

## Economics Begins at Home

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*"In a sense, the Southern Agrarians led the last significant American campaign in behalf of property and the humane concerns so well expressed in the ancient right to property. One can even argue that the Agrarians were the last original group of critics in America, with anything close to a national audience, who took property and property rights seriously. An alternative way of expressing this point is that they fought the last significant, rearguard, and losing battle against either socialist or corporate forms of collectivism – against large accumulations of capital, narrowly centralized and bureaucratic management, and wage dependent, non-owning workers."*

—PAUL KEITH CONKIN



**T**HE DESTRUCTION OF THE HOUSEHOLD ECONOMY IS one of the most significant consequences of the modern revolutions of the last two centuries.<sup>1</sup> However, it is a subject that has received little attention. Professional economists find it trivial when compared to the workings of business corporations or national economies. The average American, including most Catholics, sees it as a positive development that has meant greater mobility, money, and freedom from menial labor. Yet, this seemingly benign death of the household economy is correlated with some serious social ills – from rampant crime and violence to widespread divorce, reproductive dysfunction, and mental illness. Most noticeably, the decline of the household is closely connected to the decline of the community and religious life.

The main cause of the decline of the household economy can be traced to the industrial revolution and the subsequent rise of the modern state and business corporation. The industrial revolution separated economic production from the traditional family and communal setting, and the state and business corporation were able to control and direct these new economic processes to their benefit.<sup>2</sup> While society did receive, in exchange, some material benefits from many of these new organizational and technical changes, the price paid was a high one: most of the traditional socio-economic func-

1. See e.g., Allan C. Carlson, *From Cottage to Workstation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993).

2. James Burnham aptly termed this phenomenon the "Managerial Revolution," for both the modern state and corporation are institutions that are run by a managerial class comprised of technicians, analysts and administrators. And it is these bureaucrats who displaced an older elite that were still in some way connected to the family and community. See James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution: What is Happening in the World* (New York: John Day, 1941).

tions of the household were lost to the state and the corporation. The state took over “primary-care” functions such as education, health, and care of children and the elderly, while the corporation took over those of economic production for provision of food, clothing, shelter, entertainment, and even, to some extent, biological reproduction. As a result, the modern household has become almost completely dependent upon these institutions for its survival. Moreover, this dependency has meant that the reliance people once had on themselves, their family members, their communities, and their churches have declined proportionately.

In effect, the state and the business corporation have monopolized economic (as well as political and cultural) power in America and in the entire industrialized world. It is a revolution that is also now international, as witnessed in the process of so-called “globalization.” This monopolization of power is the essence of both socialism and capitalism, which are, at least in theory, the two so-called “competing” ideologies of the modern age. Both ideologies exaggerate and hence distort one aspect of socio-economic and political life at the expense of all others. Socialism is fixated on the exclusive power of the state, whereas capitalism is fixated on that of the market. As socialism and capitalism have struggled against one another for preeminence, they have turned societies into ideological battlegrounds in which the traditional socio-economic order centered on family, community, and Church has been the ultimate casualty.

This is why the Catholic Church has always been critical of both socialism and capitalism, because both try to monopolize power at the expense of the intermediary social institutions that form the basis of the traditional social order. The Church has never condemned the role of the market to the extent that it provides goods and private property, nor has it condemned the role of government to regulate, tax, or provide social benefits. According to Church teaching, the proper roles of the state and market are to support and facilitate family, community, and religious life rather than compete against and destroy them. The former must subordinate themselves to latter – at least in terms of their ends or purposes – if they are to be rightly ordered. And in a healthy body politic, the market itself must be subordinate to the state, for the enforcement of prudent and proper limits, where such subordination is called for. Such an approach is the only way in which these institutions can be assured of working to provide for, rather than militating against, a fuller realization of human potential and the spiritual gifts given by God, as well as an equitable and stable economy.

If Catholics, and Christians generally, are serious about changing the current social and economic conditions in America and other nations that have fallen into the narrow and destructive “left vs. right” paradigm of so-

cialism and capitalism, they must begin by placing the family and community once again at the center of economic life. It is only when the household again becomes a viable actor in social and economic life that a Catholic cultural renewal will even become possible. After all, the home is the center of all civilized existence, and it is where economics begins.

