

Economics Department
Working Papers in Economics

Boston College

Year 2005

Economics as Vocation: Lessons for the
Church in the 21st Century

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ECONOMICS AS VOCATION: LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH IN THE 21ST CENTURY¹

[T]he best place for the laity to exercise their Christianity is in their occupations.²

I. THE VOCATION OF A CHRISTIAN

My first task is to deal with the word vocation. I use it in the literal sense of its Latin root to mean a calling. For the Christian, the caller is God, and the call is summed up in Christ's command to love God and neighbor. Christ explained in parable that neighbor includes everyone. So the Christian calling is a calling to a universal brotherhood of love. All people are our brothers and sisters, and no person is other than our neighbor. Vocation, in the most general sense, is thus a calling to love God and neighbor.

The command to love God and neighbor does not present us with an easy challenge. In fact, Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* ridiculed the Christian law of love as absurd.³ Christians reject Freud's outlook, but we have to admit that Christ has given us a difficult command, and not least of all because it can be quite difficult to know specifically what it requires of us in all the concrete circumstances of daily life. I recall sitting in, a few years back, on a symposium at Boston College on the subject of law. The participants included scholars in Islamic Law and Hebrew Law. The late Ernest Fortin of the Boston College Theology Department, a distinguished member of the faculty, got to his feet during the question period and made a remark that, at the time, struck me as odd and enigmatic. He said the good Jew gets up in the morning and knows just what to do. Similarly, the good Muslim gets up in the morning and knows just what to do. But the good Christian gets up in the morning and does not know what to do.

¹ Francis M. McLaughlin, Department of Economics, Boston College, prepared for the Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, October 27, 2005.

² From Chicago Declaration of Christian Concern quoted by Armand Larive in *After Sunday: A Theology of Work*, cited in *Initiatives In Support of Christians in the World*, Number 139.

³ Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, James Strachey, editor, W.W. Norton, New York, 1961, chapter 5

I don't think I ever heard Father Fortin explain exactly what he meant by his remark, but I have come to think he meant something like this. The good or observant Jew has the 613 specific commands of the Torah to guide all his actions. The good or observant Muslim has the precise directions of the Koran. But, the good or observant Christian has simply the very general command to love God and neighbor, and is thus faced each day with the task of figuring out just what that demands of him in each circumstance of his life. Thus, Christ's command presents us with an intellectual challenge.

This concept of vocation as a calling to love God and neighbor fits into the concepts of the Church presented to me throughout life. In my early education at the hands of the Sisters of Charity of Halifax in Saint Patrick's School in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston in the 1930s, the Church was presented to me as the congregation of all those who profess the faith of Christ, partake of the same sacraments, and are united under one visible head. I was taught also that what God wants of me is to love Him with my whole soul and my whole strength, and my neighbor as myself for the love of God. In 1947, in my first theology course at Boston College, Father William Van Etten Casey of the Society of Jesus described the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. And, still later, the enduring image of the Church presented to me in the early days after Vatican Council II was as the People of God. The Church as body was common to all three perspectives, although most strikingly in the doctrine of the Mystical Body. Like every body, the Mystical Body has members, and by virtue of Baptism, we are those members. A healthy body requires healthy members. Each member has a job to do, and that job must be well done for the health of the corporate body. Our work as members of the Mystical Body is not just something we do in a Church separated from our everyday life, but what we do in all parts of our everyday life as members of the Mystical Body, existing continuously, and permeating human society completely.

Thus, what was burned deep in my mind in my Boston College education was that the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ in the world, extended its reach to all spheres of human activity, and that all baptized Catholics through their baptisms were members of the one body, and that the Church, the body of Christ, was in the world through the work of its members in the world, in their families, in their work places, in their recreational activities, in their neighborhoods, and in their cities. In sum, everywhere, through its

members, Christ's Church, His Mystical Body, was brought into all spheres of human activity. I think it was clear to many of my Boston College contemporaries that Church work, was not just what we would do in our parishes, or in diocesan wide church structures. Such work and activity were important and necessary, but our unique and indispensable work as members of the Mystical Body was in all our every day activities. It was through our wholehearted and devout acceptance of that fact that Christ's work of salvation would be accomplished on a continuing basis. It was an inspiring vision, and the study of Pius the XII's *Mystici Corporis Christi* in the class I took in 1947 opened my eyes, and the eyes of many of my fellow students. We saw with clarity the important work to which we were called. The work demanded our attention. It would require our energy, our intelligence, our thought, and our effort. Thus, the clear implication of what I was taught is that the Christian vocation is lived out by all of us in the specific circumstances of our individual lives in all their enormous variety. This is true of me in the specific work I do as an economist. It is true of each of you in your individual occupations, in your individual lives, in all the varied things you do, whatever they may be.

