

Consumerism, Consumption, and Human Freedom:
Addressing the Shortcomings of Recent Magisterial Orthodox Christian Social Teachings on
Economics

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ABSTRACT

Ordered freedom is foundational to Orthodox Christian theological anthropology and to the exploration of democratic values in the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople 2020's encyclical *For the Life of the World: Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos (FLW)*. The document's primary concern is not to offer policy prescriptions but to proclaim the Gospel. In the section on economics, however, policy preferences distract the reader from the beauty and wisdom of the Church's anthropological vision that places freedom (in both its negative and positive modes) at the heart of what it means to be human. Especially as a pastor, I think it would have been more helpful to discuss our economic life in light of the Church's anthropology. Building on my work on consumerism and asceticism as contrasting approaches to our economic life, I offer a defense of economic freedom in light of the tradition of the Orthodox Church. I argue that FLW's criticisms are not intrinsic to a market economy but instances of the sin of *consumerism* or of economic decisions that undermine communion with God and neighbor. While not ruling out prudential policy, the Church's unique contribution to economic discussions is an ascetical tradition that can help reorder our economic decisions.

Magisterial Orthodox Social Teaching

Emerging out of the challenges of the Enlightenment, the spread of democracy, and the Industrial Revolution, there arose different schools of Catholic and Protestant Christian social thought that sought to bring the light of the Gospel to the various moral and practical concerns of daily life.

Orthodox social teaching is no different. How do I as an Orthodox Christian respond in justice and love to the needs I see around us. This implies a more fundamental question: How do I identify and understand what these needs actually are?

Recently, the Orthodox Church has issued two statements on social teaching: *The Basis of Orthodox Social Thought* (2000) by the Moscow Patriarchate¹ and *For the Life of the World: Toward an Orthodox Social Ethos* (2020) written by a committee composed mostly of American academics. After it was published, the original text was revised and expanded by the synod of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople.² Both documents cover much the same ground you'll find in the Catholic Church's *Compendium of Social Teaching*.³ But while *Basis* and *FLOW* cover similar themes, the latter breaks some new ground (primarily in making specific--and in my view, ill-advised policy prescriptions) and is at least in part meant as a response to the former.

The Church's primary concern in both these documents is not to offer policy prescriptions but to proclaim the Gospel and, in so doing, offer "general guidelines to difficult questions" rather than "clear-cut responses to social changes."⁴ While our focus here is on *FLOW*, I think there are moments in each when policy does in fact overshadow the Gospel. Especially in a democracy, I think it is good for Christians to advocate for public policy that conforms to the Gospel. But to do this in a manner that doesn't harm either the evangelistic ministry of the Church or compromise the unity of faith is a delicate task. At a minimum, it requires a clear articulation that it is the rare policy prescription that can rightly be described as morally obligated by the Church's teaching. Many practical paths are allowed, but very few are required.

All that said, let's begin with a brief overview of what ordered freedom means in the tradition of the Orthodox Church. We will then look at the discussion of economics in *For the Life of the World*. Specifically, we're concerned with looking at the document's presuppositions and conclusions about our economic life. We conclude with returning to a consideration of

¹ The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church, "The Orthodox Church and Society – Incommunion," Orthodox Peace Fellowship, October 14, 2004, <https://incommunion.org/2004/10/14/introduction-2/>.

² "Social Ethos Document - Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America - Orthodox Church," Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, accessed July 11, 2023, <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>. Hereafter, *FLOW*.

³ "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church," Dicastery for the Communication, accessed July 11, 2023, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_2006_0526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html.

⁴ "Social Ethos Document."

theological anthropology but now with an eye for offering a fuller understanding of the exercise of economic freedom rooted in Christian asceticism.

Orthodox Theological Anthropology of Ordered Freedom

Called to a life of Communion

According to St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – c. 395) “this is truly perfection: never to stop growing toward what is better and never placing any limit on perfection.”⁵ Thus, to be perfect, requires that we have the ability to choose so we can change. However, our freedom is not meant to be merely a series of opened-end choices among options. Much less is it the mere absence of constraints; while the myriad decisions we make daily, are important, they are not ends in themselves. They are rather in service of the purposeful and ordered change to which Gregory alludes.

