THE CHURCH AND THE ECONOMIC ORDER: SCRIPTURAL AND CONFESSIONAL BASIS

[Address, St. Louis, April 30, 1969]

Part One

1. The search is for a "Scriptural and Confessional Basis" of Christian economic ethos. Where to begin looking for such a basis? Try this: "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" (I John 3:17)

a. This passage is from the Epistle Lesson for the second Sunday after the Trinity, which by happy coincidence is the Sunday immediately following our upcoming Institute on Church and Society in Fort Wayne.

b. A similar text, from an epistle lesson later on in the Trinity season, is Ephesians 4:28: "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may be able to give to those in need."

c. Texts like these do provide a "Scriptural and Confessional Basis" for "The Church and the Economic Order," but a "basis" only as a point of departure, not really much more than that.

2. Why only a point of departure? Because texts like these, as they stand, say far too little about the Christian economic ethos, either as economic or as Christian.

a. The texts say too little as they stand – that is, in so many words. But they are rich in implication, both for what is economic and for what is Christian about the ethos. That is why they are points of departure at all.

b. Obviously, though, there is more to the Christian's ethos which is economic than merely his doing honest work and sharing with the needy. And there is more to his economic ethos which is Christian than merely exhorting him thereto.

c. What more is there in these texts, at least by implication, than talk about work and sharing? What more than mere exhorting?

3. Most obviously, there is, prior to any exhortations or any talk at all, an ugly reality situation. There are, behind these apostolic admonitions, real live Christians, who in the Ephesian situation are being outright thieves (kleptoon) and in the Johannine situation owners of "the world's goods" (bion tou kosmu), in both cases withholding help from those in need.

a. That, alas – namely, that actual thievery and stinginess – is itself part of Christian economic ethos, both as economic and as Christian, real sin being as much a part of that ethos as the earnest exhortations are which counter it.

b. But do the exhortations even do that? Do they counter the sin, really? Might they not actually worsen it? For the sorry fact here of thievery and greed already makes the apostles' exhortations into something considerably more than exhortations, namely, into clearly implied criticism, into judgment. And judgment, by alienating a man and evoking his resistance, can disable him outright from doing the very thing the exhortations are exhorting him to do.

c. For that matter, we may wonder why the apostles' judgments in these cases are not more condemnatory, the situation being as reprehensible as it is. That is an important question, one which theologically demands an explanation and one to which we shall have to return.

d. At any rate, this much has to be said now: The people whom the apostles are here addressing are not morally free. That is, they are not free simply to do what the apostles urge them to do. And why aren't they free to do that? Because what the apostles are doing is not simply urging but also criticizing, and because criticism does not leave a man free but already constricts and paralyzes him the more.

e. He is not, in that supposed "moment of decision" as he considers the apostolic imperative, hovering there in pure neutrality, free to act either one way or the other. And what binds him is not only his past, his accustomed thievery or the addiction to his wealth, but worse than that: this very imperative binds him which on the contrary is supposed to start him on a new future. It paralyzes him by its implicit accusation.

f. Oh, the imperatives may get him to stop stealing or even to begin sharing, though we should not be too quick to assume that because that prospect is conceivable it is therefore probable. But suppose it were probable, even so the problem with this thief or this miser – precisely his ethical problem – is more abject than explicit thievery or explicit greed. Worse than that, he "closes his heart against" his brother. Will exhortations cure that, especially when they are at the same time really thinly veiled accusations? Still less likely, will they make "the love of God abide in him"? What if those judgmental exhortations would extort from him some new show of generosity, only to disguise more deceptively than ever his

inner atheism and heartlessness? Isn't that not only conceivable but probable?

g. Still, aren't these ugly realities – both the de facto stinginess and its worsening under criticism – constant components of Christian economic ethos? It would be fatuous to reserve the adjective "Christian" to only such ideal behavior as seems to be extolled in apostolic paraenesis, and to ignore those human realities which directly occasion that paraenesis – consigning such embarrassments to, say, "non- Christian" ethos. Christian ethos ought not be simply equated with good behavior, flattering as that might be.

