

CATHOLIC SOCIAL ECONOMICS: CRISIS IN CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

by

**Edward J. O'Boyle, Ph.D.
Senior Research Associate
Mayo Research Institute**

www.mayoresearch.org

1217 Dean Chapel Road, West Monroe, Louisiana 71291 USA

Tel: 318/396-5779

E-mail: edoboyle737@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

One test of the effectiveness of Catholic Social Economics (CSE) is whether or not it addresses everyday economic affairs. To accomplish that end, it is necessary to build a bridge where there is a two-way interaction between CSE practitioners and everyday economic affairs. Without that kind of bridge-building work, CSE tends to waste away and rarely is seriously examined in the economics classroom at Catholic universities.

Using the girder bridge for our analogy, the three CSE premises identified in this article serve as the bridge's foundation and its nine principles as the bridge's superstructure. The economic agent – the *acting person* -- can be represented as the bridge's deck. Any Catholic institution that wants to examine economic affairs in terms that are faithful to the teachings of the Church is advised to follow these fundamental design characteristics.

One test of the effectiveness of Catholic social economics (CSE) is whether or not it addresses and influences everyday economic affairs. To accomplish that end, it is necessary to construct and maintain a bridge where there is a two-way interaction between CSE practitioners on the one hand and everyday economic affairs on the other. In the past, the Institute of Social Order in St. Louis gathered a staff of CSE advocates to examine workplace problems encountered by labor and management, business ethics issues, and unemployment insurance questions raised in the federal-state administrative agencies. The Institute was established to

- inspire Jesuits with the desire to improve the conditions of their fellowmen.**
- furnish them with principles and practices by which this could be accomplished.**
- Show every Jesuit how in his field social principles could be made a reality.**
- Make the whole Society in the United States responsive to the call of the Holy Father for trained leaders and to the challenge of our late Father general to take our place in the battle to control the happiness, temporal prosperity, and eternal safety of the next few generations [Gruenberg, p. 51].**

The Institute was re-named and relocated to Cambridge in the mid 1960s and later to Washington DC. Due to the declining numbers of active Jesuits in general and specifically for this unique ministry, this institution no longer exists.

Today there is not a single Catholic university in the United States where a graduate student in economics can master the essentials of CSE, prepare a dissertation applying CSE to contemporary economic affairs, and qualify for a doctorate in economics. Further, the few remaining senior economics faculty with the required background and commitment to this high-level work are being replaced when they retire by younger mainstream economists with little or no interest in carrying the work forward.¹ This is a sure-fire formula for marginalizing and eventually eliminating rigorous scholarly work in CSE leaving the interested graduate student with nowhere to turn within the academy for advice, direction, and support.²

¹ Roughly twenty-five years ago on the occasion of the retirement of a beloved member of the economics faculty who specialized in CSE at a Vincentian university, I asked the department head to consider finding a replacement with a similar background. Even though I was a former student and personal friend of that beloved faculty member and I was acting in my capacity as an officer of an international association of social economists, I was told in no uncertain terms to mind my own business.

² Nearly 15 years ago, a doctoral degree student in religious studies at a Jesuit university wanted to write a dissertation comparing Adam Smith and John Paul II. With the approval of her department head she turned to the author to help with her research (see Maloney 2004) even though I have never served on the economics faculty at that university. By 1960 CSE had been eliminated from the economics program at another Jesuit university that until recently awarded a Ph.D. in economics.

A colleague on the economics faculty at a major American Catholic university several years ago recounted to the author his efforts urging the economics department to afford wider acceptance of intellectual perspectives outside the mainstream. His suggestions were roundly rejected by the faculty. Years before, another colleague at the same institution asserted that it would be a grueling if not impossible task for a person with a specialization and publication record in CSE to get tenured there. Much more recently, a colleague at another Catholic university stated that even when the university offered special financial incentives no one on the economics faculty was competent and willing to teach CSE as part of the economics curriculum. Another associate also at a Catholic university asserted that colleagues on the economics faculty would not consider hiring a Catholic. In a 2010 interview Rupert Ederer lamented the fact that he could not direct a young person to a Catholic institution of higher learning with a strong CSE program [Gurries 2010, pp. 5-6].

