
The Voluntaryist

Whole Number 143

"If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself"

4th Quarter 2009

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S CONFUSED IDEAS ABOUT STEALING

By Mark R. Crovelli

Like virtually all Christian denominations, the Roman Catholic Church derives its moral philosophy in very large part from the Decalogue; that is, the set of ten moral precepts handed down from God to Moses that lay bare the moral responsibilities of man vis-à-vis God and other men. The predominant position of the Decalogue in Catholic moral philosophy was established by Jesus when he was asked "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?":

To the young man who asked this question, Jesus answers first by invoking the necessity to recognize God as the 'One there is who is good,' as the supreme Good and the source of all good. Then Jesus tells him: 'If you would enter life, keep the commandments.' And he cites for his questioner the precepts that concern love of neighbor: 'You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.' Finally Jesus sums up these commandments positively: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [1]

"Once violence is chosen as a method, falsehood becomes principle."

- Attributed to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

As the foundation upon which Catholic morality very heavily rests, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (the official depository of Catholic doctrine) unsurprisingly devotes a large amount of space and energy to explicating each of the Ten Commandments. In this article, I take issue with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church's* treatment of the 7th commandment: "You shall not steal." I argue that, insofar as the *Catechism* can be deemed to be representative of the general Catholic position, the Catholic Church has developed extremely confused, misleading, and often erroneous ideas about stealing. I argue that the Church has sought to justify the taking of property that directly contradicts the straightforward prohibition against stealing delineated in the

Decalogue. I make this argument in the hope that Catholic thinkers and writers will A) take seriously the idea that taking men's justly-earned property without their consent is *always* stealing, and B) stand up for the billions of people who are persecuted by this villainous activity.

The Definition of Stealing in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

In order for Catholics, and Christians in general, to be able to abide by the 7th commandment, it is necessary for them to know, first and foremost, what the definition of stealing is. For, quite obviously, in order to avoid stealing in one's life, one must be able to clearly discriminate between those actions that involve stealing and those actions that do not. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers just such a definition of stealing for Catholics:

The seventh commandment forbids *theft*; that is usurping another's property against the reasonable will of the owner. There is no theft if consent can be presumed or if refusal is contrary to reason and the universal destination of goods. This is the case in obvious and urgent necessity when the only way to provide for immediate, essential needs (food, shelter, clothing...) is to put at one's disposal and use the property of others. [2]

Although it is not my primary intention to dissect and critique this definition of stealing, it should be noted that this definition is extremely ambiguous in a number of respects. It is unclear, for example, whether the phrase "reasonable will" means simply the *rational consent* of the owner, or whether it means what the property owner *ought to will*. Similarly, the relevance of the phrase "universal destination of goods" is unclear, given Pope Leo XIII's clear admonition that this idea cannot be used to deny the right to private property:

The fact that God gave the whole human race the earth to use and enjoy cannot indeed in any manner serve as an objection against private possessions. For God is said to have given the earth to mankind in common, not because He intended indiscriminate ownership of it by all, but because He assigned no part to anyone in ownership, leaving the limits of private possessions to

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The Voluntaryist

Editor: Carl Watner

Subscription Information

Published quarterly by The Voluntaryists, P.O. Box 275, Gramling, SC 29348. A six-issue subscription is \$25. For overseas postage, please add \$5. Single back issues are \$5. Gold and silver readily accepted. Please check the number on your mailing label to see when you should renew. THE VOLUNTARYIST is online at www.voluntaryist.com.

AN OPEN LETTER TO ROBERT RINGER

October 26, 2008

Dear Robert Ringer,

In the very early 1980s, I taught a class at the Free University of Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD) based on your book RESTORING THE AMERICAN DREAM. A couple of years later I helped start THE VOLUNTARYIST. Many of my writings can now be found at www.voluntaryist.com.

