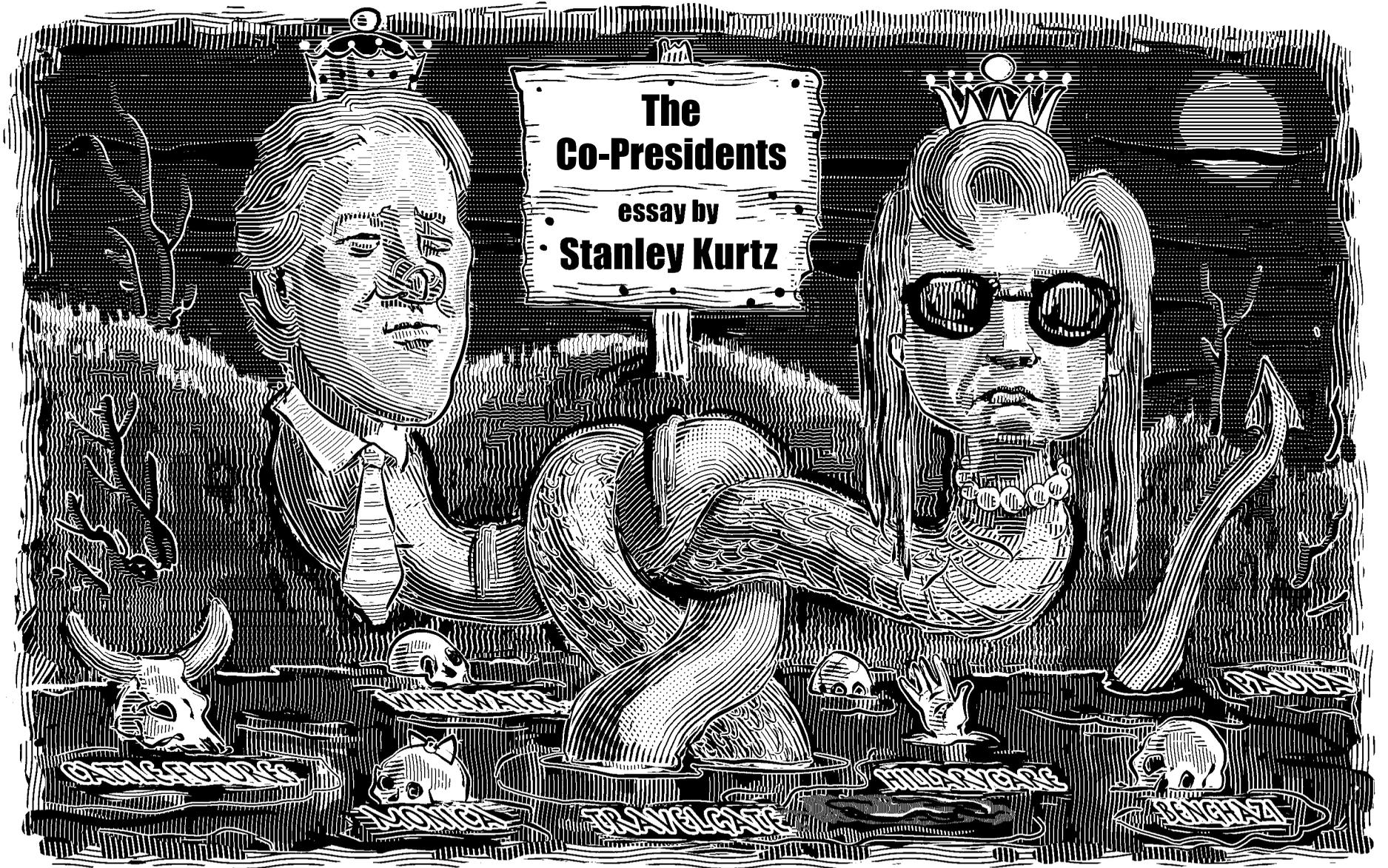


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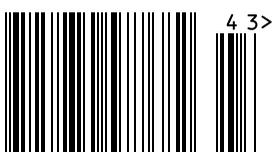
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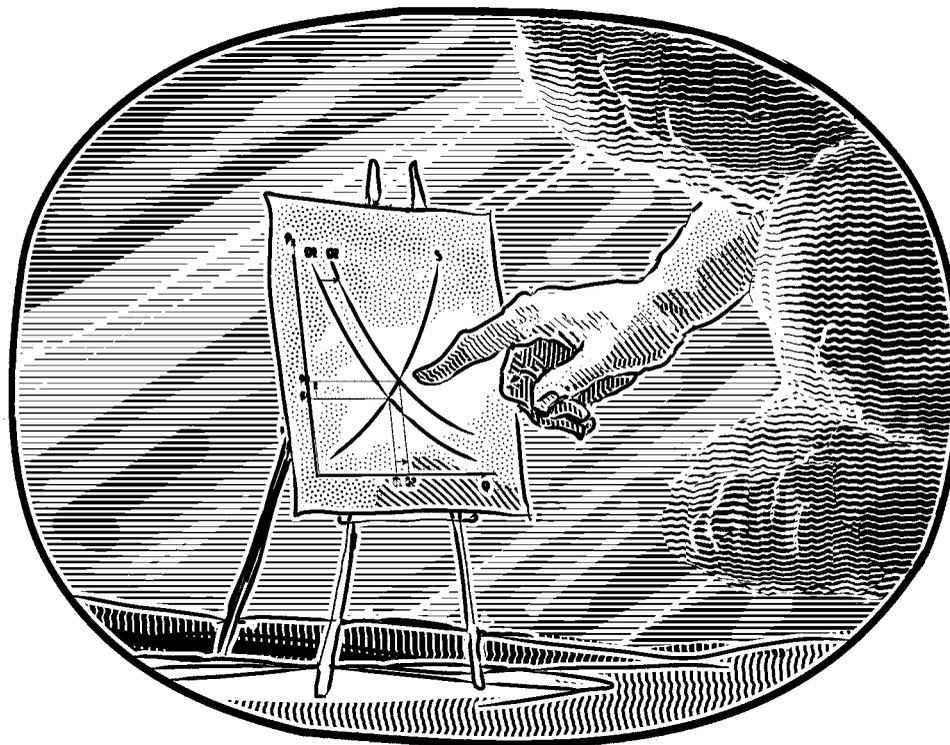
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Book Review by Michael M. Uhlmann

THOU SHALT NOT STEAL

Papal Economics: The Catholic Church on Democratic Capitalism, from Rerum Novarum to Caritas in Veritate, by Maciej Zięba, O.P.
ISI Books, 264 pages, \$26.95

Tea Party Catholic: The Catholic Case for Limited Government, a Free Economy, and Human Flourishing, by Samuel Gregg.
The Crossroad Publishing Company, 272 pages, \$24.95



THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC Church is a sizeable cloak of many colors. Its lineage is ancient and sacred, arising as it does from Biblical instruction and most emphatically from Jesus' own words and example. These scriptural passages have been elucidated over many centuries by Fathers and Doctors of the Church and, since the late 19th century, by encyclicals or other formal papal statements.

Inasmuch as the Church has been functioning (as Thomas Babington Macaulay famously put it) since cameleopards and tigers bounded in the Flavian amphitheater, the body of putatively authoritative social teaching is, as one might imagine, not merely copious but complex. One must say putatively because not everything passing under the label of Catholic Social Teaching (or Doctrine: the terms are commonly interchanged) is necessarily binding on the devout conscience. The problem is one of generality. A Christian is morally obliged to practice the virtue of charity, for example, but how precisely this should be done would seem to depend more

on prudential deliberation about particular circumstance than doctrinal formulas as such. One must not assign dogmatic finality to matters that inescapably entail questions of judgment. The problem is compounded when one moves from private behavior to standards appropriate to public life. What does the moral law of charity say about the duties of citizens or the character of a rightly constituted political order? Does it require, for example, that the modern welfare state is morally obligatory, or that Catholics have to support it?

