

1-1-2006

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Recommended Citation

Lampe, Dr. Philip E. Ph.D. (2006) "THE SHAME OF BEING NUMBER ONE," *Verbum Incarnatum: An Academic Journal of Social Justice*: Vol. 1 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://athenaeum.uiw.edu/verbumincarnatum/vol1/iss1/20>

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THE SHAME OF BEING NUMBER ONE

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Abstract

Americans are accustomed to saying and hearing that the United States is the greatest, most powerful nation in the world. Citizenship is considered to be a source of pride. Although the United States is, in fact, number one in many areas, not all are something Americans should be proud of. There appears to be a greater concern for, and focus on, those at the top than those at the bottom. The result is great inequality. The United States, which claims to be the world leader, should attempt to be the leader in social justice. To accomplish this, policies and actions should be guided by the principles of social justice, and all Americans should spend more effort in socializing our youth as we are socializing them.

Introduction

It feels great to say “We’re number one,” “numero uno,” unless, of course, we are talking about problems, something wrong. But if we are talking about our country, the United States, we must be referring to something good or right. We are the best. Everyone wants to live in this country. That is one of our biggest problems, immigration. We do not have to worry that too many people want to leave. No, the problem is too many people want to come. Consequently, Congress has passed a bill authorizing the building of 700 miles of fence along the Mexican border and has ordered national guard units to patrol the border.

The United States is like the baseball field in the movie *The Field of Dreams*. Americans have long believed we are the new “Chosen People” and that this is the new “Promised Land.” Our ancestors, inspired by these same beliefs, acted on the assumed Divine command to “build it and they will come.” It has long been accepted by governmental leaders that the United States has a corresponding “manifest destiny” which has motivated (and required?) them to spread its influence from “sea to shining sea.” The divine mandate is a matter of faith, something to be accepted. It should not be questioned. If it is, then, as the bumper stickers state, “America, love it or leave it.”

Most Americans probably believe this is the best country in the world. Politicians constantly tell the voters that the United States is the greatest nation on earth, and a vote for them and their party will keep it that way. It is fair, therefore, to see how it is and how they want to keep it. Candidates often invite voters to look at their record. A look at the record reveals that the United States is, in fact, number one in many areas. For example, it is currently the most prosperous and powerful nation. It is the recognized world leader. Compared to other major industrial nations, the United States “ranks Number One in real wealth, number of billionaires, the amount of space in homes, defense spending and military capability, executive salaries, physicians’ salaries, ethnic

diversity, percentage of the population with access to safe drinking water, and the percentage of residents enrolled in higher education “(Eitzen & Leedham, 2004, p. 3). Many people may see this and think “So far so good.” These may be considered as sources of pride and things which they want to continue. Others may be uneasy about the number of billionaires, the spacious homes, the amount of military spending and executive salaries.

Leadership Devoid of Pride

The United States, however, is also number one in many other areas which should not be sources of patriotic pride for anyone and which no one should want to continue. The *status quo* is not a model of social justice. For example, “compared to its industrialized counterparts the United States had the highest incidence of poverty (11.7 percent in 2001, U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Among the industrialized nations, the United States has the highest rate of child poverty (one in six). Nearly 11 million children (15.5 percent of all children) are not covered by health insurance, and 500,000 children are homeless (Pollitt, 2001). Compared to its peers, the poor in the United States experience the longest periods in poverty. And, compared with Canada and the nations of Western Europe and Scandinavia, the United States eliminates much less poverty through welfare subsidies than any of the other fourteen nations (Solow, 2000). Moreover, the United States ranks first in the percent of its children under 6 in poverty (at 18.0 percent in 2001); its rate is three to five times the rate of Western European nations” (Eitzen & Leedham, 2004, p. 3).

The authors go on to say that even though the United States has the most advanced health care system, it is the only industrialized nation without some form of universal health care. Health care largely depends on ability to pay, and the United States has the most unfair distribution of wealth and income of all industrialized nations. The gap in pay between the CEOs and their average blue-collar workers is approximately 458 times greater. Between 1990 and 2000, the average pay increase for the CEOs was 571 percent while that of the workers was 37 percent. Not surprisingly, this same discrepancy between CEO’s and workers’ income is found in the distribution of wealth. Approximately 80 percent of the nation’s property is owned by only 10 percent of the population. This discrepancy is also greater than that found in any other advanced nation (Eitzen & Leedham, 2004, p. 3-4). In addition, 40 percent of the nation’s total assets were owned by just one percent of Americans in 2000 (Henslin, 2004, p.193).