II. ECONOMICS AS THE CHRISTIAN VOCATION: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

This brings me to my second task, which is to explain how the occupation of economist came to occupy a large place in the specific work of my vocation as a baptized Catholic. Obviously, economist is not all I am. I am a husband for 51 years, a father of six sons and five daughters, a father-in-law of the 11 spouses of my sons and daughters, a grandfather of 26, a brother, an uncle, a neighbor, a friend, a parishioner, and so on. The list is long. What's true of me is true of you. We all occupy many roles in life, and for me economist is only one of them, and not the most important one. Nevertheless, my Christian vocation is made concrete in an important way in my work as an academic economist, and I think the best way for me to put some flesh on a person's work as vocation is to tell something of my own story. It includes my education at Boston College and at MIT, my teaching career at Boston College, my years as a core faculty member in both the Harvard Institute of Employment and Training Administration and

the Harvard Trade Union Fellows Program, my years of participation in the Perspectives program at Boston College, and my quarter of a century at the periphery of the Lonergan Workshop.

The vision of the Mystical Body presented to me in Father Casey's theology course encouraged me to think about the kind of specific work in which I might best contribute to the work of the Church in the world. It was courses on the Papal Social Encyclicals and Collective Bargaining, that I took with another Boston College Jesuit, Father Thomas Shortell, that led me eventually to economics. Father Shortell made the direction my work efforts should take seem clear. He taught his students to regard the papal encyclicals, in particular, *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno*, as authoritative documents meriting serious consideration. He urged us to make a serious effort to apply the teaching the encyclicals contained to economic life in the United States. And, he let us know that in his judgment, the most important continuing economic question facing the United States concerned the question of low and irregular wages and poor working conditions, what economists would call matters of the distribution of the fruits of economic activity. An important practical effect of the encyclicals was the support they gave to efforts to improve the wages and working conditions of workers and their families through trade unions, collective bargaining, and by means of progressive social legislation. Thus, Father Shortell and the encyclicals stimulated my interest in distribution. I became convinced I should support democratic trade unions, collective bargaining, and progressive social legislation, and be guided in making practical judgments by the principle of subsidiary function, that a higher organization should never arrogate to itself what can be done by a lower organization. I came to believe that the intelligent application of this principle would preserve and foster a rich network of associational life that would help ensure a free, humane, and democratic society, and prevent the growth of a suffocating state control. Pius XI's instructions in *Quadragesimo Anno* as communicated by Father Shortell were clear. Strive for personal holiness, learn the principles of the Church's social teaching, and become technically competent in a social science discipline such as economics. This would equip a person to play an intelligent role in helping restore the social order to Christ perfecting it in accord with Gospel principles. My 45 years at Boston College teaching labor economics; my 14

years as a core faculty member in the Harvard Trade Union Fellows Program; my 10 years in the Harvard Institute in Employment and Training Administration; and my study and research in industrial relations and employment and training originated in the influence Father Shortell had on me.

III. THE DISCIPLINE OF ECONOMICS

This brings me to the task of explaining a bit about the discipline of economics. Economists, as a tribe, don't spend much time, or devote much effort, to the task of articulating a precise and universally applicable definition of their discipline. They are often sufficiently occupied with doing economics and are not interested in devoting their scarce time to definition and methodological matters, and in this concern with the best use of their scarce time they are often acting as good economists. If you look at what economists do in their professional lives their range of concerns is enormous. In fact, some economists have defined economics, and not completely facetiously, as economics is what economists do. A quick look at the scheme for the classification of publications in economics contained in the *Journal of Economic Literature* for September 2004 reveals a complex classification system with main categories A to Z, and 106 finer categories, and ultimately 1440 even finer categories. These cover topics as diverse as tort law and product liability, dispute resolution, statistical decision theory, and substance abuse and addiction. You can see why some economists define economics as what economists do.

