

The Detroit News

World commerce fosters cooperation and charity

By REV. ROBERT SIRICO

Faith and Policy

We live in an age of vast commercial engagement, and it is here where we can and must find peace, harmony and human cooperation.

Every day, every minute, hundreds of millions of people cooperate across many language groups and time zones and nationalities to work out the great project of creating and allocating world resources in a manner than improves the lot of all peoples from all classes in most parts of the world.

From the largest to the smallest exchanges, commerce and enterprise provide a wonderful setting for the achievement of peace. And let us not belittle the contribution of the commercial marketplace to the well being of the human population. It is not only about fast food and cheap toys, as certain activists would have it; it is also about health care, nutrition for the hungry, housing and clothing for the world, and less misery for the human race in general.

Commerce and the prosperity it brings also make possible the funding of charity, religious institutions, libraries, cultural affairs, and other non-market endeavors important to the building of a civilization worthy of the human person. The market provides a point of connection that brings all peoples of the world in contact with each other and permits all people to make contributions to the prosperity of humankind.

Economics implies that we can cooperate toward our mutual betterment. Our society is so filled with people who thrive on conflict that this is not always a welcome message. Such people depend on the conflict of others for their own justification.

Commercial activity has (and must have) a moral dimension. It is rooted in the institutions of freedom and the ownership of private property. Without ownership, Aristotle said, even basic acts of human charity are not possible. After all, you cannot welcome someone into your home if you cannot own a home.

Commercial activity has (and must have) a moral dimension.

Freedom, ownership, and trade — these are essential institutions that form the basis of human cooperation and peace. And yet, they are so often misunderstood and traduced, such as when private property is called theft, or when confiscatory rates of taxation are termed “investments,” and most especially, when the international expansion of trade is dubbed “international imperialism” as though globalization were some kind of coerced relationship that advantages one party at the expense of another.

What is trade if not the normative way in which people better themselves and their families, and thereby whole societies? When human beings are not hindered from employing their varied talents and creative energies to solve the problems of scarcity — and do so freely — how is this either violent or unjust?

We commonly distinguish between charity and commerce as if the two were completely separate. In fact, both work together. There would be no charity in the absence of the wealth created through commerce; nor would

commerce long survive if it did not result in increasing the well being of individuals in society.

I do find it fascinating how the line that once separated charity and commerce has become ever thinner, as businesses and stock funds discover that their institutional self-interest is bound up with advertising and promoting their social mission. More enterprises need to understand their social mission, and it is not only about giving to the poor but also about human service generally.

Peace is not the mere absence of conflict: it is, rather, the right ordering of things and people in their just relationships. And it is here where we must place an emphasis on spiritual renewal. I do not believe that the mysteries and glories of human society can be fully comprehended apart from an understanding of the worth of the individual person and that Masterful hand which is the origin and destiny of all things.

We are made in the image and likeness of God. We are called to develop a fuller and deeper understanding of why God made the world to be characterized by peace and cooperation rather than war and conflict. He did so because he endowed human beings with free will, transcendent dignity, and intelligence. To achieve our right end requires that we see the world as the occasion of encountering God's grace — precisely here in the midst of human limitation and scarcity. It requires that we understand not only economics but also the transcendent end toward which all things, including economic affairs, are drawn.

Fr. Robert Sirico is president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids.