

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

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Produced by the Commission on Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation

English Speaking Conference

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**Study Guide**

Prepared by Jason Welle, O.F.M.

**Franciscan Economics in Action**

For a complement to Thomas Nairn's reflections, one can examine the writings of David Flood, O.F.M. on early Franciscan economics. Especially in *The Daily Labor of the Early Franciscans* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2010), Flood describes the practical consequences of the spiritual insights sketched by Nairn.

Work took on great symbolic importance for Francis' first followers. Francis insisted that friars should work for their bread, usually by learning a trade. They did this to send a message in their social context. The Assisi Charter of 1210 summoned all citizens to work for gain and glory; through work, one acquired a share of Assisi's goods and improved one's social status. The charter freed many serfs from bonds to their lords, but only enfranchised those who could pay. Many *minores* remained stuck in feudal social relationships, despite new rhetoric of work and self-betterment.

The friars saw through this ploy, working instead for a common purpose. A wage earner works for himself and his family; the friars worked for themselves and for others. Their story involved a celebration of life in the service of others, seeking just distribution of God's good gifts. The friars' "good example" did not mean a proper comportment which confirmed the existing social order—quite the opposite! The friars identified with the poor but would not accept servile dependency on feudal lords, nor did the friars trap others in relationships of dependency to them. They resisted all modes of bondage, offering a visible criticism of the dominant morality and economic order. They did not seek positions of leadership, but chose to remain servants and subjects to all in their work. Their approach provides a precursor to St. John Paul II's notion of solidarity, because the friars manifested integral solidarity and the primacy of labor over capital.

Two centuries later, another institution manifested Franciscan economic insights: the *monte di pieta*. Friars urged the wealthy to voluntarily contribute to a common base of capital, lending to the poor at low interest. Lending at interest remained theologically problematic, but Franciscans emphasized the good purpose of the usury: benefit to the poor. Lamentably, the message thrived on anti-Jewish sentiment, but the institution depended on a simple principle often absent from economic debates today: capital exists to benefit persons, not as an end in itself. The growth of capital is valueless—and indeed, often sinful—when it fails to benefit persons, particularly those most in need.

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**Segment 1: Beginning the Conversation**

**Key points:**

- In the physical structure of Assisi, politics and economics merge; the poorest lived both literally and symbolically on the bottom
- Francis founded the “Order of Little Brothers”; where economic class differences became increasingly important, Francis identified with the least.

**For Discussion:**

- In your area are rich and poor divided? What happens when they live near each other? How often do you personally come into contact with the poor?
- What governmental policies reinforce or break down a physical separation between rich and poor? What personal decisions by private citizens sustain or weaken a physical separation between rich and poor?

**Segment 2: Economics and Voluntary Poverty**

**Key points:**

- Aristotle saw a right to private property; this desire was part of human nature.
- Benedictine monks renounced personal ownership, but their communities possessed property and juridical rights.
- Franciscans sought a third way, living *sine proprio*, or “without anything of one’s own”; they attempted to live according to divine law, not human law.
- Franciscans see the person neither as a consumer nor an accumulator, but as one invited to live with sisters and brothers, children of one Father.

**For Discussion:**

- To how much wealth and property do you claim a right? Do others have this same right? Before God, what do you have that is your own?

**Segment 3: Everything in Common to All**

**Key points:**

- Francis perceived God’s generosity; God’s goodness spills over to creation.
- We are called to respond to God’s goodness, living with an ethic of sharing.
- The Franciscan vision does not fit neatly into modern economic categories:
  - Like socialism, it has a communitarian ethos
  - Like capitalism, it takes personal initiative and responsibility seriously

**For Discussion:**

- How do you categorize the Franciscan economic vision? If it is neither capitalist nor socialist, what is it? Where (if only locally) have you seen it?

#### **Segment 4: One Freedom for All**

##### **Key points:**

- Franciscans emphasize the relational aspect of the human person, because we are created in the image of a relational, Trinitarian God.
- An ideal society is one of friends, lacking any domination of one over another.
- Diversity and difference are necessary and a blessing; God calls Christians to equity and solidarity, not sameness.

##### **For Discussion:**

- Is it possible to live in a society of friends? At what level (the family, the parish, the city) is such a society possible? What can you do to promote it?
- Practical Case Study: Immigration
  - Do you see the diversity brought by immigrants as a blessing or a problem for the Church? For the nation?
  - Do individuals have the right to immigrate in search of security and livelihood? What policies, in your nation or others, would reflect a government's responsibility to welcome persons in search of this right?
  - What shortcomings in your culture can diversity help perfect?

#### **Segment 5: Franciscan Realism**

##### **Key points:**

- The world in which we live is not what God intended; Franciscan realism feels the tension between the way things are and the way things ought to be.
- The Franciscan vision provides a goal and a goad: it points to the end, while prodding us to make this world closer to what God intended.

##### **For Discussion:**

- What policy discussions are quickly dismissed as idealistic? Should they be?
- Can you give a concrete, local example of an effort to bring our world closer to God's intention (promoting human solidarity, a society of friends)? Can you imagine such a new effort? What, practically speaking, would it require?
- Practical Case Study: Taxation
  - What changes in taxation could better benefit the common good? Why?
  - Do you see taxation as a moral issue? What is a just and moral response to the dilemma of persons or businesses who fail to pay legitimate taxes?
  - The US Bishops insist that "the tax system should be continually evaluated in terms of its impact on the poor." How have changes of the last decade affected them? How would current debates affect them?

#### **Segment 6: The Franciscan Story as a Story of Justice**

##### **Key points:**

- The Franciscan story is the Gospel story: justice signifies both right relationship and righteousness.

- Francis' notion of brotherhood was founded our divinely-given dignity.
- Sinful social structures obscure this human dignity; the antidote is solidarity.

**For Discussion:**

- What social structures impede the recognition of others' dignity? What social structures help promote solidarity with others?
- Practical Case Study: Living Wage Laws / Minimum Wage Laws
  - What things should a just, living wage enable a worker to provide for a family? Where you live, what hourly wages would be necessary for this?
  - Where do you see persons working for wages which do not honor the dignity of their labor? In these cases, where does the sin lie?
  - Are minimum wage laws the most appropriate way of fulfilling the Church's call for a just wage that enables a laborer to provide for his or her family?

**Segment 7: The Franciscan Story as a Story of Solidarity**

**Key points:**

- Solidarity is a firm and persevering determination to commit to the common good; it is not a feeling of identification, but an acceptance of responsibility.
- Francis witnessed the mystique of encounter, of realizing solidarity with others when he dared to reach out to them.

**For Discussion:**

- What have you done recently to live the virtue of solidarity as defined above? What actions of solidarity have you seen in others?
- Give an example of economic policies that promote the virtue of solidarity.
- Practical Case Study: Globalization
  - Think about the goods you have used or consumed today. How did the means of their production/distribution affect persons you never see?
  - How did the goods you have used or consumed today affect the environment in places far from you? Do you have more moral options available and what would be their consequences?
  - What policies promote the just production and trade of goods in a globalized market? What is the cost of just labor?

**Segment 8: The Franciscan Story as a Story of Conversion**

**Key points:**

- Francis's encounter with the leper is a story of conversion.
- The Church can never remain closed in on itself; Pope Francis emphasizes missionary conversion which results in the transformation of society.

**For Discussion:**

- Identify a major social change in recent decades—ideally relating to economics. Does it manifest Gospel values? How might it better do so?
- What encounters with others have led to experiences of conversion for you?