

Initiatives

In Support of Christians in the World

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50 Years since Vatican II

Fifty years ago Pope John XXIII (1881-1963) called for an ecumenical council, Vatican II (1962-1965). The 50 year anniversary of Vatican II's formal closing will be December 2015. Until then, INITIATIVES will periodically revisit Vatican II, noting its antecedents, its documents and its implementation.

Fr. Felicite Robert de Lamennais (1782-1854) of France anticipated Vatican II, argues Thomas Kohler of Boston College Law School. However, Lamennais was eventually condemned by the papacy and he died disaffected from the church. (*America* [8/24/09], 106 W. 56th St., New York, NY 10019)

The French Revolution (1789) accelerated the changes associated with modernity, including faith in human progress and in liberalism. Some forces were determined to destroy Catholicism.

Lamennais was a prominent champion of ultramontanism, a dependence on the authority of the pope and the faithful acceptance of God as the source of truth. In the face of extreme liberalism, he was a traditional conservative. Lamennais, explains Kohler, opposes "self-sovereignty and the sufficiency of one's own reasoning." However, in contrast to rigid, reactionary traditionalists who adopt a state-of-siege posture, Lamennais is so confident in the need for God and the truth of the papacy that he advocates a dialogue between faith and reason, a sophisticated openness to modernity.

The Church has no need to be intertwined with monarchies and other governments, says Lamennais. Instead, the church is at its best when it is involved in real society, which, writes Kohler, makes the laity "indispensable collaborators in any revitalization... Earlier than perhaps anyone else, he understood that the hour of the laity truly had struck."

Along with a lay-centered church, Lamennais pushes for pluralism, multiculturalism, science and religion dialogue, attention to the social question, the need for organizing among the poor, labor unions, women's suffrage and more.

Lamennais started the first daily Catholic newspaper, *The Future*. Its position on church-state separation was opposed by bishops and Lamennais' style of openness was condemned by Pope Gregory XVI.

Kohler concludes with some *what ifs?* In any case, knowing about Lamennais and other influences in church history puts Vatican II "into perspective" and belies the notion that John XXIII was impetuous and that Vatican II came out of nowhere.

Taking the Initiative

Against Predators

From 1776 until 1978 states capped interest at 6% up to 12%, with some exceptions. There were no legal payday loan stores, no ballooning credit card rates, no adjustable mortgages, no tax return schemes and the like. Recalling longstanding U.S. practices and venerable religious teaching, Metro Industrial Areas Foundation (85-18 61st Rd., Rego Park, NY 11374; www.10percentisenough.org) launches a national anti-usury campaign, specifically a 10% cap on interest rates.

The current loan predicament follows a 1978 Supreme Court decision by which a national bank can charter in one of two states without caps and thereafter can operate without caps in the other 49 states, IAF explains. A 1980 Congressional act dispenses savings banks and other financial companies from usury limits. The purpose of financial business thus changes. Instead of providing credit to homeowners, manufacturers and service companies, their purpose is "making more money itself," regardless of tangible goods and real services.

IAF is a network of community organizations. It has a 70-year history of waging successful campaigns, premised on its painstaking cultivation of one-to-one relationships within parishes and other mediating institutions.

Tom Geoghegan, longtime friend of our National Center for the Laity and one of today's prophets, decries the recent abolition of those usury laws. In *See You in Court* (New Press

[2007], 38 Greene St., New York, NY 10013; \$17.95), he explains how deregulation allows banks to charge 24%, 35% and more on credit cards. Such exorbitant interest used to be the purview of collectors with brass knuckles. But now a college student who racks up \$1,000 on a credit card and forgets about it may automatically owe \$7,000.

"[U]sury law is the law of civilization," Geoghegan writes. "It is as old as the Code of Hammurabi... Abolishing usury law's limits on interest rates to cardinal numbers like 5% or 6% had devastating impact on our economy and caused in part the latest economic turmoil."

