

Boston College
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY
Continuing Education Encore Events

Transcript of

“Human and Church Community and the Evil of Economic Inequality”

presented on November 14, 2017 by
Rev. Kenneth Himes, O.F.M., and Rev. Michael Himes

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Dr. Thomas Groome:

Thank you, Melinda, and what an honor, what a pleasure, it is for me to have this good task this evening. I mean, a Himes twofer? And as Ken just said, you buy one, get one free.

And I'm so blessed to be able to do this and pull their leg a little bit, because they're both dear friends of many, many years. If the old cliché was ever true, it's true tonight: that there is no need for an introduction. That is true; there's no need for an introduction.

But I want an explanation. I need an explanation. I really do, and the question is, how did God pour so much gifts and blessings and graces and intelligence and teaching ability and perspicacity and faith and hope and love and charm into one particular family? Like, I mean what was God thinking of to be so generous to any one family? And they're not, I mean they're not even twins. God, God did this twice! That God did this with such generosity and graciousness and all charming personalities.

I mean compared to my family, for example. I mean I have a brother, a jockey. Yeah, a jockey. Much smaller than me as you might expect. And, but he rode 1,000 races, at least, and he won two. Like I mean in little, small, out of the way race tracks at the rear end of Ireland. He won two races, eventually.

I mean if these two guys had been jockeys, just imagine. I mean every other race, and the winner is Michael Himes, riding Ongoing Incarnation! The, the winner is Ken Himes riding critical Social Consciousness! I mean they'd have won every race. It doesn't make any sense.

Now Melinda gave me a whole list of things that I should say about them, but none of them explain my problem. None of them answer the question. How come God was so generous to this one family, these two brothers? I mean it's enough to make you jealous, it really is.

Michael, Michael is a priest of the diocese of Brooklyn. Taught at Immaculate Seminary for many years, and then in a moment of weakness went off out to that little school out in South Bend, Indiana. And we rescued him from there and brought him back to his senses and to Boston College.

He has written copiously, I mean lectured widely, four honorary degrees, and everybody who talks about him, especially that have had his course, talk about him as changing their lives. Seriously. He's just been a powerful pedagogue in people's life and a pedagogue of

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faith and hope and love, and has just had extraordinary influence on whole generations of Boston College students and Notre Dame students and, and everywhere he's been.

Ken then, is a Franciscan. Came to Boston College here about 12, 15 years ago. After 20 years at the Washington Theological Union, I remember, and in fact now that he's been such a success I will claim credit for it, I actually served on the search committee that found Ken to be the chair of our Theology Department at the time. And after a great stint in office there, moved on and is now a full-time teacher. Was the past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

And his passion all his life has been this interface of Christian ethics with the public life, with the public realm. A great example is his most recent book, *Targeted Killings and the Ethics of Drone Warfare*. Terribly important issue, terribly important topic. Typical of Ken to keep it on.

And then there's lots of things that are not in their CV at all. Like Michael, not to embarrass him, but when his good mother became incapacitated, was in a retirement home, literally for 10 years Michael went every night of his life to sit with his good mother and to keep her company in her retirement home. Now which one of you moms wouldn't love to have a son or a dad or a son like that? God bless. If Teddy ever comes to see me in the retirement home, I'll be surprised I think.

And then Ken, what do you say about, Ken is a real Franciscan, let me tell you. Now it's somewhat en vogue to be a Franciscan at the moment. I mean we have a Jesuit pope who dresses like a Dominican and tries to live like a Franciscan. And, and he does a fair job. I mean he approximates, he does fairly good. But Ken is a real Franciscan. I mean Ken drinks beer rather than Scotch. If he was a Jesuit, he would drink Scotch. But no, Ken is a Franciscan, he drinks, he drinks his beer.

So I could go on and on and I won't, but has anybody ever come up with an explanation to my problem? How did God give so much eloquence and gifts to one particular family? The only little saving flicker of hope I have, is that God did not make them totally unbelievably handsome. I mean okay, there's somebody over here, just objected, they think they're very handsome. But, but, but, so I don't know, I don't know where to go from here.

So let me just say, tonight their talk, their talk is called "Human and Church Community and the Evil of Economic Inequality." Well, maybe they're not so good at coming up with lecture titles, either. But it wouldn't matter, because even if they were going to read the phone book to us tonight, we'd all still be here. So please welcome, and how blessed we are to have them, Michael and Ken Himes.

Fr. Ken Himes:

So good evening. That's Mike Himes, I'm the other one. Tom was commenting upon our looks. Michael's the one who looks more like Ryan Gosling, and I'm the one who looks more like Tom Cruise. That's the easiest way to distinguish us. Actually, when Tom, if you knew my sister, you would know that my sister got all the looks in our family.

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And the truth be told, all the stuff Tom was saying about wisdom and knowledge, Michael got all the knowledge in the family. But as Tom said, I'm the Franciscan so I got even. I got all the money in the family.

But let me just say what we're going to do tonight. Michael's going to kick things off for a bit and talk on the theological foundations for this topic. Then after Mike speaks, I'm going to follow up and sort of further develop that theme in terms of what it leads to in terms of a sort of social ethic. Then by that point you're going to need to get woken up so we're going to give you a break.

And you'll get a little stand-up break and hit the bathrooms or get a cold drink or whatever. And then when you come back, Mike and I are going to do a little back and forth for a while. But then we're going to end with plenty of time for comments and questions and the like, okay? So without further ado, big brother.

Fr. Michael Himes:

Thank you. It's the only time that I get introduced by somebody with whom I shared a bedroom for years, as we did when we were growing up. It's an honor to be here. But it's an honor to be here, it's an honor to be invited, and it's a pleasure to be able to do this with Ken. I'm going to talk about the deep theological foundations for what Ken is going to draw consequences from.

So when I say deep foundations I mean very deep. I want to think about the words "God" and "community." And I'm going to suggest to you that you can't talk about the first without having the second. That anyone who thinks that they can talk about God apart from the experience of commitment to community, doesn't know what community is and hasn't a clue what the word God means in the Christian tradition.

First of all, let me point out this out, I do this when I introduce new undergrads to theology, I always begin the first day of class by saying to them, "I want you to remember there is no one named God. God is not anyone's name. God is not the name of a person out there older, wiser, stronger than you and me. There is no job description which is the description for God's work."

So that yes, it may not be God's name, but it's a role that only this one person can fulfill. No, it's not a job description. What is God? God is a handy dandy bit of theological abbreviation, which takes the place of talking about the Mystery which grounds and surrounds all that exists.

When we talk about God, we're talking about the experience of Mystery with a capital M. We're talking not about a particular person, because we can know persons; you can't know God, totally. You may bump into God, you may have experienced God, but you haven't captured God. We never comprehend God, because the very image of comprehension would suggest that our minds are big enough to enclose God. If that were true, then you would be God.

So we know that we can't talk about God as a person. We can't talk about God is a force that penetrates our lives. What do we believe when we talk about God? We mean Mystery,

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the Mystery which grounds, that surrounds all that exists. The answer to the question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" That's what we mean when we talk about God. But how do you talk about God, if it's a mystery? What you have to do is avoid talking about God too confidently, as if you know what it means.

The most important thing I do with students in theology over the years is to take apart their ideas, the things they believe in. Not because I don't believe, or because I don't want them to be believers, but because I want them to realize that believing is a problem. Believing is a struggle. Believing requires commitment and work and energy and dedication. It's not something that you arrive at by deducing from first principles. It's not something that you work out like you work out a geometric problem and end up saying "and therefore x equals God." That's not what we mean when we talk about God.

We mean something infinitely richer and much more mysterious. We mean a kind of experience that we have, that we have to talk about but know we can't talk about adequately.

