

Pope Francis warns of real-life dragon sickness

Smaug, the dragon in *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, is obsessed with his gold and treasure. Tolkien calls it “the dragon sickness.”

Dragons are not the only ones susceptible. In the story, Thorin Oakenshield shows us how greed can corrupt anyone. The desire to control and to possess can become a sickness growing and growing to consume anyone’s soul.

“Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten,” wrote G.K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy*.

What cures the dragon sickness? In his recent Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Francis tells us. He gives the answer away in its title: *Evangelii Gaudium* (“The Joy of the Gospel”).

Francis diagnoses how the dragon sickness spreads around the globe: “To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being



incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people’s pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else’s responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.” (EG 54)

The Pope also explains the cause of the dragon sickness: “a rejection of ethics and a rejection of God.” Reason can show us how “ethics leads to a God who calls for a committed response which is outside the categories of the marketplace.” (EG 57)

There is only one cure for the dragon sickness: “Money must serve, not rule! The Pope loves everyone, rich and poor alike, but he is obliged in the



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Martin Freeman stars in a scene from the movie *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. C.S. Morrissey writes that Pope Francis “diagnoses how dragon sickness,” a convention from *The Hobbit*, “spreads around the globe.”

name of Christ to remind all that the rich must help, respect and promote the poor.” (EG 58)

As Tolkien intuited, “dragon sickness” is the best phrase for talking about the spiritual danger that the Gospel must

confront. When Francis used a different phrase in his Exhortation, the phrase that got translated as “trickle-down economics,” many people mistook it to be signaling something about the Pope’s own personal economic views.

Chris Lowney, who worked as an investment banker at J.P. Morgan, noted how that particular phrase detracts from the Pope’s proclamation of the Gospel: “My gripe with the pope? By inserting a phrase like ‘trickle-down economics’ in his powerful message, he let us all off the hook too easily. That simplistic caricature absolved us from thinking afresh and allowed everyone

to retreat into their Republican or Democratic ideological foxholes.”

To his credit, the Pope took note of the ensuing controversy. Remarkably, he clarified his intent in an interview with the Italian newspaper *La Stampa*: “There is nothing in the Exhortation that cannot be found in the social Doctrine of the Church. I wasn’t speaking See PONTIFF – Page 8

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from a technical point of view, what I was trying to do was to give a picture of what is going on,” explained the Pope.

In other words, Francis didn’t want to talk economics. He wanted to talk about the Gospel. He wanted to diagnose the dragon sickness (“that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference”), to explain its causes, to proclaim the cure.

Nevertheless, Francis also admitted that the media correctly quoted him when they seized upon that one phrase invoking a technical economic controversy:

“The only specific quote I used was the one regarding the ‘trickle-down theories’ which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and social inclusiveness in the world.”

But, to his credit, the Pope then backed away from discussing the finer points of economic theory. Which was wise, since as the economist Thomas Sowell has demon-

strated in his writings, there is no such thing as “trickle-down theory” defended academically by anyone anywhere.

“Trickle-down theory” is “a non-existent theory,” writes Sowell. The phrase is used only for ideological purposes by those who find it convenient for “arguing against a caricature instead of confronting the argument actually made.”

The author Daniel McInermy helpfully points out that the Pope thinks primarily in terms of stories, of narrative form, and not of philosophical or theological explanation. I observe the same is true for Francis and economic explanations, because when the Pope spoke to *La Stampa*, he told a story about something “magically” making desires grow.

The Pope’s magical “trickle-down” story is a variation on the economic story that “a rising tide lifts all boats,” that increasing wealth is good for all. And the moral of the story is not Marxist economics, but Catholic teaching.

Listen to the Pope’s story

about a “rising tide,” or “overflow,” of the dragon sickness: “The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefitting the poor. But what happens instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger nothing ever comes out for the poor,” said Francis. “This was the only reference to a specific theory. I was not, I repeat, speaking from a technical point of view but according to the Church’s social doctrine. This does not mean being a Marxist.”

In other words, globalization is a rising tide lifting a lot of boats, with increasing wealth around the globe. But we need to realize that there are still people who do not even have boats. They are missing out on the lifting we enjoy. And they are drowning.

Only the Gospel can cure the dragon sickness in our hearts, the sickness that keeps us indifferent to their plight.

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