

A TRIBUTE TO EDMUND A. OPITZ

by Robert Sirico

It is customary on occasions such as this to begin by stating what an honor it is to have been asked to speak. And the challenge with which I find myself confronted is how to express to you my deep sense of privilege without it sounding in any way perfunctory.

The best way in which I can do that is, perhaps, indulgent, but being a Catholic, I tend to believe in indulgences, within the requisite boundaries—and I consider this occasion to meet that standard.

I was born not more than fifty miles due south of this compound, at the Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, into a hard-working, blue-collar Italian family. I went to school in a multicultural and ecumenical context, long before the words *multicultural* or *ecumenical* were employed in common parlance.

I will relate only one of the images etched in my mind which formed the initial soil that would harbor and nourish the seeds which would come to fruition at a somewhat later date—seeds which this institution, in general, and Edmund Opitz, in particular, had something to do with scattering and planting.

The image to which I refer is of an elderly Jewish lady who lived across from my family's railroad flat above Coney Island Avenue. Mrs. Snyder had, what seemed to a child of six, the magic ability to cause the

most luscious, aromatic, and sweet smells imaginable to emanate from her old Wedgewood stove.

I recall sitting at our kitchen window as she would gather and pour all her ingredients into a large mixing bowl, creating a doughy substance, which she would then pluck from the bowl, piece by piece, and place on a cookie sheet. This she would then place into the oven which, in a short time, would result in an aroma that was so rich that you could almost see it wafting between our two windows.

A few minutes later, which seemed like an eternity, Mrs. Snyder would remove that tray, replacing it with another, and place the now finished product on her windowsill to cool.

I watched this ritual intently, and when the temperature of the cookies had dropped, but not so much that they weren't still warm, Mrs. Snyder would beckon me in her thick Central European accent: "You'll come and I'll give you some." I hopped out my window and walked—floated is perhaps a more apt word to describe the sensation—the few feet to her window.

One summer day when Mrs. Snyder, in a short-sleeved calico dress, filled my hands with a napkin overflowing with her treasures, I noticed something on her forearm.

I didn't say anything to her, but when I climbed back into my kitchen, I asked my mother why Mrs. Snyder had numbers on her arm.

Mr. Robert Sirico, President of the Acton Institute, made these remarks on the occasion of the retirement dinner of Mr. Edmund Opitz at the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington, New York, on December 13, 1992.

My mother explained, as best she could to one so young, that because of their religion Mr. and Mrs. Snyder had been treated like animals and branded.

That remembrance of the attempt to use force over the human conscience stays with me to this day. But, at the time, and for many years after it, I found myself confused when I tried to make sense of the interrelationship of liberty and religion.

It was when I was in my mid-twenties, still not having made a coherent connection between these ideas, that a friend visited. (It was my birthday.) We had had numerous conversations, indeed arguments, about philosophy, economics, politics, and religion.

I was, at the time, I confess, ensnared in the fog of socialist rhetoric, there being little else intellectually about socialism to ensnare one. The birthday present my friend arrived with that day was a small library of books and magazines. Among them were titles with which this gathering will be familiar: *Socialism*, by Ludwig von Mises, *Capitalism and the Historians* and *The Road to Serfdom*, by F. A. Hayek, *The Law*, by Frederic Bastiat, *The Freeman*, and, of course, *Religion and Capitalism: Allies, Not Enemies*, by Edmund Opitz.

In a short period of time the fog cleared, proving once again the truth of the old saying: "You may be a socialist when you're young because you have a heart, but you won't be a socialist when you're older if you have any brains."

Thus, I began to read *The Freeman* and have been assisted in ways too countless to enumerate by the wise, prudent, temperate, and erudite contributions of Ed Opitz.

Not only his scholarship, but his very example as a Christian gentleman assured me of the possibility of integrating virtue and liberty in one's life and society.

It came to pass that I recovered my earlier faith, and thanks in significant part to the existence of The Foundation for Economic Education and the cogitations of Ed over the years, I was duly inoculated against the specious claims of the left by the time I entered seminary to study for the priesthood.