I often say that all of theology gets done between two poles. One pole I'll embody with a quote from from Ludwig Wittgenstein. Now I don't know whether you were reading Wittgenstein earlier today. I'm sure a day hardly goes by that you don't reach out and pick up a copy of Wittgenstein. But Wittgenstein is certainly one of the great names of the 20th century to conjure with in philosophy. And Wittgenstein wrote one book. He only published one book in the course of his lifetime. But that book had a powerful impact. It's only about 110 pages long.

It has, Tom was teasing us about our title for this presentation this evening. Well, it's in the spirit of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein's only book was entitled *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Doesn't that make you just want to rush out and see the movie? The *Tractatus* was received with such astonishment and such delight by his teachers at Cambridge, where he was studying still at the time, he hadn't done his doctoral dissertation, he hadn't received his degree. The faculty voted him an honorary degree and then hired him, as a result of that one book.

But then he never wrote anything else, the whole of his lifetime. They thought that he was right, that he hadn't written anything. In fact, he had written tons of work, which was discovered after his death all lined up in crates that have since been published, as unfinished work. But Wittgenstein has had a profound impact on contemporary thought.

And nowhere more than through the last sentence of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. That one work that he published in his lifetime. The last sentence of that book is, I suggest to you, quite possibly the most famous single sentence in the whole of 20th century philosophy. The last sentence of the book is, "of that about which we can say nothing, let us be silent." Or if you want a good Brooklyn version of that, "if you don't know what you're talking about, shut up."

And that, I think is the first and most important thing we have to say about talking about God. If you don't know what you're talking about, and none of us do when we talk about

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God, then let us be silent. Rather than natter on as if we know what we are talking about, which is not just foolish, it's blasphemous, we ought to just be reverently silent.

It's not unlike at the end of the Book of Job. You remember at the end of Job, Job challenges God to come into court and defend the treatment that Job has received from God throughout his life. He has now lost his wife, his health, his children, his home, his property, his health. He's a leper sitting out on a dung hill.

And his friends keep telling him, "just tell God you're sorry." And he keeps saying, "but I haven't got anything to be sorry for, I haven't sinned." And his friends keep telling him, "No, you must. Don't say that, because that will only get God angry at you, further angry at you and you won't you won't survive this at all. Just tell God you're at fault and you're sorry, even if you don't feel it, even if you don't mean it." And God says, rather Job says he's not going to do that.

He challenges God to come into court. God does and proceeds to respond to Job with two long pieces of Hebrew poetry. Probably the most beautiful poetry that's ever been written in Hebrew, those two last, great speeches of Job. In which God says to him over and over again, "Where were you when I laid out the sands of the sea? Were you there to number the stars as I put them in place? Can you put a hook to Leviathan's jaws? Can you control the depths of the oceans?"

And at the end, and he leads Job to the point where Job concludes the book by saying, "I've been speaking about things too deep for me. I will put my hand over my mouth." Job's final response is, "God is a mystery and I know I can't answer, I can't demand an answer to that question. And I oughtn't to make my partial answers into attempts at whole answers. So let me simply put my hand over my mouth." That's very much what they, Wittgenstein, was suggesting. If you don't know what you're talking about, let us be silent.

But, there is another pole which balances that. Because if that were all we had to say, then we could go home right now and you would have a free evening. But instead, there is another quote, which I'm going to take from T.S. Eliot. There are many people I could cite as an example of this other end of the spectrum. "From that about which we can say nothing, let us be silent." This other line, this other figure is T.S. Eliot, the great English poet. English and American poet. And Eliot, in one of his essays, he's talking about poetry. But I think it applies perfectly to all religious language. Eliot says, "There are those things about which about which we can say nothing, and before which we dare not keep silent."

There are some things that you know in advance you can't say right. But you know also that you can't not say something. You can't just put your hand over your mouth and be silent. Think about probably the most common example, and therefore the most hackneyed, is, "I love you."

If you are talking to someone who matters deeply to you, who you are passionately concerned about, whom you would do anything to assist, whom you reach out to help in any way you can. If you are talking to someone like that, you have to say in some words, "I love you." Not to be, not to say it is not to be silent, it's to be destructive. You have to say something. But you have to know in advance that it won't be enough. Are there three more

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hackneyed words in the English language than "I love you"? Is there a more hackneyed phrase than, "I love you"? But nevertheless, we have to go on saying it, because to say nothing would be to betray it.

So on the one hand, we have to know that anything we say is inadequate, on the other hand, we have to know we can't not say something. And it's in that tension that all of our language about God, all of our language about faith, all of our language about Church and Eucharist, all of our language about grace, all of our language about the meaning and direction of life, comes from within that space. The space between Wittgenstein and Eliot. Between "that about which we can say nothing, let us be silent," and "those things about which we can say nothing and dare not keep silent."

Now in that space, how are we going to talk about God? Well I'm going to suggest to you that we have to talk about God as a communal reality. That if we think about God as the Great One, we lose the meaning of God altogether.

We can only come to know God if we engage in community, because God is a kind of communal reality. A kind of communal reality, remember, think of how many times you probably already today have said that you act in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. We don't say we're acting in the name of the One, we say we're acting in the name of the relationship of the Three. That it's the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit, which is what we mean when we talk about God.

How is God both completely one and completely three? Very difficult question, unless we realize that we're talking about God as being a kind of an experience, rather than a person. God is something that happens to us, not someone that we go out and find and meet. That we take God as the result of an ongoing experience. And the experience we learn from is the experience of *agape*. The experience of self-gift.

You know, of course, that there are really three words that in the time of the New Testament would have been used in Greek that we might translate today, and often people do translate them, as love. But they really mean quite different things. The first is the word in Greek *eros*, from which we get "erotic." So obviously, as you might expect, it refers to sexual love.

But not only sexual love, it refers to any love which seeks and finds satisfaction in the person or thing loved. So if somebody says, "I love playing golf." Well, that's *eros*. If somebody says, "Did you see that film? I loved that movie." That's *eros*. It's something that you looked forward to seeing, and having seen it, it gave you great pleasure. That's *eros*.

Eros is wonderful, *eros* is good, there's nothing wrong with *eros*. It's just that that's not the word that the New Testament ever uses to describe the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Then there's the word *philia*, which also gets translated as love. But *philia* is the word we use that it gives us philosophy and philanthropy and Philadelphia. It's a word that means companionship or friendship. And it's very important indeed, but you see you get delight and pleasure from the company of the person that you love. So it's a form of love, but it's

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also a form of *eros* love. It's a form that's seeking satisfaction in its desire and in its eagerness to love.

But then there's the rarest word, the word that is used, but most unusually used, in Greek. But it's used all the time in the New Testament. I would suggest to you it's on word on every page of the New Testament. Sometimes not spelled out, but it's talked about. And that is the word that we translate as love or charity often. Following Saint Jerome who first translated it as charity at the end of the fourth century: *agape*.

That *agape* is, I like to translate it as, "self-gift" to make sure that we don't confuse it with love as *eros* or love as *philia*. It's self-gift, it's the giving of the self to the other. And over and over again throughout the New Testament, we hear God described as the source, the origin, the meaning, the depth of *agape*.

Let me give you an example of what I mean when I say that *agape* is the center of this. *Agape* is a, it also illustrates why it's so hard to talk about God. It comes from one of the two probably most familiar, most famous parables attributed to Jesus. These, the two parables that are probably the most famous, the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, both appear only in Luke's Gospel. They're not in John, they're not in Matthew, they're not in Mark. But their use is something that we have to look at carefully because it's frequently misunderstood.

I've often said over the years that you give us a text and 2000 years to work on it and we'll make hash of it all the time. So it's not surprising to realize that this parable has so often been misinterpreted, I think. And badly misinterpreted. It's the parable that we call the Prodigal Son. Though it's often been observed it's really about the prodigal father, rather than the prodigal son.