Purposeful and ordered change is rooted in human nature. As we read in the opening lines [emphasis added] of *For the Life of the World* (§1):

The Orthodox Church understands the human person as having been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26). To be made in God’s image is to be made for *free and conscious communion and union with God in Jesus Christ*, inasmuch as we are formed in, through, and for him (Colossians 1:16).

This life of communion is built on

...prayer and action...derived from loving and reverent gratitude for life and for all the gifts that God imparts to us through his Son and in his Spirit. Our service to God is fundamentally doxological in nature and essentially Eucharistic in character.

Quoting St. Basil the Great (330-378/9), the authors go on to explain that this, *doxological* character of human life means we *only* exercise our freedom in a full sense (to say nothing of becoming fully ourselves), when we “look up and see God, worshipping him and acknowledging him as [our] source and origin.” And since God is a community of Three Divine Persons, a life of personal communion with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit must include as well communion with our neighbor and the creation. Human life, then, is necessarily Eucharistic in character; “it is only in and through our participation in the community of Christ’s body that any of us, as a unique object of divine love, can enter into full union with God.”

Freedom, Asceticism & Martyrdom

We can sketch out the Church’s anthropological vision thus: Because we are not only free, but social, and purposeful beings, created in the image of God, we are also doxological beings. In

⁵ *On Perfection*,

this life, our doxological vocation finds its fulfillment in the celebration of the Eucharist which in turn points us beyond this life to the life to come:

In giving himself always anew in the Eucharistic mystery, Christ draws us forever to himself, and thereby draws us to one another. He also grants us a foretaste of that wedding-feast of the Kingdom to which all persons are called, even those who are at present outside the visible communion of the Church. However great the labors of Christians in this world, out of obedience to the law of divine love, they are sustained by a deeper and ultimately irrepressible rejoicing (§5).

Given the *eschatological* character of human freedom, we might be tempted to think that freedom in the political and economic arenas is unimportant and have little if any, role to play in the pursuit of human flourishing and Christian holiness. As Charles Taylor argues, not without a touch of irony, this disconnect between human flourishing in this life and life in the Kingdom of God is common both to modernity and early modern Christianity albeit for different reasons.⁶

The eschatological fulfillment of our doxological vocation is not a rejection of prudence or technical expertise. Nor is it meant as a rejection of the role of culture in human affairs in favor of sectarianism or liturgical reductionism; to say that worship is the source and fulfillment of the human must be carefully distinguished from any attempt to reduce life in Christ to our participation in formal acts of communal worship. Indeed it is precisely because of our doxological identity that Christians must “strive against evil, however invincible it may at times appear, and to work for the love and justice that God requires of his creatures, however impractical that may at times prove.” In this struggle, however, we must not lose sight of our *primary* obligation “to bless, elevate, and transfigure this world, so that its intrinsic goodness may be revealed even amidst its fallenness” (§4). Or if you prefer, Christians fulfill our doxological vocation when in Word, Sacrament, in ascetical struggles and works of charity, we “preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mark 16;15).

But all is not rosy. In a fallen world we can, and do, err in exercising our freedom in love. Moreover--and more importantly--acting rightly “may on many occasions” take the form of a call “to pursue God’s goodness even to the point of self-sacrifice.” We must not ignore the fact that martyrdom is the possible cost of taking seriously the Christian vocation to “struggle against everything distorted and malignant, both in ourselves and in the damaged structure and fabric of a suffering creation.”

Even when it does not end in physical martyrdom, fidelity to the Gospel is “inevitably ... an ascetical labor” since above all else, Christ calls us

to strive against the obstinate selfishness of our own sinful inclinations, and to undertake a constant effort to cultivate in ourselves the eye of charity, which alone is able to see the face of Christ in the face of our every brother and sisters (§5).

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2018). I’ll come back to Taylor below.

