

# Distributism



# Distributism

An economic theory according to which property ownership is a fundamental right which should be extended as widely as possible rather than being centralized under the control of the state or of capital.

# Biblical Basis for Distributism

“Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years. 9 Then have the trumpet sounded everywhere on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the Day of Atonement sound the trumpet throughout your land. 10 Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you.”

- Leviticus 25.



# Biblical Basis for Distributism

Jesus said: “Beware! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.”

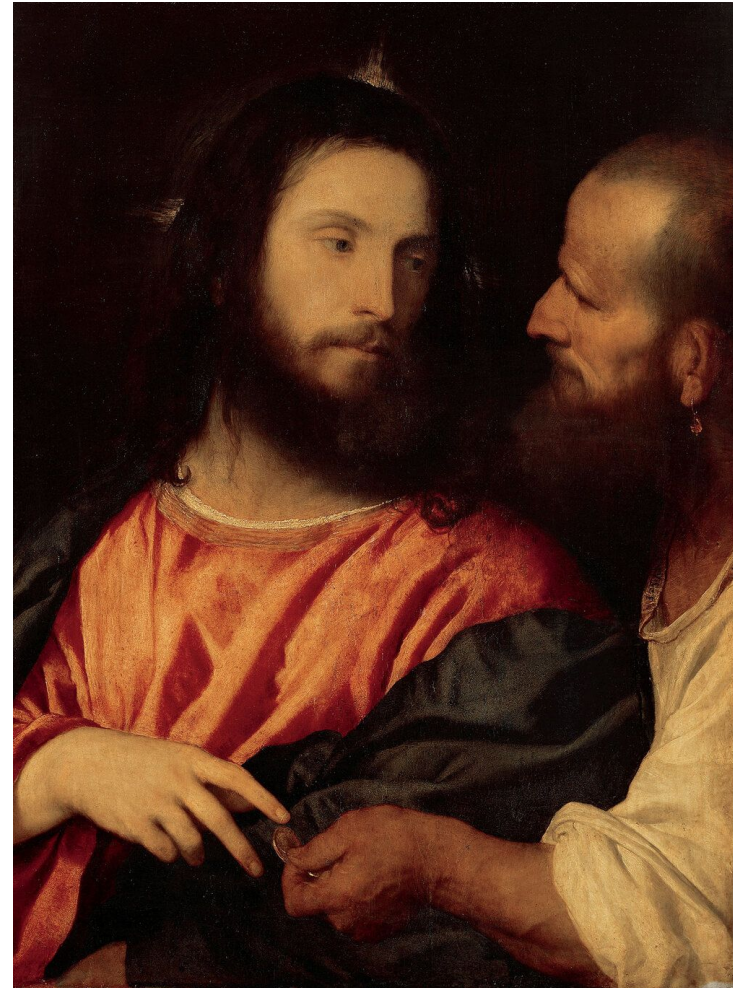
And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’”

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I’ll say to myself, ‘You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.’”

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

- Luke 11



# Private Property

“According to right reason the use of things ought to belong to human beings in a way that conduces to peaceful dealings in society and to meeting people’s needs. And in the state of innocence having the use of things in common was more efficacious for these purposes than private property, since at that time no one would have laid claim to what someone else needed, and it would not have been necessary for anyone to wrest what he needed from another by violence. Rather, each person would claim whatever he came across first for his own need. Also, in that way there would have been a greater abundance to meet everyone’s needs than if one person’s use of something were forestalled because someone else had appropriated that thing for himself.”

- Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*.





# Distributive Justice

“Particular justice is directed to the private individual, who is compared to the community as a part to the whole. Now a twofold order may be considered in relation to a part. **In the first place there is the order of one part to another, to which corresponds the order of one private individual to another. This order is directed by commutative justice, which is concerned about the mutual dealings between two persons. In the second place there is the order of the whole towards the parts, to which corresponds the order of that which belongs to the community in relation to each single person. This order is directed by distributive justice, which distributes common goods proportionately.** Hence there are two species of justice, distributive and commutative.”

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2 Q61, A1.



# Distributive Justice

“Two things are competent to man in respect of exterior things. One is the power to procure and dispense them, and in this regard it is lawful for man to possess property. Moreover this is necessary to human life for three reasons. First because every man is more careful to procure what is for himself alone than that which is common to many or to all: since each one would shirk the labor and leave to another that which concerns the community, as happens where there is a great number of servants. Secondly, because human affairs are conducted in more orderly fashion if each man is charged with taking care of some particular thing himself, whereas there would be confusion if everyone had to look after any one thing indeterminately. Thirdly, because a more peaceful state is ensured to man if each one is contented with his own. Hence it is to be observed that quarrels arise more frequently where there is no division of the things possessed.”

