

A Priestly Letter to Speaker Paul Ryan

From Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox

Dear Speaker and Congressman Paul Ryan,

As a priest who commemorates his 50th year in the priesthood this year (28 as a Roman Catholic and 22 as an Episcopalian), and as your elder, I am writing you this letter because I am worried about your soul.

We all know you take good care of your body, working out frequently in the congressional gym we taxpayers provide for those in Congress, and that is a good thing. But I am concerned that you are neglecting your soul. It too requires workouts and practice to stay healthy.

You claim to be a good and a practicing Catholic Christian but I have serious doubts that you are. Our Christian beliefs include these words of Jesus after all: “What does it profit a person if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?” These powerful words are surely important for anyone serving in public office or any other places of responsibility, whether in government or business or church or wherever. Yes, they even apply to your close buddies the Koch brothers, upon whom you depend so fully for your income and ideas and campaigns and job.

You see, another passage that grounds Catholicism and Christianity is found in Matthew 25: “Do it to the least and you do it to me.” Not to mention the Golden Rule which is found in Matthew 7:12 and is reflected in some form in every world religion since the time of Hammurabi: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”

Now I want to ask from a spiritual and theological perspective how you can possibly reconcile these basic teachings of the Gospels with your continued efforts to create budgets for our entire nation that do the following:

1. Threaten to privatize and thereby destroy Social Security for elders and disabled people.

2. Destroy critical health support systems for the sick, handicapped, mentally disabled, and homeless by effectively scuttling Medicare and Medicaid.
3. Dismantle the EPA so that the rest of God's sacred creation is imperiled by human narcissism (Pope Francis' words). Have you not read Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si* that teaches everyone—believer and non-believer alike—that we humans are not here to destroy but to support creation for the good of all beings on earth now and in the future? If you have studied this great document—as you must as a thinking believer—where is it to be found in your legislative agenda?

Another Biblical teaching is the warning that we are not to worship idols. But Wall Street is a purveyor of the idolatry of money. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer in that system. Pope Francis has spoken to that truth also when he speaks of the “savage capitalism” and the “god of money” that dominates so much of decision-making in western culture.

Your naked efforts to give more and more tax breaks to billionaires like your supporters the Koch brothers is proof that you have up to now chosen to be on the side of the savage capitalists and the gods of money. Have you no shame? Have you no conscience? Do your faith and Jesus' teachings mean nothing to you because you are mesmerized by power and the powerful? Do you not know—or do you simply not care—that when the uber-rich do not pay their fair share, the struggling poor and middle class must pay from their meager resources to subsidize the rich? And when the uber-rich get still more tax breaks, the poor and middle class are forced to make up the difference?

I am worried about your soul. It is not too late to repent and start over. It is time to examine your commitment to the values that drive your heroes the Koch brothers, who want to worship the idols of Wall Street instead of caring for God's sacred creation, and who refuse to pay their fair share of taxes to contribute to the common good. And who buy the loyalty of politicians like you to commit sins against the poor and creation itself to make their fat wallets even fatter. Shame on you!

Yours are not the values I learned growing up in Wisconsin (indeed, my godmother lived in your hometown of Janesville) and growing up in the Catholic Church. How have you wandered so far off track? Was it the ridiculous narcissistic writings of atheist Ayn Rand that enticed you to surrender Gospel morality for Mammon? (Let me add that I admire many atheists for their ethics and morality but Ayn Rand is not one of them. Not by a long shot. She has rendered selfishness a virtue.)

I wish through this letter to awaken your soul. Your sweet Wisconsin smile and gym-toned body notwithstanding, through your choices you are dancing with Evil. The gospels teach such truths. So too does Pope Francis who, as a Roman Catholic, you supposedly respect and listen to. Have you listened to his warnings and his teachings lately? Allow me to remind you of some of them.

The Pope minces no words when speaking of the divergence of wealth and poverty today. He speaks to globalization this way: “The globalization that makes everything uniform is essentially imperialist...it is not human. In the end it is a way to enslave the nations.”ⁱ Is globalization enslaving the nations? It seems to me that much of Trump’s success as a candidate was built around this very idea—only his solutions seem to me to be dark indeed. What is your agenda, Mr. Speaker, about this “inhuman” globalization that is hurting so many citizens of our country and beyond?

Pope Francis says: “Christianity condemns both Communism and wild capitalism with the same vigor”ⁱⁱ and one needs to reject the “wild economic liberalism we see today” and “seek equal opportunities and rights and strive for social benefits, dignified retirement, vacation time, rest, and freedom of unions.”ⁱⁱⁱ Are you on board with this set of values? Or are you in the camp of “savage capitalism?” Why do you want to destroy the dignified retirement of American people by diminishing Social Security instead of building it up? And to destroy social benefits for the very poor and working classes while giving tax gifts to the super rich and corporations? And to eliminate a current health insurance program that provides assistance for many millions of people instead of improving it?

