Let's Occupy Our Minds With New Possibilities

by Fr. John S. Rausch

When the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) folks established their encampment in New York's Zuccotti Park last September, they also seized a place in the national debate by making questions of justice and fairness part of the political debate. Calling themselves "the 99 percent," they focused the nation's attention on wealth inequality that brings an exaggerated amount of political power to the top "1 percent." While the agenda from main-stream media discussed the deficit crisis, deregulation and smaller government, the OWS folks changed the conversation to jobs, mortgage help and personal debt relief.

Vatican officials, like Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, say the basic sentiment behind the OWS protests is consistent with Catholic social teachings. Indeed, that teaching offers moral principles for dealing with the economic crisis created by the greed and indifference of the few. Human dignity, distributive justice and subsidiarity remind us that the economy must serve people, that individuals have a right to dignified employment and that everyone has a right to participate in the economic life of society.

While the richness of Catholic social thought uses weighty philosophical arguments to show that property and profits must benefit the common good and not just the privileged, the message from the simple parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31) seems to cut through all the ideology and economic reasoning that keep a broken system in place. The sin of the Rich Man was not siccing the dogs on Lazarus, the beggar at his gate, or calling the police to evict him. The Rich Man's sin was, rather, not recognizing Lazarus as a brother who had a claim on him in the spirit of solidarity and community! Whatever the Rich Man's reasoning, he could not deny that Lazarus was not his agenda.

The OWS protests are sparking reflections in people of faith about economic inequality and the rhetoric that maintains the status quo. For example, some politicians argue against raising taxes on the very rich because they are the so-called job creators. But, are they? Another myth says that only the marketplace creates jobs, not the government. Is that true? A third myth claims that lower taxes is the best way to stimulate the economy. What do the data show?

While these economic statements need more precision, some trends are clear enough. Currently, after-tax corporate profits stand at an all-time high, but businesses are not creating jobs. Corporations and the rich become job creators when demand for goods and services grows and they see potential customers. Demand appears key to economic recovery.

To increase demand means getting spending money into the hands of more people. In the Great Depression, Roosevelt's Civil Works Administration created jobs for 4 million people in two months by directly hiring unemployed people to do ordinary tasks to benefit local communities.

Giving tax breaks to corporations and wealthy individuals may over time create jobs, but that is not guaranteed. The Clinton Administration raised taxes in 1993 and the economy boomed. The Bush Administration lowered taxes in 2001 and 2003 and the economy expanded sluggishly. What's behind the rhetoric?

Time to reread the Rich Man and Lazarus. The second part of the parable reveals the real agenda of the Rich Man. After death he still lacks compassion for the poor, because his priority rests with warning his five brothers "lest they too come to this place of torment." Like the OWS protests, the parable reveals the chasm between the vulnerable and those of privilege.