## Subsidiarity and the Natural Economy

**THE SHIFT** OF the most basic economic functions (especially food production, cooking, household chores, entertainment) away from the household to the marketplace accounts for much of the economic growth of the last several decades. It is what is euphemistically called the “service economy.” But its essence is consumerism, ultimately a product of the divorce of the consumption of economic goods from their production: the modern household has been almost universally transformed into a center of consumption by workers who are no longer themselves producers, but mere employees in a “service industry.” The traditional connection, so much insisted upon by Fr. McNabb and others,<sup>1</sup> between the production of goods and their consumption *by those who produced them*, or at least by members of the neighborhood or community where the goods are produced, has given place to the “dormitory” model of the American household. It is today nothing more than a place where one retires at the end of the day to eat industrially processed food, watch TV, and sleep. Production, meanwhile, of the goods consumed in the “dorm” takes place hundreds if not thousands of miles away.

The early (nineteenth-century) criticisms of socialism and capitalism by the Church focused, among other things, on the exploitative and alienating aspects of work under centralized economic systems. However, more recent papal encyclicals have focused on the socially and spiritually destructive aspects of consumerism as almost a psychological and ideological problem of its own. As Pope John Paul exclaimed in 1991 in *Centesimus Annus* (CA):

In advanced economics the demand is no longer for quantity, but for quality. Hence the issue of consumerism arises. The new material, physical, and instinctive needs should remain subordinate to humanity’s interior and spiritual needs. Appealing to instinct only may create lifestyles and consumer attitudes that are damaging to spiritual and physical health. The education

1. See the essays by Anthony Cooney and Dr. Chojnowski in this volume for more on the Distributist (normative) “law” that seeks to re-unite the areas of production and consumption.

and cultural formation of consumers and producers and of the mass media are urgently needed, as well as the intervention of public authority (§36).

The only thing that can really counter the consumer culture would be a “producer culture.”<sup>1</sup> Naturally, the first step towards creating a producer culture would be to cut consumption. The modern economy is constantly trying to create new demand for goods and services, many of which are unnecessary and wasteful, if not downright sinful. Consumption creates dependency upon the sources of goods that we “can’t live without,” and relegates ever more power to the state and business corporations which thrive from the profits and taxes generated by these massive consumer industries. Consumerism also directly contradicts the most basic Christian principle of poverty. While not all Catholics are called to a life of radical poverty, all are called to a life of simplicity. The simple life is only possible when the “consumer impulse” is thwarted.

The second and most critical step in returning to a producer culture is when people actually produce more of what they consume, and this can only occur at the level of the household and community. To modern ears this sounds like a romantic and unworkable program. Yet the idea of a producer culture is at the heart of the natural economy advocated by Catholic social teaching. The principle that underlies this economy is *subsidiarity*, whose importance Pope Pius XI explains in this way in his 1931 *Quadragesimo Anno*:

[T]hat most weighty principle, which cannot be set aside or changed, remains fixed and unshaken in social philosophy: just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them (§79).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, if an economic function can be performed at the level of the household, it should be. And it is only if it cannot be done there, that higher levels of institutional complexity (i.e., the state or business corporation) should be called upon to perform the task. It comes as no surprise that the modern world has totally abandoned the principle of subsidiarity. In fact, it has it exactly backwards, for modern economies prod man to constantly adopt the most complex means to achieve simple tasks. In the end the household and community lose all of their socio-economic functions and become de-

pendent on massive and impersonal bureaucracies to fulfill even the basic needs.

Historically, the social body where subsidiarity was most fully practiced was the family farm. It was here that people relied on simple forms of energy, technology, and technique – namely the human being and his labor – to provide for basic needs. The family farm was also the center of human reproduction. And it is where the active ingredients of religious faith – the feelings of trust, obedience, discipline, and fidelity – were cultivated. The family nurtured and sustained these bonds of love, which was the “glue” that held society together. Thus, the family farm was the cultural foundation of society, because it is the only social body where both spiritual and material reproduction co-existed.