But remember how it begins. It begins, it's always important when interpreting the parables, I find, to ask who are they told to. Sometimes we're told in the text that Jesus told this parable to his followers. Sometimes we hear it's to his disciples, a bigger group than just the immediate followers. And then we hear sometimes that he told this to the crowd. And sometimes he tells it to a particular person. Sometimes he tells it to his critics.

Well this time he's talking to his critics, if you remember in Luke's Gospel. He's gone to have, he's been invited into a town, and been invited to have dinner with the local tax collector. And of course the tax collectors were regarded as both crooked and traitors to Israel, traitors to their people. And so the Pharisees stand about saying, "Look at this, he pretends to be sent to us by God. And he's hanging out with people like this."

And so the story begins with the question, "Who should you have dinner with?" Keep that in mind, because that's how the story will end too. That same question will come back. We hear there was a certain man who had two sons.

Now notice the things that we find in the parable, and notice what's left out. For example, we never find out where is mom in this story? I mean didn't they have a mother? Wasn't their father married? Has she died? We don't know. We never find out, because we don't

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need that piece of information for this story. What we need to know was that there was two sons, a man with two sons.

The younger one came to him and noticed that in the time of Jesus, the standard way in which inheritances were arranged, were arranged in Israel, was that when a person died, all of their estate was left intact to the eldest son. Daughters inherited nothing, sons-in-law inherited nothing, younger sons inherited nothing. An eminently sensible arrangement, by the way.

[LAUGHTER]

Then when we try to put ourselves back in the place of those Pharisees, who had been the occasion for Jesus to start telling this story, we notice that there's something strange in the request that we get from the youngest son right off the bat. He says, in effect, "Father, why should I hang around until you finally drop dead? Give me my share of the inheritance now."

Now quite apart from the fact that it's unthinkable in our day to speak to a parent that way, and that in Jesus's time, in the extraordinarily and overwhelmingly patriarchal ancient Near East, to talk like, for a younger son to talk like that to a father would simply be beyond the pale. But it also makes no sense. "Give me my share of the inheritance." This is the younger son, he has no share of the inheritance. He doesn't get a nickel whether dad's alive or dead. So what is this about, it sounds like an absurd request.

And what do we hear, the father, the father interestingly enough in this story, we never hear actually speak to the, to the youngest son. So the father did that, he turned half the estate into cash and gave it to the younger son who then went off to a foreign land and spent it on wine, women, and song. And having wasted the family, half the family estate that he had been given, he ended up attending pigs on a farm in that land.

Now notice, it's always interesting as I say, to see what the parables include and what they leave out. We don't hear about anything about their mother, but we hear that he was tending pigs. Why did we have to know it was pigs? Why couldn't we just know he was doing farm work? Because this is a Jewish story, told by a Jewish storyteller, to Jewish hearers. There's nothing lower than tending unclean, un-kosher animals. He's tending pigs. To end up envying the slops thrown to non-kosher animals, you can't get lower than that. You've hit rock bottom at that point.

And so he came to his senses. Now what does it mean that he came to his senses? Well far too often, as we've preached this parable over the course of centuries, I think we've made the mistake of turning it into a story about repentance. As if he came to his senses means he started to repent for the way he had treated his father and his family. It doesn't say that, it simply says he started to come to his senses.

And then we find out what it means, that he came to his senses. And he said to himself, "At home even the servants eat better than I am here. I know what I will do. I will go home and say to my father, 'Father, I have sinned before heaven and against you, I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And so he set off.

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One reason and one reason only in the whole parable is given for the son's return to the family. And it's got nothing to do with feeling bad, needing to repent, missing the family. It has to do with the fact that they eat better at home. You see, I think the thing to realize is this is not a story about growth and change and development. It's not a story about how the younger son grew up and became really mature and emotionally intact.

This is a story about a young man who is an absolute selfish twit at the beginning of the story and is an absolutely selfish twit at the end of the story. He doesn't change at all. Neither does the father, because just as we've seen the father behave unaccountably, and doing what the son asked for, that made no sense, giving him half the estate.

When the father sees the son coming from a great distance, he runs down the road to meet him. And the son begins, notice word for word, syllable for syllable, the prerecorded message that he had decided on: "Father, I am not worthy to be called your, I've sinned against heaven and before you, I am not worthy to be called your son." And he doesn't get to the last line, "Treat me as one of your servants." He's cut off by the father before he could even finish this little speech that he's prepared.

The father turns, not to him, but turns to some of the servants presumably in the family, and says "Quick, get sandals for his feet, get a robe to put on him, slay the fatted calf, invite the neighbors." Scoops the boy up and takes him in and they start the feast.

Nice story, but the real point now comes on the scene because there's a third character to this story. The third character, whom we haven't met yet, is the older brother. And we hear the older brother was coming in from been working all day on the family farm. This is your ultimate good kid. I mean he really is a little sickening. I've often thought that Jesus at this point lays it on a bit thick in Luke's Gospel.

The older son came in having been working all day on the family farm, what a good kid. And he hears the sound of the party going on inside the house and he stops one of the servants to ask what's the occasion for all this noise. To which the servant replies, and I've never seen an English translation that gets this quite right, because it's not in what the words say, it's in the way that they sound in Hebrew, and Greek rather. They drip with sarcasm. The servant says, "Your, your brother has come home having wasted half the family fortune on loose women and your father is giving a party."

[LAUGHTER]

I mean, even the servants think the old man is crazy. This is bizarre behavior on the part of the father. Up until now, notice all our sympathy should be with the older son. Now, our sympathy shifts, because what we hear instead is, and so the younger son is in having dinner. The older son refused to go in and eat with them.

Now even today if one of our students here at B.C. had a fight with his older sister and refused to go home at Thanksgiving, "I won't sit down at a table with my family if she's there." We'd say, "Well, that's a bit much. You know, not sit down with your family at Thanksgiving." But if that's true of us, again imagine in the patriarchal ancient Near East,

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what it was like to say, "I won't sit at the table and break bread with my father." It's almost unthinkable.

But the older son takes that position and what does the father do? Well just what you'd expect him to do. He's hopeless as a parent, by this point. He's, if you want, if points about good parenting, read Dr. Spock. If you want points about *agape*, read Luke's Gospel. But don't confuse them. [Laughter] It's not about his growing up or maturing or failing to, it's about the fact that he initially refuses to go out and eat with them. And so the father pleads with him to come in and have dinner.

And now we get to the climax of the whole, the whole parable, what it's all been aiming at. And by the way, remember how did it begins? As a story that we were telling the Pharisees who were saying, "You shouldn't have dinner with him." Where have we gotten to at the end of the story? To an argument about who you should go in and have dinner with.

Well instead, we find the young son saying to the father, the older son saying to the father, "I have worked and slaved for you every day of my life. I've done everything you ever asked of me and you've given me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends. Oh the days you could keep them happy with a goat. But you've never given me so much as a kid goat to celebrate with my friends and now this wastrel, this bum, having gone through half our money with his with his loose women, comes home and you slay the fatted calf for him. It's not fair."

The cry of every sibling since Cain. [Laughter] "It's not fair. She could stay up till 10 o'clock, I have to go to bed at 9:30. It's not fair." And what does the father do? The father's response is he agrees with everything the son says. He says, "You're quite right, you've been always with me and everything I have is yours." There's 50% less thanks to Junior but we won't bring that up right now. "Everything I have is yours, but the one who was lost, is found. The one who was dead is alive. We had to have a party. We had to rejoice," end of story.

What's the story about? It's not about repentance. Nobody repents in the story. It's about the incomprehensibility of God's love. It's about the fact that just as neither son ever really understands that father, neither son, neither the older nor the younger son, ever figures out what makes the father tick, what decides what makes the father act the way he does.

