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## Christian virtue and the free market. How is being poor the best way to prosperity?

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### 1. Clarifying the basic terms and their relation

To what extent the term ‘Christian virtue’ is ambiguous, one can better appreciate through reading the already classic reflection of Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue*. I would like to start at the end of the journey of the Scottish philosopher with his rather famous invocation of a new “St. Benedict.” It is all the more important to listen closely and critically to this quotation, since it gave rise to the recent powerful but controversial interpretation of Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option*.<sup>1</sup>

It is not my task here to analyze Dreher’s book in detail but to offer a critical response that can highlight something of how prosperous Christian communities come to existence.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*, Penguin, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Dreher gives us many practical suggestions and promotes us with an elaborate idea of a prosperous Christian community. On the other hand it seems that Dreher’s book manifests precisely that misunderstanding of the last passage of *After virtue* (namely a withdrawal strategy) for which MacIntyre truly regretted to have ever written these words. See: P. Mommsen, “Why Community is Dangerous? An Interview with Stanley Hauerwas”, in: *Plough Quarterly*, no. 9, *All things in Common?*, Summer 2016, <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/community/church-community/why-community-is-dangerous> (access: 2.07.2017).

Following MacIntyre's reference to St. Benedict I'd like to offer here a radical interpretation of Christian virtues. I will argue that precisely by a deeper understanding of 'Christian virtue' one gets a better grip on what 'free market' really means. In another words, an elaborated and community centered praxis of Christian virtues helps develop not just those attitudes in general but that very fundamental attitude (*Grundeinstellung*),<sup>3</sup> without which freedom is just another name for ego-centered self-realization.

I would like to challenge our general understanding of the 'free market' on the basis of the ambiguity of the term 'free'. My guess is that what is commonly called 'free market' is not free, that is, not free on many levels (personal, communitarian, ecological, cultural, religious). If this is the case then a general claim<sup>4</sup> that *Christian virtues contribute to establish free markets*<sup>5</sup> is only true if "freedom" is meant in a very specific sense. The ambiguity stems from understanding the freedom of the market exclusively in terms of freedom from unnecessary regulations or restrictions imposed by the government, rather than the freedom of the person involved in economic transactions. This latter meaning of freedom is incomparably more fundamental than the first one that is usually affirmed.

My main contention is the following: Christian virtues – and especially those affirmed by St. Benedict – contribute to a "free market" precisely by showing us *new aspects of freedom*.<sup>6</sup> These features of liberty are not so much

<sup>3</sup> See on this D. von Hildebrand, "Die Umgestaltung in Christus", in: *Gesammelte Werke* 10, J. Habbel, 1971, p. 70; A. Pfänder, *Die Seele des Menschen*, Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1933; M. Crespo, "Esbozo de unafenomenología de las disposiciones de ánimo", in: *Dialogo Filosófico*, no. 68, May/August 2007; see also E. Przywara, *Deus semper maior*, Herder, 1939. Przywara considers humility as one of the three fundamental attitudes (besides veracity and liberty) that characterizes human person as creature.

<sup>4</sup> While this claim is explicitly sustained only by certain part of the politically right and those conservative political thinkers who support it, it is far more common as an attitude. One might not think that free markets do make us freer and yet not be aware who very often the contrary happens. Philosophy can help not only by disentangling the benevolent and the dangerous aspects of free market among other ways by clarifying the notion of freedom but it also can help us to revise our attitudes. Once they are clarified one can offer resistance when it is needed and at the same time embrace the rare moments of freedom.

<sup>5</sup> While certainly no serious Christian would sacralise the market economy, as John Paul II noted, market economy has proved to be the most efficient human means for meeting the basic material needs of entire societies. See: *Centesimus annus*, 32, 34. See also: S. Gregg, "Catholicism and the Case for Limited Government", in: Ph. Booth, *Catholic Social Teaching and the Market Economy*, City University London, 2007, especially p. 473–476; see also: M. Novak, "How Christianity created capitalism", in: *Wall Street Journal* 21 (1999).

<sup>6</sup> What I mean by 'new' here is simply that these aspects pertain genuinely to freedom but are considered as irrelevant in the dimension of free markets, thus when they claim their due and become accredited within the sphere of economy they radically transform the human

perceived as *abstract forms* by the *reflective mind* but are rather existentially lived through the embodied praxis of a Christian community. It is in this respect that the question becomes highly relevant: What is the particular challenge that Christian communities as communities of traditional virtues have to meet today?

## 2. Rereading MacIntyre

When deliberating on the complex relationship between the virtues and economy, it is reasonable to “start at the end”, i.e. to situate ourselves within a narrative of what became and what now remains of “virtues.” In order to see this, let me break into four parts the powerful text of MacIntyre and comment briefly on these insights.