h. The flattery is only slightly more subtle when we pretend that Christian ethos is but one moment after another of free decision-making. 'As though the very demands upon us, being judgmental as they are, did not already prejudice our decisions and our chances. 'As though all we needed for right decisions were some moral guidance and sufficient motivation to carry it out. 'As though we didn't need, first of all and continually, to be relieved of the criticism.

i. Christian ethos is the actual ethos of Christians, as that is being actively and immanently evaluated by God and as his ongoing evaluating of it influences their ethos in turn. One dimension of this divine evaluation is judgmental, with the result that Christians too begrudge it – begrudge both God and brother. But then that grudging result likewise belongs to their ethos, though it is no less Christian of them to strive that it won't. How does Paul say it: "the law begats wrath"?

4. What else do the apostolic admonitions imply – in addition, that is, to the negative reality of greed-compounded-by-criticism? Don't they imply also another whole reality, this

time not an evil one but a good one, that very reality in fact which thieves and misers violate and in conflict with which they are thieves and misers? Let us call it, at the risk of misunderstanding, “the economic order.”

a. This term cries our for at least minimal definition. For aren’t we here suggesting that the economic order, in order to be good, must be distinguished from such evil things as greed? But does this square with the facts? Isn’t it often enough the very factor of greed which keeps the economic order going at all? How can we then, at least on economic grounds, pretend that greed is evil? Or alternately, if greed is essential to the functioning of the economic order, how can we say the economic order is good?

b. The truth is, the way we are using “economic order” in present context is determined, remember, by the apostolic paraenesis, not by an empirical study of the economy, at least not directly. The economic order which these passages implicitly affirm is admittedly something less than the de facto economy. It is that economy all right, but with such factors as greed and thievery abstracted from it, as subversive elements in it to be repudiated. Whether or not they are subversive of the existing economic system, (though they might be that too) at least they subvert the “brother in need,” “honest work,” “the love of God.” The fact that the existing economy may “need” greed or even poverty and oppression for its orderly operation only illustrates that mere order, as such, is no absolute good and may well be demonic. Or to put it affirmatively, it illustrates that a resourceful Creator can by his ordering bring good not only from nothing but even from evil.

c. On the other hand, to say that this good and greed-less economic order is inferred from the apostolic paraenesis is not to say however that this order exists only as an ideal, as a

wistful blueprint for some perfect “Christian” economy. That is a conclusion, to be sure, which many a quietist, many a resigned idealist is content to draw. No, this valid ordering of economic life is not only something which ought to be but also something which is. It is an actuality, as actual as the predatory greed and the grinding want and the oppression with which it is inextricably intertwined. Whether the one can be distinguished from the other except on Christian trust – and even then, perhaps, often only in principle – is another question. But the sure implication of the texts at hand is that such economic arrangements as the following are in fact operative.

d. For one thing, there simply are those human needs which are met only by “the goods of the world,” by what we call a “living” (bion), the necessities of life, the wherewithal. That is not only imperative. It is, if only for the fortunate few, a daily occurrence, so actual that those deprived of it, the starving millions, are the surest to notice it does occur. Next, since those who have are to share with those who have not, the former must obviously have something to share beyond their own immediate needs. Call it wealth. It is almost gratuitous to say they ought to have it; the fact is they do. Wherewithal, wealth and thirdly, work. Although a thief too might by his stealing make a living, or even amass surplus wealth beyond his immediate wherewithal, his stealing is what is out of order. What is in order is for him to “labor” (kopiatoo). Getting comes from working, the apostle assumes, and not only ideally but in regular experience – at least regularly enough to encourage the thief’s reform. The whole intricate ordering of wherewithal, work and wealth will be the subject of Part Two of this essay. Meanwhile let us say of that order, not only that it is valid but that it is at all! It is, already and in fact, however much it simultaneously is not.