So Jesus is saying, "So it is with my Father in heaven. You're talking about, about justice, and about law, and about what is required, and what is demanded, about what seems to be equal, and what, what it means to divide things up with equality. You're talking about that as if that's the center of things. It's not. The center of things is pure self-gift. It's not something that the father owes the son or that the father has to do. It's something that the father does simply because it delights the father to do it.

You see the sign of *agape* is joy, the sign of *agape* is delight. It's not something that, "I love you though I'm gritting my teeth to love you, but by heaven I'm going to love you. [Laughter] Whether you want me to love you or not." [Laughter] That completely misses the point. The sign something is *agape* is that in the delight, the joy, the happiness that it gives you.

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The father is absolutely happy. Neither son is, but the father is completely happy at the end of the parable. Although he knows that neither son will ever understand him. That's what *agape* is about. That's what Jesus is telling us in page after page after page of the Gospel. And the sign of that, the sealing of that will be at the Last Supper. But in order to understand the sealing of it, we have to notice one all important thing.

What do you need in order to live agapically? You need someone to give the gift to. They may appreciate the gift, they may fail to appreciate it. They may ignore it, they may be delighted with it. That's not the concern. The concern is, have you given yourself to another? Have you given yourself away to others? In countless ways. Some very big, some very minor, some that will be noticed and appreciated, some that people might actually find a little irksome at times.

But the goal is to love one another selflessly. To give ourselves as gifts to the other. That's where we discover God. And it means that we cannot discover God unless there's a community. If it's only me, if there's no one to whom I am giving myself, if I am not able to reach out concretely to others agapically, then I can't know what God means.

Because the word God is not the name of a person, it's the name of a relationship. You see when we read, and it's the clearest and simplest statement of all of this, in John in the New Testament. In the First Letter of John chapter 4, verse 8, and again in verse 16, that God is love, that God is *agape*, that's what we mean by the word God, then what we're doing is we are saying God is the name of a relationship. God is not the name of an individual. God is the name of a dimension of our experience which is communal. You can't know God apart from community.

Which means, I mean we could talk about this forever but I'm going to jump to the chase at this point so that I give Ken plenty of time. What we are saying is that if you are going to try and understand God, you must do so by living communally. If you would absent yourself from a communal dimension, if you deny or reject living together as a community, you can't know what God is.

Or if I can now put it into more familiar, perhaps, and more theological sounding words, if you are not a member of the Church, you are always wrong when you talk about God. Not because you haven't learned the catechism, or you haven't heard the doctrine, or we haven't taught you the creed. Because you haven't had the experience of which God is the name.

Until you have the experience of pure and perfect self-gift, until you have the experience of *agape*, until you've glimpsed it as a possibility for yourself, you don't know what God means. I've often said to students over the years, graduate students most often, who have come to talk to me about various issues, sometime more personal than theological, I've often said to them, "You know what we mean when we talk about God? Let me suggest to you to think about it this way. Think about God as, well, think about the way in which you find yourself delighted by the existence of another person. Have you ever had the experience," I ask them. "Have you ever had the experience of just finding yourself for no particular reason that you could explain, utterly and totally delighted by the existence of another person? Now maybe somebody you know very well. Maybe somebody very close to

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you. Maybe your spouse, or your parent, or your child, or your sibling. Or it maybe somebody you barely, you may never have spoken to at all, you may be sitting opposite them on the T. You don't know them, you'll never see them again, but you find yourself quite unaccountably, absolutely delighted that they exist. That you find yourself saying, 'What a good thing the world is that it has that person in it.' Not for any particular reason that you can explain, but simply because it delights you that they are."

Well I suggest to you the source of that delight, the source of that joy, that's what we mean when we talk about *agape*. That's what we mean when we talk about God. We're all endlessly caught up in a community. Sometimes that community is very apparent, sometimes it's very much obscured by our experience. But if you've never had the experience of absolutely delighting in the life and the existence of someone else, you can't know what we mean by the word God.

That's why it sometimes takes a long time to get to the point where you can talk about God meaningfully. It's not something you can necessarily do early on, because you have to wait until that experience strikes you. And when it does, you'll never be able to forget it. The one thing you can't deny is that something very powerful happened. You may try and write it off as some sort of odd experience that you've had, some sort of strange psychic quirk. You may regard it as the voice of God at work in your heart. But the one thing you can't deny is something happened, and it was very important. And what it does is it reveals to us what we mean by the word God.

You see, that's why when we come to the Last Supper, especially in John's Gospel, what unites us at the Last Supper is, you notice, it's a great Last Supper speech of Jesus running from chapter 13 through 17 of John's Gospel. You remember the things that you don't hear in that extraordinary address that John's Gospel has Jesus give to his followers. We hear that we should love one another. We hear that the Father loves Jesus. We hear that Jesus loves the Father. We hear that Jesus loves us. We hear that the Father loves us. But the one thing we never hear is that we are to love God. No place in the whole of this talk that Jesus gives does he ever say, "You ought to love me. You ought to love my Father."

Because, you see, God is not another object for our love, God is our capacity for love. It's not, it's not that we set out to love God, it's that in loving anyone, we're experiencing God. It's always a matter of being part of a community.

That's why it's so important to be part of the Church. It's not that the Church is the community that's got all the answers to all the important questions. It's not that the Church is the one who knows the truth and doles it out to us in doctrine. It's not that the Church is the place that we go to celebrate the liturgy in a way that touches us or moves us, at least occasionally. It's not that the Church is any of those things. It's that the Church is the name we give to the network of people whom we love and who love back. We're talking about a community of *agape*. And if you've never experienced that community, you can't know what we mean when we talk about God.

So that if we're going to talk about the way in which we ought to respond to community, the way in which we build communities, the way in which we build a society, the way in which we invite people in to join with us in building a community, the way in which we become

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Church is our experience of God. It's not something we do that God rewards. It's the way we are in touch with God. God is the basis of our community.

And the surest sign of God's presence is our capacity to endlessly rejoice in the good of the other. That's how Saint Thomas Aquinas defines charity or *agape*. As you know, Thomas has a gift for sounding dry as dust, but he's always brilliant. If you simply take time to parse what Thomas is saying, it's breathtaking. And no more so than in his definition of charity or *caritas* in Latin. Or *agape* as it would be in Greek.

He defines charity or *agape* as the effective willing of the good of the other. Now that sounds, as I say, dry as dust, but think about it for a moment. The effective willing of the good of the other. It's not an emotion. It's not a passion. It's not something that happens to us. It's a choice. It's something we will. We decide to do it. We choose it. It's not that it chooses us, we choose it. We choose to love. We choose to give ourselves away. It's the affective willing of the good of the other. It's trying to discern what is the best for the other person and then acting to make it real. And it's doing it effectively. It's making a difference. It's not just wishing, giving somebody our pious wishes. It's not simply go home and be warm and comfortable and well-fed. We've got to do something to help that person be warm and comfortable and well-fed. It's about the doing, about the acting out effectively of our willing the good of the other person.

That's immensely complex. It's the crown of all the virtues, Thomas says. And it's the source of all community. It is the ground on which equality, a very strange notion, equality, as I think you'll hear from my brother Ken, it's the ground on which equality makes sense. And in order to make sense of it I now hand it over to my brother, for the time being.

Fr. Ken Himes:

Well, I think it was Mario Cuomo who said, "You engage in running for office using poetry, but you govern using prose." [Laughter] And we've heard the parables and the poetry. I'm going to give you the prose, okay? But in accord with what Michael has laid out.

