Thinking about “Economy” through the lenses of Christianity and Catholic Social Thought*
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I. Christianity’s “Widest-Angle” Lens: Work and Economy within God’s Economy

Modern Catholicism engages economic questions from a perspective that emphasizes economy’s inclusive, provisioning purposes, and that situates markets within broader political, cultural, historical, and natural contexts. As a religious tradition that aspires to honor and embrace the fullness of reality from a God-centered perspective, Catholic Christianity roots its reflections on the mundane realities of work and markets in a perspective deeper and wider than that of economics, one that encompasses the spiritual and the transcendent. Seeking to address credibly the economic issues of our day is, for this faith tradition, part and parcel of a calling to witness to (without ever fully controlling, much less fully comprehending) an ultimate mystery of healing Truth and Love: the one God who is Creator, Word, and Spirit, encountered by humanity in the God of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, and most fully in the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Christians, writes Margaret Farley, “The biblical witness...claims to present a truth that will heal us, make us whole; it will free us, not enslave us to what violates our very sense of truth and justice.” Its truth makes, in the words of philosopher Paul Ricoeur, a “nonviolent appeal.” That which is authentically true, in this perspective, answers both “the demands of reason” and the “cries of the human heart.”

Christians who have encountered and set their hearts on this enlightening, beautiful, healing, and freeing truth perceive all of humanity and all of reality as created by God and, hence, valuable. Because all reality is connected to God, all is connected across space, time, and differences. The one, true God of Jesus Christ, believers affirm, abides with and can be encountered within every nook and cranny of God’s creation, from the smallest, seemingly insignificant flora and fauna on earth to the cosmos’s most majestic reaches. Christianity’s sacramental sensibility further claims that God may be reflected and encountered in every aspect of our human species’ being and doing, our cultures and our history.

As its central symbol of the cross (and a savior who died a tortured victim of human evil) attests, Christianity is neither sentimental nor naive. God is present with and for humanity amid lives and histories ravaged by sin, cruelty, suffering, and life-sapping evil of all sorts. And despite Christians’ confession that “our God is an on-time God,” God’s timeframe for the provisioning, enlightenment, healing, and wholeness that suffering people and their communities seek often appears perplexingly long-term and inscrutable.

Biblical faith and human experience thus counsel sober realism concerning the limits that attempts at intra-historical transformation are likely to face. No person, policy, or institution can assure that the good will be fully served. All progress is ambiguous. But this is not the whole story. Christian realism warrants neither withdrawal from, nor acquiescence to a sinful status quo. Faith and human experience also fund a theologically grounded hope that impels action for change, and enables people continually to begin again even in the face of failure. “All serious and upright human conduct is hope in action,” writes Pope Benedict XVI. For Christians,
realism about the weight and persistence of evil, sin, and human limitation is relativized by the more comprehensive reality of the power of God’s Spirit and Jesus’ resurrection, continually present and working within creation and history. Using biblical vocabulary, Pope Francis writes that despite the undeniable power of sin and death, in spite of setbacks, God’s kingdom of justice and wholeness continues to break into the world:

The kingdom of God is already present in this world and is growing, here and there, and in different ways: like the small seed which grows into a great tree (cf. Mt 13:31-32), like the measure of leaven that makes the dough rise (cf. Mt 13:33) and like the good seed that grows amid the weeds (cf. Mt 13, 24-30). The kingdom is here, it returns, it struggles to flourish anew. Christ’s resurrection everywhere calls forth seeds of that new world; even if they are cut back, they grow again, for the resurrection is already secretly woven into the fabric of this history, for Jesus did not rise in vain. May we never remain on the sidelines of this march of living hope!  

Over the centuries, this God-centered understanding of reality has been visualized in many ways. For our purposes, one descriptor found in Scripture and Tradition is especially apt: economy. This term, which derives from the Greek οίκονομια, meaning “the management of a household,” has been used in Christian theology to refer to the full compass of God’s dealings with creation and humanity, as well as more particular narratives of Divine–human relations. In the eras of the New Testament and early Church, the oikos denoted household, house, abode, dwelling place, and its inhabitants; oikonomia, the dynamics of sustaining and properly managing the household for the well-being of its members. Over centuries, Christians continued to use oikonomia to refer to God’s doings with the world, including God’s saving action in and through Christ; while in the wider society, economy continued to describe the management of resources and wealth within households, larger communities, and eventually, nations.