e. Let us reemphasize that this valid economic ordering, though

it is inferred from the apostolic admonitions, is not however brought into existence by such admonitions. Nor does it depend upon them for its validity. On the contrary, the admonitions already presuppose that order as a prior given. It is there to begin with. They simply take it for granted and, by their admonishings, reenforce it. Why make a point of it? Because there is a tempting illusion to the contrary. ‘As though the very question whether to have economic structures at all, like wherewithal or work or wealth, were primarily a matter for decision needing perhaps only the right (preferably “Christian”) ethical rules. ‘As though even the most basic human relationships, like marriage or family or nationality or economic role, are essentially moral responses to some imperative. ‘As though we enact these relations by first obeying some admonition, some rule or norm, like “Be fruitful and multiply” of “Fall in love” or “Be born a Smith” or “Grow up an American” or “Consume goods.” ‘As though the very prescriptions we receive for these situations don’t already assume that we are situated within them.

f. The issue here is not between situational ethics and an ethics of rules, between “norm and context.” The point rather is that as often as not a “rule” – for instance, Share your wealth with the needy brother – assumes from the outset a preexisting “situation”: namely, that I do in fact have a brother, that he is needy and I am wealthy, and that my wealth is in order to his needs. Probably none of those situational factors originated with any decision of mine, or with any rule. Yet without the situation as it is, the rule would be hypothetical and academic. But given that prior situation, which is but a particular instance of the whole underlying economic ordering, the paraenetic “rule” gives new voice to that ordering, now so sadly muted, and prosecutes its cause out loud.

g. The word “prosecutes” reminds us once again that the

apostolic exhortations are not only that – not only non-prejudicial exhortings – but also, by implication, criticisms. But that is true likewise of that primordial economic ordering for which the exhortations speak. It too advances criticism. It does that, not first of all through criticisms spoken or written or even with any words at all, but through its own mute processes. Native to these processes is that function of theirs called retribution, that persistent arrangement whereby men, as we say, are to get what is coming to them – suum cuique tribuere. This retributive dimension is not of course unique to economic processes. It pervades all human relationships and every social structure. But in economic transactions the element of retribution is especially vivid. Witness the way theology, in order to dramatize the fact of retribution, borrows some of its most telling metaphors from the economic sector: recompense, reward, redeem. "Forgive us our debts." Death follows sin as its "wage."

h. For retribution in the theological sense, however, economic retribution is not only its analogy but also a means of carrying it out. The latter executes the former, enacting the divine recompense itself through the immanental transactions of buying and selling, earning and losing. Granted, that conclusion is not directly inferable from the empirical data. What for the economist may be nothing more than the natural effect of a cause, a probable outcome of an antecedent condition, a "concomitant variation," for the Christian – perhaps for the selfsame economist qua Christian – takes on the depth dimension of an ultimate evaluation, an eschatological verdict. At least that is the sort of in-depth retribution inherent in the biblical interpretation of history.

i. Even on this interpretation, however, it isn't as though every worthy economic transaction is neatly balanced by some corresponding cosmic approval, or every unworthy one by

disapproval, tit for tat. Such merit-badge individualism falsifies, if nothing else, the facts of economic history, not to mention the biblical interpretation of it. No, the retribution here is not piecemeal but comprehensive: whole judgment for whole man, for whole economics, for the whole of history.

j. For that matter, why limit retribution to judgment – to judgment, that is, in its negative, punitive forms? Don't the same retributive processes which recompense evil also recompense good? And why is even the former needed except to encourage distributive justice, to promote not adversity but prosperity? Ah, but the very fact that economic man so much as needs retribution at all – isn't that already a standing criticism of him? That he cannot live without it is incriminating evidence that neither can he live with it – genuinely live. In fact, his very affluence, his institutionalized gluttony, his disproportionate longevity may themselves incriminate him. The youngster who prayed the Lord's Prayer conflating the petitions, "Forgive us our daily bread," committed more than a Freudian slip. Comes now John's rhetorical question about the Christian who keeps more than enough for himself, "How does the love of God abide in him?" But that criticism, with its implication of divine disgust, is not only read into but off of the economic facts, whose internal logic supports the criticism.