I want to talk about how might we use this theological tradition of the Church to shape the way that believers respond to social issues. In particular, how does belief in the Catholic tradition's understanding of God, human beings, and the centrality of community, the things that Michael talked about, how did those things or how ought those things impact how we might think about economic inequality?

As you may know, in 1891 Leo XIII wrote a document called *Rerum Novarum*, in which he presented what he saw as the primary social concern of his moment. Which he said was the plight of the workers. Leo claimed belief in human dignity, and the moral equality of all persons to be foundational for any proper view of economic justice. Workers had a right to wages that would secure essential material goods, to have a decent life for the worker and the workers' dependents.

But at the same time, Leo did not explore the full possible implications of moral equality and equal dignity of persons. He didn't look into the full implications of that claim for social, political, and economic life. Leo was of noble ancestry. He had no strong objection to social

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hierarchy and castes in a society. He had no objection to aristocratic or monarchical political orders. He wasn't terribly upset with dramatic differentials in wealth within a society. As long as everybody just had a basic minimum, that was sufficient to live a frugal life.

Subsequent Church teaching, however, has developed Leo's thinking about the meaning of moral equality and equal dignity, developed it in such a way that it has effectively moved Catholic teaching away from acquiescence in significant economic inequality, and toward what I'm going to call *relative egalitarianism*, when we think about economic justice.

So where does this relative egalitarianism come from in our tradition? Start with Michael's suggestions, with an understanding of the God whom we worship. Start with the Trinitarian God, not a unitarian one. Then move to a theological vision of humanity as being essentially related to one another, as being one family, and think about the Church as the sacrament of unity for that family. That's the backdrop out of which emerges the ethic espoused in Catholic Social Thought. The ethic begins with the claim that the human person is both sacred and social. That is, human beings are creatures of dignity who are essentially relational.

As Michael explained, we are made for God and for one another. And we can only be fully actualized as human persons by the experience of loving and being loved. Simply put, we are made for communion. So once the social nature of the person is asserted, the next move, in Catholic Social Thought, is the claim that authentic community is the true social ideal. As Vatican II put it, "God did not create the person for life in isolation, but for the formation of social unity. From the beginning of salvation history," the Council says, "God did not create the person as an individual, but as a member of a certain community." Therefore the formation of community, in the various realms of human experience, becomes the vital goal for Catholic Social Thought.

This in turn suggests the centrality of solidarity as both an ethical principle and a moral virtue. Because of the theological vision Michael sketched, solidarity serves as the deep theory of recent Catholic Social Teaching. By this I mean solidarity is the taken for granted, understanding of what justice is in Catholic Social Thought. It is the tacit intuition, the background vision, that supplies a conception or an idea of justice in Catholic teaching. When the Catholic imagination tries to envision what is a just society, and think about that for a moment. Imagine, if you would, a society that is just, truly just. What does it look like? I'd suggest to you that the Catholic imagination depicts a situation in which human beings exist in right relationship with one another. In which we are mutually devoted to a common good, in which we are all able to partake, and to which we are all called to contribute.

This perspective is related to the conviction that humans are profoundly social. So much so that the U.S. bishops in their 1986 Pastoral Letter on economic life noted that human dignity is only protected, and it's only realized, in community.

So the Catholic understanding of justice demands the creation of genuine communities. And this means more than simply paying people respect for their rights. For you and I are more than bearers of rights. Rights may be respected, yet society can still fail its members. For a sense of belonging, a sense of respect, of friendship, of forgiveness and love, these things

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are essential to human wellbeing, but they are not easily addressed by the language of rights. I have a right to your forgiveness or a right to your friendship. And yet these qualities are important building blocks of what genuine community entails.

And then the exclusion of people from the experience of community. The reality of marginalization. This is a major flaw in any society, according to Catholic Social Teaching. When debates arise about justice, the background that informs the formulation of norms in Catholic Social Teaching, is a commitment to the creation of a society where the experience of community is made real. Made real by the virtue of solidarity, which orders our personal relationships with one another, as well as the principle of solidarity, that regulates our social institutions.

So just for a moment, according to the compendium of Catholic Social Teaching, solidarity may be seen in two complimentary aspects. That of a social principle, and that of a moral virtue. As a principle, solidarity directs the laws, the market regulations, the juridical systems, in which we live. They try to take these things and move them away from becoming structures of sin, toward being structures of solidarity and community.

As a virtue, solidarity is not some compassionate sentiment, but rather, we're told it is a firm and persevering commitment to the common good. It's what allows each individual to have access to those conditions that lead to human wellbeing and flourishing.

So we think of virtue as a sort of quality of character. We talk about some people being a generous person; not just that they do acts of generosity, they are generous. We talk about people being honest, or people being people of integrity, or of kindness. It's not just the deeds they do, it's the very identity that they have taken on. It's who they are. It's a quality of their personal character.

In the case of solidarity, that virtue of solidarity means one takes on a certain orientation to the common good. To be a virtuous citizen with solidarity is to have a commitment to the common good of the society. It's to be orientated in one's values, priorities, activities, toward the common good.

If you turn to solidarity as a principle, what we are talking about is a norm for governing our institutions. Political, economic, legal. The activities of institutions are governed by solidarity when they are set up to serve, and when, in fact, they effectively do serve the common good of their participants.

On the other hand, when an institution effectively brings about, whether or not it's intended, but whether it effectively brings about, a state of communal life that presents, that prevents the participation of everyone in the common good, then that's an institution that violates solidarity.

This point about participation deserves a further comment. A particularly significant text for understanding the importance of participation in Catholic Social Thought comes from 1971. Paul VI wrote a document called "A Call to Action," and in that document he talks about two aspirations of modern persons. And their aspirations, he says, that people feel ever more

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strongly as they become better informed and better educated. Those two aspirations are the aspiration to equality and the aspiration to participation.

Paul says these are the two new forms of human dignity and freedom. The aspiration to participation is intimately linked to the claim that the human person is a social being. Because of its solid heuristic vision, Catholic Social Teaching places great weight on the ability of persons to enter into relationships if they are to achieve their genuine fulfillment. Relationships are crucial for understanding how do people actualize themselves. How do they attain true fulfillment?

As Michael suggested, persons are called to be self-giving, to get beyond self-absorption through genuine altruistic action. Participation is crucial for developing opportunities to be self-giving. If people are left outside the circle, if someone is not seated at the table, then they are really encouraged to act irresponsibly. They are not encouraged to act altruistically when they are marginalized.

But the opportunity to enter into a community of life, the opportunity to give oneself away to others in mutually supportive ways, this is the marker for assessing whether a society is properly ordered. Basic justice demands the minimum levels of participation in the human community for all persons. "The ultimate injustice," the American bishops said back in 1986, "is to be actively treated, or passively abandoned," as if a person is a non-member of the human family.

So participation is the path to a good society. A lack of participation, or the existence of obstacles to participation, serves to mark a society as improperly organized. Christians are called to participate in the communal life since it is precisely through such shared life that they can fulfill the commandment to love and serve their neighbors.

That is why Catholic Social Teaching understands participation not only as a right, but as a duty. For it is by people contributing to the common good of all, and the welfare of each, that genuine community comes to be. In modern Catholic Social Teaching, there's an increasing emphasis on this element of participation as a key feature to understand what justice asks of us in our time.

There's yet another aspect of justice that can be drawn from an ethic built upon solidarity. The commitment to human unity, coupled with the reality of deepening economic inequality within and between societies, has brought to prominence a standard, or the moral standard, of relative equality. Within Catholic Social Teaching, relative equality is an expression arising from a commitment to solidarity. The modifier "relative" here, signals that the equality we're aiming at is not absolute, where everyone has exactly the same share of benefits and burdens. Relative equality means that we keep inequalities within a range of moral limits.