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2 Q66, A2.





# Distributive Justice

“The second thing that is competent to man with regard to external things is their use. On this respect man ought to possess external things, not as his own, but as common, so that, to wit, he is ready to communicate them to others in their need.”

- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2 Q66, A2.

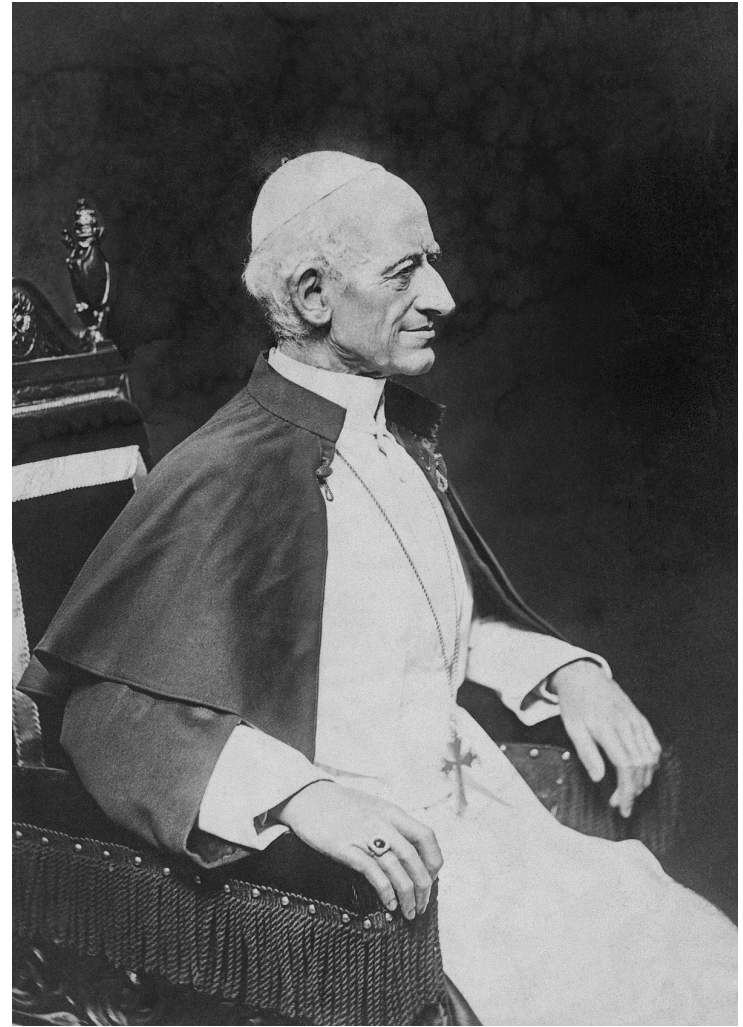




# Private Property

“The fact that God has given the earth for the use and enjoyment of the whole human race can in no way be a bar to the owning of private property. For God has granted the earth to mankind in general, not in the sense that all without distinction can deal with it as they like, but rather that no part of it was assigned to any one in particular, and that the limits of private possession have been left to be fixed by man's own industry.”

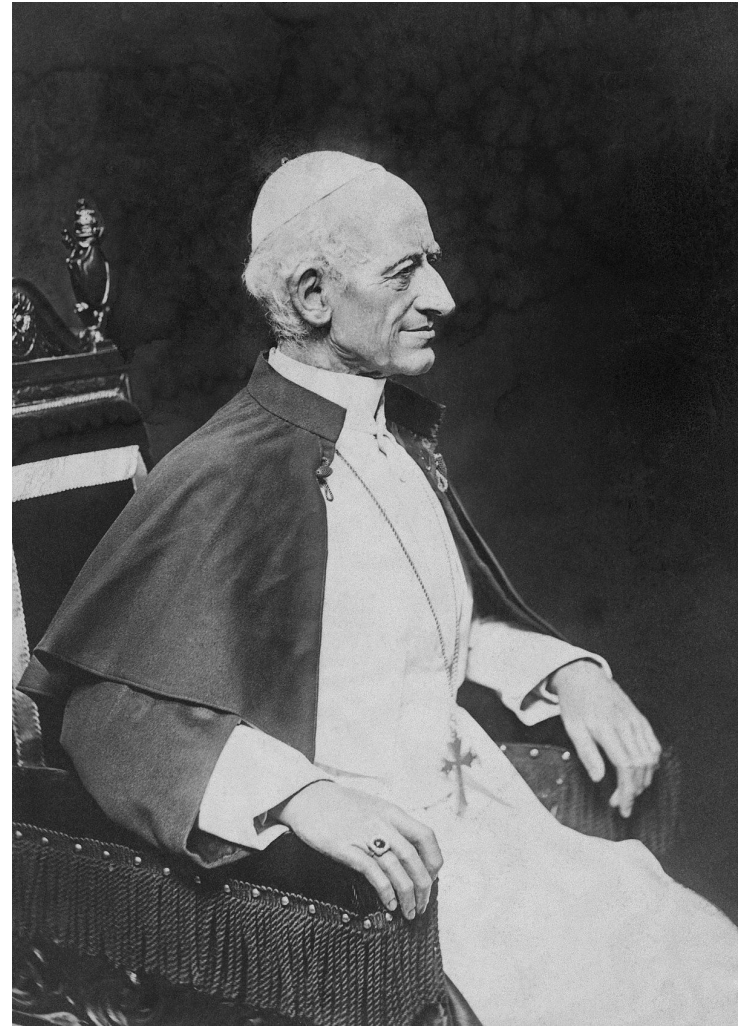
- *Rerum Novarum* (1891)



