

November 16, 2008
First Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The principle of the ownership of property is complex.

First, as Christians we should insist that it is rooted in the biblical concepts of the person and the family. According to Christian teaching about the nature of human beings, they have a strict metaphysical right to the things that they work for or have inherited from their parents. Property has a metaphysical root; it is an extension of personality and a proper expression of family.

Ownership of property is not a concession of the government. Indeed, governments exist for the purpose of protecting the metaphysical, God-given rights of the citizens, and one of those rights is the right to the ownership of property. It is not the business of government to take away the rightful property of its citizens.

Taxation, for the purpose of maintaining the services of government---including the care of the poor---is not a violation of this principle. We render to Caesar what is his, however, precisely because Caesar is our servant, not a thief.

Consequently, robbery by the government---for the purpose of redistribution of wealth, for example---is just another form of theft. It is the playground bully stealing the lunch money of those who are smaller than he is and have no ability to stand up to him. The Lord does not like bullies. God looks on such theft the way He looks on all robbery: He does not like it, and He has very harsh things to say about it. If one is in doubt on in this point, let him go back and re-read the sermon of Samuel just before the election of Saul (1 Samuel 8) or the story of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21).

This is not the whole story about ownership, however. The right of families to the ownership of their property is likewise subject to a prior claim---the claim of God, the Creator of all things. The very fact of death at the end of a human life testifies to God's prior claims over all His Creation.

Human ownership of property always has the sense of stewardship, which means that we human beings are really taking care of God's Creation. It is everywhere the teaching of Holy Scripture that the world and everything in it belongs to God, not to men. An impulse of human nature prompts men to regard their possessions as belonging to themselves. Left to its own lights, this is exactly what philosophy will declare.

Man, however, does not live by philosophy alone. Theology will insist that we also render to God what is His. According to Holy Scripture, men do not have absolute ownership of their possessions; they hold all such things in stewardship from God. The Lord planted Adam and Eve in the garden and commanded them to take care of it. He did not, in any absolute sense, give it to them. This is the proper theological principle on which Christian ecology is based.

Everything that God made belongs to Him. The earth and the elements are not given to men to exploit and abuse. Human beings are strictly answerable to God for how they treat His Creation. This is a long recognized truth of Christian theology: The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof.

This is why the Bible enjoins tithing on all God's servants. We have a mandate to give back to God the first ten percent of everything that comes to us---all the fruit of our labor and investments---as a sign that all of it belongs to God. The tithing of our income, a fundamental principle of biblical economics, expresses our practical recognition that we hold everything as stewards. This is why the Bible enjoins tithing on all God's servants. We serve a God who gives us everything and graciously blesses us to keep ninety percent of what comes to us. Therefore, our tithe is an act of thanksgiving as well as stewardship.

Indeed, the constant expression of thanksgiving and joy are the surest marks of good stewardship.

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