There's a variety of factors, need, merit, contribution to the common good, that may justify different treatment of individuals. But there are limits to be set on the differences that are permitted. Not only should we have floors below which no one should be allowed to fall, we must also consider whether there are ceilings above which no one should rise.

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We need to set limits for the sake of limiting inequality. The limits and the differences are meant to serve the same purpose. To promote solidarity among people, so that the unity of the human family can be experienced. There is a latter aim, an intimation of a conclusion that has been reached by the modern papacy regarding the growth of significant inequalities in our world. And that intimation, or that insight, is that the bonds of communal life are being corroded by extreme inequalities. It is the divisiveness caused by grave economic inequality that makes it such a concern; because the resultant breakdown of community stands in opposition to the theologically informed vision of the Catholic moral tradition, that we are essentially a communal people.

Because of the appeal of participation as an aspiration in human history, it has become difficult to discuss moral equality while walling it off from the realms of politics and economics. Inequality in one sphere of life tends to undercut equality in other realms of life. Human dignity, in other words, is threatened not only by moral inequality, but by political and economic inequality as well. Without a measure of relative equality in the realms of politics, economics, and social life, it is hard to maintain that human beings are equal in dignity.

So it's no surprise that when the U.S. bishops issued their Pastoral Letter on the economy, they saw three questions as central for determining economic justice: What does an economy do to people? What does an economy do for people? And how do people participate in it?

Certainly this communal perspective of Catholic Social Teaching requires further specification and application to specific economic issues. But the vision offered by the tradition has generated a set of ideas. The social nature of the person, the centrality of community for human development, the common good, the virtue and principle of solidarity, and an understanding of economic justice as being inflected by the idea of participation.

All these things have moved Catholic Social Teaching away from accepting significant economic inequalities a la Leo, in 1891, and toward approval of what is called relative equality in today's modern society. Moving from the theologically grounded claim of humanity's morally equality, to egalitarian claims in other realms of human life, has been a gradual process. Indeed, it's been a long, difficult, uneven, and still unfinished effort within the Catholic Church to unpack the implications of moral equality for political life, for economic life, and indeed for life within this Church.

Catholicism's belated and uneasy alliance with democracy, its past acceptance of aristocratic and patriarchal social orders, its still problematic gender relations within the Church, all these things demonstrate the difficulty of translating moral equality into practical rights and duties within a community. Yet the growing appreciation for the aspiration to participation and equality are undeniable signs of the times, according to modern Catholic Social Thought.

To embrace the cause of lessening inequality in a variety of sectors, including the economic realm, is crucial for the advancement of the Catholic vision. Human rights as being social and economic, as well as civil and political; the universal destiny of all goods as a check on

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exclusive access to certain material resources; the preferential option for the poor as a norm for economic planning; the idea that all private property has a social mortgage. All of these are ways that recent popes have talked about the Catholic Social Tradition retrieving classical themes with a new emphasis on economic equality.

These developments, I suggest, in Catholic Social Teaching are in continuity with the tradition's fundamental vision. Its deep theory that the bonds of community ought to be built in every realm of human existence and that the forces undermining the unity of the human family must be challenged and corrected.

With greater insight into the importance of participation for genuine community, and with increased awareness of how economic inequality can be one of the corrosive agents that destroys communal solidarity, Catholic Social Teaching today provides a critical moral perspective that we can use to interrogate whether the present state of economic life in the U.S. is acceptable.

Let me stop there, give you all a chance to take a stretch and a break. We come back, Michael will have some closing remarks, I will as well. And then we'll open it up for your comments and questions.

[Break]

Fr. Ken Himes:

So again we're going to start off with some briefer remarks by Michael and myself and then we're going to throw it open for your comments or questions or reactions, okay? But first the floor goes back, Michael.

Fr. Michael Himes:

I'll just say a word or two about that notion of equality that can build so much on, and solidarity. And the first comment I'd make on it is not a strictly theological one, it's more of a historical and perhaps philosophical one, but I think it's an important question to raise at this point in thinking about equality. It's what I've sometimes, when I've taught an occasional course here at B.C. on theology and the American experience, the way it's been shaped by our peculiar experience in this country over the course of the last 300 years. I've often referred to the "Jeffersonian fastball," by which I mean something that Thomas Jefferson wrote that we all know, we've all quoted 1,000 times, that we perhaps haven't noted that for 2000 years prior to Thomas Jefferson everyone thought that what he was recommending couldn't happen, that it was impossible.

You remember, of course, the famous, the little prologue to the Declaration of Independence, in which we say that we affirm that "all men are created equal," pardon to the women please, but we include you in that. "That all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights." Inalienable, nobody can take them away. You can't give them away, they're inalienable rights. "And among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

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But Jefferson has just slipped a fast one past us because he said that there, that there are two among these rights, are two things, freedom and equality, that ever since Aristotle it had been the kind of common sense of most people's political thinking, that you could be either free or equal, but you couldn't be both.

You see, if you were going to give somebody equality, you had to do it by, as Ken referred to, not only setting a floor that they can't fall below, but a ceiling they can't rise above. If everybody were absolutely free, then obviously some people would achieve more than other people. Some people would end up knowing more than other people or experiencing more than other people. Some people are more talented in one area than another person would be. They can't be absolutely equal, if they're going to be absolutely free. On the other hand, if you're going to make them absolutely equal, if you're going to make sure nobody rises above this level or falls below this level, you're going to limit their freedom. They won't be actually free.

So if you're equal, you can't be free, if you're free, you can't be equal. That had been the common sense of Western political thinking from Aristotle on. So when Thomas Jefferson says, "We hold these things to be self-evident," which of course means I'm not going to talk about them, I'm not going to offer you any proofs, I'm not offering any demonstrations, I'm just going to say it and you'll buy it.

That we hold these things to be self-evident, that you can be both free and equal; in effect, that's an incredible intellectual fastball he just sneaked past us. Everybody since Aristotle would have thought he was wrong on that. How do you hold together freedom and equality?

Well it seems to be that the way in which you do it, the relative equality that Ken was talking about, that it is relative, it's never absolute. And I think that's, perhaps, the thing that we have to notice: freedom is not an absolute. Neither is equality an absolute. Neither is the pursuit of happiness an absolute.

Those are all possibilities that remain open to us for realization. We will realize them in different ways and to different degrees, depending on our interests, our abilities, our talents. But we're never going to be able to be absolutely free and achieve absolute equality in any society, big or small. You just can't do it.

And we shouldn't do it because to absolutize any such quality is to, in a sense, say that freedom is our experience of God. It's not. Freedom is a great experience of what it is to be fully human, but it's not an experience of God. The experience of God is first and foremost, least strongly understood as pure and perfect self-gift, as pure and perfect *agape*. It's that which is the measure of our experience of God. It's there that we come to grips with the way in which God shapes our lives, and the way in which we experience God.

And it's rooted in community. It's something that only can happen to us when we are in communion with one another. That's why, of course, the closing gift of Jesus to his disciples is communion. It's being brought together and sharing him and his life by as we share this meal. And in that sharing, we experience the presence of God.

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That's why we're not told in the Fourth Gospel to love God. It's not about our loving God, it's about our loving one another and that will be our experience of God. It's not a case of, we've got to show God how much we love him by putting up with one another. Putting up with one another is the way we bump into God, it's the way we experience God. It's not simply a task we perform, it's a gift that we're given. The ability to love one another is the best thing about us. It's the great gift given us and it's the source of all of our joy. As Jesus tells us in the Fourth Gospel, "I have come so that they may have joy and have it to the full."

Fr. Ken Himes:

So the experience that Mike mentioned just talking about Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, and as Mike said, he claims these truths are self-evident, including the belief that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. He clearly was not thinking of women, at the time. Nor was he thinking of African Americans. Nor was he thinking, frankly, of white property-less citizens. And yet the narrative of progress in the United States is one that reveals a gradual, ongoing appreciation for what the full implications of what that statement might mean.

