

Neoconservatives' Reading of Catholic Social Teaching The Political Debate Over the Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*

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Abstract Pope John Paul II's 1991 publication of the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* sparked a lively debate that lasted for years. Neoconservative Catholics promptly showed great enthusiasm for the encyclical, which they saw as the Church finally embracing economic liberalism. On the other hand, progressive Catholics rejected the neoconservative analysis and put an entirely different interpretation on the encyclical. This article examines some of the main neocon interpretations of John Paul II's social thinking, primarily focusing on the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. We consider the analyses of Michael Novak and Richard Neuhaus, who show partisan bias in their interpretation of *Centesimus Annus*. John Paul II's encyclical soon became a battlefield on which the conflict between neoconservative and progressive Catholics was played out, and a landmark in the debate on Catholic social teaching and its various interpretations.

Keywords Catholic Social Teaching. John Paul II. Neoconservative Catholics. United States. Michael Novak. Richard Neuhaus.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Church, the Market and John Paul II's Social Teaching. – 3 Capitalism, Neoliberalism and *Centesimus Annus*. – 4 God Bless Capitalism: Michael Novak's Reading of *Centesimus Annus*. – 5 The Capitalism of John Paul II According to Richard Neuhaus. – 6 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

In the United States, religious issues have always arisen a heated debate, in Protestant as well as Catholic circles. In the twentieth century, several forms of Protestantism sought to play not only a religious role in American society but also a political and economic one. In particular, the Moral Majority, a conservative Protestant organisation, gradually grew in strength, wielding significant influence on US politics, especially during the Cold War.¹ Furthermore, over the years conservative Protestants reached substantial agreement and convergence with Catholic conservatives on a number of key issues.² Since the 1950s, their views have been expressed in Neoconservatism, a political movement whose protagonists are from different faith backgrounds, including Protestantism, Catholicism and Judaism.³ In particular, American neoconservatives made their voice heard in the journals *National Review* and *Modern Age*, founded in 1955 and 1956, respectively. Many contributors to these journals were self-proclaimed Catholic defenders of the capitalist economic system against communism. For example, when Pope John XXIII promulgated the social encyclical *Mater et Magistra* in 1961, *National Review* was critical of its emphasis on the contrast between rich and poor nations rather than on the confrontation between capitalism and communism.⁴

In 1991, Pope John Paul II publishes *Centesimus Annus*, his third social encyclical, following *Laborem Exercens* and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Lively public debate breaks out immediately, and neoconservative interpretations of *Centesimus Annus* swiftly gain ground. The key figures in this debate are Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel, prominent representatives of religious neoconservatism in the United States and heirs to the pundits and politicians known as the Cold War Liberals, who had gradually been drifting away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party since the 1970s.⁵ Indeed, the neoconservative Catholic movement had been gaining ground in the US since the 1980s and wielded considerable political influence. From the Reagan administration onwards, increasing numbers of American Catholics adopted neoconservative

1 Thomas, "The Moral Majority: Background and Current Projects".

2 Russell, "The Catholic Neoconservative Misreading of John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* Revisited", 173-5.

3 Eminent influential Jewish neoconservatives included Daniel Bell, Norman Podhoretz and Irving Kristol. See Del Pero, *Henry Kissinger e l'ascesa dei neoconservatori*, 107-9, and Allitt, "American Catholics and the New Conservatism of the 1950s", 36-7.

4 Allitt, "American Catholics", 15, 28.

5 For further information about the development of the neoconservative movement, see Del Pero, "The Historical and Ideological Roots" and Del Pero, *Henry Kissinger*.

positions, exploiting a one-sided interpretation of *Centesimus Annus* to boost support.

The political importance of neoconservative positions also increased after the 1990s, especially during the administrations of George Bush and his son George W. Bush, with a number of politicians close to the neoconservative movement, such as Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, holding important positions.⁶ Under the leadership of Michael Novak, neoconservative Catholics became more powerful over those years, exercising considerable political influence.⁷ The neoconservative movement eventually peaked after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when it strived to formulate an ideological and theoretical framework that justified the 2003 American intervention in Iraq.⁸

Following the publication of *Centesimus Annus*, a heated discussion broke out in the 1990s, involving both secular society and the clergy. A notable example is Robert Alan Sirico, neocon Catholic priest and founder of the Acton Institute, a conservative research and educational institution based in Michigan. He argued that *Centesimus Annus* marked a paradigm shift in the Catholic tradition and a reversal of the left-leaning trend.⁹ The debate sparked by the publication of the encyclical quickly became the embodiment of the clash between two politically polarised and irreconcilable forms of Catholicism.¹⁰ Progressive Catholics rejected the neoconservative analysis and put an entirely different interpretation on the encyclical, sparking a cultural and political conflict. Neoconservative Catholics emphasised the sections of *Centesimus Annus* that appear more favourable to capitalism, whereas progressive Catholics made frequent reference to the Pope's criticism of its excesses.