One of the sad consequences of the dismantling of CSE at American Catholic universities is that very few academics are left who are able to give CSE an articulate voice and apply it to the problems of the contemporary economic order. To illustrate, in the early 1980s the author received a first-draft copy of what would become the U.S. Bishops' pastoral letter on the economy -- *Economic Justice for All*. He was deeply concerned that the document was drafted in a way which indicated that the writers knew little about developments in CSE since the 1930s.³ The pastoral letter was improved significantly through revision, but never included the powerful CSE insights as exemplified in the work of German Jesuit economists Heinrich Pesch, Gustav Gundlach, and Oswald von Nell-Breuning, the American Jesuit economists Thomas Divine, Bernard Dempsey, Leo Brown, Joseph Becker, Richard Mulcahy, and Clifford Besse, along with Catholic laymen Joseph Solterer, Goetz and Henry Briefs, Franz Mueller, Rupert Ederer, William Waters, Peter Danner, Stephen Worland, Gladys Gruenberg, and others.

One telling indicator of the decline of CSE is that Pope Francis, himself a Jesuit, along with his advisers appears to be totally unaware of the vital contributions of these CSE academics to our understanding of economics and economic affairs.

In the late 1990s the U.S. Catholic bishops recognized the problem from the perspective of the laity.

... far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand that the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of the Catholic faith [USCCB c1998, not paginated].

³ Neither the first draft nor the published letter contained a single reference to work published in the *Review of Social Economy* the official journal of the Catholic Economics Association that began publishing in 1944.

This message is still maintained on the USCCB website.

Bridging the Gap

Bridging the gap today is left to a handful of persons acting largely alone or at university-based centers such as the National Center for Business Ethics at Loyola University of New Orleans, the Vincentian Center for Church and Society at St. John's University in New York, the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and the Center for American Catholic Studies at Fordham University in New York. The key to the effectiveness of a bridge is that it carries the more-or-less abstract theoretical thought from the CSE side to the real-world side and feedback from that side to the CSE side. Without that feedback, CSE becomes fixed in time and fails to take into account the changing circumstances of everyday economic affairs.⁴ In other words, *it can become increasingly irrelevant especially without a connection to a doctoral-degree program that trains the next generation of CSE specialists.*

In what follows we present several instances in which the gap between certain principles of CSE and everyday economic affairs already has been bridged as a way of demonstrating that CSE is not a set of irrelevant principles and that Catholic universities have good reason to retain the economics faculty necessary to teach them and to support the research that establishes where, when, and how they succeed or fail. We are concerned less with identifying where the initiative originated -- on the CSE side or the economic affairs side -- and more with examples of real effectiveness in bridging the gap. We proceed under the following three premises.

***First*, whether one's argument rests principally on the essential equality of all human beings or the common Fatherhood of all humankind, there is a fundamental sacred dignity in every living human being which cannot be taken away or diminished during his/her lifetime and may not be subordinated to any economic valuation of worth proceeding from economic affairs.**

***Second*, it is need not want that conceptually connects CSE and our way of thinking about economic affairs. Employing need -- the things necessary for human well-being -- rather than want -- the things desirable for human well-being -- clearly differentiates our way of thinking from the mainstream way.**

***Third*, it is the principle of cooperation -- human beings are activated to work together because the work cannot be done at all or as well by working alone -- along with the principle of competition -- a human being is activated to work alone for the gain that is associated with working alone -- that organizes economic affairs.**

⁴ See Mezrich (especially pp. 248-254) for the bridging role of principals from the NYMEX who were required to call on two Saudi religious leaders in order to reconcile the opening of the proposed Dubai Mercantile Exchange with Muslim teachings. The leaders' decision was neither to approve the DME nor disapprove it. Since strictly speaking it was *not* forbidden by the clerics, the DME was allowed to open.

We hope that our comments herein will instruct and inspire Catholic university faculty and administrators to take up the task of re-instating CSE in their curricula.

Re-Stating Catholic Social Economics

Re-instating CSE begins with an understanding of CSE essentials. The following re-states those essentials all of which are constructed on the foundation of human need -- a necessary first step for any bridge to connect CSE advocates and everyday economic affairs.

Four CSE principles related to need. Given the second premise, it is necessary to re-state CSE in a way that reconciles the *need of the person with the need of all*. We begin with three teachings of CSE that are commonly recognized and accepted in everyday economic affairs. The right to private property and the right of workers to form a union as defined in Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* [§§ 15, 51] and the right to a day of rest as re-affirmed in John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* [§ 15].

The *right to private property* may be re-stated as follows: the good or service produced belongs to the person who produces it [see Leo XIII, § 10]. This principle means that the need of the person and therefore the need of all are best met through personal action in the workplace that in turn is demonstrated by the practice of performance-based pay. Depriving the worker of the pay that is his/her due violates this principle and is fundamentally unjust. Virtually every worker and manager in a market economy knows this principle at least at the instinctive level.