Geoghegan argues that no one in the U.S. will invest in industry when they can get 25% investing in finance companies that issue credit cards. As a consequence, all investment capital has flowed away from industry and the jobs it once offered.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) could have predicted it. To take usury is unjust in itself, he writes, because this is to sell what does not exist and this evidently leads to inequality. While the church gradually loosened total prohibition on charging interest, no authority exists to justify the rapacious interest rates of today. Geoghegan paints a picture of his legal clients who are caught in credit card and payday loan trouble. Debts that last a lifetime transform people from creditors to indentured servants, stripping them of economic power and imperiling their sense of citizenship, Geoghegan argues. Aquinas certainly agrees.

Taking the Initiative For Marriage

An entire industry promotes weddings and the romance of marriage, including a TV program entirely devoted to following one young woman after another as she chooses a wedding dress. Yet people in the U.S. step into and out of romantic relationships faster and more frequently than in any other developed country, documents Andrew Cherlin in *The Marriage-Go-Round* (Alfred Knopf [2009], 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; \$25.95).

To give one telling fact: Even though the cohabitation rate is higher in parts of Europe, a child in the U.S. is less likely to grow up with both birth parents because marriage and cohabitation are more fragile here. About 8% of children under 15 in the U.S. sequentially have

three men in the home; another 21% see two men come and go.

Cherlin explains the paradox of attraction to marriage and romance amid high instability in relationships. There are two models at play. People "draw upon both a cultural model of marriage and a cultural model of individualism."

The *marriage model*, very pronounced in the U.S., leads people to believe their own marriage will last; to think their own family is solid; to consider adultery wrong in their own relationship. The *individualism model* imparts a primary obligation to a sense of self; prizes choices and emotional satisfaction; views success in individual terms. The two messages can sometimes coexist, but overall people in the U.S. absorb the notion that partnerships are voluntary and can be ended for the sake of self-fulfillment.

Usually, says Cherlin, people "may not realize they are combining two inconsistent models." Both models "spin the merry-go-round."

Cherlin includes a few comments about religion. Of course, churches uphold marriage. But in the U.S. they also embrace "the cultural model of individualism" in their presentation of teachings, in worship and more.

Arlie Hochschild, commenting on Cherlin and the topic of family life, mentions the *slow food movement*. Maybe it is time for slow parenting, she suggests. "Maybe we would be ready to try slow love and marriage... The culprit is not the absence of family values, I believe, but a continual state of unconscious immersion in a market turnover culture." (*N.Y. Times Book Review*, 10/18/09)

Taking the Initiative For Local Economy

INITIATIVES regularly reports on efforts to support local economies—farmers markets and the like. Alternative local currency is another way to make local shopping routine.

The strategy, common in the early 1900s, is gaining popularity. A non-profit entity prints high quality bills (using a local printer), devises a distribution process and solicits businesses that will honor the currency. It's legal as long as no coins are minted and wages paid in alternative bills are taxable. (*Time*, 7/13/09)

BerkShares (PO Box 125, Great Barrington, MA 01230; www.berkshares.org)

has a relationship with five local banks, including branch offices. Anyone can give the bank \$95 U.S. currency and receive \$100 in colorful BerkShares. In turn, 360 businesses along U.S. Route Seven through the Berkshires region accept the new money at face value. Out-of-state businesses operating in the region only accept U.S. cash or standard credit cards. The banks will redeem BerkShares for U.S. currency at a 95% rate. Over time the program stimulates local business and creates some jobs.

Ithaca Hours (PO Box 6731, Ithaca, NY 14851; www.ithacahours.org) is the oldest plan in the U.S. It is so widely used that it has a reserve, allowing Ithaca Hours to make no-interest loans to expanding businesses and even \$300 grants to a few non-profits. Ithaca Hours are now accepted for bus fare—a unique pairing of an alternative currency and a government entity.

RiverHours (993 Tucker Rd. #A, Hood River, OR 97031; www.riverhours.org) are accepted at 80 businesses along the Columbia River. There is a nominal membership fee for businesses. (*A Matter of Spirit* [Summer/09], 1216 NE 65th St., Seattle, WA 98115)

E.F. Schumacher Society (140 Jug End Rd., Great Barr, MA 01230; www.smallisbeautiful.org) maintains a directory of and provides resources about alternative currency in the U.S.