I just read a series of articles on www.robertringer.com comprising your "Core Beliefs" and don't think your criticism of purist-libertarians is correct. In "The Price of Freedom" you write that we purists "argue that a totally free society can exist only in an atmosphere of anarchy, but this notion conflicts with the reality that civilization cannot exist without a generally accepted code of conduct." On the contrary, Murray Rothbard in his book FOR A NEW LIBERTY (NY: Macmillan, 1973), pointed out that a libertarian society would have a generally accepted legal code that would be established on the basis of the self-ownership axiom and non-aggression principle. Much of the English common law and law merchant are examples of customary law (as opposed to statutory law). See his discussion of "Law and the Courts," pages 234-243. I believe most free market anarchists would agree with him.

Later, in your same essay you refer to the great paradox of freedom: that in order to prevent some with a distorted sense of freedom from trampling the freedom of others "to one extent or another freedom must be restricted." Your further comments in your essay "The Survival of Western Civilization" lead me to believe that you now support compulsory taxation and coercive government because government is needed to "protect its citizens from aggression, both domestic and foreign." Your justification for government implies an "either-or" alternative: either government protects us from our

enemies or we will have no protection at all. This is false: if there were no government, we would still have self-protection, and, furthermore, the specialization of labor on the free market would result in individuals or organizations that sell protection services. They might not provide perfect protection; but then neither does government.

Furthermore, isn't taxation at odds with the self-ownership axiom and principle of non-aggression? At the very least, those of us who do not want to contribute to the United States Treasury should not be forced to do so. Whatever amount the Treasury can collect voluntarily, the government should use to provide whatever protection that amount will buy. (As an aside, I might ask, what evidence is there that government can do a satisfactory job providing protection? Whenever an organization becomes a coercive, monopolistic service provider, the quality and/or quantity of its service deteriorates. As you know, there is no incentive for such an organization to please its customers because they have no option but to deal with it.)

The issue is not whether we, as self-responsible human beings, need protection or not, any more than the issue is whether we, as self-responsible beings, require food, shelter, and clothing. Of course, we need all of these things. The question that divides us is: HOW are we to provide ourselves with food, shelter, clothing, and protection? Are some of us to be forced to provide these goods and services to others? Are we to be forced to deal with a coercive monopolist? Do these things require 1) a monopoly of coercion over a given territory, and 2) support via compulsory taxation? Or may we rely upon voluntary efforts to furnish ourselves with food, shelter, clothing, and protection? For the most part, we rely upon voluntaryism for our food, shelter and clothing. Just because government does not take charge and provide them for us, does not mean that we must do without them. Why is protection any different?

The problem with our civilization is that it does not see any contradiction between the generally accepted rule against stealing, and taxation. The mark of a truly civilized society should be the "triumph of persuasion over force." I believe our civilization will destroy itself and disappear if it continues to rely on coercion and government protection (so-called). What do you think?

Sincerely,

Carl Watner 

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be fixed by the industry of men and the institutions of peoples. Yet, however the earth may be apportioned among private owners, it does not cease to serve the common interest of all, inasmuch as no living being is sustained except by what the fields bring forth. [3]

My objection to the *Catechism's* treatment of stealing goes much deeper than mere quibbling over phraseology. Indeed, it is my contention that there is an absolute failure to consistently apply the standards for stealing as delineated in this definition throughout the *Catechism*. Specifically, there is an utter failure to apply the standards for stealing *to those people who work for the State*. While the *Catechism* applies the criteria for stealing quite consistently to ordinary people, it does not apply those criteria to presidents, prime ministers, congressmen, police officers, tax collectors, bureaucrats and every other person who lives off of tax money.

It's Not Stealing if the State Does It

When discussing the actions of people who are not employed by the state, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* applies its definition of stealing quite consistently. Thus, we find a condemnation of “*any form of unjustly taking and keeping the property of others*” as a violation of the 7th commandment. [4] Similarly, the *Catechism* admonishes those who have stolen goods to make restitution to the goods' rightful owner: “In virtue of commutative justice, *reparation for injustice committed* requires the restitution of stolen goods to their owner.” [5]

When it comes to the actions of people employed by the state, however, the *Catechism* makes a variety of excuses for state employees to take property without the consent of the owner. In fact, the idea advanced in the *Catechism* is that when the people employed by the state take private property without the consent of the owners, (e.g., *tax* them), *they are not stealing*. Though the *Catechism* does not explicitly state that taxation is not stealing, it does nevertheless state that

Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes... [6]

And

It is unjust not to pay the social security *contributions* required by legitimate authority. [7]

Taken alone, these admonishments do not necessarily imply that taxation is not stealing. They *do* have this necessary implication, however, when they are coupled with another central tenet of Catholic, and indeed all Christian, morality; namely, the duty to disobey the state

when its laws are contrary to those of God: “We must obey God rather than Men” (Acts 5:29). With respect to this tenet of Catholic morality, the *Catechism* explicitly enjoins Catholics to refuse to obey the state when its actions are contrary to the laws of God:

The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. *Refusing obedience* to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community. ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ ‘We must obey God rather than men.’ [8]

“Right is right, though nobody is right, and wrong is wrong though everyone is wrong.”

- Msgr. Fulton Sheen, THE CATHOLIC WORKER, May 1943.

(Note here that the *Catechism* does not say that citizens are merely *permitted* to disobey the civil authority when its demands are contrary to the moral code; rather, it states plainly that citizens are “*obliged in conscience*” to disobey.)

Putting these two ideas together, we see that the *Catechism* commands Catholics to disobey the state when its laws run counter to those of God, but it also explicitly commands Catholics to pay their taxes and social security “contributions.” The necessary implication here is that when the state takes money away from people against their will, this is not a violation of God’s law—*specifically, the 7th commandment*. For, if taxation was deemed to be a form of stealing, (and, thus, a violation of the 7th commandment), Catholics would be conscience-bound to oppose it on principle and refuse to pay taxes whenever possible. The unavoidable conclusion to be drawn here is that, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, it’s not stealing if the state does it.

Theft is Theft—Even if the State Does It

As was just seen, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* takes the position that when people employed by the state take property without the consent of the owner, this is not a form of stealing. I would like to suggest that this is not the position that should be taken by a Christian church that takes the Decalogue as the foundation for its moral code. The 7th commandment is explicit in its prohibition of theft, and it does not make exceptions for people who work for the state.

In order to see why taxation is indeed a form of stealing, all that is necessary is to recognize that *all* people pay their taxes to the state involuntarily. This is true, quite simply, because all people pay their taxes only in order to avoid the punishments that are put in place by the state for those who refuse to obey. I will have several more observations to make about the fact that taxation is theft, but what is truly morally relevant is simply that taxes are paid to the state *involuntarily*. The involuntary nature of taxation can be seen in the very meaning of the word. As Charles Adams has noted in this regard:

The similarity between tax collectors and robbers is also found in the basic meaning behind the word ‘taxation,’ which means *forced exaction*. Taxes are not debts, despite the fact that we carelessly refer to them as such. The principle of fair value received—which is the basis for a legally enforceable debt—has no place in a tax dispute. A tax is owed because a government orders it to be paid. Nothing else is required. [9]

It matters not, moreover, that the state claims to provide “services” in exchange for the money it extracts from its subjects. This is true, quite simply, because if the state must threaten its subjects with severe penalties in order to get its subjects to fork over their money for its “services,” the subjects clearly don’t value those services very much. Sony does not have to threaten its customers with long jail sentences in the company of rapists and murderers in order to sell its newest hi-definition televisions, because it provides a product that at least some people are voluntarily willing to purchase. The state, on the other hand, does *literally* threaten to incarcerate its subjects if they refuse to hand over their money—and *indeed does incarcerate them if they fail to pay*; a measure that would be unnecessary if the so-called “services” it claims to provide were actually valued by its subjects. It is simply not the case, in short, that subjects of a government pay their taxes in an attempt to purchase “services” that they either want or need. As H.L. Mencken has sardonically observed in this respect, the intelligent man does not pay his taxes believing that he has thereby purchased a valuable service.

