

## Frank Hanna: Christian Charity and the Demands of Economic Justice

*Frank Hanna, a longtime friend of the Napa Institute and extraordinary Catholic benefactor, gave an inspiring talk at our Summer Conference. We'd like to share it with you:*

I want to start with a couple of words from *Lumen Gentium*, a document produced from Vatican II. If you have not read it, I recommend it. It is a short document written in a fashion that laypeople like me can understand it.

Part of it reads:

“Now the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where **only through them** can it become the salt of the earth. Thus every layman, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a **witness** and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself ‘according to **the measure of Christ's bestowal.**’”

“Each individual layman must stand before the world as a **witness** to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God. All the laity as a community and **each one** according to his ability must nourish the world with spiritual fruits. In a word, ‘Christians must be to the world what the soul is to the body.’”

I have been involved with the Napa Institute from the beginning. And this is a lot of what it's about – being to the world what the soul is to the body.

So since we are in this world, I want us to talk about something with which we are confronted almost every day. **Profit**, and what we ought to do with it.

“For what does it profiteth a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?”  
(Matt 16:26)

Obviously, Christ was aware of the concept of profit, and wary of the way in which it might be gained. But was He against profit itself, or instead being cautionary about how we might obtain it?

And maybe, more provocatively, was he in **favor** of man seeking profit, as a means by which the Common Good, and economic justice, might be obtained?

We all know that he spoke approvingly of the servant who took the talents given to him by the master and multiplied them, and we also know that he disapproved of the man who buried his treasure, rather than increase it. It makes you wonder: **Did Jesus want us to seek profit?**

The concept of profit is not that complicated. We tend to think of profit as something only tied to money, but I think Jesus meant it more broadly than that. That's because **profit is the benefit that results from a mixture of God's Providence and the work done by a human being.** The exact mixture of Providence and work varies during our lives.

Notably, and we see this in other mammals, some animals thrive more than others. And sometimes this inequality of thriving is based on the amount of work done, but sometimes it **just is**. Some animals thrive more than others. Even among the animals, there is inequality of profit.

Human beings have a somewhat interesting characteristic not shared by animals in that many of them keep working and end up providing more than they absolutely need for survival. And this additional work (and innate ability) creates even more inequality between individual humans.

**Our biological reality is replete with inequality.**

Not every star has an equal number of planets. Not every planet can sustain life. Out of millions of sperm, only one made me, and only one made you. The rest failed. One sperm's work created a lot more wealth than all the others combined. Not every sperm achieved the same vitality.

Not everyone can write an opera like Mozart, or a symphony like Beethoven. Not everyone can paint a chapel like Michelangelo.

So we see that in something as broad as our universe, and something as intimate as brothers and sisters of the same parents, there is a plenitude of inequality throughout the world that God gave us. We might even go so far as to say that God gave us inequality.

But what should that mean for us?

Is inequality a sin, a result of our fallenness, **or a defining characteristic of our world as God designed it?**

In our society today, when we hear "inequality," we typically think of it as something for which there must be a remedy. And if inequality is something to be remedied – a disease if you will – then any cause of that disease (like profit), should be eliminated to prevent the disease, or at least restricted and redistributed.

Cain did not like the fact that Abel received an unequal measure of God's favor. It offended Cain's own perception of justice. It was an offense for which he felt murder was justified – not unlike so many socialist warriors for justice. In the pursuit of equality, almost every type of violence has been committed since the Garden of Eden.

We human beings seem **to go crazy over inequality!** We cannot stand the idea that someone else may be getting more than us – it's not fair! How many times do we hear this said among brothers and sisters? And yet, even this reaction is based, to some degree, in biology. Biologically, when a litter of kittens is born, there may be more kittens than the mother can feed. And so the kittens struggle against one another for food from their mother. And sometimes, one of them dies for lack of nourishment, or goes through the rest of life as the "runt of the litter."

But what if – **WHAT IF**, the inequality is a feature of the common good, and not a bug? That's a phrase from software programming? The user of the software finds something within the program that seems to not be working well and he calls attention to the supposed bug. The programmer steps up and says, "You don't understand. That is not a bug in the program. It is a **feature of the program**. The program works that way for a greater good that cannot be achieved were it not there..