So just as the Catholic Church, and indeed I would say all Christian churches, have had to struggle to sort of unpack the claims about the equality of moral dignity, and what the implications of that are in other realms of life, I would suggest that same story of struggling to unpack the full implications of that claim about equality and dignity, that's been the story of the American journey. Trying to unpack what that means for us as a society.

My belief is that the growing inequality within American economic life today presents an existential threat to that American project. What is happening is that many of the advances made in our nation's life since its beginning are now at risk. Because economic inequality is eroding the fundamental aspects of equality in American democracy, and in the belief of equality of opportunity.

For some, inequality is not the real issue. They would say that the relevant moral concern is not that people have very different amounts of wealth or income, but that too many do not have enough. To be preoccupied with how your income matches up against that of others, means you are letting other people's success shape your own sense of who you are and what you need. And the argument would be, that is to be alienated from your very self. Furthermore, if you focus on inequality, you shift attention to the 1% or the top 10% or the top quintile. And you shift the perspective away from the poor, who are the ones who deserve our attention.

Now it is true that economic inequality is not evil in itself. Indeed, I would suggest it may even be necessary to some degree for the sake of justice, to reward people on the basis of effort or merit or contribution to the well-being of a society. Nonetheless, although it's not inherently problematic, economic inequality when it gets to be too extreme, has an array of undesirable consequences that we must face. Inequality in one realm of life, economics, inevitably bleeds over into other realms of social and political equality. In so doing, the present state of economic inequality, I would suggest to you, seriously undercuts the workings of American democracy today.

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Now as Michael has laid out and as I tried to reemphasize, Catholic Social Teaching is built upon a theological foundation. Regarding the aspiration to equality noted by Paul VI, we have to differentiate between different social realms. Catholic Social Teaching offers a vision of political and economic life that generates broad guidance based on general principles, such as the social nature of the person, the necessity of community for human wellbeing and development, and centrality of solidarity, the primacy of the common good, and the firm conviction that even economic life is subject to ethical observation and scrutiny.

Those general principles must then be used to generate more specific guidance in specific contexts. In the contemporary situation of the United States, the existence of vast inequality between the rich and the rest of the population, serves as a clear challenge to the vision of Catholic Social Thought. It also serves as a clear threat, I would suggest, to the American public life, including democracy.

Economic inequality in the U.S. deserves more attention and a bolder response than we have seen from our leaders or from within the general population of this country. Just what exactly that bolder response ought to be requires discernment. But Catholic Social Teaching, I think, points us in a certain direction.

Over the past four decades, the American economy has grown and its productivity has increased. And yet, the benefits of those realities has accrued in a dramatically disproportionate way to those already at the top in income and in wealth. The claim that “a rising tide lifts all boats” has simply not been verified by recent experience of the last few decades.

So what might the Christian community do? Let me close our joint reflection by suggesting some ways for we as a people of faith to move forward in pursuing economic justice. First, I think we have to acknowledge there are two types of structures in any society, or at work in any culture.

There are ideological structures and there are operational structures. Operational structures refer to the patterns of behavior that make up our social life: Zoning laws, tax systems, international trade agreements, health care systems, monetary and banking policies. These are operational structures.

Ideological structures refer to patterns of belief. The way you and I put together our values to construe for ourselves, this is a meaningful life, or this is a just society. Operational structures are wrong when the ideological structure implicit in them offends human dignity and violates communal bonds. Ideological structures demean persons when values other than the sacredness and social nature of persons become the dominating or organizing values in a society.

So part of the task in promoting social change is to analyze, what are the values of a given culture, so that we begin to awaken moral sensibilities. We call forth new images of what might constitute human fulfillment.

Clearly the vision that Michael and I have suggested, in terms of the emphasis on building and supporting communal bonds, cuts against much of the grain of the American society

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with its exaltation of individualism, and sort of rational self-interest as being the guiding norm of economic life. To bring about change on the operational level in our economy, there is the need to complement, or even precede that, by transformation on the ideological level.

Therefore, if the Christian community is to effectively help bring about social change, you need a dual focus. We have to address both types of structure, operational and ideological. However, although the community of faith must act where it can on operational structures of society, I'd like to suggest to you that for the faith community, our real strength is to foster and tutor the moral imagination, so as to combat false ideological structures that undergird and inspire the unjust operational structures.

The prevailing view of economic policy is that people are essentially self-interested rather than self-giving and altruistic. And that people behave the same way, whether they are buying a car or voting on a referendum. Personal preferences are not significantly affected by politics or moral norms. They're simply driven by self-interest.

That seems to be the prevailing view in American life. That the public good is simply the sum of individual preferences. That society is working effectively whenever people's preferences can be satisfied without making other people worse off, and usually market exchanges suffice for improving society this way.

Such a policy approach, I'd like to suggest to you, does not take ideas seriously. It does not ask us to inquire into our ideas about what an ethically good society might look like. Nor does this economic approach of self-interest see any usefulness to debate the relative merits of differing conceptions of what a just society might be.

The prevailing view short-changes the role that normative moral visions can play in shaping what people want and what people expect from one another. Furthermore, the dominant approach disregards the importance of public deliberation, discussion, and debate that allows us to refine and revise our moral visions.

Catholic Social Teaching suggests that ideas about what is good for society ought to occupy a more prominent place in our public life. The responsibility of those who deal with public policy should not be reducible to identifying what the people want for themselves, and then we go about implementing the most efficient way to satisfy everyone's wants.

Instead, the Christian community ought to provide an alternative vision of what is desirable and what is possible for human beings: to stimulate deliberation about what our wants should be, to provoke an examination of the assumptions and values within our culture, and thereby to deepen society's self-understanding as well as our own.

Many of the important policy initiatives in recent years, or recent decades, cannot be explained by the prevailing view of maximizing rational self-interest. The Civil Rights laws of the 1960s, the movements of public health or consumer safety or environmental protection in the 70s. These policies were not motivated mainly by people seeking to satisfy self-interested preferences. People supported these initiatives largely because they thought it would be good for American society. In addition, public support for these initiatives has not been stable and unchanging.

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Public support has grown and evolved as people engaged with different ideas and values. There was a time when child labor in factories and mills was widely accepted in this country. And then it was not. There was a time when cigarette smoking was widespread and unquestioned in public places. And then it was not. There was a time when people knew what was women's work. And then they did not.

How does the unthinkable become thinkable? How does the conventional wisdom get overturned? It is true that some of the most accomplished government leaders are those women and men who deliberately and purposefully craft visions of what is desirable and possible for a society to do. Rather than simply giving voice to already existing public wants, the true art of political leadership has been to give voice to half-known, half-articulated hopes and dreams that we have for our society.

If that is true, then there may be far more room for the influence of communities of faith in this society than is sometimes thought. Thank you.

[Applause]

So Michael has a watch. I don't because I'm a Franciscan, I'm poor. Michael has a watch, so Michael you're time keeper, all right?

Fr. Michael Himes: Yes, I have a watch because I'm a diocesan and I have actual responsibilities. Whereas the Franciscan. . .

Fr. Ken Himes: So you watch the time, all right? Okay.

So the floor is open, but we're going to cut it all off at 5 of 8, okay? No, 7:25 we're going to cut it off, right? 7:25, we're going to get you out of here at 7:30, okay? So the floor is open, and we have a microphone person who's going to be running around earning her pay.