Guard against false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but invariably are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.
- Matthew 7:15-16

The intelligent man, when he pays his taxes, certainly does not believe that he is making a prudent and productive investment of his

money; on the contrary, he feels that he is being mulcted in an excessive amount for services that, in the main, are useless to him, and that, in substantial part, are downright inimical to him. He may be convinced that a police force, say, is necessary for the protection of his life and property, and that an army and navy safeguard him from being reduced to slavery by some vague foreign kaiser, but even so he views these things as extravagantly expensive—he sees in even the most essential of them an agency for making it easier for the exploiters constituting the government to rob him. In those exploiters themselves he has no confidence whatever. He sees them as purely predatory and useless; he believes that he gets no more net benefit from their vast and costly operations than he gets from the money he lends to his wife’s brother. They constitute a power that stands over him constantly, ever alert for new chances to squeeze him. If they could do so safely they would strip him to his hide. If they leave him anything at all, it is simply prudentially, as a farmer leaves a hen some of her eggs. [10]

Just as taxes are not voluntary payments in return for services rendered, they are also not voluntary “contributions” intended to help “the common good.” This is a critical point, because, as was seen above, the *Catechism* carelessly refers to social security taxes as “contributions.” It is appropriate to use the term “contribution” when referring to a voluntary donation to, say, a Boy Scout candy drive. It is, however, completely inappropriate to use the term to describe social security taxes—or any other tax. In the first place, as was just seen, subjects are not given a choice about whether to make this so-called “contribution.” On the contrary, they are simply ordered to pay a certain amount or face a stint in jail. More often than not, moreover, the money the state desires is simply deducted from the subject’s paycheck before he has a chance to even hold his own hard-earned money in his hands. The subject can hardly be said to have made a “contribution” when his money is extracted even before it makes its way into his hands. This is to say nothing of the rather large number of people who view government social security schemes as nothing more than inherently bankrupt Ponzi schemes on a massive scale. It would be completely disingenuous to claim that those people would be making “contributions” to a program they despise and view as criminally insolvent. In like manner, we would hardly use the word “contribution” to describe tax money that is forcefully

extracted from American Catholics to be used for state-funded abortions. Catholics do not want to voluntarily fund abortions, but, because taxes (and, yes, social security payments as well) are compulsory and thus involuntary, they have no choice in the matter.

It would be useless to object at this point that people do ultimately consent to taxation, at least in democracies, because they are given the right to vote. To view voting as an act of consent to the state's taxing powers would be to radically misinterpret what actually happens when people vote. As A. John Simmons has pointed out, voting is only an action that expresses *preference*—it by no means can be assumed to imply *consent* to taxation, or even to the existence of the state:

[W]e would do well to remember that voting is often a way not of consenting to something, but only of *expressing a preference*. If the state gives a group of condemned prisoners the choice of being executed by firing squad or by lethal injection, and all of them vote for firing squad, we cannot conclude from this that the prisoners thereby *consent* to being executed by firing squad. They do, of course, choose this option; they approve of it, but only in the sense that they prefer it to the other option. They consent to neither option, despising both. Voting for a candidate in a democratic election sometimes has a depressingly similar structure. The state offers you a choice among candidates (or perhaps it is “the people” who make the offer), and you choose one, hoping to make the best of a bad situation. You thereby express a preference, approve of that candidate (over the others), but consent to the authority of no one. [11]

These considerations bring us back to the definition of stealing contained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Recall that the *Catechism* defines as stealing, (and thus proscribes as violations of the 7th commandment), those actions that usurp “another’s property against the reasonable will of the owner.” I have thus far argued that taxation is necessarily nothing more than the usurpation of people’s property without their consent on a massive scale, because taxpayers hand over their money only in order to avoid being sent to prison—or worse, in some cases. I have put forth evidence in support of St. Augustine’s famous rhetorical question, “what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale? What are criminal gangs but petty kingdoms?” I have argued, in short, that taxation is stealing, and is thus proscribed by the 7th commandment. The remainder of this section will be devoted to two objections to the

idea that taxation is theft that could be made using the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Objection 1: People Ought to Want to Pay Taxes for “the Common Good”

The first objection that could be raised is that taxation is not stealing because people ought to want to support “the common good” by paying money to the state. This objection asks us to make a gigantic leap of faith with regard to the state; namely, that the state is an institution that actually acts for “the common good.” Unfortunately, there is not a shred of truth to this idea. In fact, we would probably be closer to the mark if we were to argue the reverse; namely, that the state is an institution inexorably *opposed* to “the common good” of mankind.