5. Is that all there is to Christian economic ethos? Is criticism the last word? So it might seem, the more so since the criticism is not a mere theological construct which, if it were, might easily enough be altered at theologians' convenience (which has been said to happen). But if, instead, the criticism is already anticipated in the very criminate orderings of economic life, in the way it has to proceed by retribution,

which is no more dispensable that the economic order itself is – what then? Or to put the problem theologically, if the divine Word, the ultimate evaluation, is not only verbalized in words but is played out in the most elemental structures and functions of economic existence – then what? Is there, in other words, a saving alternative at least as radical as this pervasive criticism, to trump it and – eventually, at least, and for now bit by bit – to replace it? The Christian faith stands or falls by just that hope.

a. In fact, as perhaps we ought to have admitted long before this, none of the devastating negations we have been making so far could even have been conceded except in the hope for which supercedes them. In the absence of that hope, the negations could hardly be taken seriously (except perhaps by a world-renouncing pessimist), evoking at best – and understandably so – offense and aversion.

b. Still, as we said originally, that was the very reaction which the criticism, whether as verbal paraenesis or as pre-verbal economic retribution, was bound to elicit from the miser and the thief: namely, aversion to criticism and a new and subtler self-justification of their greed. The law does beget wrath. But not inevitably so. For as we also hinted earlier, this reaction of defensiveness in face of ultimate criticism is a reaction Christians have power to combat, having authority to do so. True, they cannot live without the retributive order or without its incriminations, which continue valid. But they do claim to live with it – really live. They are not bound to begrudge it, but neither are they bound to grant it the last word.

c. By what right? Their authority, in a word, is that authority which the Son of Man has upon earth to forgive sin. But does he have it? Either he does or he doesn’t. In view of that

disjunction we had better amend our statement of a moment ago about that hope by which the Christian faith stands or falls. For it isn't the hoping as such, however resolute and heroic, (which it seldom is) which is decisive.
What the hoping, in turn, stands or falls by is this Son of Man. The christological issue is of the essence. Does he indeed have the authority to forgive sin, and to do so "upon earth"? That is, is he authorized to reverse and entire criminate order, at once both eschatological and earthly, both factual and unconditionally valid, and to supercede it by its opposite: forgiveness?

d. The question is not, Was he authorized to demand of men that they forgive one another, on pain of being themselves unforgiven if they don't? He did demand that, too, but that is still retribution. Love thus demanded – which is still my neighbor's just due – is not really an alternative to "justice," as Christian ethicists sometimes pretend. That is still only justice, though now in its most stringent requirement, which when refused is justly retributed. No, the question is, Was Jesus authorized to amend even that order of justice, forgiving men for no other reason than that they conceded him that authority, men who themselves had not forgiven?

e. For example, could he forgive a culprit like the Ephesian kleptoon? Could he, on his own authority and without fear of being outranked or countermanded, forgive a thief? As his last dying act, one thief he did not forgive and another one – who trusted him – he did. But was the thief's trust justified? Was Jesus' own trust justified? "He trusted him who judges justly." But that One did confirm Jesus' new authority – not only by words but, characteristically, by historic action: by raising him from the dead.

f. Hs radical authority, thus won "upon earth," boldly extends

forgiveness now to a vast motley of beneficiaries right where they are, “upon earth,” still very much implicated in the criminate order, in its incriminating processes of wherewithal and work and wealth. They need not contest that order, and not only because its incriminations are of course incontestable, but also because they are free enough not to contest it, entitled as they are to appeal beyond it. Among them, no doubt, are still thieves and misers and who knows what sorts of economic sports — all of them, as the Pharisees foresaw, bad risks. But that risk, they dare to believe, the Son of Man calculated and vindicated.

