



# **Social Concerns Spirituality Reprint**

## **Sabbath Economics: The gift must always move**



### **CATHOLIC COMMUNITY OF ST. FRANCIS SOCIAL CONCERNS MINISTRY**

The following is one of a series of reprints highlighting the spirituality of the Church's Social Mission.

The following is from an interview with Ched Myers, whose biblical scholarship and exegeses help to relate the scriptures to the present reality we all live in, especially as it relates to the way we structure our relationships with each other institutionally and globally. This piece really offers much food for thought on the spirituality of Social Concerns.

**An Interview with Ched Myers on "Sabbath Economics" by Kayla McClurg, from *Inward/Outward: A Journal of the Servant Leadership School. The Gift Must Always Move***

**KM:** Ched, what do you mean when you say "Sabbath Economics?" Aren't those two words contradictory? Isn't "Sabbath" about letting go and receiving and "economics" about attaining and possessing? How do they fit together?

**CM:** You are certainly correct in your impression that these two terms, when viewed from the vantage point of current economic orthodoxies, would seem to be mutually exclusive. I have put them together, however, precisely to argue that economics for Christians must be reinterpreted in the light of the central biblical tradition of keeping Sabbath. Conversely, I contend that Sabbath is at its core an economic ethic, not just a spiritual one.

**KM:** How are you defining the word “Sabbath?”

**CM:** Sabbath in the Bible has three essential connotations.

**First**, the Sabbath suspension of *doing* in order to *be* is grounded in the Self-limiting character of God, who created and then rested (Gen 2:1ff). Indeed, according to the prime view of the Garden story, the original vocation of the human being (Adam) was simply to enjoy this “cosmic Sabbath” by entering into intimate relationship with an abundant and wonderful Creation (Gen 2:19f). Instead, as the Fall story goes, the human being succumbed to the fatal temptation to try to re-engineer or “improve” upon the work of God. Life outside the Garden thus consists of alienation from God, from each other, and from the Creation, all symbolized by difficult and exhausting work and a creation that, as a result, is not quite as abundant. The Sabbath is a hedge on our tragic fate, however, reminding us of the original symbiosis. This explains why the ecstatic and erotic dimensions of human activity, such as sex or singing or eating, are not only allowed on the Sabbath, but encouraged.

**Second**, Sabbath concerns the communal discipline of setting limits. We are commanded to cease our determined work to transform the world, in particular the “economic” activity of production and distribution of goods. Why? It is because of our Fallen human impulse to work compulsively, to consume addictively, and to use and exploit resources and labor mercilessly. Sabbath represents a cautionary discipline that seeks to constrain this addiction/compulsion (which the Bible calls Sin). Interestingly, the central question of the 21st century will be whether or not humans can set or maintain limits: on our plundering of the planet, on our increasingly Promethean technologies, and on our spiraling violence toward the biosphere and each other. If we cannot, we will perish—which is precisely what the old Sabbath traditions of Scripture warn (see e.g. Ex 31:14-17; Lev 26:2-39).

**Third**, the Sabbath is a tradition of economic justice. The practice is introduced in the context of the manna story in Exodus 16. This grounds it firmly in the “economic instructions” of that archetypal tale, in which the newly liberated Hebrew slaves are tutored in the old ways of sharing: everyone must gather “enough” and no one must accumulate “too much.” So Sabbath is not an individual spiritual discipline only; it represents a communal practice of constraint within the context of economic sufficiency for all.

**KM:** And “economics?”

**CM:** Economics, on the other hand, is usually identified in our capitalist culture with profit, accumulation, markets, development, and trade. But our word comes from the Greek *oikonomia*, which means “law of the household.” Ironically, the household today is the last space in our hyper-market society in which the traditional “gift economy” still holds: labor is cooperative, assets and possessions are shared equitably, and consumption is done without payment. Before the rise of the great civilizations and empires – which is to say, for 99% of the history of homo sapiens – all human communities operated this way, practicing what anthropologists call “generalized reciprocity.” Indeed, prior to the rise and relentless and aggressive spread of modern capitalism beginning in the 17th century, most people on the planet still lived more or less this way. The older life-ways were based upon a cosmology that saw everyone in the community as kin, the Creation around us as commonwealth, and the Spirit world as the origin of the great Gift.

