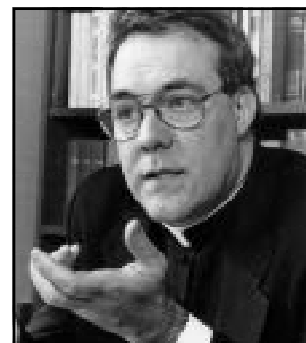




Don't Blame Globalization for Moral Problems, says Father Sirico

INTERVIEW WITH ACTON INSTITUTE PRESIDENT



ROME, FEB. 28, 2002 (Zenit.org).- Globalization has its fans and foes. Many defenders of free-market economics see globalization as a sort of panacea for expanding the opportunities for increased wealth, employment and liberty worldwide.

Others, however, see it as an expression of an unjust system that favors the rich and marginalizes the poor, distorts the politics of social aid, and destroys local cultures.

To delve into these themes, ZENIT interviewed Father Robert Sirico, president of the Michigan-based Acton Institute.

Q: What's your opinion regarding the anti-globalization movement?

Father Sirico: Certainly, there are many things about Western culture that are worthy of criticism: the degradation of human sexuality, especially women, in its media; the confusion between "having" and "being"; an inflated notion of rights along with a lessening sense of social responsibility. These are just a few of the cultural manifestations of Western civilization worthy of critique.

But the problem with the "no-global people" is that their criticism equates these moral and cultural weaknesses with the system of international free trade. I am not persuaded that the market creates culture as much as it reflects and perhaps amplifies culture.

The process of free trade is a process whereby the values that people hold are given expression in the form of goods which are demanded and services which are supplied. To a significant extent, the culture and the values are already in place which determine what is bought and sold. So the virtuous formation of a culture, like the resistance to consumerism, is much more a moral enterprise than it is an economic one, and needs to be altered on that level.

Besides, the formation of a virtuous culture does not appear to be a high priority of the demonstrations about which you make inquiry.

Q: What are the benefits and the limitations of the process of economic and cultural globalization?

Father Sirico: The benefits of the process of globalization are numerous and manifest.

The extension of the division of labor results in the reduction of costs for the things that people depend upon for their well-being. It enables those in poorer regions of the world to more fully participate in what the Holy Father calls the "circle of exchange," building an infrastructure of enterprise within their own countries, thus making those people less dependent upon political rulers within their own countries, and foreign political influences for their well-being and economic

progress. Meanwhile, it encourages an interdependence among trading people in different parts of the world, tending to increase cultural awareness by interaction with people from different nations doing business with each other.

The limits come in expecting a free economy to supply the cultural and moral formation needed for a community worthy of the human person. This is not the function of a market, and both the critics and supporters of an international process of free exchange need to understand this clearly. As one theologian has noted: "The market will exhibit all the shortcomings and failures that people, in their peaceful acting will exhibit, because that is, in essence what a market is."

Q: The anti-globalization activists contend that the division between rich and poor is growing, and that the rich always get fat on the toil of the poor. Is that correct?

Father Sirico: This is a very popular statement, but the evidence simply doesn't back it up. The fact is, that a market economy is the only known way to economic development, not just for the rich but for everyone. It is astonishing that at this late date there are so many who claim otherwise.

Without markets, all societies would be quickly reduced to a state of barbarism; and in those places in the world where there

Thursday, February 28, 2002

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is a state of barbarism, one finds, not surprisingly, that markets are severely restricted. The market order is not a replacement for the charitable sector, but the charitable sector has never found a greater benefactor than in liberal systems of economic exchange and enterprise.

Studies, such as the one by David Dollar of the World Bank, have shown a direct relationship between trade, economic growth, and increasing standards of living for the poor and all classes. These studies confirm that countries that reduce tariffs, reduce taxes, protect private property and get their financial houses in order attract foreign investment and foster a more vibrant export market.

This increases economic growth at home, which in turn lifts incomes of the poor, thus creating a middle class in the developing world. It is also true that trade helps rich countries as well: It is in the very nature of exchange that both parties benefit. But this is not the former benefiting at the expense of the latter.

This pattern shows itself again and again in time-series analysis of economic patterns for the last three decades. But let us be clear that these studies have also shown that trade alone will not lift incomes, and it is this fact that anti-globalization advocates have seized upon to argue for economic nationalism and isolation.

What they leave out is that trade fosters the key intervening step, namely economic growth, that leads to rising incomes. Development is a process that takes time, and the surest way to impede economic progress for all classes is to return to the old ideas of regimentation and central economic planning.

Q: According to the opponents of globalization, economic development is directly associated with environmental degradation. From this

comes the idea that man is a cancer on the planet. What is the relation between economic growth and the defense of the environment, and what is the liberal and Christian idea of man?

Father Sirico: In fact, the exact opposite is true. When we look at developed nations, we see that their environments are much cleaner, and with good reason: They have the resources to devote to cleaning their environment. Thus, if one wants a clean and livable environment, one prerequisite is economic development.

The notion that man is a cancer on the planet derives from the presupposition of socialist economics which thinks of the economy as static and in perpetual need of being redistributed; in this anthropological concept, every new person is seen as a threat to the well-being of the whole. This is why socialists and anti-natalists are closely aligned with the no-global movement.

Christian anthropology, on the other hand, believes that “man is man’s greatest resource.” Solutions for real environmental problems are to be found in a system that permits human ingenuity to discover more efficient uses for resources. A free-pricing system and the protection of private property will accomplish this to a far greater extent, and at a more rapid pace, than will governmental bureaucrats.

Q: What points do the liberal idea and the Church’s social doctrine have in common? Where do they differ?

Father Sirico: The word “liberal” is a conflicted and confusing one. Its obvious root is liberty, and this of course, has great resonance with Christianity. One might say, in fact, that the liberal idea, rightly understood, is the offspring of Christianity.

The intrinsic and transcendent value of each human life, the institutions of the judiciary and contract, the separation of powers, private property, a universal concept of human rights, the principle of subsidiarity and other pillars of Western civilization all have their roots in Christianity and have been expressed in authentic liberal societies.

However, with the Enlightenment, a certain distortion of this notion of the value of the human person emerged, placing man, not merely at the apex of creation — as the book of Genesis states — but over against his Creator, and making man, in a radically individual concept, the final arbiter of truth and goodness, rather than the being who, through the use of his intelligence, has a natural and grave responsibility to discover the truth that is revealed to the world, both in nature and through divine disclosure.

If by the “liberal idea” is meant the concept of freedom oriented to the truth of who man is in his totality, then the Church certainly embraces this idea. But if what is meant by this idea is a notion of liberty divorced from truth, a radically individualist or autonomous liberty, this is clearly rejected by the social teaching of the Church.

Lord Acton put it well when he said that the liberty of which we speak is not the liberty to do what we want, but the freedom to do what we ought. This is an authentic Catholic approach to the liberal idea. Any other concept is incoherent.