A First with Worldwide Effects

Since 1990 the United States has been the leading arms dealer in the world. Twelve of the top twenty weapons-producing companies in the world are located in this country. President Carter unilaterally renounced the sale of major weapons systems to South American countries because, he said, most of the region was run by brutal military dictators or juntas. However, President Clinton did not follow the lead of Carter and under his leadership arms sales abroad greatly increased and exports doubled. Between 1993 and 2000, 68 percent of all arms sales were made to developing nations, although since 1997 there has been some decrease in the sales to such countries. The Bush

administration has continued to keep America the leading arms dealer, and as his predecessor, has not been too selective in the clientele. Currently the United States is the leading provider of military weapons to developing countries.

Opponents of the international arms trade argue that selling weapons is immoral and puts profits above people who will be killed by them. In addition, the sale of weapons will help dictators oppress their people, and selling arms to underdeveloped and developing countries takes away scarce resources which should be spent on necessities which will help their people. Finally, the debt incurred gives power to the creditor nation and establishes the basis for neocolonialism.

Proponents of the international arms sales respond that such production helps insure U.S. military superiority, aids the economy, provides secure well-paying jobs, helps the interchangeability of parts and equipment in joint U.N. and NATO operations and, the final argument, “if we don’t sell them someone else will.”

In a 1987 encyclical entitled *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* Pope John Paul II called this trade “scandalous.” The arms trade was also denounced by the U.S. bishops in 1995 in their document *Sowing Weapons of War* in which they stated that selling weapons of war as though they were simply another commodity “is a serious moral disorder in today’s world” and “jobs at home cannot justify exporting the means of war abroad.” The bishops also stated that “The United States needs to put its energies into building peace, not supplying arms.” In 2000 a study by the Council for a Liveable World Educational Fund entitled *Human Rights and Weapons: Records of Selected U.S. Arms Clients* noted that many of the worst human rights abusing countries were customers of the United States.

Criteria for a Just Society

The preceding data illustrates that the law-makers, and by extension, the American people have a lot of soul-searching and explaining to do. We all need to examine our consciences, either for what we do or fail to do. For what is supposed to be a Christian country we have clearly not followed our professed beliefs or the Christian message to “love one another.” If we apply the basic principles of Catholic Social Teaching we find a discrepancy between our professed Christian beliefs and our actions (or inactions). The government’s policies and their consequences should be examined in light of the following principles. 1) *Dignity of the Human Person*. All life comes from God and is therefore sacred. This means that life should be respected, protected and developed at all stages of the life cycle. This development includes the physical, mental, social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual dimensions of human life. 2) *Dignity of Work*. Humans were created to work, which is an extension and continuation of God’s creative work. Work should be productive, in a safe environment, providing a living wage and furthering the common good. Work and the economic system are for the good of the workers; workers are not for the good of the economy. 3) *Community and the Person*. Humans are by nature social beings. Individuals are born and raised within interrelated and interdependent human networks. Socialization of new members is a communal

endeavor. Each of the members of these networks affects, and is affected by, all other members. Human dignity is recognized, developed and protected in community with others. Communities to which individuals belong include family, town or city, state, country, and the whole world. Ultimately, our obligation and concern for community and the common good refer to the entire human community. 4) *Rights and Responsibilities*. The first and most basic right is the right to life. Without this right, all others will cease to exist. Among our many rights is the right to private property. However, this right is not absolute. It is limited by the purpose of all things, which is to serve the common good. This means that no one has the right to accumulate more private property than is needed while others lack the very means of survival. Everyone has a right to share in God's creation and bounty. Applied to government this means that government should let individuals and groups do for themselves what they are capable of doing without government aid or interference. However, government, at the lowest level possible, must provide assistance when individuals or groups are unable to meet their basic needs. This is referred to as the Principle of Subsidiarity. Among our rights and responsibilities is that of participation both as decision makers and as implementers 5) *Option for the Poor*. In both the Old and New Testaments God showed a special concern for the poor and vulnerable. Societies should be judged not by comparing the size and opulence of those at the top but rather by comparing the size and poverty of those at the bottom. Such a comparison will indicate society's concern and commitment for the common good. Applied internationally, the current lack of concern for the global common good has resulted in what has been termed "inadmissible superdevelopment" of excessively prosperous nations at the expense of excessively poverty stricken nations. 6) *Solidarity of Humanity*. All people are our brothers and sisters, all children of God. Like a good parent, God loves us all and has commanded us to love one another as He loves us. He also said that whatever we do to others we do to Him, and anyone who says she/he loves Him but hates her/his neighbor is a liar. Solidarity demands not only the avoidance of violence in all its forms but also the fostering of peace. As Pope Paul VI has stated, peace is not just the absence of war, and if we want peace we must work for justice. 7) *Care for Creation*. Humans, who are part of creation, must respect all of creation which reflects the Creator. We are called to be stewards who protect and share the resources of the earth. Pollution, destruction and waste of the environment are contrary to God's plan. Nature's resources are intended not only for our benefit but for future generations (DeBerri, et al: 2006, & p. 18-34).

