authority is problematic if it fails to recognize the tendency of great power to corrupt individuals and institutions.

Developing countries might well be suspicious of the call for a global public authority. Indeed a consistent critique of international economic and political institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the IMF has been that they are dominated by Western industrial states who use their powerful global positions to exploit and dominate weaker nations. Moreover, the Pax Romana International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs has averred that "the poor countries have a weak position and no voice in the globalization process." While there is some attention to this when the Pontifical Council acknowledges that "less developed or emerging countries" have been at times excluded from centres of power, there does not seem to be any real solution suggested to this inevitable power imbalance and the

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negative consequences for the developing world. From the theological perspective, sin is too pervasive to ensure that a global public authority would operate ethically without institutional checks and balances against domination and corruption, or that the prevailing forces in international politics would allow such a global authority to emerge that could check their interests. Presumably such checks and balances would fall under the rubric of subsidiarity, but much more must be said about how this works in a practical way and how various powerful stakeholders would have to be contained.

One possible form of checks and balances that might alleviate some of the effects of structural sin with regard to a global public authority is to strengthen the role of NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations) in mediating between the local and the global.31 Pope John Paul II recognized the importance of NGOs:

No organization...not even the United Nations or any of its specialized agencies, can alone solve the global problems which are constantly brought to its attention, if its concerns are not shared by all the people. It is then the privileged task of the non-governmental organizations to help bring these concerns into the communities and the homes of the people, and to bring back to the established agencies the priorities and aspirations of the people, so that all the solutions and projects which are envisaged may be truly geared to the needs of the human person.32

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31 For an excellent analysis of the work of NGOs in this context, consult Kevin Ahern, “Catholic NGOs: Mediators between the Local and the Global,” paper presentation, College Theology Society, June, 2012.

Here, John Paul II recognizes how important it is that local needs and desires be effectively communicated to those in power in national and international governing structures.\(^3\) Indeed, he clearly links NGOs to the international community’s ability effectively to promote human dignity. On the other hand, the Pontifical Council’s document largely seems to view the ideal of the global public authority as consisting of representatives from various nation states. Given the power differentials amongst various nation states, it would seem critical to include non-state actors in any global authoritative body. If NGOs can indeed be “alternative centres of power”\(^4\) then they can provide an important check on the inevitable power imbalances between competing nation states within a global public authority. Representatives from NGOs as well as representatives from large and small banks, corporations, and other businesses, and perhaps even representatives from small tribes and neighborhoods, should, at least periodically, be included and empowered within a world authority over globalization. This need to include non-state actors in any global authority seems particularly relevant in the context of the global financial crisis. The crisis was caused less by nation states themselves and more by financial institutions and corporations, and arguably those most negatively affected are small local communities and families.

The lack of inclusion of NGOs as well as other sorts of local and grassroots representation points to a final area of concern with the suggestion of a world authority over globalization: it represents a top-down rather than a bottom-up approach to solving a problem.

\(3\) Todd Whitmore notes that classical liberalism “tends to overlook those forms of association that form the matrix of most of human life and provide a mediating buffer between the person and the state.” Whitmore, “Catholic Social Teaching,” 76. Just as subsidiarity demands intermediate institutions with a particular society, so do NGOs fill that role on an international level.

that was arguably created by those at the top. The document would be more balanced if it argued for strengthening and empowering local organizations so that they can keep financial institutions within their communities accountable to their needs. NGOs might help to empower local communities to an extent, but they may be best at mediating between those on the top and those on the bottom. Thus a truly bottom-up method must also approach some foreign NGOs with a degree of suspicion in local contexts. While arguably good mediators between the local and the global, many NGOs nevertheless approach development and problems created by globalization by lobbying and bargaining within existing structures of government, rather than radically shifting power to the local community. A bottom-up approach might include NGOs which want to adopt community organizing strategies and ultimately hand over decision making power to local groups. The famous community organizer Paolo Freire argued that this kind of leadership involves “organizing with the people.” Such cooperation between NGOs and local contexts would be in accord with the traditional concept of subsidiarity, and it would further enhance the participation of people in working towards the common good, which are clearly concerns of the council. These forms of participation would seem especially important for African nations, as they continue to struggle and succeed in “addressing the challenges faced by the continent and demonstrating the inherent African capacity to handle its own problems.” It is important to support small financial institutions, such as co-ops, community banks, and credit unions. The need to strengthen these

organizations has already been intuitively recognized at the grassroots, as individuals, families, and small businesses have divested from large financial institutions and invested instead in local banks. Grassroots organizing will be as, if not more, important than a large global public authority and even top-down NGOs in holding large financial institutions accountable to the common good. To consider more thoroughly the role of grassroots participation in economic life also seems more in line with the full meaning of the principle of subsidiarity.

Conclusion

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has responded to the global economic crisis by suggesting the formation of a world authority over globalization. The notion of a world authority can function positively as an ideal, which provides a set of standards or criteria rooted in subsidiarity, solidarity, and the common good, for evaluating existing and emerging global financial structures. The more financial institutions conform to these standards, the more they uphold the values of social ethics, including human dignity, and the more legitimate they are as institutions that promote the common good. On the other hand, the notion of a world authority over globalization raises questions about structural sin and the nature of power that cannot be easily glossed over. In his analysis of *Caritas in Veritate*, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, insists that "What negates the principles of Catholic social teaching is the tendency for developed countries of the West and the East to pursue their economic interests in Africa at the expense of basic human rights, decent quality of life, and various indicators of development."38 The idea of a global public authority represents a top-down approach to problems arguably created by people and

institutions at the top. It is important therefore to consider seriously how to place checks against structural sin in the organization of any such global authority. Empowering people and organizations at the grassroots—that is a bottom-up approach—will be more efficacious than the formation of a global public authority alone.