### 2.1. Where do we stand today?

It is always dangerous to draw too precise parallels between one historical period and another; and among the most misleading of such parallels are those which have been drawn between our own age in Europe and North America and the epoch in which the Roman Empire declined into the Dark Ages. Nonetheless certain parallels there are. A crucial turning point in that earlier history occurred when men and women of good will turned aside from the task of shoring up the Roman Empire and ceased to identify the continuation of civility and moral community with the maintenance of that Empire. What they set themselves to achieve instead – often not recognizing fully what they were doing – was the construction of new forms of community within which the moral life could be sustained so that both morality and civility might survive the coming ages of barbarism and darkness.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly, one can draw some parallels between the self-destructive tendencies of the Roman empire and the contemporary situation in both Europe and North America. Despite these mostly superficial similarities, however, it must be acknowledged that the *barbarism* we have to endure is of a different kind, and in some respects far more severe. We ought to remember that it was the fall of the Roman Empire that led to Christian Europe, provoking a long purifying struggle through which Christianity bid farewell to the old

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interchange and restore its unreduced form. The notion of freedom I particularly had in mind by elaborating the critique of free markets was the “freedom for excellence” offered by the Swiss theologian Servais Pinckaers OP. See: S. Pinckaers, “Les Sources de la morale chrétienne”, in: *Sa methode, son contenu, son histoire* 3 (1993), p. 354–378.

<sup>7</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After virtue*, A&C Black, 2013.

encrustation of ancient cosmology and the conceptual world based on it. At the same time it provoked Christianity to slowly disentangle itself from the temptation to 'Cesaropapism,' (Both of these two aspects are relevant for how virtues are understood today: not in mere cosmological terms or civil terms.)

Can we expect any such unintentional positive results from our current struggle with barbarism? This question becomes overwhelming when we recall the impotence of our increasingly secular version of Christianity to resist the barbarism of the holocaust.<sup>8</sup> Today, after the defeat of not just the Roman Empire but, more importantly, the Third Empire (Third Reich), when we are talking about virtues we should not forget that those who efficiently carried out the most inhuman liquidation of innocent victims in history were "virtuous," they were diligent and obedient people, who were diligent and obedient in the name of *human progress, justice and peace*. And we shall not easily pass over the fact that the post-war society seems to have comprehended nothing from this experience more than the need for more diligence in the constant effort to improve both the civic and the military virtues. Thus virtues as such when upheld as adherence to abstract values, i.e. without their vivid relationship to Christ offer no guarantee whatsoever to avoid the reoccurrence of the humanist catastrophe we witnessed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Although already several generations have reflected on the holocaust, we have not yet fully comprehended that the evil was caused by secular philosophical humanism. And we still don't understand sufficiently how virtues once devoid their Christian meaning can easily be employed by ideologies can greatly contribute to unleash the beast again.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in our culturally Post-Christian era – in times when the market took hostage the whole cultural field and became the undisputed leading force of denying the relevance of metaphysics and prohibiting any form of vertical hierarchy, and what is technically termed *analogia entis*, and in an epoch when, as a result of all this, theological and philosophical reflection are considered irrelevant for politics, culture and the hard sciences<sup>10</sup> – it is all the more important to offer

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<sup>8</sup> B.M. Mezei, *Religion and Revelation after Auschwitz*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> "Alasdair MacIntyre, for one, resists being called a communitarian – he fears that in this place and time such calls are bound to lead to nationalistic movements. Those who hunger for community should never forget Nuremberg"; in: P. Mommsen, "Why Community is Dangerous? An Interview with Stanley Hauerwas", op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> This claim should be placed into perspective by what is often referred to as „post-secular age." See: J. Habermas, *An awareness of what is missing: Faith and reason in a post-secular age*, Polity, 2010; idem, "Notes on post-secular society", in: *New perspectives quarterly* 25.4 (2008), p. 17–29.

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an answer to the question: How exactly do Christian virtues and the Christian way of life call for a transformation of the ‘free market’?

## 2.2. The call to establish new forms of communities

The times of new barbarism<sup>11</sup> and darkness MacIntyre saw approaching are indubitably upon us and call us, ones again, not just to reflect deeply and thoroughly on what went wrong, but also to engage fully in a positive way, i.e. vocationally in renewing our communities.

MacIntyre continues:

If my account of our moral condition is correct, we ought also to conclude that for some time now we too have reached that turning point. What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us.

Let me first make a critical remark that might help us to reformulate MacIntyre’s hope concerning the rebirth of a similar figure like St. Benedict. I do not think that his description is perfectly correct, even though I approve his final analysis of having arrived at a critical turning point.

What is at stake here is not so much the preservation of credibility of the Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition of virtue – as much as this may be an important cornerstone of Christian culture – but rather the survival of the Christian Gospel of the Loving God, who gave and gives rise to a radically new form of human love in the world. However the Aristotelian tradition of virtue is a powerful vehicle that has transported the Christian message, it is not the kerygma, Aristotle is not the Gospel message. The real turning point we have arrived at does not so much concern humanity generally, or *civilization, culture and morality*, but rather, and *primordially*, humanity as the Church that has experienced the divine love of Jesus Christ, even if it has yet to be truly and fully transformed by it.