As you might have guessed, that is how I want us to think about profit, and the inequality of its distribution. It is not a bug in the system, but a feature, as designed by God, for some reasons we understand and other reasons which may remain a mystery.

God favored Abel over Cain.

God favored Abraham to make him the father of nations.

God favored Joseph, and his brothers resented the inequality of it all.

God favored John the Baptist, his own cousin.

God favored Mary.

And God gave Mozart the talent of an angel, and I struggle to play the violin.

These things are called mysteries because we don't understand them. But regardless of whether we understand these mysteries, we still must live with them, and even embrace them.

Now let's be clear. I think God wants us to seek profit, for ourselves and for others, but I am not here today as an apologist for capitalism.

I see, experience, and live among many examples of terrible greed and selfishness in the commercial world in which I am engaged. I see lying, cheating, materialism, consumerism, shallowness, insincerity – and I could go on and on.

But I have also seen that those sins are not unique to market economies, driven by profit. In fact, they are not even unique to the commercial world. I have witnessed almost all of these sins in every environment in which I have found myself, including the Church.

I do not think that the market economy, and the pursuit of profit, are without fault. I think they are **teeming** with fault. But as I have mentioned, the **world** is teeming with fault. Because **human nature** is teeming with fault.

We are not here to imagine that sin no longer existed. We are here to ask ourselves, “Given that we live in this fallen world in which the Lord has placed us, how might we organize our efforts in such a way that we might all grow closer to God and to one another in a relationship of love?” Of **caritas**. That’s actually the whole purpose of our time here.

I believe that if we all had equal ability, we would not have as much need for one another, and that inequality is thus a **feature** of the world God gave us, and not a bug, or an error. My thinking is similar to how we think of male and female – their human dignity is equal in God’s eyes, but their abilities are unequal, though complementary.

Remember *Lumen Gentium*. We are to **witness** according to the measure by which Christ **bestowed**.

And so obviously, those who are especially blessed must – they simply must – be mindful of how they might share those blessings. Profit is a good thing to seek when we are continually mindful of how it might be **shared**, rather than **preserved**.

But this basic truth is denied by those reject the world that God established and want to make the world into something else. Take Karl Marx. He was an ideologue who sought to remake our human society in a way that comported with his version of how the world **should be**, rather than recognize the world as God established it.

Marx **denied** the Logos as the reason for who we are. He **denied** human nature. He saw alienation of the worker from his work, rather than from God, as the chief societal problem.

Marx was a utopian—one of many throughout history. But **St Thomas More** thought differently. He penned a famous essay called “Utopia,” a word that in the Greek actually means “nowhere.” There is nowhere on this earth that is an Eden. Even in Eden, Adam and Eve sought to supplant God’s judgment by determining that, as good as Eden was, God must have been mistaken by forbidding the fruit from one certain tree. They felt they knew better than God how society ought to be organized, and so put him aside to institute their own “intervention” into the economy of Eden.

Nevertheless, we must not gloss over or ignore the human failures within our market economies. We **all now** live in a materialistic, consumerist, Marxist world. We **all** have come to define ourselves by what we consume and control, and by our status within society. **Even** those who ostensibly support a free market.

The non-believers deny human nature in their search for Utopia. The socialists want to intervene in a way that stifles the creation of wealth. That doesn’t help anyone!

But among the believers we see what I think of as an inward turning “**society of the mirror**” where the comfortable gaze at themselves and **curate** and **preserve** their lives. And yes, the selfie is indeed one of our mirrors of curation and preservation. This curation process produces a timid aversion to risk for ourselves and our families. And this sin echoes the servant who buried his talent.

This is a disease I often see among my peers in business.

Having had success in creating profit, they seek to hold on to it more and more tightly. To **preserve** it.

Having convinced themselves that all of their success is due to their own work, **without accounting for Providence**, they seek to **preserve** the advantage Providence has provided to them by seeking **protection of their status** through the avoidance of the risk of generosity and witness.

Stated another way, they **[we!]** store up our grain in silos, and ignore the responsibility God gave us to be good stewards for others.

So what is the answer to this problem in which we find ourselves? The Progressive disavows the market as a tool of alienation by those in power, and many on the free market side seek to hold too tightly to their gains so as to preserve their own wealth.

The Progressive is fundamentally wrong, but too many on the side of the market give an insufficient example of how one should respond to Providential profit. Yes, you may have worked hard for what you now have, but you would not have it without Providence!

