



The 401(k) Is Tearing Society Apart

What if Americans have got retirement all wrong?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Catholic social teaching emphasizes principles such as the universal destination of goods—the idea that the right to private property is secondary to the needs of all—and subsidiarity, which favors local, communal solutions over distant, centralized ones. If we accept these principles, how does the 401(k) model change from being a neutral financial tool to a potential challenge for the Catholic conscience? Specifically, does the “cultural logic” of saving for a private future fundamentally conflict with a religious commitment to immediate communal care?

2. Social analyst Ian Marcus Corbin describes a “gut-level sense of precarity” in America—the fear “that I am alone, that I could fall... and there would be nothing and no one there to catch me.” How does the design of our current retirement system contribute to this psychological isolation? What role should the Church or local community groups play in providing our missing mutual-aid networks?

3. A central tension in the article, and American society at large, is between the “pay yourself first” attitude and the Christian impulse toward generosity and charity. How does one balance this personally and politically in precarious times? Do the article’s policy suggestions do well at marrying the two?

4. Bernhard contrasts the Western “financial-planning axiom” with the cultural logic found in Indonesia and among lower-income U.S. households, where “social spending” is prioritized over individual hoarding. In what ways does the current U.S. retirement system enforce a specific “cultural” view of saving that may be “at odds with caring for others”?

5. Bernhard gives four policy suggestions at the end of the article: incentivize informal networks of care, share the burden of saving, reform tax incentives for everyday people, and increase taxes on the wealthy in order to fund Social Security. Many of these suggestions address only the state. What role could institutions like the Church play?

6. Retirement requires planning for the future. What do we sacrifice for the future and what do we give up when we think too far in advance? How does our planning impact the way we act in the present? Are the impacts worth it?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Ian Marcus Corbin, “What’s Behind America’s Loneliness Crisis?” July/August 2024:
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/whats-behind-americas-loneliness-crisis>

Lynn Casteel Harper, “The Virtues of Solitude,” September 2025: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/virtues-solitude>

Meghan Sullivan, “The Limits of ‘Longtermism,’” February 2023:
<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/limits-longtermism-effective-altruism-bankman-fried>

Collin Miller, “Dying to Work,” December 2025: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/dying-work>

William T. Cavanaugh, “Strange Gods,” January 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/strange-gods>