# Distributism

**“Men always work harder and more readily when they work on that which belongs to them;** nay, they learn to love the very soil that yields in response to the labor of their hands, not only food to eat, but an abundance of good things for themselves and those that are dear to them. That such a spirit of willing labor would add to the produce of the earth and to the wealth of the community is self evident. And a third advantage would spring from this: men would cling to the country in which they were born, for no one would exchange his country for a foreign land if his own afforded him the means of living a decent and happy life.”

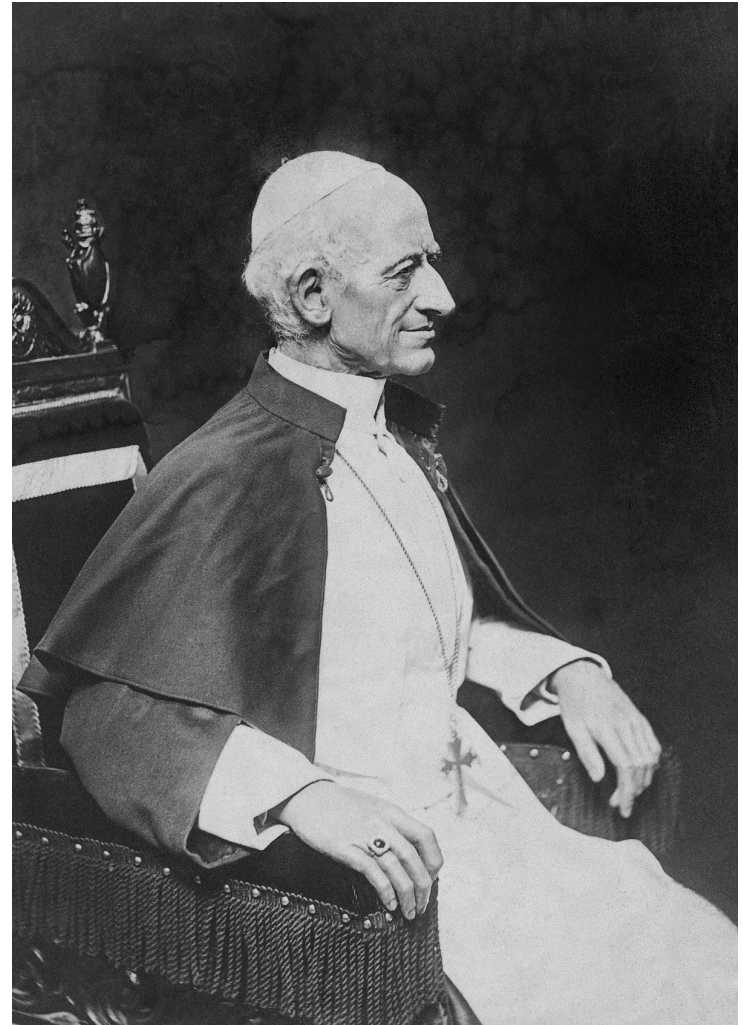
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# Distributism

“Great labor question cannot be solved save by assuming as a principle that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable. The law, therefore, should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners. Many excellent results will follow from this; and, first of all, property will certainly become more equitably divided. For, the result of civil change and revolution has been to divide cities into two classes separated by a wide chasm. On the one side there is the party which holds power because it holds wealth; which has in its grasp the whole of labor and trade; which manipulates for its own benefit and its own purposes all the sources of supply, and which is not without influence even in the administration of the commonwealth. On the other side there is the needy and powerless multitude, sick and sore in spirit and ever ready for disturbance. If working people can be encouraged to look forward to obtaining a share in the land, the consequence will be that the gulf between vast wealth and sheer poverty will be bridged.”