We Can Do Better

Unfortunately, most people, including those in positions of authority who are able to influence policy, appear to be primarily concerned with the welfare of certain sectors of the population rather than the nation, or world, as a whole. Concerns are focused on individuals in groups. In government it appears that most politicians have a hierarchy of concerns. At the top of the list is themselves, followed by their party, then their constituents, followed by the rest of the voters and finally the good of the rest of the nation. The good of the rest of humanity (the universal common good) is not a concern, unless it in some way affects one of the previously enumerated concerns. Even the concern for constituents and the rest of the nation appears to have a hierarchy. At the top

of the list are the wealthy donors, followed by their voters, all other voters and, at the bottom are the poor nonvoters. To the extent politicians are concerned for people in other countries, once again, there is a hierarchy. At the top are our allies and trading partners, particularly those from Western Europe and Canada, followed by oil producing countries and Mexico. At the bottom are poor nonwhite countries that have nothing to offer us. This hierarchy of concerns can readily be seen in those countries around the world in which we intervene and those in which we fail to intervene. The present situation in our government, including the recent spate of scandals, has led Norman Ornstein, a well respected political analyst of the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and coauthor of the book *The Broken Branch* which deals with Congress, to declare that we have lost our moral compass and that there is a “culture of corruption” in government.

In business it appears that CEOs also have a hierarchy of concerns. At the top of the list are themselves, followed by the share holders, then the market (the consumers of their product or services) and finally the workers. The gap in salaries between the CEOs and their employees is obscene and unjust. Pensions are being lost, benefits are being reduced or lost and workers are often being asked to accept reductions in compensation and many are being retired or downsized. Then, to add insult to injury, the well-paid CEOs responsible for these actions are often given large bonuses because they were able to save the company money at the expense of their employees.

In addition to an apparent lack of concern for individuals, both government and business fail to exhibit a concern for the environment. This not only shows a disrespect for the Creator but also a disregard for future generations. We forget that creation is not ours to do with as we wish but to preserve and protect for all others.

Socialization and Societalization

According to some who have considered the evidence, America’s level of inequality is by design (Fischer et al., 1996, p. 125). Our policies and programs indicate a state of mind that accepts the current situation and views a welfare state with suspicion and disdain. Our mentality regarding extensive welfare, or aid to the poor, is reminiscent of the views of William Graham Sumner (1883), which is basically summed up in the belief that such aid is contrary to nature, or survival of the fittest, and leads to survival of the unfittest. Such a view is clearly unchristian and contrary to the principles of social justice. Some may argue that Christianity as a religious belief system and guide to personal morality is fine but, as a guide to social living including political and economic behavior, is unrealistic and a failure. The truth is that Christianity as a guide to human interaction and social relations has not failed; it has never been tried.

Overall, the current situation indicates a strong sense of individualism and a general lack of concern for the common good. One thing which schools and other agents of socialization can and should do which will help ameliorate the present unjust situation, in addition to teaching the principles of social justice, is to societalize as we socialize our youth. Socialization refers to the *process of learning* the culture of a group, while societalization refers the *process of developing* a concern for the feelings and welfare of

the members of the group. These are not the same nor do they necessarily occur together. Many people are socialized and learn the American way of life but fail to become societalized and seek the common good. When this occurs social problems result, as is evident from the list of problems previously noted which indicate a lack of concern for others.

Societalization results in the development of a social conscience, empathy, respect for others, civility, altruism and the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes. It entails replacing individualism and egoism with altruism, an emphasis on competition with cooperation, a belief that ends do not justify means with the knowledge that some things are inherently wrong (what social scientists refer to as *mala en se* and theologians refer to as intrinsically evil) and a recognition that we are responsible for our actions and how they affect others. This is a lifelong process which must be learned, reinforced and practiced. Injustice and social problems can never be completely eliminated, but they can be reduced.

If the concern expressed in the popular motto "look out for number one" is replaced with "I am my brother's keeper," and the emphasis on "I" is replaced with "we," all people will enjoy the benefits which the Creator has provided. We must practice contributive justice, by sharing our time and talents, as well as distributive justice, by sharing social and economic rewards in a fair manner. Such would lead not only to prosperity but also to peace. As Pope Paul VI stated, "If you want peace, work for justice." This is similar to the observation of Benito Juarez, a former president of Mexico, that "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz." We must recognize that without justice there will be no peace, either in our country or in the world. If we are as concerned for the rights and welfare of others as much as we are for our own, and if we apply the principles of social justice, we may become the Christian nation we profess to be. This would ensure that the United States could truly take pride in being number one.

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