This traditional cosmology is shared by the Bible – which is why it seems so strange to our capitalist ears! The natural abundance of the Creation lasts as long as the gift circulates; conversely, to try to own or hoard or consume the gift for ourselves replaces the abundance with addiction, a warning nicely illustrated in the alternative version of the manna story found in Numbers 11:31-34. As Lewis Hyde puts it in his brilliant and highly recommended study, *The Gift: Imagination*

and the Erotic Life of Property (Vintage 1983), indigenous people ... Understood a cardinal property of the gift: whatever we have been given is supposed to be given away again, not kept. . . . The only essential is this: the gift must always move . . . 'One man's gift,' they say, 'must not be another man's capital.' So in effect, "economics," etymologically speaking, should concern how we manage and share the gift -- it is modern capitalism that has hijacked the term, not me! In sum, then, I would boil Sabbath Economics down to this basic proposition: a) we must limit and constrain our economic activity in order to b) keep the gifts of Creation circulating equitably.

**KM:** If symbiosis is how we are created, and disintegration is the result of the Fall, what should be our response? Should we try to return to that earlier state of harmony – or move to something new and as yet unimagined?

**CM:** The old story in its wisdom reminds us that there are flaming swords that forever keep us out of the garden. We cannot go back to hunting and gathering life-ways, not because they are primitive but because we have destroyed that possibility – our numbers are too large, our plundering of nature too far advanced, our competence in the old ways too atrophied. But ironically, neither can we continue on with our addictive-compulsive way of life. Here again the old traditions prove to be more relevant than ever. The biblical prophets right up to Jesus predicate the future upon the people's ability and willingness to repent, which means to "turn around." We must turn around not because we can go back to the beginning, but because we must first *stop* heading in this destructive direction. Then we must *learn* from the old ways, and then we must use all of our creativity and commitment to *reconstruct* postmodern life-ways that are just, sustainable, and re-integrative. This will necessarily focus upon creating and maintaining limits, learning from the poor and marginalized, and embracing disciplines of sharing. This will demand of us extraordinary spiritual resources, which is why the church ought to be leading the way rather than indulging in the middle-class fantasy that everything will somehow work out (to our continual advantage!) and that our faith meanwhile has nothing to do with economics

**KM:** What about Jesus? Did he care about economic systems, or did his comment that we should "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" indicate he wasn't concerned, as some folks argue?

**CM:** That verse, so notoriously misinterpreted, sums up our dilemma perfectly! We have indeed conceded that economy, and with it the Creation itself, to the dictates and designs of Caesar. But he is concerned only with trade advantages, profit-maximization, capital flows, and the consolidation of economic and political power. And the problem for the church is that the Creation belongs to Creator, not to Caesar or any other would-be proprietor: "the land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine, and you are but aliens and tenants" (Lev 25:23). Conscientious Christians today should no longer take refuge from moral accountability in the old "two kingdoms" cop-out. Admittedly, Jesus is all too often portrayed as having little to say apart from the mildest occasional moral gloss on the dominant economic system of the day (as if the best he could muster was: "Try not to be greedy," or "give to charity once in a while"). This is *not* the Jesus of our gospels, however.

Jesus of Nazareth was unafraid to identify the cultural phenomenon of money-capital with the principalities (even employing the ancient Babylonian name of "Mammon" to emphasize its pagan and imperial origins), whose enslaving power is omnipresent (Mt 6:24). He called the rich plainly and unequivocally to redistribute their wealth to the poor while inviting disciples to "re-communitize" their assets (Mk 10:17ff). Above all, he was immersed in that old Gift cosmology: he asserted without a hint of irony that Solomon's Temple – symbol of the socio-economic zenith of Israel's civilization – pales in worth next to one single wildflower in the eyes of the Creator (Lk 12:27).