Under the threat of barbarism in its recurring ancient and new forms<sup>12</sup> the real drama is not about the preservation of “Christian civilization, culture or morality”<sup>13</sup> (for – as argued above – the very content of these terms can easily be modified up to its very opposites), but rather, the survival of that sustains and originates them: the faith of the Christian Community.

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<sup>11</sup> M. Henry, *Barbarism*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Th. Molnar, “The Essence of Modernity”, in: *Modern Age* 24.4 (1980), p. 379.

<sup>13</sup> R. Brague, J.M. Palacios, *Europa, la via romana*, Gredos, 1995.

### 2.3. The tradition of virtues and the hope it offers

Reading on in our quotation of MacIntyre we find another relevant observation:

And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time however the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament.<sup>14</sup>

Nothing can illustrate this point better than MacIntyre's own book. The tradition of values did not simply survive the damage caused by barbarian times. The tradition of values suffered substantial changes up to a complete obfuscation of them by the barbarians. They not only threaten us from within, but also show more clearly how the whole tradition of virtues can be put into the barbarians' service. Coming to consciousness concerning the internal threat is tantamount to understanding the internal crisis of Christianity. The crisis consist in Christian faith being defined by contemporary culture rather than defining and transforming it.<sup>15</sup> The internal threat is giving over to being defined by the world and so giving up on being the salt that gives the world its savor.

### 2.4. Who are we waiting for?

"We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another-doubtless very different-St. Benedict."<sup>16</sup> This is MacIntyre's conclusion.

After this rather sketchy surveillance of the present situation, i.e. on what remained of virtues, let us turn to the question what we can hope for. From a Catholic perspective, of course we do not expect the literal rebirth of St. Benedict or any saint, but we pray for their intercession as members of our own living community with them in Christ.

If we are ready to acknowledge that our concrete community is an extension of a greater supernatural community and thus cannot be reduced to the failures and backslidings of its visible members, a new horizon appears not only as a future hope but also as present reality. Our ultimate hope in the second coming of Christ does both, liberate us from all anxiety and inspire us

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<sup>14</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After virtue*, op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After virtue*, op. cit.

to extend the love poured out of the heart of the divine Trinity on those on the margin of human community.

This is the way new communities are founded; they are not founded by the anxious preoccupation for the prosperity of one's own community. What is at the bottom of all new Christian communities is *kenosis*, the careless self-denying (and becoming radically poor) of God that allows for the reestablishing and restoring of the love-relationship with fallen men. Thus, perhaps paradoxically those who have most radically renewed Christian communities were not about 'building relationships', or 'building peace' or 'defending Christian values', but rather cared about returning God's love, and in responding to it tried to reach out for those at the margins of society.

When contemplating the history of the Church, the vast range of adequate answers to the divine love is rather amazing. Whatever the radical differences of, let us say, Opus Dei and the Dominican order, all of these new communities share one peculiarity: they are fragile and on the verge of collapsing. Their strength is their weakness for they do not sustain themselves; their *raison d'être*, their fundament lies outside of their own existence and does not consist in their virtues and achievements. (See the history of any religious order from Franciscans or Benedictines through the Jesuits to the *Legionari di Christo*, etc.)

The new St. Benedict is not going to be different than the old in the sense of what he stands for, but there will be an important contrast concerning *how* the same message is articulated, received and made fruitful. To put it in traditional symbolical language: there are and will be always new gifts for the Bride but they will all express the same love of the only Bridegroom.

### 3. A renewed understanding of Christian virtues

Christianity as a *civilization of love*<sup>17</sup> does not only presents itself partially by relying on the language and wisdom of ancient philosophy but also radically

<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, Letter to Families (1994), especially no. 13. „The civilization of love, in its current meaning, is inspired by the words of the Conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: »Christ (...) fully discloses man to himself and unfolds his noble calling.« And so we can say that the civilization of love originates in the revelation of the God who »is love«, as John writes (1 Jn 4:8, 16); it is effectively described by Paul in the hymn of charity found in his First Letter to the Corinthians (13:1–13). This civilization is intimately linked to the love »poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us« (Rom 5:5), and it grows as a result of the constant cultivation which the Gospel allegory of the vine and the branches describes in such a direct way: »I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit« (Jn 15:1–2).”

transforms ancient *sapientia*. This process is so assumed that sometimes we oversee the drama and the struggle of several centuries and thus we forget about the radical novelty of the Christian proposal.

In order to grasp how Christian virtues allow for a freedom of expression, offering a new groundwork for “free markets,” we need to get a grasp on the specificity of Christian virtues in contrast to the ancient understanding of virtues based on the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic cosmo-theological universe.

In his book his book, *Everything Consists in Him*, the Mexican-Spanish theologian, Fr Ricardo Aldana,<sup>18</sup> makes a valuable point in this respect, stating that the *heroic virtues* of the ancient world became through Christian Revelation *virtues of humility*. The excellencies acquired by the virtuous person due to his own effort, now became understood as “answers” to the ‘super-exigent’ divine call to be fully transformed by love. Virtues were thus reconfigured, what was once the evidence of one’s activity (*Nic. Ethics*, 98 a 16), became now a sign of one’s capacity to receive of divine ‘strength.’