Keeping with the image of economy as a household wherein resources are produced, managed, and distributed in order to provision members’ various needs, we can visualize the different sorts of economies we inhabit as an interconnected set of households within households, each with its own provisioning dynamics. We humans continuously depend upon multiple intersecting and interacting economies to supply our needs and wants, to protect our vulnerabilities, to build up and replenish our capabilities, and to provide the platforms and resources we need to survive, grow, thrive, and contribute. Metaphorically connected like Russian nesting dolls or the pieces of a puzzle, these economies are interacting environments that, quite literally, hold us in life, and enable our well-being.

For Christians and other believers, the most fundamental, all-encompassing household/economy is God’s. Wendell Berry speaks of this as the Great Economy, his term for God’s kingdom—the oikonomia from which nothing is excluded. Embraced and held within the oikonomia of God, “Who was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,” is the created economy of the cosmos in all its vast variety, its ages and stages. Enfolded within this vastness, within our home galaxy and solar system, is the oikonomia, or global ecology, of our small, blue planet Earth, whose own interactive economies of water, air, land, and climate support the existence of biological life, from microbes and manatees to men and women.
As a species dependent on this earthly ecosphere, humanity also depends for its survival upon social interconnections within the globalized political “household” that Martin Luther King Jr. called the world house. What King saw in 1964 is still the case today: this world house, this complex and highly interdependent web of polities, cultures, and nations, each with their own types of local, national, regional, and international governance, comprises essential conditions for the living and thriving of the world’s peoples. Now, as in King’s day, this political household is endangered and fragile. It is collapsing in part, as violence, poverty, racism, social and economic inequality, and the failures of solidarity take their toll.

Civil society, the sphere of associations that are nonmarket and nongovernment, crisscrosses and intersects larger and smaller communities. Both sustaining and dependent on political economies and civil societies are market economies, which comprise the economies of regions and nations, and local communities of cities, towns, and rural areas. Most locally, we find family and household economies, comprising individuals, kith and kin, and proximate neighbors.

Bounded but permeable matrices, these different economies provide sustaining ground, protective shelter, and vital resources that members depend upon, participate in, and according to their capabilities, contribute to and further cultivate. What do people seek to gain by participating in these economies? Keeping with our oikos metaphor, we might say we seek “livelihood.” But what does livelihood entail? Here again, a Christian optic provides both material and spiritual depth perception.

Writing in the 1930s about Catholic teaching’s advocacy for worker justice, priest-economist Msgr. John A. Ryan summarized the elements of economic livelihood as “sufficiency, security, and status.” This triad of aspirations helps describe fundamental needs that people look to any economy to provide. In keeping with Catholicism’s sacramental attunement, Ryan’s words about the material economy can also help image what God’s economy provides and enables us in turn to provide for ourselves and others.

God’s Great Oikonomia envelops, grounds, and surpasses all the other households/economies in which we dwell. Psalm 23, likely the best-known and most beloved psalm among Christians, conjures a profound picture of this deepest, divine matrix of dependency and trust in which we live, move, and have our being. The psalmist evokes earthy images of God, the good shepherd who abundantly provides for our needs, giving us sufficiency; who guides and safeguards our lives, our comings and goings, giving us security; and dignifies us by welcoming us as members of God’s own house/oikos for our whole lives, giving us status.

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
    in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
    my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
    all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house [oikos] of the LORD
    my whole life long.\(^8\)

The sufficiency, security, and status that we look to human and natural economies to provide are, as we know, never assured. As we move through our lives, observes artist Leonora Carrington, “Safety, under any circumstances, is an illusion.”\(^9\) At moments of crisis, this harsh truth becomes starkly evident and can overwhelm us. Even in ordinary circumstances, the precarious that continues to accompany us despite our best efforts can tempt us to march to a drumbeat of fear and anxiety, throwing all our energies into getting and keeping what we feel is needed to quell—or at least muffle—the terror our vulnerability evokes. Psalm 23 speaks to these fundamental fears and anxieties about our safety, our sustenance, and our well-being. Believers over centuries have sensed divine affirmation in its poetic lines: that the security and flourishing we seek is not an illusion, but a hope; a hope that is fulfilled not by our own accomplishment, but in our being embraced graciously within the household and economy of the living God. Our earth and human economies reflect, at their best sacramentalize, but can never replicate or substitute for the durable security, abundant sufficiency, and graciously given status that only comes from walking with and resting in God.

