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Commentary on *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All,* the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Social Statement on Economic Life

Adopted in August of 1999, the ELCA's general social statement on economic life reflects the economic optimism of the 1990's and the apparent triumph of Capitalism and its governing appendage, neo-liberal democracy. On the one hand, "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" is a straightforward affirmation, rooted in Scripture and Luther's teaching on the Commandments in the Large Catechism, that the economy should exist for the good of all, both as individuals and a collective. Everyone should have sufficient access to the social goods they need in a vocational livelihood that is sustainable for the environment and human society. On the other hand, this document, a product of a different time, fails to fully confront evils that human reason, itself a gift of God, must address.

Supported theologically on the basis of the 10 Commandments and Luther's commentary of those commandments in the Large Catechism, *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* proceeds from the command that we are to have no other gods besides the Lord, Our God, including money and wealth. "The First Commandment is clear: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Or as Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24c, Luke 16:13)" (SSLI, p.2). Citing Luther's commentary on the commandments in the Large Catechism (LC, 430-431), the social statement affirms that:

> When we pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread," we place ourselves in tension with economic assumptions of our society. Rather than being self-sufficient, we need and depend on what God gives or provides through people, practices, and systems. "Daily bread" is not earned by efforts of individuals alone, but is made possible through a variety of relationships and institutions" (SSLI, p.4)

Citing Luther's commentary of the later commandments, specifically commandments 5, 7, and 9 and the numerous admonitions in Scripture to care for the poor and to reject greed, the case that all should

have access to society's goods in a sustainable way through vocational work is relatively straightforward work of Biblical exegesis and historical theology.

This vision for the world mirroring the kingdom of God is clearly expressed when the statement says:

> The cross of Christ challenges Christians to view [the economy] through the experience of those of us who are impoverished, suffering, broken, betrayed, left out, without hope. Through those who are "despised" and "held of no account" (Isaiah 53:3) we see the crucified Christ (Matthew 25:31-46), through whom God's righteousness and justice are revealed. The power of God's suffering, self-giving love transforms and challenges the Church to stand with all who are overlooked for the sake of economic progress or greed. Confession of faith ought to flow into acts of justice for the sake of the most vulnerable. (SSLA, p.4-5)

The end goal of an economic system for Lutherans is not in dispute. The kingdom of God on earth includes that all are fed and housed and resources are allocated justly. The divisive issue facing Lutheranism and any Christian seeking the kingdom of God in the economic sphere is that the various priorities expressed in this social statement are often in tension with one another.

> [Sustainability and sufficiency for everyone] often are in tension with one another. What benefits people in one area, sector, or country may harm those elsewhere. What is sufficient in one context is not in another. What is economically sufficient is not necessarily sustainable. There are difficult and complex trade-offs and ambiguities in the dynamic processes of economic life. As believers, we are both impelled by God's promises and confronted with the practical realities of economic life. (SSLA, p.3)

Therefore, in a fallen world, we must weigh various evils and goods against one another in order to discern the most just strategies for acting in public life. Fortunately we are not without guidance regarding how to navigate the tensions inherent in economic life in a fallen world. "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" recommends that preferential concern for the poor can help us prioritize incompatible means and goals (SSLA, p.4-7). This preferential treatment for the poor recognizes that economic change affects the poor most acutely and that scripture time and again declares that we are to understand God's promises in light of the most marginalized and vulnerable.

While recognizing that there are tensions when prioritizing values in economic planning, the social statement does not go so far as to outline a theory of social power structures. Because it does not

present a political philosophy of the power structures that make up our economic system, the statement cannot serve as a guide for specific economic change. In other words, there is no basis given for how to reason from principles to outcomes that instantiate those principles. While this social statement provides a compelling picture of what our economic life should ideally look like, there is little to indicate what actions a Christian community ought to take to make this vision a reality in a systematic way. Because of this, I claim that there is no overarching political philosophy, no ontology of power, and therefore no explanation of how current unjust conditions arise. This leaves ultimately unaddressed how economic power structures might be transformed into something more in keeping with the reign of God in Christ.

This lack of an overarching political ontology or metaphysics parallels another area of Lutheran theology where metaphysics is avoided and rejected. Lutheran theology of the sacraments affirms that the Bread and Wine are Jesus's body and blood and yet rejected is:

> Papistic transubstantiation, according to which it is taught that the bread and wine which have been concentrated or blessed in the Holy Supper lose their substance and essence completely and are transformed into the substance of Christ's body and blood, so that only the mere form of bread and wine or the *accidentia sine subiecto* remain. They assert that under this form of the bread (which they allege, is no longer bread but has lost its natural substance) the body of Christ remains present, even apart from the administration of the supper. (*Formula of Concord*, Solid Declaration VII, 108)

Indeed, Lutheran sacramental theology, with its emphasis on the command of God and a literal understanding of Jesus's words in the Gospels, does not commit the faithful to any metaphysical interpretation of communion. Bread remains bread. Jesus's body is truly eaten, and the mystery of how this occurs is not obscured by trying to find a sufficient philosophical explanation or ontological description.