Pope Benedict XVI mentions other strategies for local wealth, including credit unions, micro-financing and even pawnshops in his encyclical *Charity in Truth* (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$6). (He probably has in mind a quaint European village pawnshop, not the U.S. type.)

Taking the Initiative

In the Classroom

There are several thriving programs for recently graduated Catholic young adults that include a year of service with community living. Some are sponsored by religious orders, some by dioceses or other entities. Other denominations sponsor similar programs.

Alliance for Catholic Education (154 IEI Bldg., Notre Dame, IN 46556; www.ace.nd.edu) adapted the concept for young adults interested in a teaching career, starting with a stint in a Catholic grammar school.

United Consortium for Catholic Education (c/o LU Choice, 820 N. Michigan

Ave. #1100, Chicago, IL 60611; www.ucceproclaimers.org) expands things. A recent grad volunteers for two years at a UCCE-identified grammar school. The young adult lives with a few other volunteer teachers and participates in spiritual formation. In return the young adult gets \$1,000 monthly stipend plus a full scholarship to a graduate-level education program at one of 15 Catholic universities. More than 95% of the UCCE participants complete the program and 80% continue teaching in a Catholic school thereafter. (*Our Sunday Visitor* [10/18/09], 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750)

Teach for America (315 W. 36th St. #700, New York, NY 10018; www.teachforamerica.org) is the secular counterpart. The length of service and the stipend are different than in UCCE. The formation component is obviously not religious-based. Teach for America is so popular, writes Megan Greenwell, that its acceptance rate is only 15%. (*Washington Post Weekly*, 12/21/08)

Donna Foote reports on the program in *Relentless Pursuit: A Year in the Trenches with Teach for America* (Alfred Knopf [2008], 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019; \$24.95).

Taking the Initiative

For Part-Time Teachers

College courses are increasingly taught by adjunct faculty, now exceeding the majority of credit hours in many schools. Administrators coping with a tight budget turn to adjuncts because their pay-per-course is much lower, they receive few benefits and they are easier to dismiss.

New Faculty Majority (287 Castle Blvd., Akron, OH 44313; www.newfacultymajority.org) is a free membership group that educates people about adjunct working conditions. It also tracks cases and trends in colleges and lobbies boards or agencies. NFM is not a union, but it is in contact with those unions that include adjuncts. (*Chronicle of Higher Education* [9/18/09], 1255 23rd St. NW #700, Washington, DC 20037)

It is difficult to establish solidarity among adjuncts. On campus less than their full-time colleagues, they often teach at less desirable times and at a school's remote sites. They may have courses at two or more schools. There is no financial incentive for them to attend meetings or

functions. Few adjuncts have time to organize local or national support networks.

Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (701 N. Randolph St., Champaign, IL 61820; www.chicagocoabal.org) is therefore all the more remarkable. Led by busy part-time teachers, it is the best-known resource for information and conferences regarding adjuncts and their work situation.

Adjuncts are “*migrant workers* in the field of academia,” writes Kevin Clarke, and they constitute “a new class of overeducated poor... This category of exploited worker [is] apparent in the extra-hallowed halls of U.S. Catholic universities.”

Invoking Catholic doctrine, some full-time teachers at Marquette University are lobbying for their school to extend health benefits to adjuncts. More information: Daniel McGuire (Marquette University, PO Box 1881 # Coughlin 215, Milwaukee, WI 53201). (*U.S. Catholic* [5/09], 205 W. Monroe St., Chicago, IL 60606)

The definition of *exploitation* is separate from or “precedes” good-hearted intentions of an employer or an employee, says the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$20). That is, an administrator may offer an insufficient salary for the sake of budget constraints and tuition affordability. A part-time teacher might accept the salary in devotion to his or her vocation, among other reasons. This “simple agreement” is not sufficient to establish justice and dismiss sinful exploitation.