Yet when it comes to engaging in social and economic life, Christians’ profound theological focus on trust in God calls for believers to be neither passive nor sheep. Trust and reliance on God act as support and springboard for believers’ active social engagement and contributions. Monk and spiritual writer Thomas Merton underscores each Christian’s significance, giftedness, and responsibility to contribute actively to God’s Great Economy through service to neighbor and world:

Jesus...constantly reminded His hearers that the Master who had given various talents to His servants would one day return and ask for an accounting....The virtues of faith, hope, and charity, by which we are united to God, are talents given us to be developed....These gifts are given us, remember, not for ourselves alone, but for others as well. The sublime economy of divine love... demands this sharing in merits and graces....One of the most fundamental laws of life is the need to multiply itself....Good is diffusive of itself.\(^10\)

“Every baptism,” Merton continues, citing St. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12–13, “implies a distinct individual vocation, a peculiar function in the building up of the Mystical Body....Each one has something to do. We are not called merely to vegetate in the Mystical Body, but to act and to grow and to help the growth of other members.”\(^11\)
II. Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Engaging Society and Economy

Christians from New Testament times on have reflected on what the gospel means for the nitty-gritty aspects of buying and selling, wealth and poverty, lending and borrowing, work and wages, owning and sharing, and corresponding economic institutions. Over two millennia, successive generations of believers have striven to understand and act upon the implications of their faith within their own particular political, social, and economic circumstances. Continuing this tradition in the modern era, Catholic leaders, scholars, and activists in various countries beginning in the eighteenth century grappled with the impact of modern industrializing economies on the lives of individuals and communities. This modern Catholic percolation of study and action entered ecclesial and public discourse in a new way when Pope Leo XIII issued his encyclical *Rerum novarum* in May 1891. This groundbreaking document offered Catholic social teaching on “labor and capital” and “the condition of the working classes” in the new circumstances of modern economies. Using arguments meant to be accessible not only to Christians but to anyone with “right reason,” and widely reported and discussed in the churches and secular press of the day, Leo’s letter became the first in a now 125-year stream of publicly promulgated Church teachings on economic and social matters. As an important subset of the broader Catholic social tradition, modern Catholic social teaching (CST) seeks to articulate and promote “an integral and solidary humanism capable of creating a new social, economic and political order, founded on the dignity and freedom of every human person, to be brought about in peace, justice and solidarity.”

Central themes that shape CST include, first, reverence for human dignity and respect for life of each and every human being, “from womb to tomb,” and a commitment to ensuring the material and social conditions for inclusive human flourishing; a relational view of reality that emphasizes social interdependence and the common good; a multi-associational vision of political life that stresses both subsidiarity—that is, the value of locating power and decision-making at local levels of organization—and an active role for governmental authority in ensuring the well-being of citizens and communities; a stress on the dignity of work and the rights of workers to a livelihood for themselves and their families; an understanding of the universal purpose of created goods (God intends the resources of creation to serve the well-being of all) that requires equitable sharing and use of the world’s resources; a conception of authentic, integral development that sets directions for human progress that promote the human dignity of each and all while respecting the integrity of creation; and a focus on solidarity and a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable as the keys to combating patterns or structures of sin that corrupt or thwart authentic, sustainable development.

Since the 1960s, Catholic teaching has increasingly emphasized care for creation and warned of the dangers posed to vulnerable peoples and to “the small delicate biosphere of the whole complex of all life on earth” by current patterns of global development. Successive popes affirm the right to humane economic development for all. But if environmental limits preclude universal access to the types of development rich nations now enjoy, current development patterns become illegitimate. The common-good logic of modern CST dictates that “development” that is available only to some is not authentic development, but a kind of
exploitation, both of the earth’s resources and of all those left out of elites’ super-development loop. Accordingly, more recent official social teaching has joined traditional exhortations to generosity by the rich to calls for changes in affluent nations’ lifestyles, and for redistributing political and economic power to marginalized peoples in equitable, sustainable ways.