My preference for defining economics is to look at some of the foundational works in the history of the discipline. These indicate that most economists have focused on one or both of two major concerns, economic growth and efficient allocation. I will begin with Adam Smith whose *Wealth of Nations* published in 1776 focused on economic growth. Smith defined economics as the study of the causes of the growth in the wealth of a nation. He defined wealth as tangible material goods, such things as bread, beer, butchers' meat, clothing, blankets, thatch, window glass, cooking utensils, and coal. The existence of a large supply of such goods was the condition of the possibility of an improved standard of material living for all, especially the masses of laboring poor. Smith's emphasis on the importance of savings and investment, and free

markets remains enormously influential in the teaching of economics. The first course in economics, taught in the United States, was taught in 1798 at the College of William and Mary, and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was the text.

Seventy-five years after the publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, John Stuart Mill, called one of the two great schoolmaster economists of the 19th and early 20th centuries because of his enormous pedagogical influence, published his *Principles of Economics*. As with Smith Economics was for Mill the study of production and distribution, but Mill also paid a great deal of attention to the laws, customs, and institutions that would help achieve a distribution of what was produced that would ensure at least the possibility of frugal comfort for all. Thus there is a fundamental compatibility in the works of Smith and Mill whose books bracket the period of dominance of what is called classical economics.

In the 1870s Stanley Jevons helped birth what is called neoclassical economics. With Jevons the focus of economics slipped away from the classical emphasis on the size and distribution of national wealth to the efficient allocation of limited resources among competing ends. This is the root of a contemporary characterization of economic theory as the grammar of the social sciences. Economics is the study of choice making in situations where one choice involves as its cost the giving up of an alternative. Since scarcity describes virtually every human situation, and choices must be made, the method of economics, economists believe, has universal applicability to all human decisions. Every economist, regardless of his politics, has this concern with efficient allocation near the top of his mind.

Alfred Marshall, who, along with Mill, was the other great schoolmaster economist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pulled it together in his text first published in 1890. He defined economics as "the study of mankind in the ordinary business of life," that is, the business of getting and making a living. Marshall came from a long line of clergymen. He entered Cambridge University with thoughts of becoming a Christian missionary, but at Cambridge he was part of a generation that abandoned religious belief. Nevertheless his missionary spirit remained. He was anxious to be of service. He decided to study economics after walking through the slums of London and looking deeply into the faces of the desperately poor. He concluded that the extreme

poverty of their daily lives was the source of their moral degradation, and he was persuaded that in economic study lay the possibility of understanding the causes of poverty and devising means for relieving poverty and contributing to moral improvement. He turned to economics from mathematics and began by reading Mill.

So, despite the enormous variety of the things that economists do, and that are in some sense economics, the writing of Smith, Mill, and Marshall reveals to us that central to the discipline from the beginning is an effort to understand the causes of the growth in human wealth and the consequent possibility of the material improvement of the lives of ordinary people. An abundant supply of goods and services is, to use my colleague Fred Lawrence's apt expression, "the condition of the possibility" of an adequate material standard of living for all. And an adequate material standard of living for all is in turn "the condition of the possibility" of living the Christian life in the best way. Fred Lawrence sums this up in another apt phrase "virtue needs its equipment." This description of the focus of economics as adumbrated in the writings of Smith, Mill, and Marshall indicates ample scope in the life of an economist as economist for the exercise of the Christian vocation of love of neighbor. From this perspective the vocation of the economist fits easily into the Christian context of vocation as love of neighbor by its focus on the improvement in the material conditions of life of the generality of the world's people who are poor. The need remains in the 21st century so the vocation of the economist in the modern world, in the 21st century, remains an important sphere of activity for the expression of Christian love, of the Christian vocation.

IV. LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH: PRACTICAL MATTERS

This brings me to the difficult task of relating my vocational experience as an economist, in particular as a teacher of economics, to matters confronting the Catholic Church in the 21st century. What practical lessons or observations that may have some relevance for the church in the 21st century can I draw from my years as an economist? Let me try my hand at a few.