It is important to emphasize that for Orthodox social teaching, “the link between asceticism and martyrdom is neither an assumption nor a modern extrapolation as to how the martyrs of the early church were able to withstand the excruciating pain they were subjected to.” Rather it is by “separating themselves from the norms of the world, both physically (by their seclusion and non-mainstream habits), and spiritually (by strict regulations on everything their senses and minds encountered), the ascetic is able to distance himself not only to earthly ties but his own body.” Ascetic struggle makes it possible for “the martyrs to reconfigure their bodies as battlegrounds.” As a consequence “the more the body was subject to self-disciplinary techniques and pain, the more distant it became to others, amongst whom were the torturers.”⁷

Economics in *For the Life of the World*

Are Christians Supposed to Be Communists?⁸

Turning now to the text of *FLOW* (§32-41), there is an almost total absence of this doxological anthropology. In its place, we find a fairly standard, center-left discussion of the shortcomings of the free market and globalization coupled with calls for increased government intervention to assure economic “equity,” (§33), tax reform to correct “the gross inequalities of wealth” (§35) the free flow of labor across international borders, better wages (§37), a more generous social safety net (§38), international debt relief (§39), universal access to health care (§40), and more stringent environmental regulations (§41). This is in keeping the document’s agenda to explore the relationship between “modern democratic values and the tradition of the Orthodox Church. What we see, in other words, is a theological defense of European-style democratic socialism that is offered as a theoretical and practical critique and alternative--or at least corrective--to democratic capitalism.⁹

Taking a step back, I would characterize the section that touches on economic matters as long on intuition but rather unfortunately short on prudential analysis. This is not to dismiss the concerns raised here; far from it in fact. All of the recommendations are worth debating. But to borrow from the late William Sloan Coffin, it is one thing to “say, with the prophet Amos, let justice roll down like mighty waters” but “figuring out the irrigation system is complicated”¹⁰ and the purview not of theology and theologians but economics and economists.

In *FLOW*’s favor, there is an at least implicit acknowledgment of this division of labor. The document reminds us of the primacy of faith saying that

⁷ One of the Youth, “Asceticism: The Contemporary Martyrdom? - Pimonakhos Articles,” St Shenouda Monastery, June 4, 2016, <https://stshenoudamonastery.org.au/asceticism-contemporary-martyrdom/>. For more on the ascetical character of the Christian life see Georges Florovsky, “The Ascetic Ideal and the New Testament: A Critique of the Theology of the Reformation,” in *The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Vaduz, Europa: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 17–59.

⁸ This is precisely the argument made by the theologian David Bentley Hart one of the principal contributors to and editors of *FLOW*. For example, see David Bentley Hart, “Opinion,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/christianity-communism.html>.

⁹ Cyril Horovon, *For the Life of the World and Orthodox Political Theology*.

¹⁰ Coffin, William Sloan. Bill Moyers, “On Faith & Reason”; Bill Moyers interviews William Sloane Coffin on NOW. 3.05.04. Interview by Bill Moyer. PBS, March 5, . https://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/print/coffin_print.html.

The Church must trust ... the assurances of Christ that, for those who seek God's Kingdom and its justice, God will provide all things. It must always, as heir to the missions of the prophets and to the Gospel of the incarnate God, be a voice first for the poor, and a voice raised whenever necessary against the rich and powerful, and against governments that neglect or abuse the weak in order to serve the interests of the strong.

They go on to say that we must also "in every generation" remember

the example of the Church of the Apostolic age, ask[s] of every society whether there are not *effective* means—and *perhaps new economic models*—by which it would be possible to achieve a more just distribution of wealth, and thereby a more radical commitment to the common good, of society and of the planet we all must share (§41, emphasis added).

What are we to make of such a call? Again, I think we can receive sympathetically many of the criticisms of our current economic situation that we find in *FLOW* even while raising prudential concerns about the solutions for which the document advocates.

“New Economic Models” or Better Self-Knowledge?

As for their call to develop “new economic models,” this need not be a blueprint for discrete, public policy initiatives. It can be more modest in scope; a means to help us understand how, as Christians, are to understand and respond to the ethical and prudential challenges they face in their lives as they strive not only to be “mindful of the poor,”¹¹ but also pursue their own, legitimate self-interest,¹² as they aspire to not “labor without respite,” while also being “reasonable productivity,” justly compensated for their labor, while also having sufficient time, social, and material resources “for restoration of body and soul with their families, friends, and communities” (see, §37). This is all fair as far as it goes and it is in keeping especially with the general trend of Catholic Social Teaching¹³ on the issue.

