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We must accept and humanize economic change

By REV. ROBERT SIRICO

Faith and Policy

It's hard to believe, but it's been a dozen years since H. Ross Perot famously declared during his presidential candidacy that the NAFTA treaty would create a "giant sucking sound" as American jobs drained to Mexico. Of course, that didn't happen. From 1993-2001, civilian employment in the United States grew by almost 2 million jobs per year to 135.1 million, according to an analysis by the Cato Institute.

Well, here we are in another election year and guess what? International trade is again a major political issue, as it should be. Voters are asking legitimate questions about the economic impact - and the morality - of trade policy and the expansion of the global economy. The business page of the newspaper seems to be dominated by stories about auto firms moving to China; computer and software companies outsourcing jobs to India or international negotiations on farm policy.

For too many Americans, these developments are greeted with suspicion, doubt and confusion. Some of this anxiety is caused by a genuine concern for the security of their jobs. But many of these feelings are fanned by political

demagoguery, or calls for trade protection from those seeking a shelter from rising competition. Often, religious leaders lend their support to these anti-trade, anti-globalization movements, support that is readily accepted by politicians in search of a moral weight to their campaigns. Economics is a profoundly moral field of human endeavor. But let's be clear about one thing: Mere sentiments are no substitute for sound economic thinking, nor should economic principles be applied in a utilitarian fashion to those questions that demand our highest moral discernment.

If we are to build a humane economy, and further the goal of economic liberty, we need a genuine synthesis of both moral and economic truth. Pope John Paul II was getting at this when he wrote, 15 years ago, that globalization must allow for greater participation of people in the economy, not their isolation. Neither, he warned, should economic practices and policies impoverish the many for the benefit of the few.

Religious leaders who are advocating trade protectionism, increased business regulation across international borders, and such laughable notions as a global minimum wage, need to do some homework.

I happen to have been in Kenya

recently, where I was struck by the entrepreneurial sensibility and enthusiasm for free market economics among young Kenyans. They've seen how a national dependency on foreign aid and protectionist barriers have led to economic stagnation and more dependency. It's important to understand that economic development in places like Kenya means something that Americans take very much for granted: It means clean drinking water, basic sanitation, housing in permanent structures, improved medical care, and an honest job. This, too, is globalization.

Support for economic freedom and global development does not mean that we gloss over the upheaval and hardships that people go through when entire industries undergo a transition. A truly humane society does not simply cut people adrift when their skills are no longer competitive. We need to respond creatively, using our God given talents, to meet the never-ending challenge that technological change presents us. That's the heart of entrepreneurship, really. But if, instead, we turn turtle - we set ourselves up as road kill.

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