The benefits of this approach to the theology of the sacraments are many. With the focus remaining on God's command and promise, grace remains at the forefront instead of human activity or merit. When God's promise and command are sufficient for Jesus's presence in bread, then God's

promise and command are more easily seen as sufficient in all areas pertaining to our salvation. By remaining agnostic as to how this happens at an ontological level, Lutheran theology can be properly catholic in that all who accept the command and promise of Christ are admitted to the table. The Sacraments remain a mystery. It is not necessary for one to understand how the sacraments work for God's grace to be effective through them. It is important that understanding not be necessary for God to work through the sacraments because that would make a condition and a work out of correct understanding, when the proper emphasis of the Sacraments is the grace of God.

There are benefits to a metaphysical agnosticism for the church's understanding of our economic life as well. First, it allows the Lutheranism to be a big tent church, not excluding anyone for their political ideology. Certainly a theology of grace welcomes people to the font and table regardless of their political affiliation or worldview. Additionally, maintaining a big tent in this regard may be pragmatically preferable because it keeps a wide variety of methods and ideas in collaboration with one another in our attempts to make economic life more equitable and just for all.

Recognizing these benefits of rejecting political ontology in its official statements, I want to push back against the ELCA's lack of a robust political ontology. Rejecting metaphysics is good theology when it comes to the sacraments, but not when it comes to our economic life. In terms of our salvation and God's work through the sacraments, human action is insufficient and God's is everything. In our economic life, human reason and choice matter a great deal.

There is a Confessional basis for this distinction for the Lutheran. In the Augsburg Confession, Article XVIII, "Concerning free will they teach that the human will has some freedom for producing civil righteousness and for choosing things subject to reason…" (Augsburg Confession, XVIII, Latin). Since God has ordained it that in our civil life, including our economic life, human reason makes a difference, it is important that we understand how our economic systems are structured so that our individual and collective choices can be oriented toward their God-ordained good.

It might be argued that the Lutheran church is not in the business of doing political philosophy. However, if the church is serious about orienting itself toward "Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" then the church must put reason to use to understand how this may be brought about, and this because God has created a world where our actions matter for how the goods of vocation and sustenance are distributed.

"Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All" shows its limits in this regard in its focus on big-picture goals and small steps toward equity while avoiding the kind of philosophical analysis of power structures that could give rise to collective solutions. As such, I assume it is a product of its time, the end of the Millennium, during a period of unrivaled economic optimism, at least in the so-called developed world. Nevertheless, there are several hints in this social statement that point toward a bolder, committed vision of our economic life together.

Despite naming our economic system with the euphemistic designation "market-based economy," the social statement remains ambivalent about the "market-based economy's" apparent successes and prospect for lasting prosperity for all.

> The current market-based economy does that to an amazing degree; many are prospering as never before. At the same time, others continue to lack what they need for basic subsistence… This economic globalization has brought new kinds of businesses, opportunities, and a better life for many. It also has resulted in increasing misery for others. (SSLA, p.1)

This ambivalence about global capitalism leads to at least one structural solution when it emphasizes the need for workers to bargain collectively. While not outright critique of global capitalism, this points toward a possible criticism of economies based on profit motive and endless growth that only enrich the ruling class. This also points to models of economic power that prioritize worker autonomy and dignity and operate according to other values than maximizing profit and accumulating wealth.

Furthermore, there is the recognition that the affluence of the United States is in conflict with the Gospel when it is contrasted with a world where many places experience equally dramatic scarcity:

> Because most of us in the United States have far more than we need, we can easily fall into bondage to what we have. We then become like the young man Jesus encountered, whose bondage to his possessions kept him from following Jesus (Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-25). (p.13)

Over-consumption and affluence to the level of stark inequality have their sources in concrete power structures. As the church reassesses its understanding of its relationship to our collective economic life, understanding the nature of those power structures is necessary for informing what collective action we as a church might take. This is risky since it makes the church "political" in a broad sense and might threaten its big tent ideal. This is a risk worth taking since human reason has been tasked with properly orienting our civic life. As Christians, we are called to orient that life toward the good of all with preference toward the poor and marginalized.

At the center of all of this is the fact that the ELCA, as an American church body of some affluence, has to contend with the tension of being a church made up of both the extremely wealthy and the very poor. This tension finds various solutions in Scripture, both in the New Testament and the Hebrew Scriptures. These solutions are radical and would require a complete reorientation of our collective economic life.