What is troubling here is the document's assumption that this requires adopting--or at least aspiring toward--some form of communism or socialism most faithfully reflects the economic model of the early Church and is best suited to meet the needs of those on the margins of society and the economy.¹⁴ Again, though while I think we can and should respond

¹¹ This passage from the Anaphora of the Divine Liturgy of St John Chrysostom serves as the epigraphy of *FLOW*'s discussion of economics.

¹² Though I cannot claim any originality in saying this, self-interest is different from selfishness. See Gregory Jensen, *The Cure for Consumerism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Acton Institute, 2015), pp. 69-71. Yes, the former is used to justify the latter but then as St Mark the Ascetic points out this is to be expected because “It can happen that someone may in appearance be fulfilling a commandment but is in reality serving a passion, and through evil thoughts he destroys the goodness of the action” in G.E.H. Palmer, *The Philokalia*, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Markarios of Corinth (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 145.

¹³ For example, see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Chapter 6: Human Work.

¹⁴ *FLOW* I think it overlooks the fact that poverty is always a relative term. Compared to the poor during the time of St. Basil the Great, the poor especially in Western society are unimaginably wealthy. This doesn't justify neglecting those in (relative) need but it is important to keep in mind not only the needs of the poor but also the real gains of the poor. Though one would be hard-pressed to tell from *FLOW*, these gains are the result of the free market. For more on this see Rachel Sheffield and Robert Rector, “Understanding Poverty in the United States: Surprising Facts About America's Poor,” The Heritage Foundation, accessed July 11, 2023,

<https://www.heritage.org/poverty-and-inequality/report/understanding-poverty-the-united-states-surprising->

sympathetically to the suggestion to better understand our economic life in light of the Gospel, we can also call into question the document's assumption that the evangelical and eschatological radicality (§33) of "the earliest Christian communities of the apostolic age" necessarily requires "holding all possessions in common and surrendering all private wealth to the community as a whole so that the needs of every member of Christ's body might be met (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37)." *FLOW*'s assumption to the contrary notwithstanding, the absence of private property and the corporate control of material resources is only *one* form of economic life in the early Church and can only be held as normative by discounting evidence that even in Acts of the Apostles that this was not obligatory; nor is it presented in the epistles as a universal practice.¹⁵

For example, whatever similarities some might see between the early Church and contemporary forms of socialism or communism, Ananias and Sapphira are not condemned for withholding the proceeds from the sale of their property but for lying to the Church.

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." (Acts 5:3-4, NKJV).

And as St. Paul tells the Corinthians

But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

It's only a selective appeal to the New Testament, that allows us to conclude that holding all property in common is normative in the early Church. Let me come at this from a slightly different angle.

Marriage & Wealth: Eschatological Symbols/Moral Temptations

Earlier in *FLOW*, we read a defense of the dignity of marriage in the face of a certain tendency to romanticize monasticism at the expense of conjugal life. While "consecrated virginity (which, in time, became the practice of monasticism) ... enjoyed the highest esteem" in the early, "the Church also in time came to understand marriage as a sacrament, and even condemned hostility to it." Nevertheless, and tragically, "at many times in the history of the Church," we see "something of a tension between the married life and monasticism, at least as regards their relative spiritual merits," resulting in a tendency among some to see marriage as little "more than a cultural institution or merely a means for propagating and preserving the human race."

For our, economic interest here, however, what matters is what comes next.

[facts-about](https://www.humanprogress.org/ylin/) and more recently "Your Life In Numbers - HumanProgress," Human Progress, July 1, 2020, <https://www.humanprogress.org/ylin/>.