This article offers a historical and political perspective on neoconservative interpretations of John Paul II's social teaching, with a particular focus on the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* and interpretations elaborated by Michael Novak and Richard John Neuhaus.¹¹

6 Dick Cheney served as Secretary of Defense in the H.W. Bush administration and as Vice President in the George W. Bush administration; Paul Wolfowitz served as Under Secretary of Defense in the H.W. Bush administration and as Secretary of Defense in the George W. Bush administration. See Goldstein, "The Contemporary Presidency: Cheney, Vice Presidential Power, and the War on Terror", and High, "The Recent Historiography of American Neoconservatism".

7 Del Pero, *Henry Kissinger*, 107.

8 For further information about the development of American Catholicism in the 21st century, see Faggioli, *Joe Biden e il cattolicesimo negli Stati Uniti*.

9 Sirico, "Catholicism's Developing Social Teaching".

10 Neoconservative Catholicism has declined over the years but remains significant. For further information, see Borghesi, *Catholic discordance. Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*.

11 For further information about the development of Catholic social thinking before John Paul II, see Verucci, *La Chiesa nella società contemporanea. Dal primo dopoguere*

While aware of the breadth of the debate and the variety of actors involved, this article attempts to analyse Novak's and Neuhaus's partisan views of John Paul II's social thinking. Neoconservative Catholics saw *Centesimus Annus* as a turning point in the social doctrine of the Church, interpreting it as demonstrating that the Pope had finally expressed a clear preference for a free-market economy, considering private property a fundamental human right. John Paul II was hailed as the capitalist Pope, the first to fully accept and appreciate the American economic system and its successful combination of liberal democracy and economic liberalism.

First, the article explores some novel elements introduced by John Paul II's social encyclicals and investigates the reasons why neoconservative Catholics consider *Centesimus Annus* a turning point in Catholic social thinking. Second, Novak's and Neuhaus's interpretations will be analysed, examining the ways in which *Centesimus Annus* has been adapted to advance neoconservative political and ideological positions. The article draws upon a range of published sources, including John Paul II's social encyclicals and Novak's and Neuhaus's major writings on the Pope's social teaching.

2 The Church, the Market and John Paul II's Social Teaching

John Paul II's first social encyclical was *Laborem Exercens*, published in September 1981. It addresses contemporary socio-economic issues and diverges in some ways from previous social encyclicals. John Paul II adopts a mainly spiritual approach, focusing on the theological aspects of what has become known as the "Social Question". *Laborem Exercens* states that "the Church's social teaching finds its source in Sacred Scripture, beginning with the Book of Genesis and especially in the Gospel and the writings of the Apostles".¹² The universal mission of the Church can never disregard its transcendental aspect, and the coming Kingdom of God must be considered the frame of reference for any Catholic reflections. The humanism advocated by John Paul II is thus theocentric rather than anthropocentric in nature: social or economic problems in contemporary society should be addressed using a theological approach. When laying down Catholic social principles, Pope John Paul II focuses on spiritual rather

ra al Concilio Vaticano II; Vecchio, *La dottrina sociale della Chiesa*; and Himes, Cahill, *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*.

¹² John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 3.

than material matters.¹³ Even in the context of the Social Question, the primary and ultimate aim must not be economic and material improvement but the educational and moral development of all people.¹⁴

Sollicitudo Rei Socialis is the second social encyclical published by John Paul II, in 1987 on the 20th anniversary of Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio*. First, John Paul II emphasises the need to reaffirm continuity in Catholic social teaching. Second, he underlines the importance of its renewal in line with contemporary societal problems.¹⁵ In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the Pope addresses the Social Question from a global perspective, considering socio-economic issues like social justice and the equitable distribution of wealth. In John Paul II's view, the Social Question must be examined from different perspectives: economic, sociological, ecological and moral. The overall goal is the achievement of full human development, reached by spreading solidarity across the globe.

In 1991, Pope John Paul II published his third and last social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, in which he reformulates the basic principles of Catholic social teaching. *Centesimus Annus* was published on the centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII's encyclical in which the Social Question and the condition of the working classes are addressed for the first time. *Centesimus Annus* was written as the Soviet Union was collapsing and the Cold War was coming to an end.¹⁶ This was also the era of economic globalisation. John Paul II points out that globalisation "is not to be dismissed, since it can create unusual opportunities for greater prosperity".¹⁷ If channelled towards the common good, the contemporary economic system can foster human development in line with the principles of international cooperation, charity and solidarity.¹⁸

John Paul II adopts a theological perspective in the encyclical, laying down the moral criteria that must be met in an equitable society. As affirmed by the Pope, *Centesimus Annus* does not aim to design a specific economic system but rather adopts a theological approach to interpret and evaluate contemporary socio-economic models.¹⁹ First,

13 For further information about the social teaching of John XXIII and Paul VI and the course of the Second Vatican Council, see, as well as the papal encyclicals, Melloni, *Il Concilio e la grazia. Saggi di storia sul Vaticano II*; Alberigo, *Breve storia del Concilio Vaticano II*; Bressan, "Un welfare aperto alla modernità"; Bressan, *Le vie cristiane della sicurezza sociale*.