This combination of delusion and Godlessness by the non-believers, combined with a fear of uncertainty and a doubt in God by the believers, leads to what we might call the *Prophylactic Economy*.

The socialists want to put up barriers to others having disproportionate success, and the Bourgeoise want to erect barriers to preserve their disproportionate success. Rather than focus on “putting out into the deep,” as Christ commanded, both sides retreat in fear into protective silos. of false community.

The word “existential” is overused in our society, but this *Prophylactic Economy* is possibly the only crisis that is truly existential for the human race. The non-believers **and** believers have all stopped making babies. The ultimate profit of bringing another soul made in the image of God into this world is being forfeited every minute of every day by our modern world’s failure to heed Jesus’ command to “Put out into the deep water.”

The non-believers feel that the power structures are so alienating that there is no use in bringing more life into the world. The believers fear a dilution of their own career and wealth objectives if they have children, and when they **do** have them, they only have one or two in an attempt to focus more closely on the economic success of those few.

We all know that the real answer to the issue of Caritas, Commerce and Philanthropy, all of which are ingredients of our Catholic term, the “Common Good” – the real answer is to seek and love the Lord our God with all of our hearts and minds and souls, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. But the world does not always listen to that. We don’t always listen to that ourselves.

I have been immersed in this commercial world for forty-five years, and here are some economic observations I have noticed during that time:

- Blessings are not distributed equally, and wealth is a form of economic blessing, but financial capital is **just one form** of wealth.

- We see humans disproportionately blessed with the wealth of intelligence, beauty, good parents, stable cultures, physical strength, land, good health, children, education, and the list goes on and on and on, to the point we must conclude that this distribution, in nature here on earth, can never be made equal. Actually, the Soviets tried to equalize it, but the process itself was a full-time endeavor that revealed that the only way to create such equality was to enforce universal impoverishment, which impoverishment included spiritual death.

- Envy is an element of human nature that has plagued humanity since Cain and Abel. Therefore, given that blessings have been unequal forever, society must account for how to manage the envy that arises from that inequality.

- If wealth is not increased, there will be greater envy over its fixed supply.

- If the efforts to increase wealth are promoted, not all envy and not all fighting will be eliminated, but much of the energy that would have been used on such fighting will instead be used on the production of additional wealth.

- This production of wealth will be very messy and difficult to control, but those consequences will pale in comparison to the troubles caused by war with one another.

- Therefore that society which desires the best conditions for the common good will **promote** the pursuit of wealth, or profit.

- It will also promote an embrace of the reality that we all may be blessed more or less, or in different ways, and that such blessings can redound to the benefit of all.

- It should also frown and discourage the expression of envy and resentment.

- It should also vigorously encourage stewardship among those who are blessed, and

- And it should also vigorously frown and discourage vain and immodest displays of status and wealth by those who possess them.

If you look around the free economies of the world, the **laborer** has actually raised his standard of living at a much greater rate of improvement than the **owner**. There was a much larger discrepancy in their respective daily lives 100 years ago than there is today. The laborer has received the lion's share of the economic progress made in free markets.

**In the end, the laborer benefits from the pursuit of profit more than the owner.**

However we have three significant enemies of the economic Common Good. Envy and Timidity and Vanity.

Envy manifests itself in an attempt to stifle the creation of wealth.

Timidity manifests itself in hoarding and preservation by those who have achieved a level of material comfort. This desire to preserve kills their caritas and their stewardship.

And vanity can manifest itself in the affiliations and curated experiences that are collected to maintain status among one's peers.

It is this combination of envy and timidity and vanity that has led to what I earlier referred to as a prophylactic economy – an economy that is not pro-life.

As to the timidity of those in material comfort, they are afraid of risk. They are afraid of losing what they have. They get used to their efforts in life producing success, and they forget the role that Providence had in that success. Accordingly, they become convinced that the only thing that can keep them in their own comfort is their own effort, and they grow increasingly further away from God with their own pride.

I know this – I have been around them, and at times have been guilty of the same thing. I am saddened and grieved at how many successful leaders are seventy years old, have three or four children, and have zero, **zero** grandchildren. They are so wealthy and preserved that their larger family has grown timid about life. So they seek to preserve and curate rather than create.