My first practical observation concerns the complexity of particular judgments. Let me illustrate this by a particular example. The particular judgments of Father

Shortell that influenced me strongly were rooted in his concrete experience of the U.S. in the 1930s. Although his specific application of the Church's social teaching seemed straightforward and uncomplicated, I quickly came to realize the inherent complexity of many of the economic and social issues confronted by a person trying to work out the concrete implications of love of neighbor in particular situations. I recall his firm judgment that the *Taft Hartley Act of 1947*, which had been opposed vigorously by both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, enacted into law by Congress over President Harry Truman's veto, and called by some critics the Slave Labor Act of 1947, was an immoral law. Strong language, I thought. I asked him the reason for his judgment. He replied that *Taft-Hartley* outlawed the closed shop, an arrangement where a person had to be a union member in order to be hired. He said that the closed shop was a necessary means for ensuring stable and regularized employment and good wages and working conditions in certain inherently chaotic industries,, and that it was immoral to outlaw a means necessary for assuring decent working lives for workers in these industries. A short time later Father Paul Murphy of the Society of Jesus, in a talk at Saint Joseph's Workingmen's Retreat League in Boston, defended the Taft Hartley ban on the closed shop. When I related Father Shortell's opposite opinion to Father Murphy he explained that some unions had abused the legal right to negotiate a closed shop, and because of this abuse the common good justified the forfeiture of the right. I learned by this concrete experience that the morally correct answer was not always easy to arrive at. Practical judgments relative to specific situations need to be made, and equally sincere inquirers trying to do the right thing can differ in major ways in the substance of their conclusions.

This lesson has been reinforced many times. As I have advanced in the study of economics I found that economics alone often does not provide easy and workable answers to questions of what specifically should be done in order to do the Christian and loving thing. As Father Fortin's observation about the uncertainties surrounding the Christian vocation indicated, there are always uncertainties. Different weights can be given to different possible outcomes, and perfection is not possible. We live in an uncertain world and what is necessary is judgment in each specific situation and the judgment of equally sincere and good intentioned investigators can differ significantly.

But although concrete practical judgments are difficult to make, they must be made, and the person trying to work out the demands of his vocation as a member of the Mystical Body in his specific occupation must use all the skill that training in that occupation has provided him to make the best judgment he can about what the law of love demands. Careful prudential judgment, not snap judgment is what the Christian should bring to the practice of economics as to any other specific vocational field. Economists must go outside the framework provided by economic study to make these practical judgments, and for those committed to the Christian vocation the steady vantage point must be provided by Christ's command to love one's neighbor. In making such judgments the member of the church makes the church present in the world and carries forward the work of salvation. But, the person trying to live his Christian vocation in the practice of economics, as in every other occupation must recognize that other equally sincere and similarly motivated people may differ in their judgments about the right thing to do in specific situations. I think this is an important point to keep in mind in dealing with contemporary contentious issues related to the structure and practices of church governance.

My second practical observation concerns the value of training in economics. At the close of my first year teaching at Boston College, I was invited to the annual banquet of the undergraduate Economics Academy. The invited speaker, an economist and bank president, told the students that it had been discovered during World War II that persons who had studied economics were especially valuable in the planning demanded by the war effort. They were valuable for three reasons. They were found to be better than average in reasoning in terms of cause and effect, and also better than average in handling analyses with more than two variables, and finally they were better than average in reasoning dispassionately. Perhaps these are characteristics of those people drawn to economics. On the other hand, perhaps training in economics hones these skills of careful reasoning, and if so, perhaps training in economics could be helpful, at the margin, to Catholics in helping the church to deal with the many practical problems it confronts currently. The general point is that rigorous training in economic theory provides a rigorous training in deductive logic, a useful skill in all areas of human life including the life of both the institutional Church and the church as Mystical Body. This

point is underscored by a view put forth by an economist who described economic theory as the “grammar of social science.”⁴ What he meant by this is that all social decision makers must confront the fact of scarcity relative to desires. Everything desired cannot be accomplished. Choices must be made, and economic theory provides us with a general theory of optimal choice making. The theory is universally applicable. It can contribute to wise decision-making in all situations and in all institutional settings.