Aldana reminds us that:

Already Thomas Aquinas who accepted with the whole Christian tradition that it [namely the one’s own efforts] precedes the ethics and the moral and intellectual virtues, when it comes to present the supernatural virtues that give rise to the natural ones, has to change radically the pre-Christian notion of virtue: virtues are the modes how God moves gently those called to the eternal Good. (STh I, II, q. 110, a. 2.)

To elaborate this difference between the new and the old (i.e. pre-Christian versus Christian) understanding, Aldana reminds us of a great passage of G.K. Chesterton in *Heretics*<sup>19</sup> where Chesterton compares ancient natural virtues with the radical proposal of the supernatural virtues illuminated by Christianity. He not only states that natural or pagan virtues are sad while supernatural ones (love, hope and faith) are happy, he also goes on by pointing out that while natural virtues are reasonable, Christian and mystical virtues entail a paradox referring to a higher and fuller reason.

Now, let us add here that the well observed *paradox nature of supernatural virtues* does not only concern them but its logic transforms the interpretation of any virtue. If humility is a cardinal virtue, it removes the pride that was the primordial fountain of all sin and acknowledges the ontological superiority

<sup>18</sup> R. Aldana, “Todo consiste en Él: en la senda de von Balthasar y von Speyr”, in: *Encuentro*, 2005, especially p. 15–25.

<sup>19</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, in: *Collected Works I*, San Francisco 1986.

of the Divine. In other words, it becomes the hermeneutical key according to which all the virtues now ought to be understood and exercised.

Chesterton makes an even more important point when reminding us that *humility* is not a property but rather a way of encountering reality. He insists that, even though we once saw the Sun and at first found thought it spectacular, after a while we grow used to it and it becomes for us nothing other than normal daylight. *Humility is the capacity to get into the first darkness and thus see everything afresh*: Only for a humble man the Sun is the Sun and the Ocean is the Ocean as it was created and – we shall continue in the given context– a human person is a human person, and the economical interaction between people what it truly is.

This clairvoyance of the humble man is due to a *personal encounter* with Christ; this is the core of every virtue.<sup>20</sup> The personal encounter provides us with experience of utmost love precisely as the original *logos* of everything that exists.

Let me stress here that both the supernatural and natural virtues have to be considered in the light of this Christ-centered experience, i.e. according to an experience of the *logos* that is incarnated love manifested in human history. Virtues in Christian term remain thus ways to perfection, but perfection is always understood as greater love.

In this approach one can rightly observe a paradigmatic change in comparison with virtues stemming from the Aristotelian cosmo-theological world view.<sup>21</sup> Christian virtues are not understood any more in cosmological terms but rather in personal terms, i.e. in direct reference to Christ. Their cosmological meaning does not disappear however, given that Christ is both the *logos* in whom everything was created, and thus the Lord of everything and Christ is the filial word fully given back to the Father that recollects the whole cosmos into one obedient yes.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Within the Christian tradition there are several sources from the Father of Western Monasticism, through St. Anselm to St. Benedict to Thomas Aquinas who distinguish several stages of humility according to the gradual transformation of the person who makes himself at the disposal for the divine love by getting more fully involved in an interpersonal, divine-human relationship. Cf. *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*, chap. VII, in: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/benedict/rule.ix.html> (access: 4.07.2017); Anselm, *Liber de Similitudinibus*, 101ff; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II–II, q. 161.

<sup>21</sup> See on the relationship of Cosmotheological world-view and Christian Revelation: B.M. Mezei, “Demythologizing Christian philosophy: an outline”, in: *Logos i Ethos* 19.2 (2013), p. 109–146.

<sup>22</sup> Together with the ‘Yes’ of the Holy Mary the ‘Yes’ of Christ on the Cross is the full manifestation of human freedom as total affirmation of the Divine will. Both ‘Yes’ as graceful human acceptance of the divine love is the free surrender of human will to the divine will.

Humility – the unthinkable fundamental or capital virtue – is nothing but the adequate attitude towards the greatest love experimented through the personal encounter with Christ. For as St. Bernard affirms: “A virtue by which a man knowing himself as he truly is, abases himself. Jesus Christ is the ultimate definition of Humility.”<sup>23</sup> It is thus the personally assumed *logos* of this encounter that nurtures virtues precisely by radically transforming one’s life. What the tradition calls *metanoia* or conversion leads to following the higher and paradoxical *logos* that manifested in the encounter. This *logos* is realized in *sequela Christi* through which one refines the capacity to respond in a loving way.

It is an enormous task to understand how and to what extent Christian humility as a hermeneutical and interpretative key opens up new realities, as indicated by Chesterton.

In the line of the proposed argument I would like to focus, now, rather phenomenologically on one aspect only: how does the radical reinterpretation of virtues by Christianity open up new aspects of freedom?