14 Toso, *Welfare Society*, 400-1.

15 Fonseca, "Reflections on the Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*", 6.

16 Blackman, "Moralizing Neoliberalism? An Analysis of the Principle of Subsidiarity in Catholic Social Teaching", 55.

17 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 58.

18 Castellano, *La 'Centesimus Annus' e l'economia di mercato*, 10-11.

19 For further information about the Church's social doctrine and its theological nature, see Chenu, *La dottrina sociale della Chiesa*; Barucci, Magliulo, *L'insegnamento eco-*

John Paul II focuses on a number of fundamental principles laid down in Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, which encourages the reader to "look back", to "look around at the new thing" and to "look to the future".²⁰ *Centesimus Annus* reiterates the importance of solidarity, develops the concept of the common good and emphasises the centrality of the individual. At the same time, the encyclical introduces some novel elements, as it does not remain completely impartial between liberal and socialist ideologies. John Paul II leans strongly towards a free-market economy, which he sees as "the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs".²¹

As highlighted by sociologist Ivo Colozzi, *Centesimus Annus* identifies four spheres in contemporary society. The first is the state, whose role is to ensure the effective functioning of the market economy within a political system based on democracy and the rule of law. The second is the free-market system, which confers on individuals the right to engage in private enterprise and to own private property, and must not be jeopardised by public intervention. The third is civil society, which must develop a spirit of true solidarity and charity, enhancing the formation of private groups and associations to promote a holistic approach to personal development and safeguard human dignity. The fourth is the family, which is defined as the "sanctuary of life" and the "heart of the culture of life"²², and is the only system in which true human growth can be developed.²³ John Paul II asserts that the state must never assume the functions of the family or civil society, and must intervene only to ensure that those two spheres are able to perform their tasks unhindered.

Neoconservative thinkers expressed divergent opinions about John Paul II's social encyclicals. *Laborem Exercens* was praised by many. Novak, for instance, acknowledges that John Paul II had taken a positive step forward, differing from his predecessors in recognising the value of many forms of human creativity, including the work of inventors and of management experts. In addition, John Paul II refers to the Social Question in theological rather than pastoral terms. Novak saw these as "giant steps toward the tradition of [...] democratic capitalism".²⁴ Unlike *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* was widely criticised by neoconservative thinkers. When it was released,

nomico e sociale della Chiesa (1891-1991). I grandi documenti sociali della Chiesa cattolica; Toso, Welfare society. La riforma del welfare: l'apporto dei pontefici; Toso, "Una riforma del sistema finanziario".

20 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 3; Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 7.

21 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 34.

22 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 39.

23 Colozzi, "DSC, welfare e politiche sociali", 272-5.

24 Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, 246-7.

Novak organised a deputation to Rome to protest together with other neocons such as George Weigel, Richard Neuhaus and Peter Berger. They held that *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* failed to acknowledge the benefits and virtues of capitalism.²⁵ In particular, neocons were irked by the encyclical's condemnation of the evil face of capitalism, such as its assertion that an equitable society has an obligation to remove the 'structures of sin' which often hinder personal development.²⁶

After initial disappointment at John Paul II's views, especially after the publication of *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the neocons took a different line when *Centesimus Annus* was published in 1991.²⁷ Novak was extremely enthusiastic about the Pope's third social encyclical, applauding his decision to emphasise the virtues and benefits of a free-market economy and arguing that he was finally coming around to the neoconservative point of view.²⁸ Novak's position was shared by Sirico, who argued that *Centesimus Annus* represented a shift away from the static, zero-sum economic worldview that had made the Catholic Church wary of capitalism.²⁹

This section showed how John Paul II's social encyclicals, *Centesimus Annus* in particular, can be read from a theoretical perspective. It also introduced the interpretations given by neocon Catholics on the Pope's social teaching. The next sessions will focus on *Centesimus Annus*' assessment of capitalism. Furthermore, they will examine how the Pope's arguments were interpreted and seized by neoconservative Catholics in the US.

3 Capitalism, Neoliberalism and *Centesimus Annus*

In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II recognises that the failure of communism left capitalism as the dominant economic system, and provides his assessment of a free-market economy: "If by 'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognises the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibilities for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector", economic systems of this kind must surely be endorsed. Moreover, not only should capitalism be endorsed but it should also be "proposed to the countries of the

²⁵ Duncan, "Tackling Capitalism", 208-9.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 36.

²⁷ For a neoconservative perspective on Catholic social teaching, see Sirico, "The Pope's Warning on the Welfare State" and Sirico, *Catholicism's Developing Social Teaching*.

²⁸ Duncan, "Tackling Capitalism", 209.

²⁹ Sirico, "Catholicism's Developing Social Teaching".

