

PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANS SHOULD NOT OPPOSE THE EXPANSION OF NAFTA

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Introduction

On September 16, 1997, President Bill Clinton officially requested “fast track” authority from Congress in order to negotiate an expansion of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to include Chile and other Latin American countries. In October, Network, a national Catholic social justice lobby established by religious orders of women, took a strong stand against giving the President “fast track” authority.¹ Although I am in agreement with the values that form Network’s perspective and am in sympathy with the critique of NAFTA, I do not think progressive Christians should oppose fast track authority and the expansion of NAFTA.

The NAFTA is certainly controversial, and, like many people, I am ambivalent about the issue. While protecting the rights of workers and the environment is absolutely necessary, I think opposing free trade agreements is wrong-headed because it will ultimately be detrimental to the poor in developing countries and to the common good. Progressive Christians should focus on strengthening provisions regarding workers’ rights and the environment within free trade agreements rather than opposing the agreements themselves.

This article will examine the controversy about NAFTA and argue for its expansion and its modification on the basis of Catholic social thought. First the history of the debate will be briefly rehearsed, then the key principles of Catholic social thought related to economic development will be articulated. It seems to me that some of the arguments of both critics and supporters are somewhat disingenuous. Thus both positions will be presented and then examined for bad faith or half-truths. Finally a constructive agenda for progressive Christians regarding free trade will be suggested.