So when the Southern Agrarians, the English Distributists and other radical Christians defended the family farm and rural life, they were not simply spewing forth nostalgic pap – they were defending the only economic culture that could truly counter the spiritual and material destructiveness of modernity. Theirs was a rational argument based on thousands of years of empirical evidence that the family farm is the foundation of a healthy and properly religious society. They were also echoing the received wisdom of the Catholic Church’s most respected thinkers. As Pope Pius XII said in 1941, “Of all the goods that can be the object of private property, none is more conformable to nature, according to the teaching of *Retrum Novarum*, than the land, the holding on which the family lives, and from the products of which it draws all or part of its subsistence”; and “only that stability which is rooted in one’s own holding makes of the family the vital and most perfect and fecund cell of society . . . .”<sup>1</sup> Five years later he would only strengthen his judgment: “[T]he tiller of the soil still represents the natural order of things willed by God.”<sup>2</sup> Here we was simply expounding upon the judgment of Catholic tradition, which saw “the ideal of all great statesmen from Solon to Leo XIII” as “flourishing populations of small farmers or peasants.”<sup>3</sup>

Because self-reliant agrarian communities did not have to depend on the corporation and the state, they were able to keep corporate and state power in check. And it is for this reason that the family farm remains the most important socio-economic entity for traditional Christians, just as the business corporation is the icon of liberals and the state that of socialists. Chris-

1. *La Solennità della Pentecoste, from Principles for Peace* (Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference, 1943), p. 727.

2. Speech delivered to the delegates at the Convention of the National Confederation of Farm Owners-Operators, Rome, November 15, 1946.

3. Charles S. Devas, *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907–12; online edition K. Knight, 2003), s.v., “Agrarianism.”

1. This is a term first coined by the contemporary agrarian writer Wendell Berry, who has made this argument in many of his books on agrarian life and farming in America.

2. From the Vatican edition, published at <http://www.vatican.va>.

tians know all too well that once the family farm disintegrates, a culture's ability to reproduce itself spiritually, morally, and psychologically, as well as physically, diminishes, and a civilization begins to die.

Today the family farm is virtually extinct. Some of this is due to an indifferent if not hostile government, which created policies that failed to promote the family farm aggressively. But perhaps more damaging was the seduction of the consumer lifestyle, in which one's interaction with economic goods is principally to consume them, and not to produce them. While the Church must continue to defend the family farm and the virtues of rural life, as a beacon and ideal, as well as a viable alternative, the greatest economic and cultural struggle lies in suburban America, for it is at the center of the consumer culture, and it is here that Catholics must find ways both to cut consumption and become economically more self-reliant.

### Steps Towards Restoring a Natural Economy

**I**F CATHOLICS AND other Christians want to restore economic sanity and moral stability to society, they must begin by reapplying subsidiarity to every sphere of life. In a world dominated by big business and big government, this might appear to be impossible. But it is not. Leviathan thrives on the illusion of its own inevitable triumph. It may dominate the public square, but it should never win in the home. And this is where economic (as well as political and cultural) resistance is possible. Serious Catholics and others of good will can effectively undermine the economic principles of modernity—namely, the unbridled desire for power—just as modernity has violated the Christian principle of subsidiarity. The easiest way to reduce the power of the state and business corporation is to reduce reliance on them and strengthen the family, the community, and the Church. This is the essence of subsidiarity and the basis of a more fully lived Christian social life.

The first application of subsidiarity applies to work. Those interested in beginning the slow but steady transformation should, if possible, seek to work where they live. Those who cannot work at home should at least try to live as close to work (as well as school and Church) as possible. Home or local employment *must* be the desired option for both Catholics and all others desiring a more sane and healthy life because of its many social and cultural benefits. First, families can spend more time together and in their communities. Second, a thriving business can be a multi-generational affair that can cement family relations and keep family members close to home. Third, small businesses bring life to a neighborhood. Most neighborhoods today have become ghost towns. Women, children, and the elderly were once com-

mon community fixtures. They were, in fact, the foundation of all communal life. Now they are all off at work, at day care, or deposited in facilities for the aged. The only human life forms left in the neighborhood are delivery people and "pest" exterminators—a weak foundation indeed upon which to sustain a living community.