Third World which are searching for the path to true economic and civil progress".³⁰ The Pope points out that the Marxist solution has failed and a free-market economy, with its capacity to innovate, has prevailed and can be recommended to Third World countries striving for social and economic progress. Charity, solidarity, private enterprise and the right to economic initiative are regarded as essential in a democratic society. However, to avoid excesses, some rules must be drawn up by the state "so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied".³¹

The encyclical appears to see the free-market economy and economic globalisation as morally legitimate.³² Even profit is vindicated: "the Church acknowledges the legitimate *role of profit* as an indication that a business is functioning well. When a firm makes a profit, this means that productive factors have been properly employed and corresponding human needs have been duly satisfied". However, John Paul II points out that the purpose of a business must not simply be to make a profit but is "to be found in its very existence as a *community of persons* who in various ways are endeavoring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society".³³

In addition, *Centesimus Annus* sees modern welfare states as often expensive, bureaucratic and inefficient. John Paul II emphasises the effectiveness of a free-market economy, which he sees as "the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs". However, there are some human needs that the market cannot meet so "it is also necessary to help [...] needy people to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources".³⁴ Put simply, each individual must be provided with the means to participate in a free-market system. The fundamental principle of subsidiarity must be applied to ensure the smooth functioning of the economy, and particularly to counter any totalitarian aspirations that a state might harbour. While *Centesimus Annus* levels harsh criticism at the welfare state, emphasises the principle of subsidiarity and supports a free-market economy, it also condemns excessive consumerism, harshly criticising the moral decline of contemporary society and promoting the importance of true spiritual development.

In the encyclical, John Paul II stresses the importance of the work ethic, noting that work also allows individuals to grow spiritually. The Pope asserts that all countries in the world must be able to ac-

30 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 42.

31 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 35.

32 McCann, "Catholic Social Teaching", 68.

33 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 35.

34 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 34.

quire human-resources expertise to fully benefit from the advantages of a capitalist economy. John Paul II promotes a form of personal development that is primarily qualitative rather than merely quantitative. Morality and the economy are distinct concepts but they are not conflicting or disconnected. The economy is a man-made system in which human beings are able to exercise freedom.³⁵ In summary, John Paul II's positive view of contemporary business models comes with an emphasis on religious and moral aspects of the economy. *Centesimus Annus* focuses on the theological and Christological aspects of Catholic social teaching, emphasising the importance of moral development.³⁶ John Paul II sustains that all work must become knowledge work, thereby allowing people to develop in educational, spiritual and moral ways. Socio-economic issues are seen as linked to a theological account of human nature, based on the biblical narratives of creation and the likeness between people and God.³⁷ In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II extols the Christian virtues fostered by successful businesses, affirming the value of a free-market economy in which economic freedom can be exercised. Private enterprise and the involvement of Christians in business are encouraged so that Catholics are able to "cultivate a specific set of intellectual and moral habits that make their own distinctive contribution to the common good".³⁸

Another significant innovation in the encyclical concerns the Pope's evaluation of political systems. Unlike previous encyclicals, *Centesimus Annus* explicitly praises democracy, which is "possible only in a State ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person".³⁹ John Paul II displays a willingness to accept a modern, democratic and liberal society together with its economic, political and cultural values.⁴⁰ He also expresses his opposition to direct public intervention in the economic system. However, some points remain unclear. The Pope stresses the need for some limitations to be imposed on a free-market economy.⁴¹ However, the nature of such limitations is not specified clearly. If they are regarded simply as rules which must be followed to ensure the correct functioning of capitalism, John Paul II's position is compatible with liberal thinking. If however such limitations are interpreted as state prohibitions that hinder free-market mechanisms, *Centesimus Annus* cannot be considered to be fully compatible with capitalism.

35 Castellano, *La 'Centesimus Annus'*, 163-5.

36 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 49.

37 McCann, "Catholic Social Teaching", 65.

38 McCann, "Catholic Social Teaching", 66-7.

39 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 46.

40 Rhonheimer, *The Common Good*, 490-3.

41 Beyer, "Strange Bedfellows: Religious Liberty and Neoliberalism".

4 **God Bless Capitalism: Michael Novak's Reading of *Centesimus Annus***

Michael Novak, who passed away in 2017 at the age of 83, was one of the most fervent supporters of an alliance between the Catholic Church and democratic capitalism.⁴² As a member of the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank where he held a teaching position, Novak devoted much effort over the years to demonstrating that Catholic doctrine and a free-market economy were compatible.⁴³ Before becoming a firm advocate of neoconservative ideology, in the 1960s Novak had been a member of the far left. He had argued for the rise of a progressive Catholic Church, advocating a religiously inspired revolution in consciousness leading to greater individual freedom. Novak gradually abandoned his progressive ideas, increasingly defending neoliberalism and arguing for its reconciliation with Catholicism.⁴⁴ Over the years, Novak became a fully-fledged theologian of American democratic capitalism, arguing that Catholicism and capitalism shared a common sense of solidarity and *caritas*.⁴⁵

