

Being a Poor Pilgrim: The Franciscan Story
The Gospel, Economics, and the Franciscan Moral Vision

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Summary of Content

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Much discussion of economics lacks a sound moral foundation. The Franciscan intellectual tradition can help guide contemporary discourse, infusing it with Gospel values. In the 2013 book *The Franciscan Moral Vision: Responding to God's Love* (ed. by Thomas Nairn, O.F.M.; St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications), a team of scholars summarizes eleven principles which govern Franciscan ethical reflection, principles which can subsequently be applied to debates about the economy.

1. The Franciscan moral vision emphasizes the free and self-giving exchange within the Trinity, calling us to live in free and self-giving relationships of mutuality.
2. The Franciscan moral vision emphasizes a dynamic realization of creative and loving freedom in response to God's love.
3. The Franciscan moral vision sees each individual human person as an image of God who must be treated with profound respect.
4. The Franciscan moral vision is Christological in its emphasis on the Exemplarity of Christ and upon the Incarnation, Redemption and Consummation of all things in Christ, a vision profoundly Christian and Catholic, respectful of the Church's moral magisterium, but at the same time universal and inclusive of all creation.
5. The Franciscan moral vision accounts for issues of time, history and contingency; growth involves conversion; human solutions are not perfect but are perfectible.
6. The Franciscan moral vision accepts an Augustinian recognition of human limitations, including the stark reality of sin.
7. The Franciscan moral vision is holistic, involving a spiritual discernment in intellectual, affective, and volitional ways, and the community in that discernment.
8. The Franciscan moral vision is aesthetic, involving not merely what is right but what is fitting; the moral life is beautiful, reflecting the beauty of God.
9. The Franciscan moral vision is better understood as a wisdom tradition than a scientifically organized system of analytic thought.
10. The Franciscan moral vision incorporates dynamic tension between polarities, including institutional/charismatic, universal/particular, past/future, and act/person; such tension is part of being a pilgrim in this world.
11. The Franciscan moral vision embodies a social vision that intersects the personal with the political, the individual with the communal, the singular life of virtue with the anticipation of the Reign of God for all.

These flow from each other and express a distinctive Franciscan approach to ethics.

This vision eludes common economic paradigms. It is neither Aristotelian nor Benedictine, the dominant medieval models. Aristotle granted the claims of individuals to private property and dominion; Benedictine monks renounced private ownership but lived in proprietary communities. In contrast, St. Bonaventure and Bl. John Duns Scotus argued that in nature, all things are common to all, a non-proprietary stance regarding all creation as a gift from God. Believers respond to God's diffusive goodness by giving generously and using the earth's goods to provide for each other: a relational economy which directs the use of goods toward love of God and neighbor.

In modern terms, this view is neither capitalist nor socialist, but in between. Like free market capitalism, Franciscans take individual responsibility and productivity seriously, seeing these as a grateful response to God's gifts. Like socialism, the Franciscan vision is communitarian, an ethic of sharing. Persons have a duty to treat each other as free and equal as God intended. Human beings are created in the image of a relational Trinitarian God; subjection of one to another is not natural. Thus, the ideal society is a society of friends. Friends naturally ask for, give, and receive gifts.

Franciscans take sin seriously and see that this world is not what God originally intended. Francis saw appropriation as Adam's primordial sin. First, I appropriate my own will, then I exalt myself over the good things which the Lord says and does in me. Bonaventure and Scotus condemned neither private property nor the coercive function of government in this world, but exhorted the faithful to a more perfect way: the order of love. Individuals experience *affectio commodi*, the desire for advantage and comfort. The order of love allows the *affectio iustitiae*, the desire for justice, to temper this desire for personal gain. The Franciscan tradition holds law and justice as integral elements, conceiving justice as the common good. A life *sine proprio* signifies not destitution, but a rejection of dominion, for God desires that no one have dominion over another. This anthropology favors neither a *homo oeconomicus* driven by self-interest, nor a *homo consumens* driven to possess, but a *homo creatus et donator* who recognizes God as Creator and imitates the generosity and voluntary poverty enfolded in Christ.

This vision stands upon the human dignity that forms the core of Catholic Social Teaching. Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* defines the common good as "the sum total of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment" (26). This involves social analysis and attention to the structures of sin. Solidarity provides the antidote: not a vague feeling of compassion, but a persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good and realize that all are truly responsible for all. Pope Francis speaks of the "mystique" of living together, of embracing one another. St. Francis found this in a leper, when the Lord led him to reach out and what had been bitter became sweet. Such mutual responsibility cannot be realized in this present world, but Franciscans hold up ideals which provide a goal and a goad, markers to indicate whether we as a human family are growing in the right direction in our journey together.