Integrating home and work can lead not only to more fulfilling family and community life, it can also create towns and cities that are more environmentally and socially sustainable than the high consumption, mass-sprawl metropolises that now scar the American landscape. Those who work at or close to home can also reduce their reliance on the automobile, which is not only an expensive machine to maintain, but has many hidden (and not so hidden) social and ecological costs. It is the leading cause of two of the urban world's most pervasive problems: smog and traffic (not to mention stress). More importantly, the reliance on the automobile is probably the single major cause for the explosion of state and corporate power in the last one hundred years. As E. Michael Jones has written, the automobile is highly conducive to manipulation by big business and the government. As such, it has become the basis of some of the most powerful forms of social control and social engineering ever witnessed in America and the industrial world in general. The result has been the explosive growth of suburbia and the high-mobility, high-consumption lifestyle that has dealt such a serious blow to the traditional social order.<sup>1</sup>

One of the paradoxes of suburbia, in particular, is that all of these homeowners possess land (even if it is only mortgaged), yet few use it for any economic purpose. For those who have land, the first application of subsidiarity is to grow food. This applies to *all* landowners. Even a tiny quarter acre suburban plot, with good sun and soil, can produce enough fruit and vegetables to support a family of four for an entire year! Most Americans are not aware of this. They would rather work the day away in an energy-consuming office and then purchase their input-intensive agri-goods at the local supermarket. Home food production makes particular economic sense for middle and lower income families with a little land, where the mother does not desire full-time work or work outside the home. Here the cost of full employment (including the expense of an additional car, eating out, day care, a new wardrobe, etc.) is usually not worth it. Growing and cooking one's own food at home is not only attractive, it is a viable economic solution to the worker-consumer treadmill. Once again we see the wisdom of the attempt to re-integrate production and consumption.

1. E. Michael Jones, *Slaughter of the Cities: Urban Renewal as Ethnic Cleansing* (South Bend, Ind.: St. Augustine Press, 2002).

Growing food is not simply a quaint hobby; it is, rather, a serious economic endeavor. There is a growing area of agriculture that is focused explicitly on producing food on small plots, especially in urban areas. This discipline is known as permanent agriculture or “permaculture.”<sup>1</sup> Its advocates have demonstrated that small plots are not only highly productive, but that they can yield two to three times the amount of produce per unit of land as the average farm. Moreover, permaculture production techniques are based on low-input methods coupled with superior garden designs to achieve maximum results. These principles are slowly being put into practice throughout Europe and Asia, where land is scarce, but not so much in America, where land is still cheap and abundant. There is great potential here that has yet to be realized.

Aside from its clear ecological and economic benefits, gardening should be a specific priority for Catholics and all Christians. After all, the garden is one of the most important spiritual symbols in Christianity. In our worldly struggle Christians always yearn for the beauty, bounty, and innocence of a lost Eden. Although one can never undo the mark of original sin, we can nonetheless make our own homes into places that radiate with life and beauty and stand as a spiritual counterweight to an increasingly materialistic and ugly urban world. All Catholics should make it a priority to restore even the smallest piece of land to its intended function, which is the creation of life.

Another important Christian symbol that is related to the garden and food is the table. It represents the idea of the shared meal and most importantly the Last Supper. Sadly, just as the garden has been abandoned in modern society, so has the table. Today it is not uncommon for families either to eat out or not to eat together at all! Taking raw materials and turning them into the sustenance of life is the most humanly binding and spiritually enriching form of economic production. In all cultures, except the modern consumer culture, eating, like biological reproduction, is a hallowed activity because it sustains life. And like that reproduction, eating should be done in the privacy of the home and enshrined in a distinctive set of mores and manners that serve to underscore its vital importance to life itself. Because cooking and eating together are so integral to material and spiritual well-being, it is essential that these activities be faithfully upheld in Catholic – and all seriously religious – homes.

Eating at home has many practical advantages, in addition to its social and spiritual importance. It is cheaper, healthier, and less wasteful than eating out. Restaurants, like the agribusinesses that supply them, are horren-

dous food and energy wasters. This is especially the case with large national chains that buy in bulk, serve in bulk, and waste in bulk. When eating out, seek out smaller local establishments. By buying local, one is also supporting the community. Moreover, because of their smaller size, these restaurants also tend to be less wasteful. They are also more likely to carry fresh products, especially natural and locally grown goods. But, all in all, restaurants should be reserved for special occasions. They are expensive consumer havens – designed for convenience and sensate pleasure. Subsidiarity says eat in, not out.