To start with the most obvious: If Christian virtues are not abstract excellencies understood as properties of an individual but rather concrete ways of how the person is transformed in an interpersonal relationship, within a certain community, than *freedom* is understood here as a fundamental disposition of being transformed by divine love. With the traditional expression to be free means to let oneself be moved on to the ultimate ‘meta’: *theosis*.<sup>24</sup>

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See A. Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2016, p. 235–246.

<sup>23</sup> St. Bernard in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “Humilty”, from [www.newadvent.org](http://www.newadvent.org); cf. “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you” (Rom 12:3).

<sup>24</sup> See Mt 19:21. St. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote, “He was incarnate that we might be made god” (Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐν ἡρώπτησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεοποιηθῶμεν). In: Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 54.3, transl. by J. Behr, Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011, p. 167; See also: “A sure warrant for looking forward with hope to deification of human nature is provided by the Incarnation of God, which makes man God to the same degree as God Himself became man (...) Let us become the image of the one whole God, bearing nothing earthly in ourselves, so that we may consort with God and become gods, receiving from God our existence as gods. For it is clear that He Who became man without sin (cf. Heb. 4:15) will divinize human nature without changing it into the Divine Nature, and will raise it up for His Own sake to the same degree as He lowered Himself for man’s sake. This is what St[.] Paul teaches mystically when he says, »that in the ages to come he might display the overflowing richness of His grace« (Eph. 2:7)” (Maximus the Confessor, *Philokalia*, vol. 2, p. 178).

Let us hold on to three aspects, three novelties of the Christian proposal that radicalize the concept of freedom:

a) Freedom is personal, it belongs to the very core and essence of being a person. It is also personal in the sense of a relational term that only makes full sense in an interpersonal reality. One's freedom is lived through the relation to one's own self, the other and the world, but it comes to its plenitude when fully exercised in relation to the divine Persons of the Holy Trinity.

b) Freedom is not just a communitarian experience; it is rather the proper experience of living in community, because freedom is primordially *liberation through love*. The primordial sphere of freedom concerns therefore the possibility of being transformed by an encounter in concrete context, i.e. in a concrete community.

c) Freedom is not only and not even in the first place a capacity for acting and realizing something; rather it is one's fundamental disposition to be fully transformed through divine love.

Even though there are certainly more features of freedom that the right understanding of Christian virtues might highlight, and are highly relevant for interpreting the economical exchange, concentrating on these three aspects will help us to see in which way Christian virtues may expand the liberty of *free markets*.

#### 4. Christian virtues and free markets

The meaning of the market is hardly to be limited any more to a medium that allows buyers and sellers of a specific good to facilitate exchange. The market in the post-modern world became not only ubiquitous also the dominant force and principle of social life.

David Bentley Hart – one of the leading theologians of our times – rightly observes that the market is the *ground of the real*. He specifies it by adding that this 'ground' is "the ungrounded foundation where social reality occurs, makes room only for values that can be transvalued, that can be translated into the abstract valuations of univocal exchange."

Market in post-modern times according to the understanding of not just of Hart but also thinkers like Deleuze and Guattari is not any more a specific part of social and economic reality but stand rather for a mechanism that re-defines reality. Legitimizing or even supporting 'market' in this sense is not an economical issue; it goes along with subscribing to a certain metaphysics that implies acceptance or denial of certain theological claims.

One of these important theological and metaphysical restrictions by the market concerns precisely freedom.

Once again let us turn to Hart to extricate some important features of how the market malforms freedom.

The freedom the market acknowledges and indeed imposes is a contentless freedom that is necessary for the mechanisms of the market to function, every aspect of the person that would suppress or subvert this purely positive, purely 'open' and voluntaristic freedom must be divided from the public identity of the individual, discriminated into the private sphere of closed interiority and peculiar devotion.<sup>25</sup>

I will point out four essential aspects in which market imposes its own principles and structure on human freedom.

a) Let us start with Hart's claim according to which the market makes freedom contentless. It is due to the fact that the different options are considered as products, commodities that are fully reducible to the only criteria of vertical hierarchy: money.

This leveling of choices is tragic for any virtue to be acquired and practiced for it involves precisely the preference for the more real, more beautiful and more true values that are understood as real participation in the divine reality.

b) The market not only reduces freedom to the object of choice, it also suppresses the subject of freedom.