The *workers' right to form a union*, defended in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and affirmed for the United States in the Wagner Act in 1935, may be re-stated as follows: the need of the worker and the need of all also are met through private *group* action in the workplace. This action takes the familiar form of negotiating with management on wages, hours, and working conditions and may at times justify a strike in order to force management to negotiate in good faith. The right to form a union is meaningless without the corollary *right to strike*.

The *workers' right to a day of rest* is defended in *Centesimus Annus* in 1991. This principle may be re-stated as follows: the need of the person and the need of all to work are subordinated to their need to rest. It is put into effect by the common practice of allowing workers to rest on the Sabbath and select holidays, though it must be revised for some workers especially in those activities that are continuous such as steel production and hospital care and increasingly is compromised by retail shops opening for business on the Sabbath.

Five other CSE principles related to need. Five other CSE principles are not so readily recognized in everyday economic affairs. They are the priority of labor over capital, the common good, subsidiarity, solidarity, and the universal destination of the goods of the world.

The *priority of labor over capital* may be re-stated as the profits of capital are subordinate to the need of workers. Profit-sharing, also called gain-sharing, is a common practice in the United

States and has energized Cleveland-based Lincoln Electric for many years, making its employees some of the highest-paid manufacturing workers in the world and the company one of the leading producers of quality electric motors and welding equipment and supplies. Every year since 1934, Lincoln Electric has paid a profit-sharing bonus to its eligible employees in December. For its 3,000 U.S. employees in 2013 Lincoln Electric paid an average bonus of \$33,029 raising their total earnings for the year to \$81,366 [Lincoln Electric; Koller, p. 2].

Gain-sharing is based on the simple proposition that workers are motivated to increase their productivity when they are promised a share in the gains that flow from those productivity improvements. Management benefits from gain-sharing because they too share in the gains. Management resistance to gain-sharing may take the form of this argument: we pay the workers once for their work, we should not have to pay them twice.

The *principle of the common good* for our purposes is re-stated as follows: the need of the person is subordinated to the need or well-being of all. The practice of product standardization gives expression to the common good because it helps all who need to make specific product comparisons. For instance, virtually everyone, whether producer, customer, or health-care provider, is served well by a grading system that standardizes the protection available from a range of sunscreen products available from competing firms. The same is true in various ways for many other products including home insulation, gasoline, tires, dimensional lumber, and shoes. This kind of system is made possible only if otherwise competing firms decide that everyone is better served when they agree for the good of all involved to set aside competition on this delimited issue and instead embrace cooperation.

A common currency such as the euro, which has been adopted across most of the member states of the European Union, and a common system of weights and measures contributes to the common good without in any way hindering economic agents in conducting their everyday affairs.

The *principle of subsidiarity* may be re-stated as follows: the need of all, though different at different times, may best be met first through private group action. This action may be undertaken by an industry council or committee such as St. Louis PRIDE which is a private organization of owners, contractors, and building tradesmen who sort through problems that arise on construction sites in the St. Louis area that otherwise could trigger work stoppages, cost overruns, and scheduling delays. No one from the public sector serves on [PRIDE]. Subsidiarity endorses public group action through agencies of the government whenever private group action fails.

Louisiana Offshore Oil Port (LOOP) is a limited liability company that offloads and stores foreign crude oil from tankers for eventual transport by pipeline to refineries throughout the Gulf Coast and Midwest. LOOP was organized in 1972 and has three owners: Marathon Pipe Line LLC, Valero Terminaling and Distribution Company, and Shell Oil Company. To assure the safe handling of oil from deep draft supertankers the offloading is done at a terminal

located 18 miles off the Louisiana coast in 110 feet of water. A pipeline transports the oil to onshore storage facilities and from there to the participating owners' refineries. LOOP was built and continues to operate only because the three owners understand that they can reduce the risks in offloading and transporting crude oil more effectively by working together than by operating independently [LOOP].

To reinforce cooperation, LOOP's board of directors is organized on the democratic principle that, irrespective of company size or ownership share, every participating company has just one vote. LOOP, in effect, is a producer cooperative. As with PRIDE, LOOP functions strictly as a private group with no government participation in decision-making.

The *principle of solidarity* may be re-stated as the need of the person is the need of all. One real-world example of solidarity is found in Ascension Parish, Louisiana, where an agreement [CAER] has been reached involving local government officials and several private chemical plants including Air Products and Chemicals, BASF, Dupont, Honeywell Chemicals, and Shell Chemical that operate in the Parish to "define and prepare procedures that would be utilized in the event of a chemical or industrial emergency" such as a fire or explosion.