Growing and preparing food can be taken a step further by promoting these economic activities at the community level. The trading and selling of foodstuffs is another economic activity that was once performed almost exclusively at the community level. Today it is virtually monopolized by large grocery chains. Thus, when purchasing food and other goods, subsidiarity says that local markets (for example farmers’ markets) should be patronized. For the more ambitious, local markets as well as trade and barter networks can actually be established to coordinate the buying and selling of a number of home-grown and home-made products. Again, these types of activities are particularly well suited to families who work or raise children at home.

Perhaps the most important application of subsidiarity is to technology. The proliferation of technology has greatly facilitated the sweeping socioeconomic, political, and spiritual changes of the modern era. Naturally the modern view of technology is positive. Technology is good and more is better. Sadly, most Catholics have also adopted this naïve position. They see technology simply as a tool that can enhance human abilities and improve the human condition. But technology is more than a tool. A tool is dependent on living energy forms, namely human or animal energy, i.e., a shovel or plow. In contrast, technology requires non-living energy forms such as electricity or fossil fuels. To bring these massive stores of energy to “life” requires the inevitable involvement of equally massive social institutions – namely the state and the business corporation.

Technology has permeated every facet of modern life. In fact, it is synonymous with modern life. By its very nature, a great deal of modern technology militates against the principle of subsidiarity. Generally speaking, technology makes life easy and comfortable, but it often requires large and complex institutions for its very existence. More significantly, technology breeds dependence and feeds the industrial spiral of endless consumption, production, regulation, and taxation. Using less technology helps keep this spiral under control. Thus, the Catholic response to technology is not so much the puritanical one advocated by the Amish, where all forms are banished, but a reasonable and prudent one that asks first whether a technology

1. Bill Mollison and David Holgren are two of the pioneers in permaculture design and have written several books on the topic. To date, no writer has fused permaculture with Catholic social teaching, although it would be a suitable match.

is necessary and, second, whether it brings one closer to God, family, and community. If technology creates dependency or isolates one from the traditional social order, then it must be used selectively or even jettisoned.

Along with the automobile, the most insidious example of this destructive type of technology is the television set. It is not only a means of social control by both the state and corporation; it is a direct path to sloth and stupidity. It has also become the principle cultural organ of industrial society. As such, it has replaced the role of the Church in defining and disseminating cultural values. The struggle to rid oneself of the influence of television is essential to restoring sanity in the household and rekindling human relationships, conversation, hobbies, prayer, and many other forgotten human activities. Other technologies should also be treated with a similar skeptical eye. Technology is the modern pagan fetish; much of it is unnecessary, and most of it can be easily relegated to a secondary role in one's life.

Another critical application of subsidiarity is to education. In the modern world, the state and corporation have effectively monopolized the production and dissemination of knowledge. Children have become, as a consequence, their compliant consumers. One of the most important ways to challenge this monopoly and undermine the secular worldview of modern education is to remove children from public schools. Educating children at private academies, at religious schools, or at home are all ways to exercise educational subsidiarity. The home-school movement, in particular, is growing, and it is one area in the "culture war" where Catholics and other Christians are actually winning.

Home schooling networks are flourishing, allowing many families to share information and create a social environment that is free from the poisonous influences of consumerist and materialist secularism. More importantly, since many "home schoolers" are Catholics, the movement is one of the most viable ways to sustain the Catholic culture. It may prove to be a real cultural revolution if all "home schoolers" can win the legal victories necessary to repeal property taxes for those families that chose not to support the corrupt and immoral public school system. If this ever happens, an authentic Christian counter culture can take shape—one that is ideologically and financially free from government and corporate control.