Another relevant affirmation of the author goes like this:

To be prepared to enter the market, one must suffer this division between the "private" and the real, one must endure the metabolism from one to the other; for the indestructible power of the market – its ability to adapt almost anything to its abstract system of exchange – to accommodate "selves", so many aberrant desires must be suppressed or diverted into a discrete realm of extra public activity (quietly suppressed, that is: "subjectified", poeticized, finally dissolved into the ether of the private because they do not constitute matter for substantial transactions).<sup>26</sup>

Subjects when entering the market must be divided into the public sphere of marketable things, properties, ideas and 'all the rest' that is ostracized into the merely subjective, emotional and private sphere. This division imposed by the market painfully runs through any religious person that tries to be unified, i.e. achieve a synthesis between private and public self by transforming both

<sup>25</sup> D.B. Hart, *The beauty of the infinite: The aesthetics of Christian truth*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004, p. 432.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

by the same love that substantiates his inner and external reality. Virtues, when understood in Christ-centered way, are never private goods, or individual properties; they are ways related to Christ and thus to the Church, i.e. modes in which one is called to fully give oneself to the community. Theological virtues, like hope, love and faith cannot be dismissed into the private sphere without being deflated of their eschatological and communitarian content.

c) Besides its schizophrenic impulses, the market also *d e p e r s o n a l i z e s* the subject of freedom:

(...) persons (arising from the often irreducible stresses of particular traditions, particular communities of speech and practice, even particular landscapes and vistas) must be reduced to economic selves, by way of a careful and even tender denudation and impoverishment; thereafter the “enrichment” of the person can occur only under the subjective choices made from a field of morally indifferent options, in a space bounded by a metaphysical or transcendental surveillance that views person as utterly from his or her aboriginal narratives that status perhaps of quaint fictions but preventing them from entering into the realm on other terms (as say persuasions, forces of contention that cannot be re-inscribed as part of the playful *agon* of the market).<sup>27</sup>

However gentle and tender it might feel for some (wealthy) people, there is an undeniable violence in transforming the *personal self* into the well regulated, and thus acceptable *economical self*. Although the ‘economical self’ who responds triumphing to the playful *agon* of the market must be enriched with certain virtues, he or she is deprived of being a full person. What counts and what pays off at the end are one’s alienated achievements. Market forces us to give up on our unique “narrative identity” and reduces the person to economical potentials and accomplishments that are spectacular<sup>28</sup> and creditable for commercialization.

The Christian experience that embraces the whole fallible, fragmented and particular person and in form of virtues that offer a way of unification, liberation and fulfillment, and does so in a way radically opposed to the violent reduction of the market. It can however only offer efficient resistance to its often times subterfuge infringements if virtues are not understood in terms of simple triumphing and perfection but in more dramatic and perhaps more paradoxical terms of the total poverty<sup>29</sup> and absolute failure of the Crucified.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Bread and Circuses Publishing, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> See: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor, 8–9).

<sup>30</sup> E. Przywara, *Deus semper maior*, op. cit., p. 100–103.

The fragmented and schizophrenic economical self can only be restored by the recollection and self-unification of somebody who gives away his life for others.

d) Last but not least: market reduces the act of freedom to *choice* while the *desire* the choice is based on is understood in ontologically devoid terms like a “creative and productive ebullience.”

The market does not only impose on us limitations concerning the object of free acts, it destroys the subject by dividing it and manipulates the very principle of *acting freely* through ignoring the fact that there is a dimension of freedom pervious to the act of choosing between alternatives: freedom as *inner disposition*.

Human consciousness allows for a certain distance towards the object manifested in it concerning how it affects us. This dispositional dimension of freedom comes to the fore in the original sin and in every sinful act, that consist not merely in ‘eating from the apple,’ i.e. in acting in disobedience to God’s will, but prior to it *in abandoning the filial disposition towards God*, and thus accepting the very possibility of being opposed to him. The fundamental inner disposition, certain original openness towards the divine love is previous to any act. Moreover, all free acts are rooted in this ‘relatedness’ to Being. In another words before freedom is expressed in concrete action it is a gift that enables us to have a conscious standpoint to the Giver.

The market imposes on us a violent reduction of this inner sphere by falsely identifying freedom with the desire that can never be satisfied and is therefore “infinite.”<sup>31</sup> In the ‘society of spectacle’ created by the market there seems to be no higher value than choice itself based on the horizontally infinite desire. According to this logic there cannot be any truth that might order desire toward a higher end.

That market thrives on a desire that recognizes no commonality of needs, a desire that seeks to consume and to create an identity out of what it consumes, a desire that produces out of its own energy and in indifference to a shared proportion of the good that might limit invention or acquisition. A desire that expands to the limits of which it is capable: not an analogical desire for God or the other, but a desire for nothing as such, producing in order to desire more.<sup>32</sup>

This distorted desire – according to the succinct observation of Hart: “may posit, seize, want, not want – but it must not obey.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See the notion of spurious versus true infinity. See: G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s Science of Logic*, Allen & Unwin, 1969, §275–§304.

<sup>32</sup> D.B. Hart, *The beauty of the infinite*, op. cit., p. 432.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

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In how the market reduces desire we discover an outstanding example of the market's metaphysical propositions, which lead to a false anthropology. The ontological humility of the obedient man is not just opposed by the market, but it negated as an available option of the autonomous consumer, the self-made man who invents, reinvents and consumes one's own self.

## 5. The Benedict option

If the market is a kind of imposed metaphysics, how must the Christian, who is called to nothing less than *theosis*, show resistance to the market forces by, instead, growing in Christian virtues?