“[N]ever before have so many Americans in all classes of society depended so heavily on government. (Taxes to support government spending now consume 40 percent of a typical American family’s earnings. Put another way, the average American family works about three hours a day for tax collectors.)”

- John Harmon McElroy, AMERICAN BELIEFS (1999), pp. 223-224.

In order to see why this is the case, let us take a closer look at how effective the tax-funded state has been at protecting and promoting “the common good” of mankind over just the past hundred years. During just the last hundred years the various states of the world have managed to accomplish the following, (and, mind you, this is a very partial list):

- Fight two World Wars funded through taxation that resulted in millions of deaths, the destruction of scores of cities in Europe and Japan, and the total impoverishment of many millions of other people
- Fight scores of other, bloody inter-state and civil wars funded through taxation
- Murder, in cold blood, approximately 170 million of their own innocent subjects, as R.J. Rummel has documented [12]
- Engineer, utilizing tax money, atomic weapons that threaten the very existence of human beings on Earth, and even go so far as to use them on innocent civilians
- Incarcerate tens of millions of people for either slave labor (e.g., in the U.S.S.R.), or for other trivial reasons (e.g., drugs, in the U.S.)
- Enter into murderous agreements to limit trade (e.g., Iraq) and banned the use of DDT in malaria stricken parts of the world, costing millions of lives. The enforcement of the bans being funded through taxation, of

course.

It would take either a truly utopian or truly historically blind mind to think that the tax-funded state has been an instrument for “the common good” over the last hundred years. The *Catechism* defines “the common good” as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” [13] Unless the Catholic Church thinks man finds his fulfillment in murder, it is hard to fathom that the state could be blindly presumed to be an instrument of “the common good.” Moreover, it seems hard to condemn those who, recognizing these colossal historical facts about states in the twentieth century, might refuse to pay the taxes that fund these crimes.

Even if it were true, moreover, that people ought to want to pay money to the state in order to promote “the common good,” this would by no means imply that the people employed by the state have a *right* to take money from people by force if they do not want to pay. Indeed, it would be a gigantic *non sequitur* to conclude that the state has a right to usurp people’s property without their consent merely because “they ought to want to.” As was just seen, the claim that people ought to want to support these murderous institutions is itself extremely dubious, but even if it were true that the state was an instrument solely for supporting “the common good,” how could this be a coherent moral justification for threatening to jail people who chose not to pay? As Carl Watner incisively points out in this regard:

Instead of threatening recalcitrant citizens with jail, educate them to their civic duties. Demonstrate why they ought to contribute to their government. Threatening them with force is not a way to convince them. They ought to be left alone and denied whatever government services they are unwilling to pay for. And if the supporters of government are still unable to collect enough in taxes to support the amount of government they deem necessary, then they ought to dig deeper into their own pockets. The fact that government is a “good cause” is no justification for stealing from or killing those who refuse to support it. This is what I call the Christian way of dealing with those who refuse to pay. [14]

The claim that people ought to want to support the state by no means offers a cogent moral exception to the Decalogue’s explicit and simple proscription: “You shall not steal.”

Objection 2: Only *Some* States are Evil

The second objection I wish to consider to the idea that taxation is stealing (and is thus proscribed by the 7th

commandment), has to do with the idea that only some states act in ways that are evil, while others do not. This objection arises in the *Catechism* from the idea that authority comes from God, and can be exercised either legitimately or illegitimately:

Authority is exercised legitimately only when it seeks the common good of the group concerned and if it employs morally licit means to attain it. If rulers were to enact unjust laws or take measures contrary to the moral order, such arrangements would not be binding in conscience. [15]

"Taxes, even when authorized by the public [authorities], are a violation of property ... a theft."
- J. B. Say, *TRAITE D'ECONOMIE POLITIQUE* (1841), p. 136, quoted in Edward Stringham (ed.), *ANARCHY AND THE LAW* (2007), p. 394.

