

Nino Galloni on the Papal Encyclical on the Environment

Antonino Galloni is an Italian economist who worked as director general of the Budget and Labor Ministries in the early 1990s. He has taught in the Universities of Naples, Rome (LUISS), Milan, and Modena. Currently, he is major auditor at the National Institute of National and Social Services (INPS), which manages the national pension fund. He has published many books and articles.

The following article was published in Il Domani d'Italia, a progressive Catholic publication (<http://ildomaniditalia.eu/article/la-lezione-dellenciclica-non-pu%C3%B2-consistere-nel-richiamo-buoni-propositi-bisogna-cambiare>), and republished on scenarieconomici.it, a website run by anti-euro economists. A subhead has been added.

The Encyclical issued by Pope Francis on the environment merits in-depth examination. The Pope highlights the schizophrenia of our systems, which are capable of producing more than what we need, while billions of human beings continue to live in abject poverty. We will talk more about this later, but here is the problem: our models are all based on ephemerals, on waste and useless (or even harmful) consumption, agreed: but what is the alternative model?

Well, let us eliminate the useless product and redistribute the excess (the parable of the rich man and Lazarus); behold the degrowth model! It calls itself happy, but happy it is not: the degrowth model, in fact, to be sustainable and not un-

realistic, demands that demographic decline be greater than the decline in production. Thus, you cannot endorse economic degrowth without endorsing depopulation.

The solution proposed by the Encyclical is to distribute resources equitably. Therefore, to make the analytical logic of degrowth (whose criticism of the system may be shared, and I believe, is shared by the Pope) compatible with a rejection of demographic decline, one must propose a model in which those who have more, deprive themselves of a portion of it, so that everyone gets enough.

The world has never worked that way: today, as was the case before the democracies of the Twentieth Century, scarcity,—genuine in the past, artificial today,—means an unfair distribution of resources and income because only the rich can make the investments necessary for the survival of the entire society. By contrast, with the coming into being of democratic regimes, which were then abandoned about thirty years ago, growth across the board was promoted, which improved the well-being of the lower classes, promoted the middle class and satisfied the affluent.

The same applies to the prospects of strategic resources, first of all water, in the Encyclical. It fails to call for projects to develop our current desalination capacities, to collect water from glacial melt, or by altering the flow of the Nile River (to name only a few examples). These would only utilize mankind's current techno-



Prof. Nino Galloni, addressing the 30th Anniversary Conference of the Schiller Institute in Germany, October 18-19, 2014.

logical capacities, but the Encyclical only calls on us to accept a more equitable distribution of resources.

Whereas technological progress has not solved the defense of biodiversity dilemma (paragraph 33), perhaps the mention of the Congo Basin (39) can be used to sharpen our reasoning. The Congolese population, despite wars, genocide, disease, and misery, has increased. Therefore what caused the elimination of almost all the local fauna, was poverty multiplied by increasing numbers. Misery, accompanied by demographic growth, has catastrophic effects on the environment and on biodiversity, which can only be prevented by technological progress, and increasing energy flux intensity. A small community can survive on a given territory by chopping wood and hunting animals, provided that their low numbers do not jeopardize the balance.

Change the Model

As the population grows, the model must change. Energy flux must be intensified, production technologies must change. There is no need to reduce individual consumption of resources if the population is growing; the amount of resources consumed per unit of product needs to be reduced: exactly what technology, in other words, human intelligence, is able to guarantee.

Thus, concerning Chapter II of the Encyclical, it is sufficient neither to stress that man has no right to destroy nature, nor that he should be responsible (both sacrosanct, of course),—but it is also necessary to accept the idea that man can transform nature by intervening in it; if that were not so, it would be impossible,—except marginally,—to reduce our use of resources while maintaining demographic growth.

The Encyclical seems to fear technology and the transformation (reasonable, partial, etc.) of nature, to the point of confirming, in Chapter III, at the end of paragraph 106, the thesis of the *Justitia et Pax* Commission according to which “there is no unlimited energy.” On the contrary, new technologies can already supply energy at zero cost, but the problem is that this cannot be done by the large multinationals. Why produce without profit? And so, the big lacuna in the Encyclical is the absence of a capitalist model based on state enterprises, i.e., a non-capitalistic model.

Also, when the Encyclical denies anthropocentrism, I do not understand how this coheres with the centrality of man correctly cited from *Gaudium et Spes* [of the Second Vatican Council]. See paragraph 127.

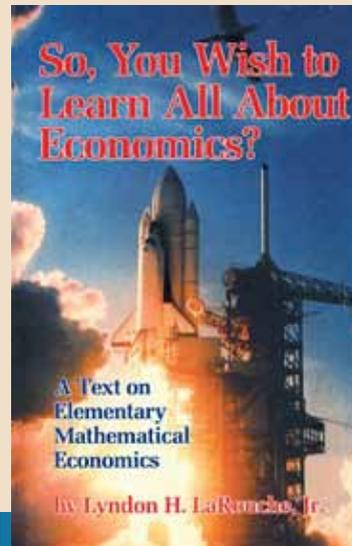
The last three chapters are exhortations, sound prin-

ciples, a reference to the common good, to a feeling of inter-generational solidarity as well as solidarity with immigrants. They are all points which we can agree on, and are important to stress; but their weakness stems from the type of economic model that began to marginalize the real economy about 30 years ago, to clear the way for increasingly devastating, if not delusory, forms of financialization of the economy.

And so, since the Encyclical shares this critique, and given the fact that it has gone beyond a merely pastoral role (a good thing, or rather, an excellent thing, which reflects the gravity of the moral and social situation in which we find ourselves), why not complete the work by not just approving desirable behaviors, but also by pushing towards new models?

The critical issue of degrowth is intriguing, but not compatible with our theology when it comes to demographic trends; an inspired view of technological progress, which minimizes polluting agents and non-renewable resources per unit of product (rather than merely calling for reduction of consumption and equitable distribution), is compatible.

—Nino Galloni



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