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Does “Love Thy Neighbor” require a minimum wage increase?

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When I saw the May 5 edition of the Saint Paul Legal Ledger featuring a photo of Archbishop Harry Flynn smiling alongside legislative leaders pushing for a higher minimum wage, I was at first disturbed: Why is a religious leader trying to get government to tell employers how much they should pay? And will I hear someone call for the need to separate church and state?

Then I thought of another question: What would Father Sirico say?

The Rev. Robert Sirico is a Catholic priest who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. If Archbishop Flynn (since retired) used his perch to call for an active government, Sirico uses his to call for government restraint.

From Michigan’s second-largest city, Sirico has directed the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty (www.acton.org) for nearly 20 years. Though Sirico and co-founder Kris Alan Mauren are Catholic, the institute itself has a broadly Christian slant, drawing substantially from Michigan’s Protestant community. (The president of Calvin College is on the board of directors, for example.)

The institute is named in honor of Lord Acton, a 19th-century British figure most famous for the aphorism “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Sirico’s official biography says that prior to founding the Acton Institute in 1990, he “experienced a growing concern over the lack of training religious studies students receive in fundamental economic principles, leaving them poorly equipped to understand and address today’s social problems.”

One problem that economic principles have some bearing on is the need to work. While the Minnesota Legislature was debating the minimum wage, Archbishop Flynn told the Legal Ledger, “If we can send people to space, it seems we can find a way so that every woman and man can live with dignity.”

Fair enough. Dignity is vital. But is a minimum wage increase the way to promote dignity? Does it actually promote dignity? Is there a better way of promoting dignity through employment?

Minnesota Public Radio told us that “Archbishop Flynn says he is not an economist.” This admission shows that Sirico was on to something 18 years ago. If theological concerns lead to laws that are contrary to economic principles, then they are not helpful. In fact, they can assault human dignity.

For his part, Sirico has a sound grasp of economics, which he demonstrated in a commentary titled “Minimum wage, Maximum suffering.”

Citing the case of a disabled teenager he knows, Sirico writes, “Whenever the minimum wage is raised, there are victims and those victims are the people who are the most marginal members of society, the people without work experience, the young, those who are likely to be discriminated against.”

A minimum wage makes some low-skilled workers unattractive to employers. It gives employers an incentive to ship jobs to cheaper workers overseas or introduce automation as a way of making up for higher labor costs.

Concern for human dignity, then, can play out two ways: increasing the minimum wage (the archbishop’s view) or not increasing it (the priest’s view). I’ll take the priest.

The Acton Institute is guided by more than economics, however. It has 10 operating principles, one of which is subsidiarity. That, the institute says, is the principle that “First, jurisdictionally broader institutions must refrain from usurping the proper functions that should be performed by the person and institutions more immediate to him. Second, jurisdictionally broader institutions should assist individual persons and institutions more immediate to the person only when the latter cannot fulfill their proper functions.”

Call it “federalism for the rest of life.” Check and balances. Division of power, or at least responsibilities.

The institute carries out its mission of educating religious and other leaders through publishing books, periodicals and web sites. Sirico and his staff frequently write op-eds for newspapers across the nation (and world), and they appear on television news shows.

The institute also conducts seminars and conferences. While some events are for students, others are open to the general public.

One such event is “Acton University,” a week-long symposium of lectures and discussions that incorporate moral and political philosophy, Christian theology and economics. As I observed when I attended the 2006 session, “Love thy neighbor” doesn’t necessarily translate into “support the minimum wage.”

The conference was a time to meet academics, pastors, business owners and other leaders. Some sessions covered basic principles of economics; others addressed more specific questions such as globalization, technological change, and private versus public welfare programs.

The week was a good example of how a group can use economics to inform religious concerns. Religious groups and principles have played important parts in our national history — sometimes to good effect, sometimes not.

As the contrast between the archbishop and the priest reveals, the differences of thought within a religious group can be just as interesting and important, if not more so, than the differences between political parties.