g. So here at last is the answer to that question we had wondered about from the beginning: Why do those paraenetic texts we quoted treat the thief and the miser as leniently as they do? Why, if greed is incriminated by the Creator’s very order of things and explicitly by his Word, is that criticism now so muted and gentle in these apostolic exhortations? It isn’t that the authors, either the Johannine or the Ephesian author, no longer recognize the enduring validity of that criticism. They do indeed, even to the point of insisting that the criticism is nothing less than annihilating for those who have no recourse beyond it. And that, as they warn, is a continuing possibility also for Christians. It is altogether possible for a well-to-do Christian to infer from his greed that the loving God no longer “abides” with him but has abandoned him, with retribution then as the last and only word.

h. The fact is, though, that John intimates this rejection only as a possibility, and then only in the form of a question. The criticism is still there, though not as the last word. The miser is still assumed to be within range of the apostle’s voice, the forgiving Word, and hence within range of “the love of God.” Too, he is still assumed to be within the Christian brotherhood. And the same is assumed of the Ephesian thief. In other words, both are still under the Son of Man’s protective “authority upon

earth to forgive sins," contrary as that authority may be to the criminate order in which they likewise operate. The struggle to live under both authorities simultaneously, with forgiveness as the decisive one, now actually comes to the surface in words and syntax in the way the apostles formulate their sentences: a prodding question here, a bit of advice there – though now not unto death but unto life. Say it another way: the apostles can risk direct imperatives and at least a gentle rebuke, even with the weak and wayward, in view of the higher authority which liberates these culprits from being defensive. Isn't that The Secret, the mysterion, behind the predominantly constructive tone of apostolic paraenesis?

i. But is that, much as it is, all there is to Christian economic ethos: namely, the freedom to live within the criminate order without being driven to further defensiveness and self-justification by its incriminations? Of if the ethos is more than that, is it only this much more: namely, to utilize one's freedom within this order not only by taking its criticism in stride but also by heeding its just demands and actively doing them – doing honest work, sharing with those in need? True, if even that were all Christians dared hope for (and many a prudent Christian ethic has not ventured beyond that), that would already be an immensely ambitious hope. All the moreso, if Christian agents in the economic order not only discharged its demands but actually heightened its demands and, by one retributive inducement or another, amplified what it expects from men most justly of all: peace and mercy. But what is more still than all this, Does the Christian ethos not only free men for the criminate order, to do it justice, but also introduce into that order – in, with and under it – a whole new order of its own?

j. If so, might such a new order invade the old one also in its economic sector? Can the Son of Man's "authority to forgive

sins” so insinuate itself “upon earth” that the very interactions between wherewithal and work and wealth would themselves be governed, not by recompense and just deserts and appraisals of worth, but by grace alone? That, if you would pardon the pun, is a big order. Still, though such an achievement is not likely, we ought not be too quick to say it is altogether unlikely. It has in fact been attempted from time to time, as the history of the church demonstrates. Christian communities, beginning with the earliest one in Jerusalem, have tried in the Name of Jesus to renounce all right to private property (what we have called “wealth”) or, as in the case of mendicant monastic orders, even gainful employment (“work”). Might something like that still be a possibility for the Church today, at least in limited ways?

k. Of course there is that “order of grace” which the Church has never been without, and cannot be and still be the Church: the mutual sharing of the Gospel and the sacraments, the apostolic ministry of the Word. That too is ethos, and not merely a private ethos of the inner person, but a public, supra-personal structuring of human relationships for giving and receiving, acting and being acted upon. It is an overt order like any other social order yet without (hopefully) the latters’ intrinsic retributiveness. But can this grace-ordered giving and taking of Gospel and sacraments take similar shape, nonretributively, in Christian economic community? Is that perhaps implied in the Johannine passage we have been considering, with its talk of “need” and “goods” and, especially “brother”? Does the brotherhood which is ordered by grace around the apostolic kerygma imply a similarly non-retributive brotherhood of “goods” and “needs”? That will be the subject of Part Three.

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Church and Economic Order (PDF)