During and after John Paul II's papacy, Novak analysed several encyclicals and other writings to demonstrate the link between the Catholic ethic on the one hand and liberalism and capitalism on the other. Novak encouraged the development of a theology of commerce and industry in which the Church acknowledges all the enormous benefits of democratic capitalism. To this end, he frequently questioned statements in which John Paul II was less favourable to neoconservative ideas, such as in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. However, Novak and other American neoconservatives adopted a different approach when *Centesimus Annus* was published. In Novak's view, democratic capitalism now appeared to be explicitly acknowledged as a system that was fully compatible with Catholic doctrine. Furthermore, capitalism had become the model to be recommended to Third World countries searching for the path to true economic and civil progress.⁴⁶ By conveniently disregarding the parts of the encyclical in which the excesses of capitalism are condemned, Novak's analysis of *Centesimus Annus* allowed him to conclude that Catholic principles and capitalism are fully compatible, as suggested by the title of the book in which he promotes this idea: *The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

⁴² For a broad and enthusiastic overview of Novak's thinking, see Felice, *Capitalismo e Cristianesimo. Il personalismo economico di Michael Novak*.

⁴³ McGreevy, "Catholics, Democrats and the GOP", 675.

⁴⁴ Linker, *The Theocons*.

⁴⁵ Antiseri, "Michael Novak", 164-6.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 42.

Novak devotes several chapters of the book to analysing the Catholic social doctrine that had developed over the years before the papacy of John Paul II. In particular, he examines the Church's criticisms of the free market from Leo XIII onwards. According to Novak, *Centesimus Annus* finally opened up the possibility of recognising the ethical nature of capitalism. Referring to Christian anthropology, John Paul II emphasises the principle of the subjectivity of individuals and society, which is expressed through "disciplined and creative *human work* and, as an essential part of that work, *initiative and entrepreneurial ability*".⁴⁷

Before commenting on John Paul II's social teaching, Novak investigates the origins of the Church's disparaging view of liberalism and capitalism. He refers to the thesis advanced by the Italian Catholic politician Amintore Fanfani, who saw Catholicism and capitalism as incompatible. Fanfani held that capitalism places great value on wealth and profit as the most effective means of achieving complete individual satisfaction but neglects other human needs. What particularly distresses Novak, however, is Fanfani's claim that capitalism is compatible with Protestantism but not with Catholicism.⁴⁸ Novak strongly rejects this hypothesis, emphasising instead the positive aspects of capitalism, such as volunteering, philanthropy, solidarity and charity. In Novak's view, capitalism promotes the individual initiative and creativity that stem from a deep sense of social responsibility. He is therefore extremely critical of welfare-state systems for depriving people of individual responsibility by assuming the functions and socio-economic activities that should be the responsibility of civil society. Unlike welfare-state systems, which encourage dependence and passivity, capitalism produces vast economic wealth that allows non-profit organisations of volunteers to be set up.⁴⁹

Having analysed 20th-century Catholic thinking on capitalism and liberalism, Novak turns to the papacy of John Paul II. First, he reaffirms that democratic capitalism promotes the creation of institutions and associations that foster human creativity. Second, Novak argues that capitalism also safeguards economic freedom, a fundamental aspect of a democratic society. Novak notes that the Pope emphasises these features in *Centesimus Annus*: religious and economic freedom are linked, and must be guaranteed to ensure the full deployment of individual subjectivity.⁵⁰ Novak is very enthusiastic about *Centesimus Annus*, stating that "we are all capitalists now,

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 32.

⁴⁸ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 23-6.

⁴⁹ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 35-6.

⁵⁰ Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 95-8.

even the Pope".⁵¹ Novak interprets the encyclical as clear evidence of the Pope's desire to bridge the gap between theology and economics. Religious and economic liberty are connected in that they are the highest expression of the individual's freedom of choice, which must never be constrained by state intervention.⁵²

Novak also notes John Paul II's reflections on civil society. The Pope explicitly criticises excessive state intervention, favouring the creation of private associations as icons of democracy that are in line with Catholic social principles. *Centesimus Annus* recognises the valuable social function of market forces and private enterprise. Novak also addresses the Pope's criticism of idolatry of the market, claiming that such excesses are limited to libertarianism, a fringe form of capitalism. Novak thus draws a clear distinction between capitalism and libertarianism, and ascribes all the flaws identified by the Pope to the latter. This allows him to claim that the neocon interpretation of democratic capitalism is fully accepted by the Church.⁵³

Novak holds that individual morality and collective responsibility, the key values of democratic capitalism, are more than sufficient to help the poor and the disadvantaged. State intervention must be reduced drastically, and capitalism must be fostered worldwide in order to eradicate poverty. He sees the main cause of global poverty as the limitation of individual economic creativity resulting from state intervention in low-income countries. His solution is not the redistribution of wealth and income but the spread of democratic capitalism, which he considers a panacea for reducing socio-economic disparity. The disadvantaged should not be helped directly by the state through subsidies or redistribution mechanisms, but must only be given the opportunity to develop their full potential through the free exercise of economic activity.⁵⁴ In short, Novak argues that the poor are poor because they have not yet appreciated the potential of capitalism, and that a capitalist system would let them achieve their full potential and improve their economic circumstances.