One area of modern economic life that is now completely under the control of government and the business corporations is investment and especially insurance. To invest means literally to furnish or clothe (from the Latin *vestire* meaning to clothe). From a social standpoint it also means to grant power or authority. Thus, from an economic standpoint, the question is to whom should Catholics give the authority to provide their economic means. Today, investment is defined almost exclusively in monetary

terms, especially investment in government and corporate stocks and bonds. From the standpoint of subsidiarity, the definition of investment must first be broadened to include all aspects of social life. Second, when it is applied to economics, it must begin at home. Thus, the first and most significant investment must be a home and property from which economic security and sustenance can be derived, in keeping with our vision of the unity, as far as possible, of the locations of production and consumption. Even when the home is not or cannot be used explicitly for economic purposes, Catholics and all sincere Christians must resist treating the home as a commodity to be bought and sold.

The home should grow naturally with the growth of a family. Thus, rather than "trading up," which is the norm in America, seekers after economic sanity should try to build up, adding onto smaller structures to create ones that can fulfill the growing needs of the family. In older American and European neighborhoods this has always been the case. As such, both homes and neighborhoods mature gracefully and reflect a range of social and economic differences—i.e., large and small homes, as well as apartments for those unmarried, all coexist in a single neighborhood. The modern suburb and the "trading-up" mentality have changed all this. Rather than staying put and building a larger home, people move from a subdivision comprised exclusively of small homes to one comprised exclusively of large homes. The modern subdivision reflects the essence of the consumer society: a world that is standardized, sterile, and despiritualized. A concerted and collective effort to invest in one home over the long term can transform even the drabbest suburb into a living neighborhood, especially if child-rearing and businesses can coexist there as well.

The principle of subsidiarity also applies to investing in government and corporate stocks and bonds. Catholics, in particular, should invest in those entities that support rather than compete against the natural economy, and only where investment itself is at least to an extent an extension of natural economic activity, and not simply another form of perpetuating the divorce between essential economic activity and ownership and consumption, or, what's worse, pure speculation.<sup>1</sup> Investment should also have a moral purpose. The American government and most corporations support a "moral" agenda that runs counter to Catholic teaching, especially on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, divorce, feminism, and the just-war doctrine. Entities that support these policies should never receive Catholic money. Thus,

1. As Richard Weaver put it, "the abstract property of stocks and bonds, the legal ownership of enterprises never seen, actually destroy the connection between man and his substance. . . . Property in this sense becomes a fiction useful for exploitation and makes impossible the sanctification of work" (*Icons Have Consequences* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 (1948)], pp. 132–3).

it is incumbent upon Catholic investors to educate themselves fully, not only about the monetary risks associated with these investments, but more importantly, the moral risks. Fortunately, there are companies and mutual funds that are specifically tailored to Catholic social and moral concerns, and these are the entities that must be sought out.

The question of insurance is even thornier, especially that of health insurance. Serious illness, injury, or long-term care can lead to bankruptcy. And for these scenarios, insurance has a proper place. But Catholics must also begin to rethink the entire logic of health insurance. Unlike most types of insurance, health plans cover more than just catastrophe; they frequently cover routine medical procedures (this is the case with dental insurance in particular). The application of subsidiarity would approach health and illness differently. Rather than cover every aspect of health care, Catholics should accept some risk and responsibility by paying for routine and minor medical procedures.<sup>1</sup> This approach is radical, even counterintuitive to the modern ethos, which eschews risk at every turn.

A prudent approach to health care would first ask what is the risk, and, second, who should bear the cost of that risk. The family should pay basic health costs. A higher social level (extended family and friends) would be called upon in cases with a higher financial and emotional cost. This would be followed by the community and parish. Finally the greatest burdens would be shared by the diocese or national Church. If subsidiarity were ever instituted in such a manner, the Catholic Church could provide a social network that could seriously reduce the reliance upon government or corporate health providers. Given, however, the insufficient understanding and application of subsidiarity among Catholic communities on this and other serious socio-economic questions, all health decisions have been left in the hands of professional bureaucrats. As a result, the health debate is defined in exclusively secular terms. This is why people now have greater faith in “the system” than in God and their religious communities.

## Concluding Thoughts

**THE FOREGOING EXAMPLES** are some of the most important applications of the principle of subsidiarity, but there are many ways

and degrees to which subsidiarity can be applied. It will be the collective impact of thousands (and hopefully, some day, of millions), of consumers-turned-producers that can radically change the present political-economic situation in America and other industrial nations. The goal of such a movement must be modest. It will not create sweeping social-economic changes, nor will it create a new communal Christian golden age (a point liberal cynics never fail to mention about any anti-modern movement). But if enough households can establish a level of economic self-reliance, and establish stronger communities and supportive social networks, a modicum of religious and political autonomy may be achieved. Anywhere this can be done on a merely local, small-neighborhood level, involving even just tens of families, it should be; and to the extent that it is done, it will be a victory.