Advanced Book Exchange (Abebooks) is the world's largest online marketplace for used, rare, and out-of-print books. The exchange brings together thousands of professional booksellers worldwide. Each seller decides which books to list, their general condition, price, and other information. Buyers can browse the books through a convenient search function. The on-line exchange helps meet the need of buyers and sellers alike in that it allows buyers to comparison shop and sellers to reach a much wider market [Abebooks].

LOOP and PRIDE also exhibit the principle of solidarity in their operations. Abebooks reflect not just the principle of solidarity as noted above but the principle of subsidiarity as well because they are organized strictly as private groups. CAER to a lesser extent reflects the principle of subsidiarity because it is organized as a public-private group.

For more on industry councils, also referred to intermediary groups, see O'Boyle [2014a].

The *universal destination of the goods of the world* may be re-stated in these words: the profits of the company, the property of the person, are subordinate to the need of all. The practice of allowing rival pharmaceutical companies to manufacture and sell as a generic drug a product originally developed by another company once its patent has expired, which allowed the originator to at least re-coup its research and development costs, effectively makes that medication available to more persons in need because as a generic it can be sold at a lower price and still allow the generic manufacturer the profits necessary to bring it to market. The right to private property is not an absolute right.

CSE Requires Re-Thinking Economic Agency

To re-construct and maintain a bridge between CSE proponents and everyday economic affairs, it is necessary to re-examine the economic agent, the human being, who principally as consumer and worker is engaged in those affairs literally every day. Using the common girder bridge for the basis of our analogy, the three CSE premises serve as the bridge's foundation and its nine principles as its superstructure. The economic agent – the *acting person* -- can be represented as the bridge's deck. Any Catholic institution that wants to examine economic affairs in terms that are faithful to the teachings of the Church is advised to follow the design characteristics suggested here.

The need for clarity here is simple and straight forward. Economic affairs are activated not by prices, profits, supply and demand, and the like, though the language of economics often suggests otherwise, but by human beings who alone are capable of *acting* in economic affairs because only humans are living, breathing, existential actualities. In 1890 Alfred Marshall stated in the very first sentence of his *Principle of Economics* that “Political Economy or Economics is a study of mankind in the ordinary business of life...” [Marshall 1948 (1890), p. 1].

Economic agency as represented in mainstream economics is seriously outdated in large measure because it has deliberately oversimplified the economic agent -- the individual or *homo economicus* that originated in the Enlightenment of the 17th-18th centuries -- in order to simplify economic analysis and produce empirical findings about which it can claim certitude. The bridge deck constructed on *homo economicus* has deteriorated over time and requires reconstruction to advance the necessary remedies for economic affairs gone awry. We propose as its replacement the *acting person* who is more faithful to 21st century understanding of human nature and better aligned with human activity in current economic affairs.

By the *acting person* we mean the *person in action* carrying out such uniquely economic activities as producing, distributing, exchanging, consuming, saving, investing, credit-creating, lending, borrowing, innovating, developing, and (re-)vitalizing. We suggest *acting person/person in action* for two reasons. First, *acting person/person in action* underscores the economic agent as a human being acting in economic affairs both as an individual being and a social being. Second, whereas *homo economicus* is tied to the philosophy of individualism, *acting person/person in action* links our conception of economic agency to the philosophy of personalism that aligns much more closely to CSE.

With the *acting person* emphasis is on creating new options from which the economic agent is able to choose. This kind of participation in economic affairs is active. With *homo economicus* the emphasis is on choosing from among an array of options without creating new ones or destroying old ones. This kind of participation is passive. The *acting person* is entrepreneurial. *Homo economicus* is not.

The result of this change in how the economic agent is represented admittedly is more complexity in economic analysis that in turn demands more judgment on the part of the economic analyst in correctly interpreting the findings that the analysis brings forth. This proposition rests on the premise that certitude purchased at the price of oversimplification is an illusion.

Economic agency constructed by mainstream economics is based on the proposition that *homo economicus* maximizes utility and profit and that the economy functions best when it reaches Pareto optimality. Maximizing utility and profit means that the good invariably consists in *having* more. This construction misrepresents human nature because it asserts that the economic agent passively selects from among a set of options to maximize personal net advantage. In the extreme this leads to conceiving of the economic agent as a “rational, self-interested, calculating *machine*” [see Blinder, pp. 18, 24; emphasis added].

