Occupation Therapy

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Since September, the people occupying the park near Wall Street have spoken out boldly, albeit somewhat cryptically, about economic justice. The protests spread around the country. My home state of Massachusetts alone now sports 10 Occupy sites, from Dewey Square in Boston’s financial district to encampments on town commons throughout the Commonwealth. Not even an unusually early and heavy New England snowfall deterred the motley crews of protestors.

The Occupy Wall Street movement has attracted fervent admirers as well as fierce detractors. The sparse and fuzzy collection of grievances advanced by the protesters has been subject to criticism, ridicule and demands for clarification: What precisely do you mean to say about the abuses perpetrated by the privileged 1 percent? Why don’t you stop wallowing in the supposed indignities of being trapped in the 99 percent and do some serious bootstrap-pulling? Some of the public commentary has been quite substantive, while much of it has shed more heat than light.

Before the coverage of the Occupy movement devolves into mere name-calling or comes to be dominated by speculation about the likelihood of violent confrontations with short-tempered police forces, I would like to express one sentiment that has seldom been directed at the protestors.

Thank you!

The object of my gratitude is certainly not the aesthetics of the movement. My few trips to observe (and to support, at least in a pastoral way) the protests downtown confronted me with quite an eyesore. Cheap, ramshackle tents are never pretty, not even the funky red “spirituality space” tent where I conducted a liturgy recently on a soggy and threadbare carpet. Nor am I particularly grateful for the specific content of the messages I spotted. As an academic, I have a constitutional bias against sound-bite analysis, much less any slogans that would fit on placards. This distaste has kept bumper stickers off any car I have ever driven.

My gratitude to the Occupy movement grows directly out of my identification with Catholic social teaching and its mission to scrutinize and publicize serious social justice concerns. Anybody
committed to righting injustices and addressing inequities has plenty of reason to welcome these vigorous protests in our too often apathetic nation.

Admittedly, not all the claims of the protesters are accurate or could serve as a promising basis for public policy. But many of the things they say and the ideals they stand up for are just what we need to hear in these difficult economic times. In these years of high unemployment, blocked opportunity, crushing debt, anxieties about future economic security and deep doubts about recent economic policy, the United States desperately requires greater attention to the relationship between private gain and public benefits, and to principles like the common good and social responsibility. Anybody who thinks our nation can sustain much longer such vast disparities of income, sharp concentrations of wealth and cozy relationships between money and political power is simply not paying sufficiently close attention.

It would of course be unwise to exaggerate the congruence between Occupy Wall Street and Catholic teachings on economic justice. Catholic social thought displays a predilection for the harmonious and the irenic, qualities in short supply in the rhetoric heard at Occupy sites. But it is intriguing to note the overlap between the messages of the protesters and of church documents, particularly the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All” (now marking its 25th anniversary) and the Vatican document on international financial reform, released on Oct. 24. Multi-chapter documents will always be more satisfying, but Occupiers display an eloquence of their own.

Say what you will about the protestors—as resentment-driven agitators or impractical dreamers—I for one am grateful to them for spurring our consciences, sparking a sense of urgency and offering a vision of alternative economic practices that promote the countercultural principle of “people over profits.” It might just be that Occupy Wall Street has made more headway as a catalyst for change in the United States in the last 10 weeks than Catholic social teaching has accomplished in the last 12 decades.

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