Does resistance mean here that, in order to preserve the Christian heritage, our own values and forms of life must abandon the world, so live with us in parallel, enclave communities? In post-Christian times, when Christianity is both institutionally and culturally weakened and does not represent any longer the majority of Western society, Christians are faced with the option of either going with the flow, and thus obeying the forces of the market, or being radicalized, and thus seeking original forms of community, in which the tension between the market and the holiness we are called for seems to be resolved at once.

Our Jewish fellows – relying on thousands of years of experience concerning persecution and, in the best case, minority existence, can offer us some advice in how to preserve our own identity in the midst of cultural turbulences.

Yet when the unique status of Christianity is taken seriously, a very reality situation provokes us: we believe that the Savior has already come, and also that he is incarnated into this fallen and complicated world. And while there is no Christianity without assuming fully what it means to be Jewish, there is undoubtedly a specific Christian mission that calls us into this world and invites us to live the discrepancies and the tensions. Christian virtues and especially theological virtues of love, faith and hope are meant to serve in the time “that is already now” but “not yet” and in relations that are analogical to and but differ from those of the eschatological community.

Let me share my testimony with you: I was raised in a Benedict monastery, so the world for me is only thinkable and makes sense only as an extension of the path that surrounded the monastery. Every day after lunch we went for a walk on that contemplative circular pathway and I am still doing it here with you. I can witness that what lies at the heart of the Benedict option is not cultural preservation or creating new communities, as much as all this seems

to me a noble and just response to the inherent process of the world called *secularization*.

What is at heart of my experience of the option of the Benedictine experience is more radical, and is wonderfully captured by Pope Benedict the XVI, in his speech on the roots of European culture: *quaerere Deum*.

He puts it as follows:

First and foremost, it must be frankly admitted straight away that it was not their intention to create a culture nor even to preserve a culture from the past. Their motivation was much more basic. Their goal was: *quaerere Deum*. Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential – to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself. They were searching for God. They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is. It is sometimes said that they were “eschatological” oriented. But this is not to be understood in a temporal sense, as if they were looking ahead to the end of the world or to their own death, but in an existential sense: they were seeking the definitive behind the provisional. *Quaerere Deum*: because they were Christians, this was not an expedition into a trackless wilderness, a search leading them into total darkness. God himself had provided signposts, indeed he had marked out a path which was theirs to find and to follow.<sup>34</sup>

Their signpost were the Scripture interpreted according to the tradition. And thus they understood and understand today the Evangelical counsel of being poor.

Being poor for Christ and thus, being more available for him, offers the greatest resistance to the market. But there is more in it than protection and resistance because curiously, but not paradoxically, Benedict monasteries stand all over the world for prosperity and wealth.

I can mention here both, the Hungarian monastery of Pannonhalma which runs a great complex of different enterprises, employs more people of that region than any other employer, or the monastery of Melk in Austria which is one of the most visited cultural center in whole Europe.

Both monasteries have something in common concerning their complex economical activity: they look at it as means of evangelization, as part of the service they can offer the world, let it be through cultural programs, producing

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<sup>34</sup> Apostolic journey of His Holiness Benedict XVI to France on the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Lourdes (September 12–15, 2008), Meeting with representatives from the world of culture, Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI. Collège des Bernardins, Paris, Friday, 12 September 2008, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20080912\\_pari-cultura.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080912_pari-cultura.html) (access: 4.08.2017).

tea, mineral water, herbs, lavender-oil, wine, running first class restaurants and cafes, centers of tourism and certainly schools, colleges, libraries, elderly homes, etc.

What makes this possible is that the community of monks is a center of love and caring for each other, in the first place for the fellow monks. They can do so, because each and every one of these men have freely chosen to be nothing but obedient servants, humble enough to recognize God's abundant love in everything. Their choice of being *radically poor* does not put them outside of the economical exchange or, in any other way, does not results in refusing the world. Poverty as a general percept for all Christians,<sup>35</sup> and particularly religious ones, rather places them, and thereby they place the possible all of us, in the center of another economic horizon, one based on a superabundant love that lives insofar as it is shared with others. Economic activities are fostered, by the monks, by a humble recognition of the gifts that one has received from the plenitude of God, and thus one desires to share this gift with others.

Prosperity and poverty do not exclude each other. Moreover, there is only prosperity, where there is the grateful heart of the poor. Prosperity is something that only the poor can account for, such that only the poor can be rich. What is yet needed is to learn and relearn the heart of the Christian virtues, what radically changes our perception of reality and open our eyes, both to our own need to be poorer, and our need to live more deeply from the actual reality of superabundant prosperity.