Calling to mind Aristotle on virtue, we propose instead that human beings routinely maximize what we call personalist capital in which certain good habits or virtues such as justice and courage are learned, practiced, and acquired and by which a human being develops more fully as a human person. Further, as humans develop more fully as persons, they become more effective and more highly valued as economic agents. We should add that human beings become less fully human persons by learning, practicing, and acquiring certain vices such as injustice and recklessness, and become less effective and less highly valued as economic agents. This proposition rests on the premise that the economic agent is inseparable from the human person. Maximizing personalist capital rests on the assertion that the good always inheres in *being* more.

A human being is not an automaton. A disposition to act one way or the other does not program a person to act in any predetermined manner. Otherwise that person would not be truly free for integral human development. Because the economic agent is a complex union of individuality and sociality he/she is free to act in a self-centered or other-centered manner, in a rational or emotional way, a benevolent or mean fashion, a generous or greedy mode, among many other behavioral options. This process of human development for sure is one of the profound mysteries of human nature and one of the reasons why predicting the behavior of economic agents is so weighed down with uncertainty.

For more on the *acting person* and personalist capital, see O’Boyle [2012].

Final Remarks

What we have said to this point provides only slim anecdotal evidence that economic affairs in fact are governed by more than *homo economicus* and the organizing principle of competition which are at the very core of mainstream economics. In that sense, CSE represents a direct challenge to the mainstream economics way of thinking. Much more research must be done in the workplace and the marketplace to find other examples of companies and human beings –

acting persons/persons in action -- operating in ways that are not explainable in terms of the mainstream way of thinking and demonstrate that PRIDE, LOOP, CAER, and Abebooks are more than simple curiosities which in no way undermine mainstream economics.

At the end of his professional work in employment security for which he was known across the United States as the very best researcher Jesuit Joseph Becker, who for many years served on the staff of the Institute of Social Order, reminisced on the reasons that prompted him into that line of work. His reason finally was “a vision of Judgment Day and of the Judge saying: ‘I was unemployed, Joseph, and you supported me’” [Becker, p. 56]. Becker, who insisted he was a specialist not an expert, offered this advice to one of his graduate students. “If you’re really serious about this kind of research, you must roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty in the information available only at the state employment security agency.”

Good advice then, and good advice now. It’s the stuff out of which a bridge is constructed and maintained. Without that kind of bridge-building work, CSE tends to waste away and in the extreme never is seriously re-examined in terms of everyday economic affairs. Years ago the Catholic Economic Association was split at the very top between one founding father, Jesuit Thomas Divine, who followed orthodox economic theory which emphasized economics as a science studying the allocation of scarce means among alternative ends and purposes based on rational principles of behaviour, and the other, Jesuit Bernard Dempsey, who underscored the importance of the reconstruction of social order based on the social encyclicals. The orthodox view prevailed in the pages of the Association’s journal *Review of Social Economy* [Waters, pp. 92-98].⁵ In the past several years under different editorship, CSE has become barely visible in *Review*’s pages.

The orthodox view today dominates the thinking of economic faculties across the United States, including those at Catholic colleges and universities. In that sense, there is very little difference between economics faculties at Catholic institutions of higher learning and other private or state institutions. A survey of the textbooks used to teach the principles courses would demonstrate that in general the same ones are used in Catholic colleges and universities as in private or state institutions.

Putting CSE back into the economics curriculum and supporting rigorous research along those lines, notably though not exclusively applied to real-world problems such as employment security, discrimination, and market failure, will take a huge commitment on the part of Catholic university administrators who somehow must convince their economics faculties that the mainstream paradigm based on the autonomous, entirely rational, self-interested, utility and profit-maximizing individual and strict individualism do not square with Catholic social teaching notably with John Paul II’s writings on person and personalism. There is much work to be done in re-thinking economics with CSE premises and principles, re-constituting the economic agent as an *acting person*, and applying this thinking to current economic affairs and problems -- a

⁵ See O’Boyle [2014a] for more on Divine and Dempsey.

worthy undertaking for any economics faculty free to explore beyond the boundaries of mainstream economic thought.

If such a recovery at Catholic universities is not forthcoming, the work will be left to men and women acting alone without the benefit of mentors who would have seen that they were thoroughly grounded in CSE and the research tools necessary to the task of bridge construction and maintenance including a depository to identify, collect, and provide access to relevant materials already published. Given the relative ease of establishing and maintaining Internet websites, it is a pity there is no website dedicated to function specifically as a depository for CSE materials.

The work will be slow, hazardous, and conducted under conditions similar to actual bridge work where university schools of architecture and engineering need to re-examine the problem of bridge design and engineering and the trade unions and vocational schools need to provide the technical instruction required to prepare blueprints and specifications for the new designs. Even so, it can be done.

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