¹⁵ Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, "Are Christians Really Supposed to Be Communists? A Response to David Bentley Hart," *America Magazine*, November 6, 2017 summarizes the NT evidence for this. For a more general, popular criticism of Hart's reading of the New Testament see <https://web.archive.org/web/20230124043403/https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/new-testament-strange-words-david-bentley-hart>

A depreciative view of marriage and family life flies in the face of the biblical use of “nuptial imagery as the principal means of describing the sacramental and eschatological union of Christ and his Church.” Moreover,

According to scripture, Christ vouchsafed his followers the first of his ministry’s signs of divinity at the Wedding Feast in Cana....Marriage is the sacrament of love, or human love raised into the world of the sacramental. It is the only sacrament that involves two persons freely and equally bound one to the other by God (§20).

In addition to nuptial imagery, the Scriptures--and especially the Old Testament--also use the imagery of material wealth and even what we might call, private property, to help us understand the Kingdom of God.¹⁶ The prophet Micah, for example, tells us that “everyone shall sit under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken” (4:4). And, as we saw a moment ago, *FLOW* reminds us that material abundance and the generosity this makes possible (a wedding feast) is an eschatological sign.

I’ll return to this later in our discussion on consumerism. But for now, though I would note that, yes, the Scriptures warn us the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10) but we are also told--as it happens on the last day of Great Lent as the Church prepares to journey with Jesus in Holy Week-- in Proverbs (31) that “a virtuous wife” who is “worth is far above rubies” (v. 10) is valuable not only because her husband can “trust” his heart to her but because she is also a source of material abundance (v.11).

In subsequent verses, the virtuous wife is described as hardworking and a good steward of her household. She is also an entrepreneur who “considers a field and buys it” and with the profits of this enterprise “plants a vineyard” (v. 16). An icon of philanthropy she “extend[s] her hand to the poor” and needy, clothes her family and decorates her home in rich fabrics (vv. 21-23). As we saw in the promised fig tree in Micah, her extravagant wealth is an outward sign that she is strong, wise, kind, prudent, and pious (vv. 25-29).

For the good wife--indeed for all believers---virtue and wealth need not be opposed to each other but can rather travel together for God’s glory as well as her own:

Charm is deceitful and beauty is passing,
But a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised.
Give her of the fruit of her hands,
And let her own works praise her in the gates (vv. 30-31).

The takeaway here is this.

The Scriptures praise marriage and wealth; they see both as a sign of God’s blessing in this life and as a foretaste of the Kingdom of God which is to come in the next. Along with this, we also are warned that neither is without its own temptations. Eager to please our spouses, we who are married can be distracted from serving the Lord. And, yes, the rich man can put his trust in his wealth rather than God. But temptation--as we’ll see in a moment--is not a sign that either wealth or marriage is sinful but rather the sign that I must grow in the virtues that these gifts require.

Before that, however, let’s look at how *FLOW* recommends we use wealth. I’ve taken the time here to point out that not only is wealth morally good but also that we are free to create and use

¹⁶ With some trepidation, I criticize Hart for failing to take into account what the Old Testament has to say about the moral goodness and blessing of wealth, Rev. Gregory Jensen, “David Bentley Hart’s Gospel of Class Division,” The Acton Institute, February 2, 2018, <https://www.acton.org/publications/transatlantic/2018/02/02/david-bentley-harts-gospel-class-division>.

wealth within the limits of the Gospel since if one or both of these things we're not true, then the document's philanthropic concerns would simply be wrong. To borrow from St. Paul's defense of his own Gospel, if wealth and so its creation are evil, we must hold ourselves apart from both. Why? Because we can never do evil in the pursuit of good (see, Romans 3:8).

Ecclesiastical and Civil Philanthropy

As on that first Pentecost, it does “not lie within the power of the Church to fashion civil society anew.” Nevertheless if during the subsequent centuries “the Church—given the absolutely intractable reality of imperial order” failed to produce “anything like an abstract political ideology that might correct or ameliorate the injustices of the age” they were still “able to care for the poor within their reach, and for widows and orphans especially (the most helpless classes of the ancient world), and to create among themselves a polity of love that left no one to his or her fate.” What was possible then, the document concludes, should be possible to do so today, in our own circumstances that are certainly no less “intractable” (§33).