Taking the Initiative

Among Farm Workers

In the past four years the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (PO Box 603, Immokalee, FL 34143; www.ciw-online.org) has, one by one, won agreements from major fast food chains, including Taco Bell and lately Burger King. Farm workers who harvest fruit and vegetables that eventually become ingredients at restaurants get an additional penny-per-pound. That is, the workers are paid about 82 cents for a bucket of tomatoes or apples. CIW got to the bargaining table because INITIATIVES’ readers and other consumers boycotted in succession each restaurant chain. The current boycott is against Chipolte Mexican Grill.

The story, however, is complicated and the victory is fleeting. The restaurants don’t own the fields; the harvesters are not their employees. The fields are owned by growers, of which there are many. The growers, in turn, have contracts with various restaurants. Even though the restaurants agree to penny-per-pound, the Florida Tomato Growers Exchange (800 Trafalgar Ct. #300, Maitland, FL 32751; www.floridatomatogrowers.org) levies a \$100,000 fine against any grower who abides by the restaurant agreement. And so, the farm workers never received increased wages.

CIW recently met with one grower, East Coast Growers and Packers (5050 State Rd. #60W, Mulberry, FL 33860; www.kingschoice.com). CIW introduced a question about faith into the meeting. Batista Madonia, whose parents started East Coast in Pennsylvania 50 years ago, took the question seriously: “Even when you’re in a business meeting and a comment like that comes to you, you have to put your business thoughts aside for a minute...What we do in business is a very small part of what we do in life.” Madonia then quit the Growers Exchange. His company no longer enjoys the lobbying power and other benefits of the Growers Exchange. “Yet we’ll have all the power of the people and being on the right side of doing business,” Madonia concludes. (*Florida Catholic*, 10/6/09)

The boycott tactic, INITIATIVES’ readers are reminded, obligates its practitioners to patronize the opponent, after an agreement is reached. In this case it means eating at those restaurants that comply with penny-per-pound increase, especially those that purchase from East Coast Growers.

Taking the Initiative

For Citizenship

The current scandalous behavior of one community organization network clouds others; just as the scandalous behavior of one church clouds other churches or one business clouds other businesses. When characterized by accountability and reflection, however, high quality community organizations can, in the words of Ed Chambers, serve as “experimental universities” that teach people how to relate to one another in new ways and combine their power for the common good.

Chambers, of the Industrial Areas Foundation (220 W. Kinzie St. #500, Chicago,

IL 60610; www.industrialareasfoundation.org), explains principles of citizen organization in his “Mulling on Action in the World-As-It-Is” pamphlets. They include *The Body Trumps the Brain*, *The Power of Relational Action*, and *Being Triggers Action* (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$4.25 each).

Chambers has been with IAF since 1958, first as a 26-year-old organizer in Lackawana, NY, then in Chicago and Rochester. He set up the IAF Training Institute in 1969 and became director in 1972.

One of Chambers most recent protégés is Stephen Noble Smith, whom Chambers hired in 2003 to organize Public Action for Change Today (220 W. Kinzie St. #500, Chicago, IL 60610), an organization specifically aimed at and run by young adults. Smith’s first book, *Stoking the Fire of Democracy: Our Generation’s Introduction to Grassroots Organizing*, (ACTA Publications [2009], 5559 W. Howard St., Skokie, IL 60077; \$19.95) prods activist students and young adults to think beyond immediate issues and one-shot protests.

Mike Miller, who is over 40 years older than Smith, organized for IAF from 1966-1968. He moved to San Francisco to form the Mission Coalition Organization from 1968-1971. Since then Miller directs Organize Training Center (422 Vicksburg St., San Francisco, CA 94114; www.organizetrainingcenter.org). His book, *A Community Organizer’s Tale: People and Power in San Francisco* (Heyday Books [2009], PO Box 9145 Berkeley, CA 94709; \$21.95), reflects on the role of mediating institutions in preventing urban development from displacing people and their role in preventing government programs from creating dependency. Miller too sees community organization as a school, not just a whirlwind of rallies and protests. “Community organization,” he writes, “is grounded in the capacity of everyday people to democratically participate as co-creators of civic life, not merely as consumers who occasionally choose among competing candidates.”

Another new book on community organization is *After America’s Midlife Crisis* by Michael Gecan (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$12).

