

25 years after ‘Economic Justice for All,’ pastoral still stirs debate

WASHINGTON - When the pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All” was published by the U.S. bishops in November 1986, its release was both the culmination of years of work and the beginning of a sometimes heated public debate.

That debate continues today, as proved during a panel discussion Dec. 6 marking its 25th anniversary.

In a round-table discussion convened by Georgetown University’s Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and the Governance Studies Program at Brookings Institution, self-described conservatives and liberals squared off over the merits of the pastoral letter, much as people did in 1986.

The five-part letter looked at the church’s vision of economic life, beginning with a discussion of Christian principles and their role in economic matters. It offered proposals for employment, poverty, food and agriculture, and international development; outlined a “New American Experiment” and a “Partnership for the Common Good,” and laid out a commitment for the future.

It was the product of several years’ work, including “town hall” type discussions around the country, which resulted in multiple drafts that were reviewed by the bishops before the final letter was released.

In the Dec. 6 discussion, Ross Douthat, an op-ed columnist for The New York Times said his “right-wing take” on the document was fresh, having just read it for the first time.

He said he was particularly struck by the “naivete” with which the bishops addressed the economy of the Reagan era. He said the letter paid “insufficient attention to the imperative of economic growth,” and generally misfired in the places where the bishops sought to address specific economy aspects such as agriculture policy.

He decried “a maddening specificity by people who didn’t have the policy chops to be so specific,” saying their recommendations were “naively liberal.”

But Douthat also saw the letter as constructive in some ways, and applicable to current time, for instance in its observations about the concept of a moral economy and how the economy has become depersonalized.

Father Robert Sirico, co-founder and president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty and a proponent of free-market economics grounded in Judeo-Christian morality, agreed with Douthat’s assessment that the letter is one example of the U.S. bishops “exceeding their authority in an area where they lack competency,” and that such endeavors have “cost the bishops greatly in big and small ways.”

He said the bishops would be better off spending their time and money on the salvation of souls rather than in making public policy statements that he said are “frankly embarrassing.”

Father Sirico criticized the staff of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops who managed the writing of documents including “Economic Justice for All,” saying they were “liberal Democrats,” who produce statements that don’t represent what the bishops themselves might say.

Coming to the defense of the document, E.J. Dionne, syndicated newspaper columnist, a senior fellow at Brookings and a professor at Georgetown’s Public

Policy Institute, observed that “if the bishops had laid out a bunch of economic principles and nothing else they would be criticized for not being specific.”

The fourth panelist, Christine Firer Hinze, a professor of Christian ethics at Fordham University, said the process the bishops went through to produce the pastoral letter was itself important.

Town hall meetings were held around the country at which people were invited to talk about poverty and their troubles with everyday life. She said producing drafts of the letter and putting them out for public comment amounted to an amazing way of sharing the church’s teaching and for the bishops to learn about people’s concerns.

Hinze also said she found the document’s specific recommendations to be its weakest element, but said a greater problem is that it wasn’t given the means of fulfilling its potential.

For instance, she said, “what if, instead, they set up an institute for Catholics and the economy? That still could be a wonderful way of activating” the document.

Asked by a member of the audience how the bishops might regain the moral authority in society that they appear to have lost since the time of “Economic Justice for All,” Douthat was quick to say, to applause from the audience: “The easiest way to reclaim their moral authority is for some of them who have been (somehow) implicated in the sexual abuse scandal to resign.”

Father Sirico said the bishops need to be “men of prayer and pastoral concern in their dioceses,” staying out of the public arena in areas that are not part of their expertise.

Dionne added that “the public voice of the church has been so narrowed for a lot of people who think the church is only about abortion and condemning” same-sex

marriage and other sexuality-based issues. He said the church's public image is much more focused on abortion and sexuality and as a consequence the breadth of its rich social teaching is lost.

The church's activities in the world are much more broad, Dionne noted, "but the bishops do not talk nearly enough about such things, to bring attention to what people are called to do."