But you, of all people, have heard this

kind of story many times over. And this is because The Foundation for Economic Education, and Ed Opitz, have simply become a part of the landscape of liberty in this century.

In the days when central planning was the unquestioned course of public policy, and when religious leaders taught variations on the theme that socialism was the practice of which Christianity was the religion—there was Ed Opitz, in a plethora of articles, boldly, yet calmly, adamantly, yet with respect, indicating with the most gentle and genteel of manners, that, in point of fact, the Emperor had no clothes. Before there was such a thing as liberation theology, Mr. Opitz provided the antidote to that theological and economic heresy.

Not more than four years ago, Europe was in the literal death grip of history's most brutal institutionalization of collectivism. With great prescience Ludwig von Mises, of esteemed memory, and no stranger to these very corridors, demonstrated in the 1920s that socialism would fail because it interfered with the coordination of information as expressed in the free market's pricing system. In the late 1980s, that economic insight was combined with the spiritual nudge which caused the colossal wreck of Communism to cave in on itself.

This was the very integration made flesh—whether the Pentecostals in Russia, the Soviet Jews, the Evangelicals in Hungary, or the Catholics in Poland—this was the incarnation of the theory of the alliance of religion and freedom which formed the *leitmotif* of Ed Opitz's work over the years.

If this venerable institution on the Hudson is the mother of all free-market think tanks, then Ed Opitz is one of the patriarchs of liberty-promoting clergy.

I am, in a sense, an heir to his legacy, and it is with an overwhelming sense of gratitude to Almighty God that I am aware of being merely one of Ed's intellectual descendants, though luckier than the others, because it is I who have the honor of giving voice to what I feel sure each of them would say.

Ed, in my person, your children rise up to call you blessed. In their name, I thank you. □

THE FREEMAN CLASSICS SERIES

by John Chamberlain

FREE, under the new dispensation of Hans Sennholz, has decided to refine the gold it has scattered about in its publications, particularly *The Freeman* magazine. By the beginning of 1993 it had published three collections: one, called *The Morality of Capitalism*; another, *Private Property and Political Control*; and the third, *Prices and Price Controls*. In addition, it has published a collection of many of the *Freeman* essays written by Henry Hazlitt, who died in July at age 98.

The authors of the books are well aware that capitalism is not perfect. They are also aware of the fact that capitalism is, to quote editor Mark Hendrickson, "morally as well as economically superior to every known alternative, such as socialism or the welfare state." Hans Sennholz does an informative introduction to *The Morality of Capitalism*. He notes that the critics of private property never tire of berating the profit motive. The critics "rail at successful merchants and shopkeepers, at wealthy bankers, stockbrokers, and capitalists." The critics "rave at advertising, marketing, and other business practices designed to inform and influence people in making economic decisions." But capitalism has its defenders: Orval Watts, Leonard Read, Ludwig von Mises, F. A. Hayek, Garet Garrett, Israel Kirzner. Their essays on the moral issues of our times have been taken from Paul Poirot's special editing of *The Freeman* over a thirty-year period.

Poirot sets the tone of the books with an

essay entitled "He Gains Most Who Serves Best." A businessman's profits measure his efficiency in the use of scarce and valuable resources to satisfy the most urgent wants of consumers. Ludwig von Mises notes that the consumer calls the turn. But under freedom there must be access to physical property. If the government owns all the printing presses, the possibility of printing opposing arguments becomes practically non-existent.

In his essay, "Think Twice Before You Disparage Capitalism," Perry Gresham says, "Capitalism is the one system of political economy which works, has worked, and will continue to work." The alternative system is socialism which tends toward tyranny and serfdom. Gresham has three pages of lyrical acclamation of capitalism. "It is no relic of Colonial America. It has the genius to change with the times and to meet the challenges of big industries, big unions, and big government if it can free itself from interest-group intervention, which eventuates in needless government spending." Capitalism, an economic system which believes with Locke and Jefferson in life, liberty, and property, and the inalienable rights of man, denies the "banal dichotomy between property values and human values. Property values *are* human values" (italics are Gresham's).

A reason for beginning with the selections in *The Morality of Capitalism* becomes apparent if you turn the whole business