

# FAITH MATTERS

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## WHAT I LEARNED FROM MICHAEL NOVAK

BY ROBERT A. SIRICO





I first read Michael Novak's groundbreaking work *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* when it was published in 1982, before I entered seminary at the Catholic University of America. The book's dialogue between economics and theology made a deep impression on me, as it did thousands of others. I wrote the author and asked if we might meet once I arrived in Washington. Thus began a friendship that lasted until Novak's death last year.

The first anniversary of his passing, Feb. 17, comes at a difficult time. Americans face an uncertain economy and deadlocked government. A vocal critic of capitalism leads the Catholic Church. Young people are showing a strange attraction to socialism, as are many Christians who might have been expected to sustain Novak's philosophy of virtuous capitalism. The U.S. lacks leaders who combine prudence and moral vision.

I was intrigued to find a theologian who was familiar with writers like Friedrich Hayek. I sought his mentorship as I began my theological studies at a time when much of the academy was enamored with Marxist "liberation theology." I even suggested that Novak squarely address that movement, which he did in another book, *Will It Liberate? Questions About Liberation Theology* (1986).



Even though we were from different generations, I soon found many parallels in our intellectual and religious trajectories. We had both identified as men of the left in early life. Over time we moved from advocating some form of democratic socialism to supporting the free economy. We spent decades defending free-market democracy as the system that best reflected the truth about man.

Novak's philosophical and theological formation prepared him well. He had entered seminary at 14 and completed his formation, but he withdrew before being ordained. He became a Vatican correspondent after earning degrees in theology, history and philosophy from Harvard and the Pontifical Gregorian University.

Novak began his public career in Rome during the Second Vatican Council, and he wrote in proximity to the events and debates of the time. As the church worked to define human values such as freedom and conscience, Novak argued that theories of life should be grounded in perceptible truths. He believed this perspective to be best expressed in

what he called the most "American" of the council's documents, "Dignitatis Humanae," a treatment on religious liberty and the rights of conscience.

While his appreciation for the church's traditions deepened over time, he also believed Catholics needed to engage with outsiders. I believe most of his friends and intellectual colleagues were non-Catholics.

For an American Catholic of Novak's age, ethnicity and class, the Democratic Party was the natural place to call home. But his politics began to shift in the 1970s and 1980s. More than anything, the issue that alienated Catholics from the Democratic Party was the latter's increasing embrace of abortion after Roe v. Wade.

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morality into a national, and even international, conversation within religious and secular circles.

The often hostile reaction from his erstwhile colleagues on the left struck me as more emotional than rational. Whatever else Novak was in his writings, “thin” does not describe the scope and complexity of his thought. He eschewed anger, but expressed a pleading tone in his responses to critiques, which he took as invitations to refine his arguments. His courteous demeanor was key to his persuasiveness.

People often ask me about Novak’s impact on the thinking of Pope John Paul II. Anyone reading the Polish pontiff and Novak in parallel quickly recognizes that Novak’s engagement with Smith, Hayek, Mises and Israel Kirzner would

have strongly resonated with John Paul, who was deeply interested in the workings of human choice and creative action. The pope was familiar with Novak’s thought, especially *The Spirit*. Through that and other writings, Novak’s ideas shaped important sections of John Paul’s 1991 encyclical, “Centesimus Annus.”

The loss of a mentor is difficult — but a legacy is a precious inheritance. Recalling those decades, I am grateful for Michael Novak’s example of intellectual curiosity and engagement in intense yet civilized debate. Likewise for his model of diligent work, and for helping me see the critical distinction between a person and an individual. And I will never forget the artistry of his well-made Manhattans and the joy of many memorable dinners with comrades in arms.





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Rev. Robert A. Sirico received his Master of Divinity degree from the Catholic University of America following undergraduate study at the University of Southern California and the University of London. During his studies and early ministry, he experienced a growing concern over the lack of training religious studies students receive in fundamental economic principles, leaving them poorly equipped to understand and address today's social problems. As a result of these concerns, Fr. Sirico co-founded the Acton Institute with Kris Alan Mauren in 1990.

As president of the Acton Institute, Fr. Sirico lectures at colleges, universities, and business organizations throughout the U.S. and abroad. His writings on religious, political, economic, and social matters are published in a variety of journals, including: the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, the *London Financial Times*, the *Washington Times*, the *Detroit News*, and *National Review*. Fr. Sirico is often called upon by members of the broadcast media for statements regarding economics, civil rights, and issues of religious concern, and has provided commentary for CNN, ABC, the BBC, NPR, and CBS' 60 Minutes, among others.



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