

Summary of Roundtable Conversation

The members of the Roundtable expressed their deep gratitude to Sr. Amata Miller and Paul Mariani for their powerful complementary papers, with one participant observing that the experience of hearing them in juxtaposition was rather like hearing a first reading from the prophets, followed by a responsorial psalm. All were clearly moved.

Conversation turned immediately to practical questions about how to share such an expansive vision of Catholic reflection on economics, and poverty in particular. Sr. Amata shared her experience at St. Catherine University, which has developed several ways of integrating principles of Catholic social teaching (CST) into the life of the university. For example, she described a summer workshop for faculty on CST and the Catholic intellectual tradition. That workshop has led to efforts within various professional programs to integrate CST into their educational model. Further, the disciplinary process for students now integrates principles of restorative justice. A third area of integration is curricular: faculty have developed creative ways of considering Catholic approaches to significant questions in the classroom. One example is the capstone course called “Global Search for Justice,” which teaches students to “deepen their concern for social justice and apply what they have learned through their liberal arts education to issues of justice throughout the world.”¹

Several participants marveled at how different Sr. Amata’s paper was from the kind of approaches to economics they see among university faculty today. She observed that a mathematical model dedicated to explaining current economic systems drives much of the discipline today, and few economists ask the question of why the system does not work for millions of people. We need new models, rooted in basic questions about human behavior, integrating insights from the social sciences. The key, several participants agreed, was the way that different disciplinary approaches allowed an expansive survey of human flourishing. But one participant observed that it was nevertheless important that there be leverage from within the guild of economists, leading some to question why Catholic business schools or economics departments were not producing scholars who embraced that sort of approach. The drive to succeed in the field—publishing in top-tier journals and getting graduates hired at top-tier universities—means embracing the dominant models. Another participant pointed to her university’s master of arts degree in social justice and similar emerging doctoral programs. Such programs must

¹ See a description of the course at <https://www2.stkate.edu/core/gsj>.

take an interdisciplinary approach, involving such areas as business, economics, political science, social work, philosophy, theology, history, and so on.

One participant noted a problem in the political landscape of economic issues. On the one hand, few people want to hear the bishops' perspective on economics; and even Pope Francis's writings addressing economic concerns have received criticism. On the other hand, the political system has contributed to a failure to address poverty. In response, Sr. Amata pointed to the fact that there are different political models that emphasize meeting basic human needs. She pointed to David Korten's book *The Post-Corporate World* and his notion of "mindful markets" as an attempt to distinguish various cultural iterations of capitalism² which make meeting human need, rather than making money, the primary goal. She pointed to a need to revisit the assumptions of classical economic theory and the very notion of the free market, raising hard questions about whether self-interest, enlightened or not, can lead to care for all people. The difficulty, another participant said, is that too often Catholics (and those who lead them) stand with the wealthy. Sr. Amata called to mind Robert McAfee Brown's observation that what you see depends on where you stand and whom you listen to.

In response to a question about nations and communities that offer more person-centered models, Sr. Amata reminded the Roundtable of the principle that budgets are theological statements, pointing to the decision of Costa Rica not to have a standing army and reallocating its budget as an example. She also pointed to Sweden's communitarian ethic even though the vast majority of its means of production is privately owned. Their decision to raise taxes was predicated on a recognition of the need to provide housing, health care, and jobs for everyone. In contrast, she suggested, students in the United States today have grown up in a money-dominant economic order not unlike that of the robber barons in the 1920s. The United States has had periods of different economic focus, such as in the Progressive and New Deal eras. Another participant noted that study abroad opportunities can sometimes help students understand the possibility of economic models different from those common in the United States.

One participant wondered how it was possible for a Catholic college or university to do everything we hope for: cultural engagement, nonviolent spirituality, Catholic social teaching, and so on, and raised a question of what kind of institution does these sorts of things well. In particular, she speculated that women's religious communities brought an abiding commitment to these issues long before Magisterial documents spelled them out. Sr. Amata pointed to the dynamics within religious communities following Vatican II, especially the charge to recover founding charisms in such documents as *Perfectae Caritatis*.³ Many of the women's orders began with specific works of mercy in specific

2 David Korten, *The Post-Corporate World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2000); see Sr. Amata's essay above, page 25.

3 Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis* 2: "The adaptation and renewal of the religious life includes both the constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time."

historical circumstances; she pointed to the Sisters of Saint Joseph at her own institution as an example, where there has been a straight line from the foundation of the order to the mission of the college. The turn to economic questions among women's religious communities came as a result of a growing global awareness in the 1970s and 80s, and the recognition that critique of global structures required a deep knowledge of economic theory and practice. During that same period, NETWORK, the Catholic social justice lobby, was founded,⁴ contributing to the training of a generation of social activists. More recently, the Hilton Foundation has developed National Sisters Week during Women's History Month⁵ to publicize the kind of on-the-ground work that has been a hallmark of women's congregations since their founding. Another participant remarked that awareness of founding charisms—especially attention to the poor—has led a number of congregations to become more self-critical of their use of resources domestically and internationally.

Picking up the cue about institutional self-awareness, another participant wondered how colleges and universities operate in enrollment management, particularly toward Hispanic/Latino communities and more generally toward students from economically distressed families. The current financial model is broken, he noted; it is impossible to keep discounting tuition in a sustainable way. Another participant expressed disappointment that in discussions about sustainability—at both the local and global levels—it is unlikely to have participation among economics faculty. She wondered whether it was possible to insist upon hiring faculty whose training looks more like the kind of model for which Sr. Amata advocates rather than the more dominant mathematical model prominent in the discipline. A third participant asked what sort of intellectually interesting conversations might draw in economists, particularly those raised by faculty trained in Catholic social teaching. A fourth participant considered the question of emerging markets, pointing to some work he's done in the health care market in parts of Africa. Conversations that seek to address broad concerns about human flourishing—irreducible to economic analysis, yet certainly dependent upon it—may well be a way forward in reconnecting the dismal science with the common good.

4 See www.networklobby.org/.

5 See www.hiltonfoundation.org/catholic-sisters.