Gecan, one of the directors of Metro IAF (85-18 61st Rd., Rego Park, NY 11374), got his start in the Contract Buyers League in Chicago, which was begun by Msgr. Jack Egan (1916-2001). The story of CBL is poignantly told in *Family Properties* by Beryl Satter

(Metropolitan Books [2009], 175 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10010; \$30).

After America’s Midlife Crisis is an analysis of the state of U.S. democracy, particularly in Great Lakes and Atlantic coast cities and their exurbs, and is a prescription for what to do next. Gecan also has a useful 50-page booklet overlaying the principles of community organizing on the internal development of churches and mosques, titled *Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal* (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$4.25).

The best book on religious institutions and organizing is *Activism That Makes Sense: Congregations and Community Organization* by Greg Pierce (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$9).

The notion of public life as a school and the understanding of politics as more than electioneering goes back to Aristotle. Politics for Aristotle is not merely about “protecting property or promoting economic prosperity” or even satisfying “the preferences of the majority,” explains Michael Sandel in *Justice: What’s the Right Thing To Do?* (Farrar, Straus [2009], 18 W. 18th St., New York, NY 10011; \$25). Politics is the process of forming good citizens and cultivating virtue. “It’s about learning how to live a good life.” That’s why, for Aristotle the highest public honors should go to those who are best at identifying the common good, to the true masters of politics.

In these days the true masters of politics include the highly reflective organizers associated with IAF and other reputable networks.

Taking the Initiative

Assisting the Unemployed

For 40 years WEORC (1241 Anvil Ct., Addison, IL 60101; www.weorc.blogspot.com) has helped ex-priests transition from Church employment to other employment. Its newsletter, *The Word from WEORC* (10/09), has a “Job Search Resources” insert listing six support groups in the Chicago area and 44 cyber-resources of benefit to anyone who is unemployed.

Keeping the Faith Ministry for the Unemployed (Amy Voll, St. John Parish, 8 Wickford Way, Fairport, NY 14450) is a new support group that rotates among eight suburban parishes. Its leaders include people with wide

management experience. The group partners with other resource organizations for the unemployed. (*Catholic Courier*, 10/09)

110+ Years

Of Catholic Social Thought

Some critics of one or another health care proposal bolster their objection by invoking the Catholic *principle of subsidiarity*.

Subsidiarity says a decision should be made as close as possible to those affected by the decision and that services should be delivered by those institutions closest to the beneficiaries. This principle is useful when thinking about health care reform and other social policies. Cautions are in order, however.

Sincere and well-informed Catholics can reach differing conclusions on many specific public policy proposals. It is wrong to invoke a principle like subsidiarity in a fundamentalist way and to label someone as *un-Catholic* who disagrees with a specific policy.

“Nothing in Catholic social teachings, including the idea of subsidiarity, requires that U.S. health care be addressed with a particular policy approach,” says Stephen Schneck (Life Cycle Institute, 620 Michigan Ave. NE, Washington, DC 20064; www.lifecycle.cua.edu). (*Our Sunday Visitor* [10/11/09], 200 Noll Plaza, Huntington, IN 46750 & *Human Rights for Workers* [10/8/09], www.humanrightsforworkers.blogspot.com)

Further, subsidiarity in itself is not anti-government. As Msgr. George Higgins (1916-2002) often said: Subsidiarity cannot “without a cartload of qualifications” be paired with the attitude that *government is best which governs least*.

“The integrated economy of the present day does not make the role of states redundant, but rather it commits governments to greater collaboration with one another,” says Pope Benedict XVI in *Charity in Truth* (National Center for the Laity, PO Box 291102, Chicago, IL 60629; \$6). “Both wisdom and prudence suggest not being too precipitous in declaring the demise of the state. In terms of the resolution of the present [economic] crisis, the state’s role seems destined to grow, as it regains many of its competences.”

Finally, just as with Scripture passages, one moral principle is only enhanced as it is considered among other moral principles and diminished when it is pulled apart in

fundamentalist fashion. Again, Benedict XVI: “The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism while the latter without the former gives way to social assistance that is demeaning to those in need.”

