

Richmond Times-Dispatch

The pope counters false gods

September 21, 2015

Pope Francis has angered conservatives and market purists. They do not like his teachings on, for instance, the environment (climate change, to be precise) and economics. On the eve of the pope's visit to the United States, George Will blasted Francis for advocating economic sentiments that, according to the columnist, would condemn people to poverty and the conditions associated with the Middle Ages.

Popes Benedict and John Paul II did not issue bulls and exhortations drafted by the Cato Institute and the Libertarian Party, either. They took stands against materialism. We decline to endorse theological positions; however, we note that religion ought to make believers uncomfortable with the expectations of a fallen world. The Bible challenges believers and scoffers, the devout as well as atheists, low voltage or high.

Matthew 22:21 cites Jesus as saying, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's." He does not specify which things. His words do not endorse the platforms of America's parties. They raise questions.

The Gospel according to Mark relates the story of the rich man who has led a virtuous life and has obeyed the commandments but who wants to know how to inherit eternal life. Jesus answers, "Sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow me." The rich man "went away grieved: for he had great possessions." This does not sound like supply-side economics. The Gospel according to Matthew relates the story of the centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant. The centurion — a man of great power and position, a Roman soldier presumably — explains that Jesus does not need to go to his house to accomplish the miracle but needs only to "speak the word." Jesus says he has not found so great a faith. He did not instruct the centurion to resign his commission and to sell his possessions yet the servant "was healed in the selfsame hour." This does not sound like Marxism or even the soft socialism of the occupy movement.

Francis takes his name from one of the most beloved of saints. The prayer of St. Francis was said by Hubert Humphrey when he accepted the Democratic presidential nomination in 1968 and by Margaret Thatcher upon becoming prime minister of the United Kingdom in 1979. Humphrey and Thatcher represented competing political traditions, particularly regarding economics. They both spoke with sincerity.

In his 1944 Program for Republicans, Robert Taft said: "Before our system can claim success, it must not only create a people with a higher standard of living, but people with a higher standard of character — character that must include religious faith, morality, educated intelligence, self-restraint, and an ingrained demand for justice and unselfishness. In our striving for material

things, we must not change those basic principles of government and of personal conduct which create and protect the character of a people. ... We cannot hope to achieve salvation by worshiping the god of the standard of living.”

Taft sounds Franciscan. And Francis sounds like a disciple.