Most of us have been raised to believe that we have the right to possess whatever comes to us honestly, either through our own work or through legitimate inheritance. No matter how large that wealth might be, it’s ours as long as we didn’t cheat anyone along the way. By and large, this belief has been enshrined in the laws of democratic countries and we generally believe that it is morally sanctioned by the Christianity.

Partly this is all true, but it needs a lot of qualification. From scripture, through Jesus, through the social teachings of the churches, through papal encyclicals from Leo XIII through John Paul II, the right to private ownership and private wealth is mitigated by a number of moral principles. Let me list a number of those principles (which are taught with the weight of Ordinary Magisterium within Roman Catholicism and the ecclesial equivalent of that in most Protestant churches). For Roman Catholics, I will list the major references to church documents:

• God intended the earth and everything in it for the sake of all human beings. Thus, in justice, created goods should flow fairly to all. All other rights are subordinated to this principle. (Gaudium et Spes 69 - 1965, Popularum Progressio 22 - 1967) We do have a right to private ownership and no one may ever deny us of this right (Rerum Novarum 3-5 - 1891, Quadregesimo Anno 44-56 - 1931, Mater et Magistra 109 - 1961) but that right is subordinated to the common good, to the fact that goods are intended for everyone. (Laborem Exercens 14 - 1981) Wealth and possessions must be understood as ours to steward rather than to possess absolutely. (Rerum Novarum 18-19 - 1891)

• No person (or nation) may have a surplus if others do not have the basic necessities. (Rerum Novarum 19 - 1891, Quadregesimo Anno 50-51 - 1931, Mater et Magistra 119-121 & 157-165 - 1961, Popularum Progressio 230 - 1967) Thus, no one may appropriate surplus goods solely for his own private use when others lack the bare necessities for life. (Popularum Progressio 23) People are obliged to come to the relief of the poor and if a person is in extreme necessity he has the right to take from the riches of others what he needs. (Gaudium et Spes 69 - 1931)

• The present economic situation in the world must be redressed. (Popularum Progressio 6,26,32 - 1967, Gaudium et Spes 66 - 1961, Octogesimus Adveniens 43 – 1971, Sollectitudo Rei Socialis 43 -1987) Thus the law of supply and demand, free enterprise, competition, the profit motive, and the private ownership of the means of production may not be given complete free reign. They are not absolute rights and are only good within certain limits. (Popularum Progressio 26 - 1967, Quadragesimo Anno 88, 110 - 1931)

• In regards to the private ownership of industry and the means of production, two extremes are to be avoided: Unbridled capitalism on the one hand, and complete socialism on the other. (Quadregesimo Anno 46, 55, 111-12 - 1931)

• Governments must respect the principle of subsidiarity and intervene only when necessary. (Rerum Novarum 28-29 - 1891, Quadragesimo Anno 79-80 - 1931,
Mater et Magistra 117-15 - 1961) However when the common good demands it, they not only may step in, they are obliged to do so. (Popularum Progressio 24, 33 - 1967, Mater et Magistra 53 - 2961, Gaudium et Spes 71 - 1931) As well certain forms of property should be reserved for the state since they carry with them an opportunity of domination too great to be left to private individuals. (Quadragesimo Anno 114 - 1931, Mater et Magistra 11 - 1961)

• Governments may never sacrifice the individual to the collectivity because the individual is prior to civil society and society must be directed towards him or her. (Mater et Magistra 109 - 1961, Quadragesimo Anno 26 - 1931)

• Employers must pay wages which allow the worker to live in a “reasonable and frugal comfort” (Rerum Novarum 34) and wages may not simply be a question of what contract a worker will accept. Conversely, workers may not claim that the produce and profits which are not required to repair and replace invested capital belong by right to them (Quadragesimo Anno 55, 114 - 1931) and they must negotiate their wages with the common good in mind. (Quadragesimo Anno 119 - 1931, Mater et Magistra 11 - 1961) As is the case with the employer, it is not just a question of what kind of contract can be extracted.

• Both the workers and the employers have an equal duty to be concerned for the common good. (Laborem Exercens 20 - 1981)

• And, the condemnation of injustice is part of the ministry of evangelization and is an integral aspect of the Church’s prophetic role. (Scollectitudo Rei Socialis 4 - 1987)

The church has history on its side in teaching these principles. The failure of Marxism in Eastern Europe highlights precisely that an attempt to create justice for everyone without sufficiently factoring in the place of private profit and private wealth (not to mention God or love) doesn’t lead to prosperity and justice, just as our present economic crisis highlights that an unregulated profit motive doesn’t lead to prosperity and justice either. There is a middle road, and the Church’s social teachings are that road-map.

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