In the final part of his book, Novak also briefly addresses how progressive thinkers reacted to *Centesimus Annus*. Over the years, progressive journalists and thinkers had launched bitter attacks on the neoconservative analysis, offering an entirely different interpretation of John Paul II's encyclical and making frequent reference to the Pope's criticism of the excesses of capitalism and economic glo-

51 Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 101.

52 Novak, "Truth and Liberty: the Present Crisis in Our Culture", 8-10.

53 Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 144-5.

54 Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 152.

balisation.⁵⁵ Differently from the neoconservative standing, the progressive position places much greater weight on the parts of *Centesimus Annus* that are in line with previous social encyclicals.⁵⁶ Novak claims that the Catholic left had been embarrassed by the publication of the encyclical, and had therefore focused on the parts where John Paul II values the role of the state.⁵⁷ Rejecting leftist views, Novak again extols capitalism, regarding it as the most effective system for promoting human creativity and private enterprise. He criticises progressive Catholics for erroneously treating the disadvantaged as vulnerable and passive individuals who need state intervention to get out of poverty. In contrast, neoconservatives are aware of each individual's potential, seeing the poor as capable, creative and dynamic.

Over the years, the views promoted by Novak and the neocons have been vigorously opposed by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which in 1986 promulgated the pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. The pastoral letter counters libertarian arguments by pointing out the importance of socio-economic justice and distributism.⁵⁸ The polemics continued into the 1990s. After the release of *Centesimus Annus*, John Carr, director of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, firmly opposed neocon interpretations, highlighting John Paul II's statements in support of social justice.⁵⁹ Neocon pundits argued that John Paul II's encyclical challenges the validity of the 1986 pastoral letter, but Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, who presided over the drafting of the pastoral, asserted that the Pope's firm view is that capitalism must be controlled and limited.⁶⁰ The main opponents of the neocon position accused them of having desperately tried to find legitimacy for their thinking in papal encyclicals, and in particular in John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*.⁶¹

55 Sniegocki, "The Social Ethics of Pope John Paul II", 7-10; Steinfels, "Papal Encyclical Urges Capitalism to Shed Injustices"; Storck, "What Does Centesimus Annus Really Teach?"

56 Higgins, "The Pope and the Free Market"; Rogaly, "Business; Ex Cathedra"; Sethi, Steidlmeier, "Religions's Moral Compass".

57 Novak, *The Catholic Ethic*, 148.

58 United States Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy*.

59 Steinfels, "Ideas & Trends; Rome's 100-Year Hunt For a Middle Ground".

60 Steinfels, "Papal Encyclical".

61 Brunelli, "Tra ideologia teocon e 'ospedale da campo'".

5 The Capitalism of John Paul II According to Richard Neuhaus

The papacy of John Paul II had gained the approval of American neo-conservatives like Michael Novak, who showed particular appreciation for *Centesimus Annus*. Novak was just one among many neocons who celebrated the encyclical, arguing that the Catholic Church had finally approved democratic capitalism. This section focuses on the interpretation provided by the theocon Richard John Neuhaus, who played a major role in legitimising the view of John Paul II as the capitalist Pope.

Neuhaus, a Catholic priest and writer, was the son of a Lutheran pastor. He was born in Canada but later moved to the United States and became a US citizen. His biography resembles Novak's. As a young man, Neuhaus was a liberal activist and a keen participant in progressive activities. He took part in leftist political agitation inspired by religious ideals like social justice and freedom. In the 1960s, Neuhaus joined the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. He was a firm supporter of the protests organised by Martin Luther King Jr. and was involved in clashes with police at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago.⁶² He was also active in Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam, an anti-war organisation with a religious orientation whose aim was to shed light on the injustices of American actions in Vietnam. However, some years later Neuhaus began to decry such activities, turning instead to neoconservative positions, combating the spread of secularism and opposing abortion, euthanasia and same-sex marriage.⁶³ He also began to argue for the expansion of public religiosity and for theological and political conservatism.⁶⁴ In the 1990s, Neuhaus converted to Catholicism and entered the priesthood. He became an influential member of the Acton Institute and the most prominent conservative Roman Catholic in America, sharing the views of other prominent figures such as Michael Novak, Peter Berger and George Weigel.⁶⁵ In the 2000s, Neuhaus also had a significant influence on George W. Bush, who sought his counsel before and during his presidency. When Neuhaus died in 2009, Bush expressed his sadness: "Father Neuhaus was an inspirational leader, admired theologian, and accomplished author

⁶² Linker, *The Theocons*.

⁶³ Boyagoda, *Richard John Neuhaus*.