MANY CLERICS SEEM TO THINK SO. In the United States, this view was vigorously advanced in the 1920s and 1930s through the work of Monsignor John Ryan, or "Monsignor New Deal" as he came to be known, an influential writer and advisor to Catholic bishops who argued, *inter alia*, that minimum wage laws, government-funded social security, and collective bargaining rules favorable to unions were more or less authorized, if not mandated, by

Church teaching. This disposition—which is, to say no more, highly debatable—continues to animate many American churchmen, some of whom tend to correlate Church doctrine with the Democratic Party's economic agenda.

In 2012, for example, two committee chairmen of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) sent a highly publicized letter to Representative Paul Ryan, the Republican vice-presidential candidate, criticizing his proposed budget plan for 2013. The letter argued that Ryan, a devout Catholic, was out of step with his church's teaching. Ryan fought back. Among other things, he cried foul to Cardinal Timothy Dolan, then president of the USCCB, who in turn wrote a public letter to Ryan that for all practical purposes countermanded the chastisement previously uttered by his episcopal colleagues.

The modern antecedents of this contretemps will be found in the clerical debates that occurred in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), when an influen-



tial group of liberal American bishops sought to mold a church more to their liking. One of their major initiatives took the form of the so-called “seamless garment” argument, a term coined in the 1980s by Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago. Catholic social policy, it was said, required a consistent commitment to a full range of “life” issues, not only on subjects like abortion and euthanasia, but no less on capital punishment, military strategy, and social programs. Whatever might be said about the argument’s theological merits, or about the intention of its advocates, its principal practical effect was to give liberal Catholic politicians a free ride on the abortion question—which explains why prominent figures like Joe Biden, John Kerry, Nancy Pelosi, and almost anyone named Kennedy or Cuomo have felt free to defy their church on abortion while calling themselves faithful Catholics. Their idea seems to be that it’s morally okay to support abortion, provided you also support Obamacare and increased appropriations for food stamps and unemployment compensation.

THE DUST-UP WITH CONGRESSMAN Ryan suggests that the seamless-garment faction is still alive and well among the bishops. Even so, the public policy enthusiasms that animated the episcopacy during the 1970s and ’80s seem to have diminished. The explanation, undoubtedly, lies in the long and extraordinary papacy of John Paul II, which, among other things, radically redefined the terms of debate on a host of theological and philosophical questions, including the Church’s social teaching. His intellectual legacy on this latter front is the chief focus of two recent books, Maciej Zięba’s *Papal Economics: The Catholic Church on Democratic Capitalism from Rerum Novarum to Caritas in Veritate* and Samuel Gregg’s *Tea Party Catholic: The Catholic Case for Limited Government, a Free Economy, and Human Flourishing*.

Both titles are somewhat playful. The author of *Papal Economics*, a trained physicist and Dominican priest who worked closely with John Paul, is fully aware that there is no such thing as “papal economics” in the strict sense, any more than there is papal psychology, political science, or sociology. Modern popes, however, have had rather a lot to say about the principles that ought to guide the study of such subjects; and in John Paul’s case, we were shown that a proper Christian anthropology can work side-by-side with free markets to enhance the dignity of the human person. Samuel Gregg, who shares Fr. Zięba’s enthusiasm for John Paul’s understanding, chose a delib-

erately provocative title for his book; the content, however, is far removed from what you might expect from a Tea Party rally pamphlet. Gregg, who earned his doctorate in philosophy at Oxford under the redoubtable John Finnis and now directs research at the Acton Institute, is a prolific author who knows how to engage a thoughtful audience with substantive argument.