The Pope praises St. Francis because “he contributed an entire concept of poverty

to Christianity against the wealth, pride, and vanity of the civil and ecclesiastical powers of the time” and for this reason “he changed history.”^{iv} Are you putting obstacles in the way of the wealth and vanity of the powerful in our day? Given your responsible position as Speaker of the House, why don’t you try to change history for the poor and neglected instead of for the 1% who are already over their heads in favoritism and success and (too much) power?

The Pope takes on the neocon preoccupation with “world terrorism” and the fear such language arouses when he declares that “human rights are not only violated by terrorism, repression or assassination, *but also by unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities.*”^v How important is that? He equates economic structures with terrorism. Yes, he is telling us that *Wall Street terrorizes*. Ask any Main Street citizen: we all feel the effects of this terror and that is why many in Main Street voted for Trump, out of fear of this terror from Wall Street. But your buddies the Koch brothers *are those very terrorists the Pope is speaking of*. Yes, how does it feel to be in bed with terrorists? And of course, Trump has turned his back on his promises to the working people and has appointed an unprecedented number of billionaires (terrorists) to head his cabinet positions.

The Pope also denounces the “flight of money to foreign countries” as a sin because it dishonors “the people that worked to generate” that wealth.^{vi} He also condemns those who hide their wealth in off-shore accounts to avoid paying taxes that are so important for the common good. What are you doing to challenge those hiding their wealth in off-shore accounts to avoid taxes? Aren’t you in a powerful position to do something about that?

Pope Francis has said: “The option for the poor comes from the first centuries of Christianity. It is the Gospel itself.” And he has remarked that were he to preach sermons from the first fathers of the Church on the needs of the poor, he would be called a “Maoist or Trotskyite.”^{vii} Are you leading legislation that puts an option for the poor in the forefront?

He says: “Human rights are violated by...unfair economic structures that create huge inequalities.”^{viii} Are you on the side of human rights and against economic structures that create huge inequalities? Or are you on board to actually increase

those inequalities by passing legislation that gives tax breaks to the 1% who in fact need them the least? Pope Francis warns that “The worship of the golden calf of old has found a new and heartless image in the cult of money and the dictatorship of an economy which is faceless and lacking any human goal.”^{xix} Where do you and your fat-cat donors stand on the subject of the “cult of money”?

We need, Pope Francis says, a “balanced social order that is more humane”^x and that resists consumerism. Pope Francis says further that “Money has to serve and not rule.”^{xi} It is a “savage capitalism” that teaches “the logic of profit at any cost” and exploitation of people.^{xii} Where do you stand on the topic of “savage capitalism” and the cult of money? In your very responsible position as Speaker of the House what are you doing to address these important issues—issues that touch all the people in America, especially the downtrodden and left out? If you had addressed them before the 2016 election, maybe the strongman Trump would not have been able to tap into the frustration of as many blue-collar Americans as he did.

Finally, as a Catholic, where do you stand on the notion that corporations are people (see Citizens United and Hobby Lobby Supreme Court decisions)? Are you in bed with the neo-fascist Catholic members of the Supreme Court who, contrary to Catholic teachings, are telling us to believe that a corporation is a person? How could you possibly reconcile that with the teachings of the Church on the immortality of the individual soul and more? While we are on the subject of neo-fascist Catholics, where do you stand on Opus Dei?

Unfettered capitalism is, according to Pope Francis, a “new tyranny.”^{xiii} Where do you stand on this new tyranny? What limits are you setting on unfettered capitalism by your legislative leadership? Are you keeping Dodd/Frank laws on the books? Says the Pope: “Today we are living in an unjust international system in which 'King Money' is at the center.” This “throwaway culture discards young people as well as its older people.....A whole generation of young people does not have the dignity that is brought by work.” A “diminishing of the joy of life” is the result of such idolatry.^{xiv}

In his document entitled “The Joy of the Gospel” Pope Francis speaks bluntly as all the prophets do. He says No—as all the prophets do. He denounces “trickle-down” economics as “never having been confirmed by the facts” and being built on a “crude and naive trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power....Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting.”^{xv} Where do you stand on trickle-down economics? Have you learned from its blatant failures? Are you aware how many Main Street citizens are “still waiting” for good wages and jobs to reach them?

Following are some of Pope Francis’ No’s presented in his own words:

1. *No to an economy of exclusion....An economy of exclusion and inequality kills....Today everything comes under the laws of competition and the survival of the fittest, where the powerful feed upon the powerless. As a consequence, masses of people find themselves excluded and marginalized: without work, without possibilities, without any means of escape.*^{xvi}
2. *No to the new idolatry of money....While the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few.....Self-serving tax evasion has taken on worldwide dimensions. The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits....Whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a defied market, which becomes the only rule.*^{xvii}
3. *No to a financial system which rules rather than serves. Ethics is seen as counterproductive, too human, because it makes money and power relative. It is felt to be a threat, since it condemns the manipulation and debasement of the person....Money must serve, not rule! The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor. I exhort you to generous solidarity and a return of economics and finance to an ethical approach which favors human beings.*^{xviii}
4. *No to the inequality which spawns violence. [Violence happens not] simply because inequality provokes a violent reaction from those excluded from the system, but because the socioeconomic system is unjust at its*

root. Just as goodness tends to spread, the toleration of evil, which is injustice, tends to expand its baneful influence and quietly to undermine any political and social system, no matter how solid it may appear.....Evil crystallized in unjust social structures...cannot be the basis of hope for a better future.^{xix}