Once again, *FLOW* favors intuition but does so at the expense of prudential analysis. This doesn't always serve their evangelical and philanthropic aims. Here, for example, we evidently are meant to assume that voluntary poverty and the absence of private property are morally normative for all Christians at all times.¹⁷ Fair enough. But given the long and complicated history of the Church's understanding and practice when it comes to wealth,¹⁸ *FLOW* would do better to argue the point not only theologically but demonstrate empirically how the absence of property rights serves the material benefit of the poor. Instead, they merely assert that voluntary poverty and the absence of property rights are what is needed.

Instead, we are told with a note of regret that subsequent centuries saw the Church fall from its pristine, Pentecostal economic practice.¹⁹ Yes, the Church's “understanding of the life in Christ as one of radical solidarity was carried over into the age of the politically enfranchised Church,” but it was not done “perfectly, unfortunately.” Nevertheless, it was preserved “to some real effect” and brought about a “change in imperial policy” that embodied “a concrete expression of the social consequences of the Gospel.” By this, they mean “the vast expansion of the Church's provision for the poor” made possible by “large material support from the state.”

¹⁷ They do so even though the empirical evidence suggests that it is the *absence* of property rights that contribute to the enduring poverty of the poor. See Henry DeSoto, in *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) who argues that legal barriers that prevent people from securing (and so exercising) property rights to which they have an informal claim is a key reason why many of the world's poor are unable to rise out of poverty.

¹⁸ See, for example, Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, “Scripture Made Strange,” *The Christian Century*, accessed July 12, 2023, <https://www.christiancentury.org/review/books/new-testament-strange-words-david-bentley-hart>, points out that

Hart's determination to resist “later theological and doctrinal history” in shaping his translation is fueled by his judgment that Augustine and his 16th-century successors were wrong not only in their reading of Adam's sin in Romans 5:12 but in their entire soteriology—everything from predestination to justification by faith to repentance to the division between heaven and hell. In short, the “magisterial Protestant tradition” that generated contemporary American Bible translation is “demonstrably wrong.”

Or, to put the matter directly, insofar as it brought about at least a marginal improvement in the material condition of the poor and so an expansion of the Church's evangelical and philanthropic ministries, Constantinian Christianity ain't all that bad. But this raises a question for us today. Why not bring the same moral hermeneutic to our present economic situation? While soberly criticizing its failures, why not acknowledge the real advantages for all--but especially for the poor--of the free market?

Please understand that my criticism of *FLOW* is not absolute. Yes, I do think that in their desire to offer a theological apology for social democracy, they have gone too far. But this is hardly unique to *FLOW* or the religious left. Advocates for democratic capitalism can also confuse what the Gospel allows in the prudential order with what it demands. I think the document sets out a more helpful course for us in its discussion of consumerism.

Navigating the Free Market

Consumerism & the Loss of Freedom

Reflecting on "the conversion of the empire to Christianity." we are told that

...there was no more significant change to the legal and social constitution of imperial society than the immense expansion of the Church's philanthropic resources and social responsibility. No general characterization of the relation of Church and state in the period of the Christian empire is possible; the alliance bore fruit both good and bad; but no one should doubt the immense improvement in the Western conception of the common good that was inaugurated in—and that slowly, fitfully unfolded from—the introduction of Christian conscience into the social grammar of the late antique world. In time, this cooperation for the sake of the common good was enshrined within Orthodox tradition under the term "*symphonia*" in the Emperor Justinian's Novellas.

As it has throughout the history of the Church, "the principle of *symphonia* can continue to guide the Church in her attempts to work with governments toward the common good and to struggle against injustice." What the Church cannot do, however, is appeal to such cooperation as a feint or ploy to impose a

...religious orthodoxy on society at large, or for promotion of the Church as a political power. Rather, it should serve to remind Christians that this commitment to the common good—as opposed to the mere formal protection of individual liberties, partisan interests, and the power of corporations—is the true essence of a democratic political order. Without the language of the common good at the center of social life, democratic pluralism all too easily degenerates into pure individualism, free market absolutism, and a spiritually corrosive consumerism (§14).