IN EACH CASE, THE SUBTITLE TELLS ALL. Fr. Zięba’s book is a straightforward scholarly account of how papal thought on political economy has developed since 1891. In that year, Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* (*Of Revolutionary Change*), the first comprehensive Catholic appraisal of the Industrial Revolution’s economic and political consequences. Leo severely criticized the harsh conditions to which workers and their families were frequently subjected, called for a living wage and greater workplace safety, and castigated the selfishness of greedy entrepreneurs. He was equally harsh when addressing the false god of Marxist materialism and socialism’s utopian nostrums. Along the way he had kind things to say about the importance of the right to private property, which he described as “sacred and inviolable.” *Rerum Novarum* was, all things considered, an intellectual tour de force that would set the stage for almost all subsequent debate on economic matters within Catholic circles.

Insofar as Leo was equally pointed in criticizing the wretched excesses of both capitalism and socialism, some writers have argued that the pope was pointing toward a “third way,” in effect laying the spiritual and intellectual foundation for the welfare state. That view was certainly fashionable for a time (consider the aforementioned Msgr. Ryan), and remains strong among many Catholic bishops and intellectuals who style themselves as progressive thinkers. Fr. Zięba argues that third-way thinkers are too absorbed with the mechanical details of particular social programs (about which thoughtful Catholics can disagree). What they should focus on instead is what he sees as the grand theme of modern papal teaching on social questions, namely, how best to secure the conditions of human dignity and freedom against the dehumanizing tendency of modern political regimes. That project takes us well beyond a narrow concern with the minutiae of economic redistribution schemes and points toward a broader understanding of polity and economy. The more or less definitive articulation of this broader perspective will be found in John Paul’s encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (*Hundredth Year*; written on the anniversary of

Rerum Novarum) which, Zięba argues, is the definitive statement of Catholic social teaching in our time.

Samuel Gregg would agree, though he focuses less on the development of papal teaching as such than on the ways in which the American regime, rightly understood, is compatible with Catholic social teaching. His second goal is to show that the welfare state endorsed by many Catholic thinkers in fact deprives citizens of the dignity and freedom essential to human flourishing. His book begins with an instructive discussion of the life and thought of Charles Carroll of Maryland, the sole Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence, whose opinions on politics and economics owe more to theologians Thomas Aquinas and Francisco de Vitoria than to John Locke. Gregg uses that Carrolline thread to argue, persuasively, that one need not believe men are motivated by narrow self-interest alone in order to support free markets and limited government. Markets have their vices, to be sure, but the modern social service state, Gregg shows, is as indifferent to actual individual and social growth as the most callous exponent of *laissez faire* economics. Moreover, its programs often create perverse incentives. Government expansion of old-age retirement systems, for example, tends to correlate with lower marriage and birth rates and more divorce. The wisest Catholic social teaching, he concludes, has always been wary of Caesar’s grasp and should remain so when dealing with the social-assistance state’s blandishments.

IN CONTRAST TO MANY COMMENTATORS on Catholic social thought, Zięba and Gregg actually understand economics. This is a welcome relief from the theological sentimentalism that dominates so much clerical and professorial rhetoric on social policy. It is all well and good to talk about the right to a “living wage” or to “health care.” But most who talk that way haven’t a clue about what such concepts entail in practice, much less how to bring them about. They seem to assume that capitalist economies somehow magically produce a large supply of goods just waiting to be redistributed, in the name of Christian charity, to the less fortunate. Zięba and Gregg note that, among 20th-century popes, John Paul was the first to exhibit a sophisticated understanding of, and support for, the virtues of entrepreneurialism. If you want something to redistribute, someone has to produce it; it doesn’t fall as an accidentally beneficial rain from heaven.

Zięba and Gregg also understand, as did John Paul, the dark side of the welfare state,



and how many social-service programs advanced to help the less fortunate often rob them of human dignity or produce results as bad as, if not worse than, those they seek to remediate. Once again, the authors' understanding of economics and economic incentives sheds much-needed light on matters that, when they are discussed in Catholic circles, seldom rise above the invocation of feel-good pieties.