⁶⁴ Linker, *The Theocons*.

⁶⁵ Peter Berger is one of the most influential theorists of neoconservatism like Irving Kristol, Norman Podhoretz and Michael Novak. The neoconservative Catholic George Weigel is also a biographer of John Paul II and author of the bestseller *Witness to Hope*. For other in-depth analyses of John Paul II's biography and papacy, see Rico cardì, *Giovanni Paolo II*, and Miccoli, *In difesa della fede. La chiesa di Giovanni Paolo II e Benedetto XVI*.

who devoted his life to the service of the Almighty and to the betterment of our world. He was also a dear friend, and I have treasured his wise counsel and guidance".⁶⁶

Neuhaus shared Novak's views and began contesting long-standing Catholic criticism of neoliberalism and expressing great enthusiasm for *Centesimus Annus*. In his book *Doing Well and Doing Good: The Challenge to the Christian Capitalist*, Neuhaus even claims that the encyclical is an endorsement of Novak's concept of democratic capitalism. According to Neuhaus, as Novak's writings were read widely in Poland, they had had a significant influence on Karol Wojtyła and shaped his later arguments in favour of capitalism.⁶⁷

In *Doing Well and Doing Good*, Neuhaus endeavours to reconcile Catholicism, democracy and capitalism by referring to John Paul II's thinking and in particular to *Centesimus Annus*, which aims to "propose a 're-reading' of Pope Leo's Encyclical".⁶⁸ In Neuhaus's view, the greatest innovation introduced by John Paul II is the distinction between primitive capitalism and new capitalism. The former, which is in line with Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, is criticised and rejected, whereas the latter, which implies the development of a free-market economy, is endorsed and welcomed. Neuhaus argues that, in the wake of the 1989 revolutions, a new era characterised by the spread of democratic capitalism had finally arrived, and sees the publication of *Centesimus Annus* as a tangible sign of this change.⁶⁹

In *Doing Well and Doing Good*, Neuhaus reaffirms the concept of the subjectivity of society defined in *Centesimus Annus*, in opposition to public intervention.⁷⁰ He also notes the Pope's harsh criticism of all forms of socialism. While recognising that there are still Catholics who adhere to socialist principles, John Paul II considers socialism irremediably wrong.⁷¹ Neuhaus recognises that socialism has often been regarded as an alternative to radical forms of capitalism. However, he rejects the socialist option and asserts that democratic capitalism does not entail submission to the market or idolatry of it, drawing a clear distinction between neoconservatism and radical libertarianism. Neuhaus recognises that the Pope rightly warns against radical forms of capitalism that lead to unbridled consumerism, which he condemns as totally immoral. He asserts, however, that democratic capitalism is fully accepted and endorsed by John Paul II, where-

⁶⁶ The White House, *President Bush Saddened by Death of Father Richard John Neuhaus*.

⁶⁷ Duncan, "Tackling Capitalism", 210.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 3.

⁶⁹ Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 69-70; Neuhaus, "The Pope Affirms the 'New Capitalism'".

⁷⁰ Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 29-30.

⁷¹ Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 42-3.

as all forms of socialism are rejected.⁷² Neuhaus holds that John Paul II undeniably regards socialism as fundamentally wrong, including in anthropological terms, and supports capitalism. By laying down the principle of the subjectivity of society, the Pope explicitly opposes state socialism, where the individual is nothing more than an element within the social organism. John Paul II challenges this view, emphasising how important it is for an individual to have something “he can call ‘his own’” and to “have the possibility of earning a living through his own initiative”.⁷³ In contrast, what the encyclical refers to as the “Social Assistance State” encourages passivity and dependence, stripping individuals of responsibility. When the state adopts social policies aimed at helping the poor, it creates an incentive to stay poor.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Neuhaus opposes any form of wealth redistribution, arguing that the poor must be admitted into the economic system and become part of the circle of exchange that creates wealth.⁷⁵

While admitting that capitalism does not always benefit everyone, Neuhaus argues that negative outcomes of this kind are a consequence of the economic system not yet being free enough. He reiterates his argument that the solution is not to redistribute wealth but to offer everyone the possibility of becoming part of the virtuous circle of democratic capitalism. In his view, this is exactly what *Centesimus Annus* recommends when it advocates a free-market economy based on the principle of solidarity.⁷⁶ To build a free-market economy, individuals must be able to form associations and organisations freely. All individuals must have the right to engage in unfettered enterprise and engagement in economic activity that can increase their productivity, fulfil their aspirations and allow them into the system of democratic capitalism. Capitalism is seen as the best economic framework in which Christian principles of solidarity and freedom can apply.⁷⁷ Echoing John Paul II’s encyclical, Neuhaus argues that disadvantaged people must be helped “to acquire expertise, to enter the circle of exchange, and to develop their skills in order to make the best use of their capacities and resources”.⁷⁸ He states that overthinking real or alleged inequalities caused by Western actions in developing countries is futile. Refuting complaints about Western imperialism and neocolonialism, Neuhaus asserts that poor nations

72 Neuhaus, “Democracy – A Christian Imperative”.

73 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 13.