It must be stressed that the application of subsidiarity is far from being an idealistic endeavor. On the contrary: it is a realistic attempt to return prudence and sanity to economic life. What the idea of subsidiarity really represents is a different economic strategy from that which currently reigns over modern industrial societies. It is one that seeks to *optimize* wealth, rather than *maximize* it. Optimization implies limits and boundaries to human behavior, which, in a manner of speaking, is the definition of morality. This cultivates habits and patterns informed by grace that are consistent with the teachings of the Catholic Church. In contrast, maximization is only interested in the constant amassing of material and the unbridled pursuit of power, which results in the breaking and constant changing of boundaries. It destroys all sense of limit and proportion, rejects morality, and contradicts and undermines the fundamental teachings of the Church.

The rebuilding of household and communal economies is also a political act, because it seeks to change the power relations in society from one that is concentrated among large institutions to one that is diffused among many intermediary social institutions, of which the family is the most important. At the level of national politics, such ideas may never gain currency. But Catholics and all those of good will are nonetheless called to be involved in the political process to help bring about the changes that can support the growth and development of a natural economy, such as pressing for more favorable tax rates and zoning policies. In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, it is establishing control over *local* politics that is most critical. Catholics and all Christians must begin to choose their battles carefully, and win the small victories on the political margin where their strengths are greatest. Enough small victories can eventually add up to more significant political changes in the long run.

1. The importance of accepting suffering as part of our Christian faith is never even considered in the national health debate in America or elsewhere. Yet, facing this possibility with courage and commitment would also reduce the fear of not having adequate or any insurance.

Those who sincerely pursue the natural economic path – articulated by the Catholic Church for centuries – will certainly need to sacrifice monetary wealth and social status. But they will gain something more valuable. First: a degree of economic independence and a freedom from material desire; second: the genuine health and emotional satisfaction that comes from a life dedicated to physical labor, simplicity, and thrift; and finally: the recapturing of time, and with it, leisure. Indeed, as the Catholic philosopher Joseph Pieper so poignantly wrote back in 1948,<sup>1</sup> leisure is the basis of love, friendship, and spiritual well-being. As such, it is the essence of a living culture. These are the very things that can never be found in the modern consumer culture, which is, as Pope John Paul II aptly termed it, the culture of death.



## Suggestions for Further Reading

**WHILE THE SPECIFIC ORGANIZATIONS, JOURNALS, men, and movements that advocated widespread ownership of productive property in the 1930s have for the most part passed out of existence, there remain, happily, numerous initiatives and organizations dedicated to the preservation of the aims and ideals that our authors herein vindicate. One of the original American groups, the National Catholic Rural Life Conference, is still extant and committed to “a spiritual tradition that brings together the Church, care of community, and care of creation.” A robust organic and “green” movement, though predominantly “leftist” and liberal today owing to the passing of Catholics from the field in this area of endeavor, remains in existence and is supported by well known writers such as John Seymour (who died in 2004) and Wendell Berry and journals from all and no sides of the political spectrum, such as *Chronicles*, *Resurgence*, *Mother Earth News*, *The American Conservative*, and *Countryside*. There are, additionally, the Catholic/Christian Homesteading Movement, the American Chesterton Society, the Agrarian Foundation, the Christian Homesteaders Association, the E. F. Schumacher Society, the Howard Center, Chelsea Green and similar publishers, the Land Institute of Kansas, and others still who today preserve, if in many cases unconsciously, the aims and methods of the original Distributist-Agrarian movement. The Southern Agrarians of Nashville still enjoy a wide following among paleo-conservatives and neo-confederates, as reflected in numerous journals and monographs, even though the contemporary interpretation of their original movement as “conservative” is perhaps more strained than self-evident.**

The following list of books and websites, the various contents of which it would be impossible for us to endorse in their entirety, but whose broad

1. Joseph Pieper, *Leisure, the Basis of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).