

WHAT IS THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE PANDEMIC AND THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT ECONOMIC ORDER?

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When our Prime Minister speaks of New Zealand's relative success in getting the coronavirus under control, she refers to "our team of five million". That's a way of referring to *solidarity* and to the *common good*. A stronger commitment to solidarity and to the common good is what needs to carry over into future social and economic planning.

It's interesting that the virus has thrived so much in the nation most committed to free market ideology and least committed to the common good. Predictably, such a high number of deaths has been in the USA which has nothing even resembling a social security system. As someone else has said: health security (for the wealthy) via insurance is about "me"; social security is about "us". Comparisons are being made with nations such as Japan that are culturally more self disciplined and less given to self-indulgence (more "we" and less "me") which have had more success getting the virus under control. One doesn't need an apocalyptic imagination to see how lifestyles are connected to spreading the virus and recovering from it. Enough just to look at the facts.

What I am proposing here mainly translates into simpler language what is being said more technically by some economists and social commentators. It does indeed propose an on-going redistribution of wealth, but it does not neglect to look at where that wealth needs to come from.

Discerning commentators are calling for a new economic order in which governments would get a proper return for what they have invested in wealth-creating initiatives – instead of those returns being hoarded in tax-havens. In this way, those returns would become part of the revenue from which governments can continue to invest in services and initiatives that put people first, including small businesses.

Many of today's best known corporations have all been helped by government contributions, but then they became the biggest tax-evaders. One more than half suspects that government contributions for the development of anti-coronavirus vaccines will eventually end up with corporations' brand names, and with no financial return to those governments.

These aberrations are part and parcel of neo-liberal ideology. That ideology would privatize everything that can be turned into a marketable commodity. The State is expected merely to create the conditions in which private enterprise can operate without constraint and harvest all the takings. In USA, even war has been in a real sense privatized, and now the military industry requires that there be wars (off-shore) to feed its profit-making agenda.

Breaking with this ideology, and with its assumptions that everything has a market value, is also the key to preserving a sustainable environment. The material world isn't just a quarry providing raw materials for conversion to profits. It is also, and above all, our home. "Home" is where we can be with and for one another in life-giving ways – not the life-sapping ways of a grasping and exhausting economic rat-race which benefits the few and disadvantages the many. Greed and exploitation are at the root of terrible inequalities and terrible suffering of people, families and nations.

A root problem requires root surgery: without a vision we are only tinkering. Something other than just tweaking the present system is needed. As Pope Benedict XVI has said:

Our world has grown weary of greed, exploitation and division, of the tedium of false idols and piecemeal responses, and the pain of false promises. Our hearts and minds are yearning for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth, and where identity is found in respectful communion. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. (To young people, Sydney, 2008).

A country's economy needs to be strong, and there is a proper place for self-interest. But concern for others, expressed through solidarity and commitment to the common good, also *properly belongs*. Our concern for others needs to mean so much to us that it becomes a further incentive, and not a disincentive, to creating a successful economy. The needs of weaker members of society need to be *factored into* economic planning. That is different from giving market forces free reign and then trying to redress imbalances afterwards!

A different way of economic planning starts with what it means to be persons. For example: a key assumption of capitalist thinking is that the fruits of industry and commerce belong to those who provide the finance, and not to those who provide the human labour. In that way, workers and their jobs are perceived mainly as cost items – and costs are to be minimized or eliminated for the sake of maximizing profits. This leaves workers, their families and livelihoods very vulnerable.

An alternative system, based on what it means to be persons, recognizes that by providing their personal labour, workers contribute even more significantly to the enterprise than do those who provide finance, which is impersonal. And so the fruits of the enterprise/industry/business properly *belong* to the workers as well. More equitable ways of sharing those fruits need to be worked out.

Similarly, trading relationships, industrial law and commercial practices would make room for what Pope Benedict called “gratuitousness”. In other words, compassion, giving, and forgiving are factored into these relationships and practices. National policies and international law would include the needs of the world's poor, and migrants and refugees as a matter of right, not just of charity or goodwill. This is a radically different way of thinking and of relating to one another.

Ultimately, every economic order is a humanly devised construct, and the difference between them is a matter of choices. The model given us by neo-liberal ideology is based on the premise that “the business of business is business”. That has produced the social and economic distortions we are familiar with. In a model that gives highest priority to people – their dignity, their lives and well-being - “the business of business is people”. As the Maori proverb has it: he aha te mea nui o te ao? He tangata, he tangata, he tangata! (What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, people, people.)

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