An appeal to so-called “legitimate authority” cannot, however, offer a cogent argument against the idea that taxation is stealing. On the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere, the appeal to authority is actually question begging if it is used to justify taxation:

The fallback position of Catholic social teaching, when confronted with these sobering facts about the state as a necessarily coercive institution, has been to affirm that there exists a difference between so-called ‘proper’ or ‘legitimate’ authority and wrongfully employed authority. . . . The problem with this sort of argument is that it is almost stupefyingly question begging. It would be one thing to assert that God has bestowed different gifts on people, and that some men are blessed by God with the gift of leadership, while others are not; it is quite another thing, however, to deduce from this that some men are given the right by God to impress their will on their less-fortunate neighbors, take a portion of their neighbors’ income by threatening to jail or kill them if they refuse to obey, and impress their neighbors into military service, jury duty, or any other service for that matter. [16]

It is important to note, moreover, that the *Catechism* explicitly asserts that authorities may only employ “morally licit means” to attain the common good. Given this, and the fact that stealing is not a morally licit means for Christians, any reference to legitimate authority as a justification for taxation is baldly question begging. [17]

The simple fact of the matter is that all modern states derive their funding by threatening people with harm if they refuse to pay. And, as Murray Rothbard observed, since taxation is definitionally synonymous with stealing, it

is hard to fathom that any tax-funded, self-proclaimed ruler could be said to be “legitimate.”

All other persons and groups in society (except for acknowledged and sporadic criminals such as thieves and bank robbers) obtain their income voluntarily: *either* by selling goods or services to the consuming public, *or* by voluntary gift (e.g., membership in a club or association, bequest, or inheritance). Only the State obtains its revenue by coercion, by threatening dire penalties should the income not be forthcoming. That coercion is known as ‘taxation,’ although in less regularized epochs it was often known as ‘tribute.’ Taxation is theft, purely and simply, even though it is theft on a grand and colossal scale which no acknowledged criminals could hope to match. [18]

“Only the Internal Revenue Service could invent the oxymoron ‘voluntary compliance’ to promote the collection of federal revenues without coercion.”
- Jim Russell

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is simply to remind the Catholic Church that the foundations for its ethical system lie in the Decalogue. The 7th commandment in the Decalogue offers a straightforward condemnation of the taking of people’s property without their consent. The commandment does not offer exceptions, such as “You shall not steal, except for old age Ponzi schemes,” or “You shall not steal, unless you work for a group that has an anthem and a flag.”

The question of taxation is of profound moral importance in the modern world. The people who work for modern states have enriched themselves and armed themselves to the point where they have become a profound menace to the very existence of the Earth and the people who occupy it. Their riches are acquired by taking money and property away from ordinary people, without their consent, and by threatening to jail them if they refuse to pay. It is of no value to either Catholics or people generally, for the Catholic Church to turn a romantic eye toward the state wishing and hoping that it will become an agent for “the common good,” while modern states continue to rob and murder their way into the history books. The Christian virtue of prudence in fact *demand*s that we view the world for what it is, with clear vision and hopeful resolve.

It is also of no value to the world for the Catholic Church to try to trivialize the moral question of taxation by comparing it to abortion, and concluding that, since

murder is worse than stealing, we must first deal with abortion before turning to taxation. As Saint Bernardino of Sienna noted in a story about St. Francis of Assisi, the sheer magnitude of theft in this world makes it a paramount concern of Christians:

One day, as Saint Francis was traveling through a city, a demon-possessed person appeared in front of him and asked: “What is the worst sin in the world?” Saint Francis answered that homicide is the worst. But the demon replied that there was one sin still worse than homicide. Saint Francis then commanded: “By God’s virtue, tell me which sin is worse than homicide!” And the devil answered that having goods that belong to someone else is a sin worse than homicide because it is this sin which sends more people to hell than any other. [19]