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<sup>35</sup> "The Church continually keeps before it the warning of the Apostle which moved the faithful to charity, exhorting them to experience personally what Christ Jesus had known within Himself. This was the same Christ Jesus, who »emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave (...) becoming obedient to death« (233) and because of us »being rich, he became poor« (234) Because the disciples must always offer an imitation of and a testimony to the charity and humility of Christ, Mother Church rejoices at finding within her bosom men and women who very closely follow their Saviour who debased Himself to our comprehension. There are some who, in their freedom as sons of God, renounce their own wills and take upon themselves the state of poverty. Still further, some become subject of their own accord to another man, in the matter of perfection for love of God. This is beyond the measure of the commandments, but is done in order to become more fully like the obedient Christ. (15\*) Therefore, all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed they have an obligation to so strive. Let all then have care that they guide aright their own deepest sentiments of soul. Let neither the use of the things of this world nor attachment to riches, which is against the spirit of evangelical poverty, hinder them in their quest for perfect love. Let them heed the admonition of the Apostle to those who use this world; let them not come to terms with this world; for this world, as we see it, is passing away" (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 42; see also *Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, "La pobreza del corazón", no. 2544–2547; see also David Bentley Hart's recent very provocative article: *Are Christians Supposed to Be Communists?*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/christianity-communism.html?smid=fb-share> (access: 8.10.2017).

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### **Summary**

#### **Christian virtue and the free market.**

#### **How is being poor the best way to prosperity?**

I would like to challenge our general understanding of the ‘free market’ on the basis of the ambiguity of the term ‘free’. The ambiguity stems from understanding the freedom of the market exclusively in terms of freedom from unnecessary regulations or restrictions imposed by the government, rather than the freedom of the person involved in economic transactions. This latter meaning of freedom is incomparably more fundamental than the first one that is usually affirmed.

My main contention is the following: Christian virtues – and especially those affirmed by St. Benedict – contribute to a “free market” precisely by showing us *new aspects of freedom*. These features of liberty are not so much perceived as *abstract forms* by the *reflective mind* but are rather existentially lived through the embodied praxis of a Christian community.

After a short analysis of the last pages of MacIntyre’s *After virtue*, I show the radical novelty in a Christian understanding of virtues. Relying on some of David Bentley Hart’s intuitions I point out four essential aspects in which market imposes its own principles and structure on human freedom.

If the market is a kind of imposed metaphysics, how must the Christian, who is called to nothing less than *theosis*, show resistance to the market forces by, instead, growing in Christian virtues?

In my short answer to this question, I contrast Dreher’s view to the real Benedict option as manifested in their goal *quaerere Deum*. Looking at the concrete example of a Benedictine monastery and at how economic activities are fostered, by the monks, by their humble recognition of the gifts that one has received from the plenitude of God, I conclude: Prosperity and poverty do not exclude each other. But there is only prosperity, where there is the grateful heart of the poor. Prosperity is something that only the poor can account for, such that only the poor can be rich.

**Streszczenie**  
**Chrześcijańska cnota i wolny rynek.**  
**Dlaczego bycie biednym jest najlepszą drogą do dobrobytu?**

Chciałbym poddać pod dyskusję nasze ogólne rozumienie „wolnego rynku” w oparciu o dwuznaczność terminu „wolny”. Niejednoznaczność ta wynika z rozumienia wolności rynku wyłącznie w kategoriach wolności od niepotrzebnych regulacji lub ograniczeń narzucanych przez rząd, a nie wolności osoby zaangażowanej w transakcje gospodarcze. To ostatnie znaczenie wolności jest nieporównywalnie bardziej fundamentalne niż pierwsze, które jest zwykle używane.

Moja główna teza jest następująca: cnoty chrześcijańskie – zwłaszcza te, na które wskazał św. Benedykt – współtworzą „wolny rynek” właśnie poprzez ukazanie nam nowych aspektów wolności. Te cechy wolności są nie tyle postrzegane przez refleksyjny umysł jako abstrakcyjne formy, ile raczej egzystencjalnie przeżywane poprzez ucieleśnioną praktykę wspólnoty chrześcijańskiej.

Po krótkiej analizie ostatnich stron *Dziedzictwa cnoty* MacIntyre’a pokazuję radykalną nowość chrześcijańskiego rozumienia cnot. Opierając się na niektórych intuicjach Davida Bentleya Harta, wskazuję cztery zasadnicze aspekty, w których rynek narzuca wolności człowieka własne zasady i strukturę.

Jeśli rynek jest rodzajem narzuconej metafizyki, to w jaki sposób chrześcijanin, powołany do przeobstwienia, ma się opierać jego siłom, wzbogacając się w zamian w cnoty chrześcijańskie?

W mojej krótkiej odpowiedzi na to pytanie przeciwstawiam pogląd Drehera prawdziwej opcji benedyktyńskiej, która przejawia się w *quaerere Deum* zakonników. Patrząc na konkretny przykład klasztoru benedyktyńskiego i na to, jak mnisi rozwijają działalność gospodarczą poprzez pokorne uznanie darów otrzymanych z łaski Boga, dochodzę do wniosku, że dobrobyt i ubóstwo nie wykluczają się nawzajem. Ale istnieje tylko dobrobyt, w którym jest wdzięczne serce biednych. Dobrobyt jest czymś, co mogą rozliczyć tylko biedni, i tylko biedni mogą być bogaci.