



## Catholic Social Thought and Distributive Justice

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

In their 1986 pastoral letter on *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops remind their readers of the three classical forms of justice: commutative justice (dealing with fairness in contracts among individuals and private social groups), distributive justice, and social justice. In the context of the nation's recent awakening to economic inequality—prompted in large part by the Occupy movements—it is most helpful here to revisit the meaning and roots of the concept of distributive justice. In the bishops' words:

***Distributive justice requires that the allocation of income, wealth, and power in society be evaluated in light of its effects on persons whose basic material needs are unmet.*** The *Second Vatican Council* stated: "The right to have a share of earthly goods sufficient for oneself and one's family belongs to everyone. The fathers and doctors of the church held this view, teaching that we are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and to do so not merely out of our superfluous goods." *Minimum material resources are an absolute necessity for human life.*<sup>1</sup>

Undergirding this form of justice is the fundamental understanding of what the Church calls the universal destination of goods.<sup>2</sup> This, in turn, reflects God's original gift of all creation for the good of all humanity and our inextricable link to one another in solidarity with all peoples. Private property rights, as important as they are, are to be exercised in the context of our being responsible stewards of our goods for the sake of the common good of society.

The Church sees a role of government in relationship to both property ownership and the common

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good: "Political authority has the right and duty to regulate the legitimate exercise of the right to ownership for the sake of the common good."<sup>3</sup> One of the ways in which this is done is by attending to the question of equity in distribution of income:

***The economic well-being of a country is not measured exclusively by the quantity of goods it produces but also by taking into account the manner in which they are produced and the level of equity in the distribution of income, which should allow everyone access to what is necessary for their personal development and perfection... Authentic economic well-being is pursued also by means of suitable social policies for the redistribution of income, which, taking general conditions into account, look at merit as well as at the need of each citizen.***<sup>4</sup>

Those social policies might include progressive taxation, financial assistance to families and the poor and vulnerable, minimum wage legislation, provision of public education or health care, social insurance, and other measures designed to reduce inequalities in income or

wealth—and, especially, to insure "the priority of meeting the basic needs of the poor and the importance of increasing the level of participation by all members of society in the economic life of the nation."<sup>5</sup>

The practice of distributive justice is a delicate balance of various competing economic, social, political, and prudential concerns: "Those in authority should practice distributive justice wisely, taking account of the needs and contribution of each, with a view to harmony and peace."<sup>6</sup> However complex and delicate, the practice of distributive justice is critical to realizing the common good of the members of society and protecting those who are "the least" among us.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*, 1986, No. 70 (emphasis in original).
- 2 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 2402-6.
- 3 *Ibid.*, no. 2406.
- 4 Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004), no. 303.
- 5 National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *op. cit.*, No. 185.
- 6 *Catechism*, no. 2236.