

# MICHAEL NOVAK (1933- )

Theologian, author, and former U.S. ambassador, Michael Novak currently holds the George Frederick Jewett Chair in Religion and Public Policy at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., where he is Director of Social and Political Studies. His writings have appeared in every major Western language, and in Bengali, Korean and Japanese. His book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, has been reprinted often in Latin America, and was published underground in Poland in 1984, and recently in Czechoslovakia, Germany, China and Hungary.

**QUESTIONS:** What do you think of Novak's interpretation of *Centesimus annus* and its implication for the relationship between religion and capitalism?

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## EPILOGUE: THE CREATIVE PERSON MICHAEL NOVAK<sup>1</sup>

### Seven Moral Themes

In the tradition of papal social thought from 1891 to 1991, seven moral themes particularly stand out, although a whole family of special words surrounds them. These seven, in particular, may be thought to add something to the Protestant ethic, as Max Weber defined it. They represent a distinctive Catholic contribution to the universal effort to develop a social ethic appropriate to our time. We have so far dealt with all seven:

- Recognition of the social nature of the human person, exercised in the family, in friendship, in civil society, and in universal solidarity
- The principle of subsidiarity, put in practice by the virtue of social justice
- The liberty and responsibility (hence the dignity) of persons
- The virtues necessary for exercising personal responsibility
- Creative subjectivity
- Unity amid diversity
- Emphasis on being rather than having; on character; and on grace

These seven terms recur, to be sure, in the context of other special terms characteristic of Catholic social ethics, such as justice and charity, *Imago Dei*, the preferential option for the poor, the social dimensions of the sacraments, the role of prayer, and the role of Jesus Christ as

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Novak, *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), pp. 221-237. Used with permission.

the Logos through Whom all humans (and all things) were made and as the measure of humans. In a well-considered network of terms, every term bears on every other. (Catholic theology is nothing if not highly specialized and well-considered, every term thoroughly meditated on worldwide for its ramifying meanings.)

In this book I have not developed the specifically Christological themes of Catholic social thought, since this volume is intended mostly for non-Catholics. For those who are chiefly interested in the bearing of this social theory on their own understanding of society, rather than in an exposition of the depths of Catholic faith (which they do not share), these seven themes point to an ethic accessible to all. For those who would like to explore further the role of Christ in giving final shape and measure to Catholic life, I recommend the writings of Hans Urs von Balthasar, and especially his *Theo-Drama*.<sup>1</sup> This highly original Swiss theologian and literary critic uses the categories of theater more than those of logic as the backbone of his exposition of theology.

It is not just to Catholics that modern encyclicals (“letters to the whole circle of nations”) have been addressed. Encyclicals do not demand that Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, ethical humanists, or atheists think as Catholics in order to understand them. They try to reach common universal ground. In this spirit, then, let us review and extend the argument.

### **The Right Stuff**

If Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* did not give two cheers for democracy and capitalism, he did give at least one cheer. From a church that has passed through many bad systems in history, and whose main business is eternal life, one cheer for *any* worldly system is quite a lot. For in Christian eyes, no worldly system deserves three cheers. All are flawed.

Consider democracy. Democracy, Reinhold Niebuhr once said (even before Winston Churchill did) is a poor form of government—but other forms are worse. Under democracy, the tyranny of a majority is as much a danger to minorities and individuals as is a single tyrant. Unbridled democracy, unchecked by protections for individual rights, unbalanced, irresponsibly exercised, is a misfortune.

Religious power has also often been abused, especially when intermixed with the power of the state. The medieval dream of close union between church and state, however understandable in its naiveté, compromised both religion *and* society.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that “unbridled capitalism” and even the “unbridled pursuit of wealth creation”—indeed, an unbridled *anything*—arouses fears in ordinary people. This is true even of unbridled liberty of thought and expression, although philosophers might offer better reasons for laissez-faire in this sphere than in any other.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, free societies in the West have in practice approached the institutionalization of liberty cautiously, by balancing one liberty against another. Under such practical arrangements, no liberty runs entirely unchecked. Every power is assigned its counterpower, every office its countervailing force.

The reason behind these checks and balances is a classical Christian and Jewish observation: *Every human sometimes sins*. From this fact is drawn a political principle: *Trust no one with excessive power*. Trust no institution, either.