Taxation occurs on such a massive magnitude in the modern world that it is perhaps the most consequential moral question of our time. And the Catholic Church, if it wishes to remain faithful to Jesus’ admonishment that we obey the commandments, must come to recognize that *taxation is stealing*, and is thus proscribed by the 7th commandment. ▽

End Notes

- [1] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (United States Catholic Conference Inc., Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994). Sec. 2052.
- [2] *Ibid.*, Sec. 2408.
- [3] Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2000), Par 14.
- [4] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, op. cit., Sec. 2409.
- [5] *Ibid.*, Sec. 2412.
- [6] *Ibid.*, Sec. 2240.
- [7] *Ibid.*, Sec. 2436.
- [8] *Ibid.*, Sec. 2242.
- [9] Charles Adams, *For Good and Evil: The Impact of Taxes on the Course of Civilization* (New York: Madison Books, 1993), p. 1.
- [10] H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Vintage, 1982), pp. 147-148.
- [11] A. John Simmons, *One the Edge of Anarchy: Locke, Consent, and the Limits of Society*, in Marshall Cohen, ed., *Studies in Moral, Political and Legal Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 222-223.
- [12] R. J. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1994).
- [13] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, op. cit., Sec. 1924.
- [14] I would like to thank Carl Watner for many helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this article. See his articles in *The Voluntarist*: “A Moral Challenge,” Whole Number 138 (3rd Quarter 2008), and “Moral Challenge II,” Whole Number 141 (2nd Quarter 2009).
- [15] *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, op. cit., Sec. 1903.
- [16] Mark R. Crovelli, “What Belongs to Caesar?” *Mises Daily Article*, <http://mises.org.stpru/3081> (September 2, 2008).
- [17] I am grateful to Carl Watner for this point.
- [18] Murray Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 162.
- [19] Quoted in Alejandro A. Chafuen, *Faith and Liberty: The Economic Thought of the Late Scholastics* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), p. 31.

Spending Other People's Money: A Simple Explanation

July 21, 2008

Mr. Ernest S. Christian, Executive Director
Center for Strategic Tax Reform
800 Connecticut Avenue NW # 705
Washington, D.C. 20006

Dear Mr. Christian:

In looking over some old WALL STREET JOURNALS, I recently came across your article, "Stupidity and the State," (June 7-8, 2008, p. A9). You cite examples of waste, loss, inconsistent policies, and inadequate balancing of costs vs. benefits, and conclude that "Washington never learns from its mistakes."

I would like to offer a simple explanation of why agents of the State act this way.

The large majority of government revenues comes from taxation of one sort or another. Taxes are a compulsory levy upon the citizens of a government. Generally, if you don't pay, you either end up in jail or have your property confiscated, or both.

Consequently, when government officials disburse the taxes collected, they are "spending other people's money," which the government revenue agents have coercively collected. In short, taxes collected represent stolen money.


How careful would you be if you had nearly unlimited access to other people's money, to spend as you pleased? Both individually and institutionally, nearly every connection between cost and consequence,

between responsibility and authority, and between ownership and stewardship are broken when the government "collects" taxes and then spends someone else's money on its own projects.

When Coca Cola markets a new product, and the product fails to achieve customer acceptance, we don't call its attempt "stupid." We simply observe that the product could not secure enough voluntary acceptance on the part of customers to survive. As you know government programs don't operate this way because taxes, not voluntary payment, are their essence.

You probably disagree, but I conclude that the State will always remain stupid so long as it is an organization that survives by using coercion. Stupidity and abuse of power are inherent in its form, which is dependent on taxation. Spending other people's money without their permission is clearly a violation of the commandment "thou shall not steal." Why are we, as a society, so blind that we don't recognize the obvious?

Sincerely,

Carl Watner 

"[W]hen any body of men have the power of collecting money from the people, and to be accountable to nobody for it, and have at the same time power to make war or peace, then that body of men having that power once established, have the people under the greatest bondage that it is possible to express."

- A Lover of Liberty in the Providence, RI GAZETTE, Jan 25, 1783. Quoted in RHODE ISLAND HISTORY (1949), p. 8

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