74 Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 151-2.

75 Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 156-7.

76 Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 175-6; Neuhaus, “The Liberalism of John Paul II”.

77 For an in-depth account of how Neuhaus sees the relationship between democracy and capitalism, see Neuhaus, “Democracy – A Christian Imperative”.

78 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 34.

have failed to assume their responsibilities properly, and interprets *Centesimus Annus* as emphasising this.

Neuhaus also addresses the arguments of progressive pundits who cite *Centesimus Annus* when advocating radical social change to achieve greater socio-economic and environmental justice across the world. Neuhaus asserts that the only part of *Centesimus Annus* in which the Pope refers to such issues can be ignored, even arguing that the few sentences that address lifestyle choices or environmental issues sound like throwaway comments. Neuhaus denounces progressive Catholics who reject the interpretation of the encyclical as full approval of democratic capitalism. He holds that the disappointment of progressive Catholics in the encyclical led them to interpret it incorrectly. He refers explicitly to the Center of Concern think tank based in Washington DC, which in his opinion manipulated the encyclical to discredit neoconservative interpretations.⁷⁹ To bolster the validity of his own interpretation, Neuhaus notes that in *Centesimus Annus* the Pope refers to his previous encyclicals as well as to Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, in which the right to private property and individual freedom are emphasised. In fact, John Paul II focuses less on the more progressive social documents produced by John XXIII and Paul VI - *Mater et Magistra*, *Pacem in Terris* and *Populorum Progressio* - which are only mentioned only seven times in total.⁸⁰

In conclusion, Neuhaus concurs with Novak that *Centesimus Annus* should be seen as the encyclical of democratic capitalism. He claims that John Paul II's encyclical is the clearest sign of the Catholic Church's innovative shift towards a position in which the right to private property and free economic enterprise are asserted once and for all.

6 Conclusion

In 1991, John Paul II publishes the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which provokes lively discussion in American Catholicism. In particular, neoconservative Catholics warmly applaud John Paul II's third social encyclical, focusing on the Pope's endorsement of free-market systems.

The encyclical firmly asserts the principle of subsidiarity, supports private enterprise and promotes economic freedom. It severely criticises Western welfare-state models, condemning their shortcomings and excesses. This led to *Centesimus Annus* being hailed as a great step forward by neoconservative Catholics, who interpreted the encyclical as signalling that the Church had finally accepted and em-

⁷⁹ Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 224.

⁸⁰ Neuhaus, *Doing Well*, 137-8.

braced economic liberalism. Going beyond Catholic rhetoric on a third way, namely, an alternative to both socialism and capitalism, John Paul II highlights the benefits of a market economy that safeguards economic freedom and private enterprise, and advocates a subsidiary role for central authority. Governments should abandon economic planning in favour of creating ideal conditions for citizens to exercise their right to engage in private enterprise and enjoy economic freedom.⁸¹

However, *Centesimus Annus* also notes some limitations of the market, pointing out that some collective and qualitative needs cannot be met by market mechanisms. The alleged ambiguity of some of the sentences in the encyclical has, from the outset, led to clashes between neoconservative and progressive Catholics, each side citing sections that can be read as supporting their own convictions. In particular, the Catholic neocons Novak and Neuhaus were attacked for promoting a biased interpretation of *Centesimus Annus*, glibly dismissing the Pope's criticisms of capitalism and its shortcomings. In their analysis of John Paul II's social teaching, Novak and Neuhaus were ambivalent about the social encyclical *Laborem Exercens* and criticised *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* severely, seeing them as too critical of capitalism. In contrast, they expressed wholehearted appreciation of *Centesimus Annus*, which they regard as an endorsement of the alliance between Catholicism and capitalism. In their books, Novak and Neuhaus emphasise the statements made by the Pope in which he is critical of state intervention in the economy, highlighting his declarations in favour of private enterprise. Convinced that the Church has finally embraced capitalism, neoconservative Catholics have widely criticised alternative interpretations of the encyclical. In their view, progressive Catholics were disappointed by *Centesimus Annus* and elaborated a misleading interpretation of the encyclical to further their own interests.

In summary, this article lays out the main arguments advanced by American Catholic neocons on the relationship between Catholic social teaching and a free-market economy. In particular, it focuses on some of the main views expressed by American neocons on John Paul II's papacy and his most controversial social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, which was open to different interpretations. Intense debate broke out as soon as it was published, raising the issue of whether capitalism was compatible with Catholic social teaching. There is no doubt that the publication of *Centesimus Annus* was a significant political milestone, becoming the subject of lively debate and leading to a growing rift between progressive and neoconservative Catholics.

81 Beyond neoconservative interpretations, the relationship between economic issues and the social doctrine of the Church is being explored even today. See Annett, *Catholicism: How Catholic Tradition Can Create a More Just Economy*.

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