Participant:

You bringing up Michael Himes's resemblance to Ryan Gosling got me thinking about that movie of his *The Big Short* with the line, "You know what I hate about banking? It reduces people to numbers." Here's a number, every 1% unemployment goes up, 40,000 people die, which means that we've kind of got a dual responsibility, don't we, to talk about economics in serious terms that involve mathematics, regression, statistics, the Phillips Curve, all that. But we can't just reduce it to numbers either, because it betrays people's inherent dignity. So how do we walk this balance of having a serious economic conversation in terms of number statistics without betraying that dignity?

Fr. Michael Himes:

I'll just start by saying you just introduced at the end there the word that I was thinking of, that I think responds to your question. Conversation. I cannot be the person who undertakes to talk about the economy in terms of numbers. I could, except the numbers would be all wrong. [Laughter] But not what I do. But that doesn't mean that I can't be part of a conversation with someone who does. And the more people we include in the conversation, the more positions we invite to hear, to be heard in the conversation, the

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healthier the conversation, and the closer we get to a real understanding of any one of those ways of approaching an issue.

So I think conversation is the great issue; that's why I'm inclined to think the most pressing question facing the United States today is where do you have a national conversation? It once was supposed to be the Senate back when the Senate was going to be elected by the state legislatures and they were going to be the wise old men who the House would debate the laws that would be passed. But the Senate would sort of reflect on what is it to be an American, what is it to be a society. But obviously the Senate doesn't do that anymore.

Then it went to the Supreme Court for a long time. Now the Supreme Court is much more politicized than it was, I think at any other time in its history. Some people would say it's the universities. I think that could be true but I'm worried about the fact that too many universities are putting the, what we used to call the liberal arts, the skills by which one exercises freedom, that's what liberal arts were, we've put that on the back burner now and so people come to the university primarily thinking of it as an employment agency. It's the way in which they're going to get a job, or get ahead in a career. That's wonderful, but I don't think that that's going to help us very much in having this national conversation if we want to build it around the great universities.

My one suggestion as a possibility, I don't suggest this with great optimism, but I have my fingers crossed, that we might find that that would be one of the most useful things that the Church can supply. That the Church could become an area, I mean here we are, we've got all these parishes, we've got all these facilities, we've got all these diocesan structures.

Maybe we could use the parishes as kind of town meeting hall. Invite people to come together and discuss what are the big issues facing our town, our neighborhood, our city, and how might we respond to it? And let the Church just be the host for that. Not the teacher at it, not the one that's going to speak up and say "This is what you must do," but simply the place that gets us together and says, "Let's talk about this." But I think conversation is the key issue that needs to be addressed in this.

Do you want to say anything?

Fr. Ken Himes: I'd only add, you know we talk an awful lot, I do as well, about the obstacles to having conversations. There was a time when we thought social media was going to be the great democratic experiment, right? And now we see it as actually something that's harming democratic conversation, right?

But instead, to talking about all of the neg. . . and of course you could talk about the ways in which money has absolutely skewed political campaigns, right? So I mean, what one thing money does is it amplifies the voices of the wealthy and drowns out the voices of many others. It's just the nature of political dialogue today that some people are speaking with a megaphone and some people are whispering in public conversation.

So you could go on and we could all rant about the problems of conversation. But to go back to Michael's point, how many of you are here because someone coerced you into coming? A few people who are here, because they came because Craig Ford was teaching a

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class, right? But how many people are here because someone put a gun to your head, right?

The reality is that we all came out here in the hopes of having some exchange of ideas, some thoughts, some conversation, some discussion. Maybe even beyond this, on the way home, over a beer somewhere. Well if that's true for us, why should we presume nobody else wants to have a conversation? It's just us. We're the only people in Boston who want to have a conversation.

The reality is, there's a great, it seems to me, desire on the part of many thinking adults to find fora where they can come together and think out loud with each other. And I don't see why the schools can't do it. I don't see why libraries can't do it. I don't see why churches can't do it. I don't see why YMCAs and YWCAs can't do it.

There's plenty of opportunities if we realize "I'm not alone in wanting to have a conversation that's serious." There are other people who actually will want to talk with each other if we don't approach this thing as, "We're coming in and I'm going to ram my views down your throat." Nobody wants that.

But if we actually establish places where people could converse, and discuss, and learn from one another, it seems to me the lesson is there's lots of people in the United States. There's lots of people in the local communities that really do want to have conversations if we can set them up in such a way that everyone feels as if they were actually in the conversation and they're not listening to some sort of, you know, campaign that's ramming ideas down their throat and squelching other people's views.

Participant:

Quick two-part question. What was the impact on the general public of the Bishop's Letter on the Economy from 19-- was it '85 or '86? And then in light of that, what is Catholic leadership in the United States doing now to address the current inequality crisis?

Fr. Ken Himes:

Quick answer. I think the impact was modest and for two reasons. One is, there was a strategic error on the part of the Bishops' Conference in '86 that I'll talk about in a second. But the other big error was after the Peace Pastoral in '83, which if you may recall, had that sort of, had the characteristic of a kind of Church-state confrontation, right? This was the Catholic Church taking on the Reagan administration on nuclear policy and national security.

And the press treated it that way. As if it was this kind of challenge and conflict between church and state. And I think what happened was they wanted to recast the economic Pastoral in that same dynamic. Set it up as a conflict. And so what happened was the economics Pastoral, if you read the first half of it, it's the biblical, the theological, the Catholic Social Teaching dimension, of explaining here's the overall vision, all right. A Christian vision of what an economy is for, what its purposes is, what its goals might be, what the moral norms that ought to regulate economic life, or inform economic life, should be.

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And then the second half, they got into specific policy formulations. And what the popular press did was simply ignored the first half and all they did was take up the second half. And taken out of context, the second half just looked like a bunch of sort of liberal economic proposals from a bunch of bishops who are not economists.

And a number of people said, oh this is just warmed over New Deal economics. Because it made no sense once you removed it from its religious context and the moral context it was in. So part of it was the popular press, which is the way most people get news about the Catholic Church, most people don't read Catholic newspapers or Catholic journals. Most people don't hear good homilies on social issues in their parishes.

Most people learn about what the Catholic Church says or does on social matters from secular media, for the most part. And if they don't cover it adequately, it seems to me, it suffers. And I think that's part of the economic Pastoral.

But here's the strategic flaw. And the person who was responsible for this, Rembert Weakland, the Archbishop of Milwaukee, who was the chair of the committee, he has said this. This is not me, I'm not this is Himes's view, I'm really telling you what Weakland himself said about the failure of the thing. What they were counting on was, they thought economics departments in Catholic universities would take this and teach it and run with it and use it in teaching economics in Catholic universities and the like.

The strategic mistake was they had no idea how the discipline of economics, even in Catholic universities, had moved far more into rational self-interest, mathematic quantitative economics and had moved away from questions of political economy, value-laden questions, and economics.

And the vast majority of Catholic economics departments, including Boston College, never did anything with the Pastoral Letter. And it just died because there wasn't, there wasn't that agent who sort of took it into the public forum. And they put an awful lot of their markers down on all Catholic universities and their economics departments will really move the conversation along for us. And for the most part it was absolutely ignored by Catholic economics departments.

Participant: So what are they doing now?

Fr. Ken Himes:

While of course they're meeting right now, and from what I can tell they're not doing much of anything in this regard. I mean, to be honest I don't see much of anything going on. There's division within the Bishops Conference. They are not all on the same page in terms of what the priorities are. They share basic values and those sorts of things.

But there's very different groups in terms of what they think the priority issues are. The group that thinks questions of economic justice and equality is, should be one of the priorities, seems to me, they're a minority view right now. But what you are seeing is, there's a lot of stuff coming out of Francis's Vatican that is moving in this area. Whether or not that gets resonance here in the US remains to be seen. Because an awful lot of Francis's

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focus is on questions of international economics. And a lot of that simply kind of goes right past a great many Americans.

[MUSIC PLAYING]