**KM:** What might "this Jesus" have to say to us in our present times?

**CM:** This Jesus' call to discipleship is identified in the gospel with "release" from our captivity to the dominant Mammon system. This is indicated by the fact that the verb used to describe the fishermen "leaving" their nets to follow Jesus is the same verb used to describe the forgiveness of sin/debt, the liberation of captives and the unbinding of the demon-possessed. This Jubilee release takes many forms: writing off debt, practicing solidarity with the poorest, making sure that everyone is included at the social table, sharing our assets with each other – and resisting the tyranny of Caesar's coin! I believe Jesus invites us to do the same today. Our task is not to rationalize why we can't follow, or to equivocate where Jesus was clear, but to figure out what his call means in concrete terms today, in a world quite different (but probably no more complex and ambiguous) than that of the gospels.

**KM:** Where do you see the worst consequences of the abuse of Sabbath Economics in our society? It seems we are guided as a culture by the "myth of Progress." Is there any truth to this myth, or is it merely deceptive?

**CM:** I believe the terrible but inevitable consequences of our way of life are the twin global apocalypses of the broadening environmental crisis and the deepening gulf between rich and poor. The Promethean myth of progress promised paradise, but has delivered an end-game. Social Darwinism, which is the true subtext of Progress, has indeed been a self-fulfilling prophecy; the "fittest" have survived enjoying unconscionable affluence while the many scramble for scraps. Meanwhile the "developed" world continues with exponential determination to exhaust the very life support systems of the planet – forests, waterways, air, topsoil – convinced that we can correct the problems we've created through technological intervention, even into the very genetic structures of life. We are like Icarus, relying on the artificial wings of our ingenuity, and unless we listen to the old wisdom stories, we too will fly too close to the sun and learn the terrible lessons of gravity.

**KM:** The immensity of the problem feels overwhelming. Where might we begin the task of restoring Creation and calling forth the full humanity of both the oppressed and their oppressors? What might we be doing now?

**CM:** It will take at least as many generations to repair the damage we have wrought as it took to wreak havoc. Yet Grace and the renewing power of Life in creation can sustain us, if we do our part. There are no blueprints, just the life-long tasks of turning away from all the personal and political delusions and dysfunction, and turning toward the recomunitization and reintegration of life. I would suggest that a good beginning point is to examine our relationship to the following areas of our lives:

1. **The land:** Is there any natural place that you care enough about to defend? Whether it's a backyard garden, a local streambed, a regional watershed or a beloved national park, we cannot rehabilitate our relationship to the earth in the abstract.
2. **The poor:** The truth of any society is embodied not by its richest, most powerful, or most beautiful members, but by those on the bottom. The marginalized will unmask our illusions about the nobility of the status quo and teach us about grace and the struggle to survive, to change, and to heal. I would include in this that we have a special responsibility to learn who the indigenous people of our area were and are, and to face the legacy of our dispossession of them.
3. **Our money:** Our paralysis because of debt servicing needs to be examined, on the household, national, and international levels. Re-examine how you and your church handle your surplus, and consider re-investing it in communities that most need access to capital. There is a current renaissance of alternative banking and community currency experiments just waiting for Christians to plug into!

4. ***Our possessions:*** Whether or not we suffer from “influenza,” we need to realize how fetishistic our relationship to things has become for all of us, thanks to the mystical and inescapable huckstering of Madison Avenue. Until and unless we truly are convicted that our “stuff” cannot save us or make us happy, we will be unable and uninterested in commencing the journey of “recovery” from our attachment to a consumer culture that is fundamentally addictive/compulsive and that is driving the destructive ideology of growth.

5. ***Our work:*** How we earn our bread, and the relationship between wage-labor and life-work, is possibly the most important nexus of examination. Our anxiety about money keeps us fretful about work, and allows it to direct our time and space in ways that may have little to do with our discipleship vocation. If our identity should not be defined by what we own, neither should it be defined by what we do.

**KM:** What do you see that brings you hope that we might be able to re-establish such a vision?

**CM:** The preceding suggestions focus upon individual and household issues because that is where most of us begin wrestling. But each area can and must be understood more widely as well, as public challenges, not just personal ones. My hope is that we will acknowledge our profound need for Sabbath time and space to do this kind of examination and that we will muster the character and courage to make changes. Our struggle against a sick system, however, can only be animated and sustained by a commitment to a community of life. We will make hard personal choices and take on difficult political tasks in the long run only in the context of the love, accountability, and celebration of the church – that is, a church transformed by the biblical vision of Sabbath Economics.

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