An easily remembered way of describing the economic way of thinking is in the form of five memorable aphorisms.⁵ There is no such thing as a free lunch. There is more than one way to skin a cat. Time is money [or its equivalent.] There can be too much of a good thing. *Natura non facit saltum* [nature doesn’t make leaps.] What do these mean? “There is no such thing as a free lunch” means that when all resources are employed efficiently and fully, the cost of anything is what must be given up of something else, although my colleague, Dick Tresch, qualifies this aphorism and says, “the job of the economist is to find the free lunch.” Tresch’s observation simply recognizes the real world fact that inefficiencies often exist or resources may be standing idle. If inefficiency can be eliminated or idle resources put to work, more can be had without giving up anything else. “There is more than one way to skin a cat” means that there are often many ways to do most tasks and a person should search for the one that economizes by using scarce resources most efficiently. “Time is money” underscores the fact that time is among the scarce resources and ought to be used efficiently. “There can be too much of a good thing reminds us that the extra benefit gained or extra satisfaction gained from any good thing diminishes as one has more and more of it. Satiation occurs. Finally “nature doesn’t make jumps” is the Victorian Alfred Marshall’s dictum in which he calls attention to the fact that things change for the most part in imperceptible variation from day to a day. The change process in the social organism as in the biological organism is normally one of slow growth or slow decay. Perhaps careful attention to the message contained in these aphorisms can be useful in thinking about

⁴ Hirshleiffer, Jack, “The Expanding Domain of Economics,” *American Economic Review*, December, 1985, p. 53.

⁵ Fuchs, Victor R., *How We Live*, Harvard University Press, 1983, pp. 7-9.

how to best allocate church resources of all kinds so as to best accomplish the church's mission in both the immediate and far distant future.

My third practical observation concerns benefit cost analysis. This is an economic technique that gets a good deal of attention. I believe the methodology embodied in this technique can be quite helpful, although the technique itself also can be used dishonestly to simply rationalize decisions reached on other grounds. Rigorous use of benefit cost analysis is possible only when costs and benefits can be quantified, and in this respect the technique strictly applied may have little application to important questions facing the church. Nevertheless, the concept embodied in the technique can be useful in providing a framework for making decisions. It can be helpful if each party to a decision process, in which a sincere effort is being made to make the best decision, presents his arguments up front, and all parties make a sincere effort to assess all the pluses [benefits] and minuses [costs] of each alternative, and all parties are prepared to subject all arguments and proposals to the same rigorous examination in terms of the probable effect on the objective being sought.

My fourth observation concerns the fact that economics is an empirical science. In principle, the ultimate test of any proposition in economics is whether it is supported by the facts. Sometimes the facts are hard to discern and may be open to varied interpretations, and sometimes facts are scarce, but the proposition that theoretical conclusions should be tested against the facts of the world gives an empirical cast to economic study that has relevance for the church in the 21st century as we grapple with different views of the consequences of various actions. Many statements made about consequences are ultimately statements about what are, in principle, empirically verifiable consequences.

My fifth and last practical observation is drawn from Paul Samuelson's famous text *Principles of Economics*. Samuelson called attention to the fact that we vote in at least two ways. The first is by our votes in political elections held at regular intervals. The other way is a way in which we vote every day. We cast dollar votes in the market place every time we decide to purchase a good or a service or contribute a dollar to a group that spends it in our name. The influence of these dollar votes is enormous in the aggregate. Collectively these votes shape the kind of society in which we live. If large

numbers of Christians cast their dollar votes with these consequences in mind, and asked if they really want and like the social consequences of their own purchasing decisions it could have an enormous influence on society. Collectively we get the kind of society we want by our dollar votes. This insight of America's first Nobel Laureate in Economics might be worth pondering by those of us concerned about the church in the 21st century. In our efforts as Christians to deal with a whole range of issues, including poverty and the distribution of income and opportunity, there is an important role for government in framing the right social policies, but there maybe an even more important role for us in exercising the Christian virtues directly by the way in which we cast our dollar votes and allocate our time.

V. LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH: THEORETICAL MATTERS

In addition to practical matters there are theoretical issues related importantly to Christianity and the discipline of economics. Two of these issues appear to me to be of particular importance from a Christian perspective.

My first point is that contemporary economic theorizing draws a sharp distinction between positive and normative economics, a distinction between what is and what ought to be. