

5-22-2015

## Come Now and Behold: Catholic Social Witness and Economic Inequality in the United States

Eric S. Fought

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fought, Eric S.. 2015. Come Now and Behold: Catholic Social Witness and Economic Inequality in the United States. *Obsculta* 8, (1) : 95-100. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol8/iss1/11>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

COME NOW AND BEHOLD:  
CATHOLIC SOCIAL WITNESS AND ECONOMIC INEQUALITY  
IN THE UNITED STATES

Eric S. Fought

*Nota bene - What follows is the transcript of a reflection given by Mr. Fought on the occasion of a Convivium fellowship, here at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary.*

Come now, you rich, weep and wail over your impending miseries. Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire. You have stored up treasure for the last days.

Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on earth in luxury and pleasure; you have fattened your hearts for the day of slaughter. You have condemned; you have murdered the righteous one; he offers you no resistance.<sup>1</sup>

You may or may not have heard of Maria Fernandes, a New Jersey woman who died in late August of 2014.<sup>2</sup> In October of the same year the medical examiner in Union County, New Jersey confirmed what was suspected, that Maria died from inhaling gasoline fumes inside her vehicle while she napped.

Maria was taking a quick nap, as she often did, between shifts at a local Dunkin Donuts store. As a matter of fact, she worked three jobs to make ends meet, and sometimes these naps were the only sleep she would get. Other times, she might get five or six hours at a time at home. She kept the car running while napping so that she wouldn't waste any time in getting back to work. She kept an extra tank of gas in the back of her very late model SUV so that she wouldn't have to stop to fill up.

Maria's story is the story of countless Americans who are struggling to make ends meet. They are what we might and do call the working poor, a growing segment of our population that are, at any given moment, on the brink of complete collapse.

The average minimum wage worker is no longer the high school student working between soccer practice and band lessons. Now, the typical minimum wage worker—the average member of America's working poor—is the head of a household, an adult, a husband, wife, mother or father trying to get by.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, I would argue that the greatest threat to the institution of the family today is not what might be the latest battle in the culture war of the moment. The greatest threat to the family today is the vast, intentional and systematic economic inequality that is crushing American workers, a system that is holding all of us back. That inequality is getting worse. Much like the rich that are about to weep and wail as described by the author of James, the wealthy among us—and in this I am not referring to individuals as much as corporations and corporate executives that control the economy—these wealthy are hoarding that

wealth to the point of having their forgotten wardrobes devoured by moths, their gold and silver, which they stole from the worker they employ, rusting away.

A recent study conducted by the Harvard Business School and Thailand's Chulalongkorn University asked respondents what they thought the average CEO to worker pay ratio was currently in the United States. Most folks guessed that the ratio was 30-to-1.<sup>4</sup> In actuality, it is more than 300-to-1, with some estimates as high as 350-to-1.<sup>5</sup> Now, many will say that these CEOs have earned their keep, that they bring that much value to the companies that they lead. Ok, that's difficult to believe, but ok. But when do the Marias of the world begin to earn what they are worth? When do the men and women who are working multiple jobs seven days a week begin to be able to take care of their families?

As people of faith, concerned about the world around us, we should be especially concerned about the growing economic inequality in our world today. While that inequality has created more and more poor and homeless families and hungry children, the problems of economic inequality go far beyond those realities. Gun violence, for instance, an epidemic in itself, is directly connected to economic and racial inequality...and a system designed to keep the poor poor, no matter how hard they work. When you don't have enough to make ends meet, when you yourself are the victim of economic violence, physical and deadly violence really do make sense. And there are countless other problems in our society that are created or made worse by greed and inequality.

Educational achievement gaps, lack of adequate and affordable health care, rising instances of suicides and drug overdoses, home foreclosures and the depleting of our environment all could be added to the list, along with many more. Our system of inequality has created an unequal human community, indeed, two societies, those that have—wealth and whiteness, power and control—and those that do not.

So, what are we, as a Church to do? The answer seems clear on paper—we put the poor first, giving them what we call a preferential option even. And then we do, on occasion. We make sandwiches and soup, set up some cots in the basement and call it a day. But yet tomorrow, Maria Fernandes, on a full stomach, still dies of gasoline poisoning between shifts at the donut shop. As a Church we have a long and proud history of taking care of the least among us. It is a heritage that we should be proud of. And, we have an academic understanding of Catholic social teaching—from documents and encyclicals to exhortations and episcopal directives. Both of these, the charity that we provide and the academic work we have done and are doing together are important. But, they are not enough.

The opportunity that awaits us now and in the near future—in the midst of a papacy inspired by an overzealous yet endearing saint—is to bring our unique perspective as people of faith to the public discourse. And, in case you haven't noticed, that discussion is happening, often without the benefit of our unique Catholic witness. Imagine the impact we could have if we organized our parishes, our schools, and our entire dioceses to truly speak out and act to bring about significant systematic change around these issues?

There is much that we can argue about, from doctrine and dogma to vestments and incense and the nature of love. Some of that dialogue is fruitful, some of it not as much. But the world that we are called to serve, the people of God that we have been sent to minister to, are suffering far too much for us to sit stubbornly in our ideological corners. And the Gospel we preach demands of us to not only feed and clothe, but also to challenge what is wrong and provide witness to what can be.

I have little faith that Washington can ever return to a place of effective governance. The halls of Congress are filled with so much mistrust, anger and pride. The battle lines are drawn, and the sides chosen. The same can be said of our Church today, as we choose sides in the great ideological and doctrinal debates, refusing to dialogue, refusing to consider any ideas other than our own and those of our friends who huddle in the corner with us. When will we realize that this isn't working, that we need to provide a powerful witness, not only to our fellow Christians but also to the world over?

My sense is that the leadership that will move us in this necessary direction won't come from our ordained leaders, but from the laity, the people of God. And that is appropriate, especially as we consider the current public credibility of our bishops and clergy. Legislators at the state and federal level hear regularly from the bishops and their lobbyists, far less often from the unique perspective of the Catholic faithful they represent. Indeed, many of us, our families and our friends, have much more direct personal experiences when it comes to unemployment, food insecurity and the realities of the unequal economy. Our stories must

be told. Telling those stories from a perspective of our faith can and will move the discussion in the right direction and will start the process of bringing about the common good.

*Notes:*

<sup>1</sup> James 5:1-6 (NRSV).

<sup>2</sup> Rachel L. Swarns, “For a Worker With Little Time Between Three Jobs, a Nap Has Fatal Consequences,” *New York Times* (29 September 2014): A19.

<sup>3</sup> Jared Bernstein, “Minimum Wage: Who Makes It?” *Upshot* blog, *New York Times* (9 June 2014) accessed electronically, 23 February 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Gretchen Gavett, “CEOs Get Paid Too Much, According to Pretty Much Everyone in the World,” *Harvard Business Review* (23 September 2014).

<sup>5</sup> “The lack of awareness of the gap in CEO to unskilled worker pay – which in the U.S. people estimate to be 30 to 1 but is in fact 350 to 1 – likely reduces citizens’ desire to take action to decrease that gap,” said Harvard’s Michael Norton, quoted by Gavett, see note 4.