- *Rerum Novarum* (1891)





# Hilaire Belloc

A state of society in which the families composing it are, in a determining number, owners of the land and the means of production as well as themselves the human agents of production (that is, the people who by their human energy produce wealth with those means of production), is probably the oldest, and certainly the most commonly found of all states of society... It gives freedom: that is, the exercise of one's will. A family possessed of the means of production—the simplest form of which is the possession of land and of the implements and capital for working the land—cannot be controlled by others. Of course, various producers specialise, and through exchange one with the other they become more or less interdependent, but still, each one can live “on his own”: each one can stand out, if necessary, from pressure exercised against him by another.

- Hilaire Belloc, *Economics for Helen* (1924).



# GK Chesterton

“Property is merely the art of the democracy. It means that every man should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of heaven. But because he is not God, only a graven image of God, his self-expression must deal with limits; properly with limits that are strict and even small. **I am well aware that the word "property" has been defiled in our time by the corruption of the greedy capitalists. One would think, to hear people talk, that the Rothschilds and the Rockefellers were on the side of property. But obviously they are the enemies of property; because they are enemies of their own limitations.** They do not want their own land; but other people's. When they remove their neighbor's landmark, they also remove their own. A man who loves a little triangular field ought to love it because it is triangular; anyone who destroys the shape, by giving him more land, is a thief who has stolen a triangle. **A man with the true poetry of possession wishes to see the wall where his garden meets Smith's garden; the hedge where his farm touches Brown's. He cannot see the shape of his own land unless he sees the edges of his neighbor's. It is the negation of property that the Duke of Sutherland should have all the farms in one estate; just as it would be the negation of marriage if he had all our wives in one harem.**”

- *What is wrong with the World* (1911).



## SPEAKS FOR SPANISH AID



Father Michael O'Flanagan, one-time Sinn Fein vice-president, who is touring the U. S. to plead for medical aid for Basque Catholics and other Spanish loyalists under the auspices of the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy, 381 Fourth Ave., New York City. "There will be more of the spirit of religion in Spain if democratic government is established over the entire country," the priest says. He is shown wearing special glasses he invented to protect divers' eyes.

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# José María Arizmendiarieta

“The right to private property is good in that it maintains the freedom of its owner, but it is not good if this limits or deprives others of their freedom. Therefore, we must do what best fits our personal identity with that which is ours, but considering what we do within the community in which we live, because by not taking this into account we could act in ways that are detrimental to others. Having property or material goods does not give the right to abuse them. In the end none of us can feel we are the creators of these goods to the point of being able to claim an absolute right to their ultimate use. Many people have taken part in the existence and promotion of these goods, and thus the consideration of and effect on the common good must prevail in their use and practical applications.”

- José María Arizmendiarieta, *Reflections* (1965).



“We feel that what anyone possesses beyond basic needs does not belong to him but rather to the poor who are without it. We believe in a withdrawal from the capitalist system so far as each one is able to do so. Toward this end **we favor the establishment of a distributist economy wherein those who have a vocation to the land will work on the farms surrounding the village and those who have other vocations will work in the village itself. In this way we will have a decentralized economy which will dispense with the State as we know it and will be federationist in character as was society during the period that preceded the rise of national states.** We believe in worker-ownership of the means of production and distribution, as distinguished from nationalization.” - *Catholic Worker*, vol. 31, no. 10 (May 1965)

There were two farms, actually, at Easton, the upper and lower farm, and it was on the lower farm that most of us were housed and where we had our retreats every summer. There was one old house, two large barns, one of which we

# E.F. Schumacher

“In small-scale enterprise, private ownership is natural, fruitful, and just.

In medium-scale enterprise, private ownership is already to a large extent functionally unnecessary. The idea of 'property' becomes strained, unfruitful, and unjust. If there is only one owner or a small group of owners, there can be, and should be, a voluntary surrender of privilege to the wider group of actual workers. Such an act of generosity may be unlikely when there is a large number of anonymous shareholders, but legislation could pave the way even then.

In large-scale enterprise, private ownership is a fiction for the purpose of enabling functionless owners to live parasitically on the labour of others. It is not only unjust but also an irrational element which distorts all relationships within the enterprise.”

- E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (1971).





# Pope Francis

“The economy should not be a mechanism for accumulating goods, but rather the proper administration of our common home. This entails a commitment to care for that home and to the fitting distribution of its goods among all. It is not only about ensuring a supply of food or decent sustenance.”

- Pope Francis.



# Questions

1. Is Aquinas right when he says that: “every man is more careful to procure what is for himself alone than that which is common to many or to all: since each one would shirk the labor and leave to another that which concerns the community”?
2. Is Distributism possible without authoritarianism?
3. Would a distributist system dispense with the need for the state?
4. “Distributism is sentimentalist, naive and impractical.” Do you agree?