Later, in a discussion of human rights, "During the Lenten fast of 379 AD, St. Gregory of Nyssa preached a sermon that was perhaps the first recorded attack on slavery as an institution in Western history" While it would take centuries before Christians "adhere[d] faithfully" to "the equality of all Christians as fellow heirs of the Kingdom," much less "accept the dissolution of the institution of slavery that it logically implied" this eventually happens.

Even so, the modern world has not been fully purged of this evil institution. The Orthodox Church recognizes that a commitment to human rights in today's world still involves a *tireless struggle* against all the forms of slavery that still exist in the world. These include not only continued practices of bonded servitude in various quarters of the globe, but a number of other practices as well, both criminal and legally tolerated [emphasis added].

Once again, we see the need for ascetical struggle but now not simply for one's personal freedom in Christ but in defense of the freedom of others. While not unaware of the myriad forms of "modern slavery" the document takes care to point out "the spirit that nourishes it: the deification of profit, the pervasive modern ethos of consumerism, and the base impulses of racism, sexism, and egocentrism" (§65).

In effect it seems that *FLOW* has confused consumerism--the misuse of economic freedom--with the free market as such. While I would agree with their criticisms of consumerism, I would no more use it as the lens through which I try to understand economic freedom, the I would use adultery to understand marriage. What we need instead is an anthropological vision that takes seriously the costs and benefits (to use economic language) of dynamic nature of human freedom.

St. Gregory of Nyssa and the Ascetical Struggle to be Free

We find such an anthropology is St Gregory of Nyssa who tells us that both in this life and the life to come, we are called to a life of infinite progression. This life of constant change is necessary if we are to fulfill our Lord's command that we become perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect (see Matthew 5:48). Along the way though, Gregory makes a few anthropological observations that are of interest for our analysis of the economic and public policy concerns in *FloW*.

First of all, it is precisely our mutuality that makes it possible for us to grow in perfection.

... in truth the finest aspect of our mutability is the possibility of growth in good; and this capacity for improvement transforms the soul, as it changes, more and more into the divine. And so . . . what appears so terrifying (I mean the mutability of our nature) can really be a pinion in our flight towards higher things, and indeed it would be a hardship if we were not susceptible of the sort of change which is towards the better (GtG, p. 84).

Shifting briefly from anthropology to policy, having "an inclination to evil" as well as "the possibility of growth in good," is what makes the pursuit of morally good and prudent public policies in civil affairs not only possible but at least *relatively* obtainable. More on that in a moment. For now though, if we are *only* inclined toward sin, if we cannot do that which is really and truly good, then we are left only with "the war of all against all" and our appeals to prudence and the other virtues as the motivation and standard for law and public policy are revealed as "a tissue of crimes, follies, and misfortunes, of politics without design, and wars without consequence." Yes,

In this long list of human infirmity, a great character of shining virtue may sometimes happen to arise, as we often meet a cottage or a cultivated spot in the most hideous wilderness; but for an Alfred, an Alphonso, a Frederic, or one Alexander III we meet a thousand princes who have disgraced humanity (Letter XLII).²⁰

This brings us to a second element of what we might call Gregory's anthropology of ordered change.

Especially in a fallen world, Gregory writes, "good is hard to achieve" and "only the Lord of creation is constant" in goodness. We are not, fundamentally because we are sinners (though we are) but because our "nature is mutable and prone to change. How then is it possible to establish in our changeable nature this permanence and immutability in good?" His answer is as surprising in the spiritual realm as it is common senseable in economics; we must accept a

²⁰ Oliver Goldsmith, *Citizen of the World*, vol. I (London, 1794), p. 142.

degree of risk and without the possibility of defeat there is no victory even as there is no profit without the risk of loss. The saint writes

...there can be no crown unless the contest is fair, and the contest is fair only if there is an adversary to fight with. Thus, if there is no adversary, there is no crown. There is no victory unless there is conquest.

We must then struggle against the very mutability of our nature, “coming to grips as it were with our adversary in spirit.” But, and this is key, “we become victors not by holding our adversary down,” that is by denying mutuality and the risk it necessarily entails “but rather by not allowing him to fall. For man does not merely have an inclination to evil; were this so, it would be impossible for him to grow in good, if his nature possessed only an inclination towards the contrary” (GtG, p. 83).

