

## Self-Interest vs. Love

Some years ago I was introduced to an argument being conducted within Catholic intellectual circles concerning the compatibility of Catholic values with American values. I have written of this before, but current social conditions compel me to write again:

Working from the texts of the Second Vatican Council, and the writings of Pope John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, the theologians challenged the premise underlying Western “liberal” political theory concerning the appeal to “self interest.” The classic expression of this theory comes from the 18<sup>th</sup> century theorist, Adam Smith. Smith opined that, *“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.”* On his online economics blog, writer Mark Smith explains: *“What Smith was driving at was that the butcher only cuts and sells meat to gain money to feed himself and his family. The same goes for the brewer and the baker and—when taken together—these self-interested actions are what make the (economic) world go round.”* <http://sterlingkilgore.com/what-the-butcher-the-brewer-the-baker-and-the-marketer-have-in-common/>

Of course, we all agree that *“the laborer is worth his wage.”* People have a right to make a living and to support their families and to make a good life for themselves. The question is whether this principle of “self-interest” is a sufficient basis to create a **just society**.

Consider our current political system. It is, essentially, based on the same premise of “self-interest.” The politicians are supposed servants of the people. However, it seems to this observer, that the primary service going on is self-service in the interest of getting re-elected. Service to the politician’s constituency seems, more than anything, to be instrumental toward the end of getting re-elected. In turn, the voters within a district want what they want: They want good schools, good roads, trash pickup and so forth. There may be many self-less, charitable people among them who reach out to serve those beyond their own community in pure service to others. Nevertheless, while the economic and political

system allows and welcomes this goodness, it is not predicated upon it. Rather, it’s primary motivator is *“what’s in it for me.”*

My former professor, David Schindler—one of the theologians who challenge the compatibility of American values and Catholic values—reframed Adam Smith’s original examples in Catholic terms, as follows: *“A baker trying to live out his Christianity in his life as a business person, to imbue the reality of his economic life with the Gospel . . . [would] attempt to order profit differently from the way suggested by Smith. He would seek first to make a loaf of bread that was intrinsically good — in terms of its taste and health-producing qualities and the like — and he would seek to do this from the beginning **for the sake of being of service to others in society**, of enhancing their health and well-being. To be sure, he would recognize profit as a necessary condition of his continuing ability to provide this service to others. He would recognize that he was realizing his own good in the service to others. But that is just the point: his legitimate concern for profit, and his own self-interest, would be integrated from the beginning and all along the way into the intention of service.”*



A result some of us see, as the logic of “self-interest” plays out, is a competition yielding ‘winners’ and ‘losers.’ We see a huge disparity of wealth. We see crumbling bridges, roadways and railroads because these basic needs of the people are not glamorous enough to get one re-elected. Ideologies of “Big Government” vs. “Market Solutions” have utterly eclipsed notions of service to the Common Good.

In case you hadn’t noticed, this notion of the Common Good is my latest “hobby horse.” I’m not entirely sure what it is, but I’m pretty sure we are losing it.