Given the specifically American focus of his book, Gregg is particularly good when noting that the machinery of the administrative-welfare state, quite apart from its inefficiencies, poses a threat that ought to worry defenders of freedom. To cite but one example: if the government is going to guarantee health care, the government gets to define what health care is; and when the government decides that insurance coverage for contraceptives and abortions are essential to "women's health," no one should be surprised.

TEA PARTY CATHOLIC IS ALSO A USEFUL addition to a growing literature about the nature of the American regime and its compatibility with Catholic teaching. Some critics (for example, Patrick Deneen at Notre Dame) believe the United States is

fatally flawed because its founding principles are irreducibly and irredeemably Lockean in their understanding of human nature and the ends of politics. That being the case, the argument goes, there is precious little room for contravening Catholic thought, and efforts to soften the materialist suppositions of this profoundly Lockean enterprise will come to nought.

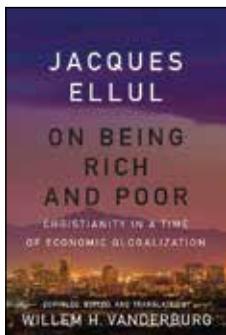
Other prominent Catholic thinkers disagree, philosophically and politically, with this pessimistic assessment, chief among them the late Richard John Neuhaus, George Weigel, and Michael Novak, to name only three. They are fully aware of the epistemological and moral flaws of John Locke, while arguing (a) that there is more than one way to read Locke and (b) that, in any event, America isn't simply Lockean. Its founding partook as well of other, richer streams of thought rooted in Christian premises. The founders, as the saying goes, built better than they knew. Rightly understood, the American regime has virtues that enable it to rise above Lockean materialism's baser tendencies. Samuel Gregg clearly belongs to this latter school, and his book may be considered an opening brief in what promises to be a long oral argument about the future of

the American regime—an argument that, as Gregg says, needs the insights that Catholic social teaching can uniquely provide.

Meanwhile, the narrower debate about the implications of Catholic social doctrine for social policy proceeds apace. When Pope Francis issued his first apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*) last year, liberals were heartened because some of Francis's language seemed to echo their own disdain for free markets. He spoke, for example, of the vices of trickle-down economics, adding that we could not trust "in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market." How deeply invested the pope is in this sort of rhetoric and critique is hard to say. Michael Novak, the gifted thinker whose ideas greatly influenced John Paul, has suggested that Francis's criticism is directed at the crony capitalism he experienced in Argentina and should not be read as an objection to free markets generally. Let us hope he is correct. But if one wanted to slip a couple of books into the pope's social policy reading list, one could hardly improve on *Papal Economics* and *Tea Party Catholic*.

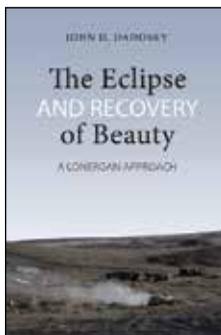
Michael M. Uhlmann teaches political science at Claremont Graduate University.

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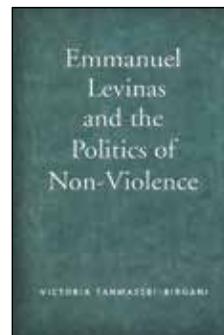
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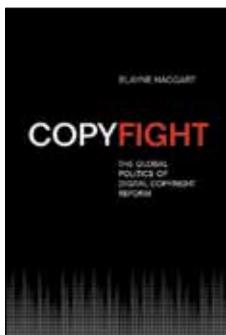
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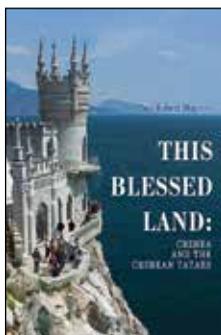
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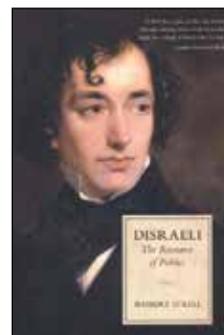
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