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OPINION

Catholic Church needs property to fulfil its mission

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Timothy Reichert's "Christian Ownership Maximalism," in the December 2025 *First Things* , ought to hit Catholic leaders like a brick through a stained-glass window. It is one of the few recent essays that refuses to indulge the pleasant fantasies on which our ecclesial

elites have overdosed: that Christendom's collapse is a "new Pentecost," that power is dirty, that poverty is glamorous, and that relevance will magically materialize if we keep "accompanying" the culture as it marches us to the margins.

Reichert rejects the delusion. His argument is simple: Christians lost the world because they stopped owning it. And if Catholics want to shape anything—schools, neighborhoods, culture, politics—then Catholics need to own things again.
This is, apparently, a radical proposition only because many in today's Church has become allergic to realism.

Christendom Is Gone—and Some Bishops Are Cheering

Reichert begins by stating the obvious: the old Catholic "ecosystem"—from medieval Christendom to the immigrant enclaves where incense mingled with chicken cacciatore—is dead.
What is astonishing is that some Church leaders seem relieved. Cardinal Zuppi, head of the Italian bishops' conference, serenely claims that the end of Christianity is almost a doctrinal certainty, a kind of Spirit-led inevitability. If *this* is "renewal," then typhus is "cardio training."

The Benedict Option as a Halfway House to Irrelevance

Rod Dreher's "Benedict Option" tried to diagnose the crisis, but its prescription—retreat into small intentional communities—cannot sustain a global Church. Ghettos, however pious, do not build universities, sustain media, or shape laws. They survive only until the surrounding culture decides it has had enough of their eccentricities.
Retreat is not a strategy; it is a prelude to irrelevance.

Renn's "Negative World" Is Real—but Insufficient

Aaron Renn's *Life in the Negative World* accurately describes our environment: overt Christianity now costs you, faithful Christianity can penalize you. It has showcased this issue among American Protestants, especially Evangelicals. It's a book that hasn't gotten due attention among Catholics – and we have common cause on this problem.

Ownership: The Word Catholic Leaders Treat Like Plutonium

Catholic social teaching has, since Leo XIII, affirmed that property is good and necessary for human flourishing. Unlike silly romantics that seem to act like apostolic Jerusalem was the world's first people's republic, the Church recognized private ownership is a human right. But Reichert emphasizes what modern Catholics don't seem to grasp: not all property is equal.
A million dollars in gadgets is dependence. A million-dollar enterprise is independence.

The former consumes. The latter shapes society's tastes, priorities, and possibilities and choices.

Guess which one Christians used to have? Guess which one we now moralize against?

The Qualitative Distinctiveness of Christian Ownership

A society owned entirely by non-Christians will never prioritize Christian values nor produce a Christian culture. That's why it's vital for Christians to own the means of production.

There is, of course, no guarantee Christian owners will be driven by Christian values, anymore than Catholic politicians have shown themselves faithful proponents of Catholic teaching in public life. But intentional Christians will be driven by Christian values. The question is whether we, as a Church, prioritize the formation of such Christians and see such a project as part of the Church's institutional mission.

Still, his core argument stands: Pious consumers don't shape history. Owners do.

Bishops Selling Church Property Like Pawn Brokers

Nothing illustrates Reichert's point more vividly than the American bishops' panic-driven liquidation of parish properties, especially in northeastern and Midwestern dioceses. They call it "stewardship." In reality it's a chancery equivalent of a garage sale to fund operating expenses, meaning it is received, spent and gone.

Once sold, Catholic land never returns. But the buyers gain appreciating assets and strategic leverage. The infrastructure lost to the Church could, with some creativity, been repurposed to Church mission. What's going on in "local Church renewal" in the United States is *not* stewardship. This is self-inflicted institutional amputation.

Masciullo's Rebuke: A Poor Church Harms the Poor

Gaetano Masciullo exposes what liberation-theology romantics refuse to acknowledge: a Church without capital cannot help the poor. A Church dependent on government grants cannot speak prophetically. There's nothing worse for the poor than a "poor Church for the poor."

The USCCB's migrant ministries are Exhibit A. They insisted their operations were driven by Christian charity, not federal contracts. Assume that's true. Still, when the money shrank, so did their outreach. A Church with income-producing assets wouldn't have to curtail operations whenever Caesar tightens the purse strings.

Catholicism Needs an Ecosystem—Not More Slogans

Masciullo calls for a Catholic "ecosystem"—schools, universities, newspapers, television stations, publishing houses, and digital platforms built on Catholic capital. We need Catholic entrepreneurs with the courage to use their influence.

Faith is not sustained merely by individuals or, at best, families. A culture (or anti-culture) transmits values (or anti-values) absorbed like the air we breathe. This is not a luxury.

But building it requires money, not platitudes. And it requires rejecting the theological allergy to prosperity cultivated by clerics who have never really worried about a heating bill.

Poland vs. Québec: Atmospheric Catholicism vs. Cultural Evaporation

Giles Fraser explains the contrast perfectly. Poland's Catholicism, although under pressure, persists on a social level because it continues to infuse the cultural air. Québec's collapsed because Catholicism there was reduced to a hobby—one other option among Sunday soccer and Netflix.

Atmospheric Catholicism requires infrastructure. Infrastructure requires ownership. Ownership requires capital. A Church that owns nothing forms nothing.

Where Reichert Is Right

Reichert is right that ownership is the missing ingredient in the Catholic response to cultural decline. He is right that Christian property, wielded purposefully, can redirect society. He is right that Catholics cannot survive—much less evangelize—while economically neutered.

Where he needs to be supplemented in saying out loud: Catholic leaders themselves surrendered our institutions. Hospitals, universities, publishing houses—these were not stolen. They were secularized by our own hands.

A Church that will not wield power will inevitably be ruled by those who do.

Conclusion: The Paper Tiger Church Must Become an Ownership Church

Reichert's "Christian Ownership Maximalism" is not extreme. It is basic.It's oxygen after decades of ecclesial suffocation.

The Church evangelized the world once because it owned things—land, schools, hospitals, guilds, ministries, presses, universities. It will not evangelize again by selling parishes, closing schools, and praising a "poor Church" that cannot even afford its own mission.

The bottom line is this: Either Catholics become an ownership class again—building, buying, controlling, shaping—or we can drop the pretense and accept our role as well-behaved serfs in someone else's empire.