Failure here, or what the saint calls our “fall,” is found in turning our back on “what appears so terrifying...the mutability of our nature.” Change and the risk it brings is “a pinion in our flight towards higher things” before going on to say that the real “hardship” would be “if we were not susceptible of the sort of change which is towards the better,” even though it comes with an irreducible and inescapable element of risk. Odd though it may seem to some, Gregory is not risk adverse; rather he encourages to throw ourselves into a life of constant experimentation, of trial and error, as the necessary cost of our growth not simply in participation in divine life or holiness but of *all* the virtues that foster human flourishing and, ultimately, Christian holiness:

One ought not then to be distressed when one considers this tendency in our nature; rather let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being transformed from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3.18), and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth, and never arriving at any limit of perfection. For that perfection consists in our never stopping in our growth in good, never circumscribing our perfection by any limitation (GtG, p. 84).

Change and so risk are constant in human life. It is when we reject this that we open ourselves up to seeing theology become ideology. This last point is where I think I would offer a fraternal correction to *FLOW*. There understanding of the free market is radically risk adverse; the judge the cost of economic freedom to be greater than any benefit. The irony here, as we saw, is that our doxological nature *presupposes* the willingness to risk all for Christ and our neighbor.

We will simply make mistakes in our economic life. Sometimes these will be the result of factual errors on our part. Other times, we will make good decisions in the moment that later turn out to have unintended consequences as events unfold. And, yes, there are times when I make morally bad economic decisions because I am sinful. But none of this justifies rejecting or even minimizing the centrality of human freedom not only in our economic life but in all dimensions of life.

A self-emptying witness

Let me leave you with this.

Policy, to repeat what I said earlier, matters. However, it is always, only secondary. The Church has preached the Gospel, called sinners to repentance, cared for the poor, and raised up saints in all manner of political and economic situations. This isn't to say all regimes or economic models are morally equal. They are not. But what they all are is, once again, secondary.

What is primary is Christ and the Church's witness to Him.

As difficult as it is to craft--much less enact--morally good and prudent public policy, a credible witness to Christ is harder still. When, as in the case of *FLOW*, we allow these difficulties to overwhelm the gift of human freedom, we not only set off down the path to bad public policy, we risk doing so at the expense of our witness. We should pursue the good public policy but only as the one aspect of our witness to Christ. The pastoral problem is we are tempted to forsake the latter in our concern for the former.

St Maximus the Confessor is helpful here. Reflecting on the divine economy, Maximus says that God “thirsts to be thirsted for, and longs to be longed for, and loves to be loved.”²¹ Creation, the Incarnation of the Son, His death and resurrection, the whole of the life of the Church, is God’s self-emptying offering to His creatures in the hope that we will respond to His love with our own.

Our witness then must be kenotic or a self-emptying witness. This means that I not only love my enemy but desire the love of my enemy. Self-emptying after the example of Christ means that I must actively pursue my enemy’s love. I need to speak to those with whom I disagree as those whose love matters to me. A social ethos that does not actively pursue the love of business owners and entrepreneurs, workers and consumers, that doesn’t see first the goodness of their economic decisions, fails to live up to which we are called.

To be free means that I not only give myself over to others in love but that I want to be loved by them. In this context, asceticism is nothing more or less than purifying both my love for you and removing from my heart anything that makes me shy away from your love. It also means that the Church must offer guidance in how--in and through our economic life--we can not only give ourselves over in love to each other but receive each other in love.

Or, maybe better, our social witness should help people understand that however “slowly, fitfully” it unfolds, our economic life is rooted in love.²²

²¹ *Ambigua*, PG 91: 1260B quoted in Nicholas Loudovikos, “Analogical Ecstasis: Maximus the Confessor, Poltinus, Heidegger and Lacan,” (unpublished), 2.

²² Once again, I cannot claim any originality in saying this. See John D. Mueller, *Redeeming Economics: Rediscovering the Missing Element* (Open Road Media, 2014).