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Catholic church's grand bargain backfires

By Antony Davies

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The Catholic Church is supposed to use its moral authority to encourage people to serve each other, while the government is supposed to use its coercive authority to prevent people from harming each other. For decades, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has encouraged the government in constructing a welfare state that uses coercive authority to force people to serve each other.

This hybrid model is coming back to haunt the bishops in the new health-care regulation that requires religious nonprofits to include "recommended contraceptive services" in employee insurance plans. By asking government to perform functions that are deemed moral in character, bishops invited the government to define what is and is not moral.

For decades, economists have warned against looking to government to cure our economic ills because the cure is almost always worse than the disease. When government interferes in markets, entrepreneurs find it more profitable to use government to take from customers rather than to earn profit by serving customers. Similarly, when government interferes in society, churches find it more expeditious to use government to take from the rich rather than to help the poor by turning people's hearts.

Before long, the same people who invoked government will find themselves trampled by it. Economists call this the law of unintended consequences. Those consequences are now being felt in full by shocked Catholics who didn't understand the ramifications of handing government that power.

The solution economists have long proposed and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has long fought is that government be confined to preventing people from harming each other. When it comes to helping each other, we must use persuasion to convince free people how they should exercise their freedom. The bishops needed to have faith that free people could be trusted to do the right thing.

But instead, in their quest for "social justice" the bishops called on government to fund programs that feed the hungry, provide basic health care for all and enact economic policies that promote just wages. The bishops are right in pointing out that we have a moral responsibility to care for the poor and to act justly.

However, the bishops are wrong to call on government to force people to do

these things. The government cannot provide health care to one person without forcibly taking the resources to create that health care from another. The government cannot guarantee higher wages for one worker without forcing a competing worker out of the labor market, taking from the employer's profits or forcing customers to pay higher prices.

In the Bible, 11 times Jesus instructs people to give to the poor, but never does he advocate taking in the name of the poor. Forcing us to care for each other dehumanizes the poor by treating them as problems to be solved and dehumanizes the rich by treating them as sources of funding. The holiness in caring for the poor comes from the rich freely giving and the poor freely receiving. Remove that freedom and giving becomes theft and receiving becomes entitlement.

The government that now has the power to compel this entitlement to continue will also have the power to compel other events -- including requirements that may directly violate a believer's freedom of conscience. The Bible teaches that we reap what we have sown. I am extremely sad that the bishops have to learn this lesson in such a difficult way.

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