

Signs of the Times: Economic Inequality and Fraternal Solidarity

by Kenneth Himes, OFM | April 29, 2016 |



The essay below is the seventh in [a series of “Franciscan Response” reflections](#) by friars and partners-in-ministry about issues facing our culture. The series is part of Holy Name Province’s response to the call to revitalize Franciscan life and ministry in the United States — a key objective of the leaders of the American OFM provinces, who are evaluating ways to reconfigure Franciscan life in the United States.

These reflections are meant to provide social analysis as part of the many considerations involved with creating a preferred future for the Franciscans of the United States. Because it is hoped that this initiative generates dialogue, friars are encouraged to provide comments about the content of the essays in the series. These reflections do not represent the official policy of Holy Name Province.

For centuries, people have come to the United States in pursuit of freedom. Both religious and political freedoms were strong allurements for immigrants. Yet, we cannot overlook economic freedom also being a vital element in the American celebration of liberty. There is an entrepreneurial spirit that runs through American history.

Those who came to these shores, first from Europe and more recently from other places, embraced America as a land of opportunity. Indeed, when Americans talk about equality they rarely mean equality of results. When some do better than others, it is because they worked harder, smarter, and longer — or so the national myth maintained. Historically, Americans have tolerated economic inequality because of their belief in upward mobility when people seized the opportunities that the nation offered.

However, today’s growth in economic inequality threatens the hope of equal opportunity. The top 20 percent of Americans experienced much faster income growth than the bottom 80 percent over the past three decades, and the incomes for the richest one percent of Americans grew fastest of all. Inequality in wealth (accumulated riches minus debts) is even greater than annual income inequality. The wealthiest one percent of U.S. households control 35.4 percent of all the nation’s wealth, while the bottom 90 percent of households hold only 23.3 percent. As the

economist Alan Krueger states, “We were growing together for the first three decades after World War II, but for the last three decades we have been growing apart.”

Marginalizing Communities

The current divide is seen in educational spending, which differs widely among rich and poor school districts, while private education has gotten far more expensive. When it comes to social mobility between generations, the U.S. now ranks near the bottom of developed nations. A poor child’s prospects are less fluid in the United States than in many economically advanced countries, including Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand, along with the traditionally more equal nations of Scandinavia.

Present trends of inequality are not simply a natural consequence of free markets, since public policy changes have tilted the economic playing field toward the rich. Tax cuts and changes in the treatment of capital gains and other investment income resulted in significant financial gains among the wealthiest, corporate governance decisions dramatically changed compensation policies for executives, and the deregulation of financial markets and banks further abetted the rise of inequality.

Inequality becomes morally problematic when it is so extreme that it marginalizes persons and whole communities. Since material goods often condition a person’s ability to participate in social life, Catholic social teaching has consistently emphasized that those at the bottom of the economic ladder must have a dignified standard of living. Unless that standard is met, any talk of equal opportunity becomes empty political rhetoric.

Respecting Basic Needs

Behind the concern about inequality is the fundamental vision of Catholic social teaching, that people ought to live within communities that respect the basic needs, fundamental freedoms, and necessary relationships that all people require for integral human development. Practices fostering solidarity give expression to Catholic convictions about the unity of the human family.

As Franciscans, we prize fraternal life among ourselves but we also assume a fraternal stance toward others, keeping an eye out for the marginalized in particular. To embrace solidarity as a virtue in social life is to acknowledge the need for practices that overcome all that divides us: race, religion, gender, and economic class.

Today, there is a widening chasm between the most and the least well off. America is witnessing erosion of the equal opportunity that permitted upward social mobility for the poor. As friars, we must translate our fraternal spirit into specific social activities that promote solidarity.

— Fr. Kenneth, who professed his final vows as a Franciscan in 1975, is a professor of theological ethics at [*Boston College*](#).