And “NO” to the despoiling of Mother Earth about whose peril Pope Francis has written an entire encyclical. Clearly you have turned your back on the sacredness of the Earth as well: you support for the head of EPA a man who has shouted that he wants to destroy it, while you make ridiculous mumbles about climate change that you are not a scientist. Well, sir, isn’t that all the more reason to listen to scientists who *do* tell us that humans are bringing about climate change and the destruction of many, many species as well as the rising of the oceans? How can one be a Christian and not recognize the sacredness of creation?

Where do you stand, Speaker Ryan, on these issues that the Pope raises? How are you using your position of power and responsibility to alleviate the ills he addresses? Isn’t what the Pope says true, that the violence the current system provokes is one reason why many victims of this system voted for Trump—and even admire his violence? Pope Francis speaks out against an “education that would tranquilize the poor, making them tame and harmless.”^{xx} And he defines injustice as “evil.”

I pray that you may be converted and return to the teachings of Christ and the Church striving to teach in his name very soon. Time is running out for our species and you are in a position of trust and responsibility and leadership in our country at this time. Earn it!

Meanwhile, until you and your party pay attention at last to these basic issues, I as a Christian priest and theologian can only conclude that you are not at all a Catholic or a Christian but just one more hypocrite flaunting your bogus religion on your sleeve to garner more votes and stay in a cushy job while you sell your soul to the Koch brothers and other Wall Street misers. People who don’t have a

clue about the “weightier matters of the Law—justice, compassion, good faith!” (Mt. 23:23) that Jesus preached, and who could not care less.

Jesus had something to say about that too, remember? It was strong stuff. He was speaking to you, Paul Ryan, and your fellow politicians when he said: “Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You who are like whitewashed tombs that look handsome on the outside, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and every kind of corruption. In the same way you appear to people from the outside like good honest men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.... You are the sons of those who murdered the prophets.” (Mt 23.27-28, 31).

I hope and pray that you and your fellow politicians, Mr. Ryan, so beholden to the rich and uber-rich, might heed Jesus’ words. And if not, at least do him the courtesy of not invoking his name to justify your lawlessness.

Sincerely in Christ’s name,

Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox

ⁱ Jorge Maria Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth: Pope Francis on Faith, Family, and the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Image Books, 2010), 158

ⁱⁱ Jason Berry, “Pope decrying ‘anesthesia of the heart’ heads to Brazil,” PRI, Public Radio International. 19 July 2013 <<https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-07-19/pope-decrying-anesthesia-heart-heads-brazil>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Bergoglio 172

^{iv} Bergoglio 231

^v Mark Rice-Oxley, “Pope Francis: the humble pontiff with practical approach to poverty” *The Guardian*, Guardian News & Media Limited. 13 March 2013 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/13/jorge-mario-bergoglio-pope-poverty>>

^{vi} Bergoglio 160

^{vii} Michael Warren, Jenny Barchfield, Marcos Aleman, John Rice, “Pope Francis: Liberation Theology Priest Sees New Hope for Catholic Church,” *Huffington Post*, The Huffington Post. 28 April 2013 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/28/pope-francis-liberation-theology_n_3173986.html>

^{viii} Oxley, “Pope Francis.”

^{ix} Pope Francis. “To new Ambassadors of Kyrgyzstan, Antigua and Barbuda, Luxembourg and Botswana accredited to the Holy See (16 May 2013) | Francis.” *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 16 May 2013. Web. 24 Feb. 2017 <http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130516_nuovi-ambasciatori.html>

^x Ibid.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Naomi O'Leary, reporter, and Michael Roddy, editor, "Pope criticizes 'Savage Capitalism' on visit to food kitchen," Reuters. 21 May 2013 <<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-capitalism-idUSBRE94K12K20130521>>

^{xiii} Eamon Javers, "Pope Francis: Capitalism 'New Tyranny,'" CNBC. 26 November 2013
<<http://video.cnbc.com/gallery/?video=3000221701>>

^{xiv} Hugh Bronstein, Reuters, "Pope Francis: 'King Money' system has failed unemployed youth, older people." NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, 28 Nov. 2013. <<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/other/pope-francis-king-money-system-has-failed-unemployed-youth-older-f2D11670341>>.

^{xv} Aaron Blake, "Pope Francis denounces 'trickle-down' economics, *The Washington Post*, Nov. 26, 2013.

^{xvi} Pope Francis. *The joy of the gospel (Evangelii gaudium): apostolic exhortation Evangelii gaudium of the Holy Father Francis to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the proclamation of the Gospel in today's world*. New York: Image-Crown Publishing, 2014, Kindle edition, 43

^{xvii} Ibid., 44

^{xviii} Ibid., 45

^{xix} Ibid., 46

^{xx} Ibid., 47