**Principles for Economic Analysis and Engagement**

For thinking clearly and concretely about inclusive economic justice today, the modern Catholic social tradition offers more specific guiding principles. First, Catholicism’s appreciation for reason, and passion for pursuing truth, fuel a *principle of intelligibility* that treats economic processes and structures as subject to analysis and understanding. It may be difficult to figure out, for instance, why wage markets systematically return less to those who work in female-dominated job sectors like garment making, child care, or domestic work, but it is possible and ought to be done. This principle also insists that Catholicism’s economic discourse reflect the most accurate and respectable economic data and interpretation available. “Great moralisms don’t help,” Benedict XVI warns, “if they’re not given substance through awareness of reality...which helps indicate what can slowly be done to change the situation.”

Related is a *principle of agency and accountability*. Catholic thought contends that economic markets are not simply mechanisms that operate beyond human intention or control, but complex sets of relationships created and sustained by specific actions and decisions for which people and communities are responsible. Industrialization and market exchange have enabled modern economies to produce goods and services at tremendous rates, and to coordinate their exchange and distribution across great distances. But to ensure that they serve their participants equitably, markets require political buffering in the form of effective rules and oversight, along with practitioners (producers, workers, and consumers) who exhibit “business virtue” and act for the common good. Yet virtuous individuals are not enough. In the informal markets for child care or hand sewing where Rosemarie and Maria labor, having a “nice” boss may help, but it cannot assure workers either job security or just remuneration.

An *incarnational principle* springs from Christianity’s refusal to divorce embodied, material life from moral and spiritual concerns. This principle insists that economic processes be evaluated in connection to their embodied, material bases and consequences. Incarnational attunement further dictates that economic processes, however complex and expansive (e.g., global chains of production, exchange, and consumption), remain attentive and accountable to the situations and needs of the embodied persons, local communities, and particular cultures from whence they spring, on whom they depend, and whose welfare they influence.

Christians’ reverence for life’s embodied and material dimensions helps explain CST’s interest in work and the economic well-being of workers. The Catholic social tenets of the universal destination of goods and the provisioning purpose of economy lead logically to a *livelihood principle* that dictates that all persons and families deserve access to ample economic sufficiency, to be gained normally through adults’ participation in appropriate work, in reasonable amounts and under decent conditions.
Pressing against large inequalities of social, economic, or political power and resources is the aforementioned *principle of subsidiarity* that envisages society as an interdependent network of differentiated groups and associations, and calls for *dispersing power* in economic relations, locating decision-making authority at local levels wherever possible, and resisting power’s usurpation by any person or group that lacks accountability to the communities it affects. Subsidiarity provides a strong warrant for markets that enable wide participation. But it critiques arrangements whereby some workers, such as Maria in Peru or Gabriela in Honduras, find the benefits of economic participation undercut by lack of voice, poor working conditions, and inadequate remuneration. When power and resources concentrate in the hands of elites, subsidiarity’s norm of *subsidium* (mutual assistance) requires governmental bodies to combat monopolies and abuses and to take measures to ensure conditions whereby power, resources, and voice are continually circulated to and through local and grassroots levels.\(^\text{25}\)

Finally, and crucially, a *principle of solidarity*, joined to a *preferential option for the most vulnerable*, yoke an embrace of the mutual obligations entailed by human interdependence with a priority commitment to including and empowering those whom current economic arrangements oppress, exploit, or marginalize.\(^\text{26}\) Recent popes identify solidarity and the option for the poor as the indispensable antidotes to destructive and entrenched dynamics and patterns that mark sinful social structures. As for how solidarity and the option for the poor relate to the conduct of economies, the Canadian bishops in 1983 spelled out the implications with discomfiting candor:

> The needs of the poor have priority over the wants of the rich; the rights of workers are more important than the maximization of profits; the participation of marginalized groups has precedence over a system that excludes them.\(^\text{27}\)

The 2008 Great Recession brought home the inescapable connectedness—*de facto* solidarity—of the global economy. The lives of families like Rosemarie’s, stretched across a global care chain, do as well. But forging policies and practices that infuse this simultaneously global and localized—some call it a “glocal”—economic web\(^\text{28}\) with an *intentional solidarity* that operates concretely both to *democratize power* and to advance structures of *inclusive, ecologically sustainable economic well-being* is a radical goal, one that supersedes what the United Nations’ “social development” model of globalization, a model largely embraced by official Catholic teaching, has attempted to date.\(^\text{29}\)

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8. Translation taken from the Bible, NRSV.


11. Ibid., 7.


21. Ibid.

22. See, for example, *Justice in the World*, nos. 9–10, *Compendium*, nos. 52, 55.