Unfortunately, we don't have to worry about AI wiping out the human race. We are doing a great job of doing that ourselves through voluntary extinction.

We have to be pro-life, even though it is very, very untidy.



Twelve years ago, if you saw the house my wife and I live in on the day after Christmas, you would say that it could be in a magazine. My wife has wonderful taste, and you would have seen beautiful furnishings and Christmas decorations throughout.

The day after this **past Christmas** our house looked like it had been hit by a tornado. Because unlike twelve years ago, we now have eight grandchildren. Thanks be to God and God willing, our house will never again look like it used to. Something is always broken or shattered, and someone almost always has a cold and needs to have their nose wiped. It is messy, messy, messy. It looks like we are not in control – and that is because we are not, and we are reminded of it every day.

Growth and dynamism and profit is messy in a society. But without it, we become like so many small cities in Europe, which serve as nothing but historical museum settings for tourists to visit, with no baby carriages around, for the Italians and French and Spanish and British are no longer investing in the greatest source of hope and profit in the universe – a baby!

We need to encourage our brothers and sisters to seek profit by giving up their lives for others. If they have a religious vocation, wonderful! If not, they need to pour themselves into seeking marriage and having children. We don't tell them that enough. Often we don't tell them that at all!

I can't imagine that there is a better environment ever created for planting and nurturing the caritas we must have for others than a loving family.

Because otherwise, we increasingly turn inward. We become so timid and unbelieving that we take no **real life-affirming** risks.

In chapter 17 of the Gospel we read:

“Jesus said to his disciples:

‘Similarly, as it was in the days of Lot:  
they were eating, drinking, buying,  
selling, planting, building;

on the day when Lot left Sodom,  
fire and brimstone rained from the sky to destroy them all.  
So it will be on the day the Son of man is revealed.’”

A few verses later Jesus said:  
“Remember the wife of Lot.  
Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it,  
but whoever loses it will save it.”

If you Google “Lot’s wife images,” you will find various depictions of a stone formation in the desert. That is what Jesus warned about. She looked back! She sought to preserve her life! Salt is the most universal preservative, and she became the preservative! A column of salt! She was trying to preserve! She was curating! Maybe stopping to take a selfie.

I got fascinated with this notion of Lot’s wife, and I found she is also referenced in the Book of Wisdom.

In Chapter 10 we read:

“Where as a testimony to its wickedness,  
even yet there remain a smoking desert,  
plants bearing fruit that never ripens,  
and the tomb of a disbelieving soul, a standing pillar of salt.”

When I read some of the obituaries in my local newspaper, I feel as if I am at times reading descriptions of pillars of salt. Some of the obituaries are all about the bucket list of sensations the person accumulated.

They sought to preserve their lives, with the religion of the prophet Zuckerberg, of the land of Facebook, who preaches that we can measure our meaning in life by how many likes we achieve with a life that has been curated. Zuckerberg will help you curate your life, and preserve it.

A curation is a collection, like in a museum, of presentations that are carefully chosen and selected. And even those of us who are not on Facebook are subject to this temptation of the modern world. Descartes said “I think: therefore I am.” Zuckerberg, and our entire culture now say, “I have **been seen**, and therefore I am.” But Jesus said something different.

You see, God planted in us a desire to love Him, and to be loved by Him. But we don’t always **feel** that love. So we seek cheap substitutes. We want to be seen, so that we will know that our lives matter, so that we will know that we are loved. But in seeking to be seen, we curate and preserve our lives, and we turn into pillars of salt.

My hope is that we can all be seekers of profit. Again, **profit is merely the benefit that results from a mixture of God's Providence, and the work done by a human being.**

God wants us to take risks!!! For profit! Risk is a function of uncertainty, and God insists in this world He created on us **having uncertainty**. We cannot store up the manna that falls on the earth. We must pray for our daily bread every day. **That is how He designed it!** He wanted uncertainty.

And living with uncertainty requires faith and courage and humility. That is how we attack this whole psychological and sociological never-ending trap of envy and timidity and vanity – with **faith** and **courage and humility**.

The following were all risk-takers: Abraham, Moses, Noah, Joseph, Mary, Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene. They were all risk-takers for profit. They all had to take a leap of faith. They all had to step out onto the water. **They all had to put out into the deep.**

Thank you very much.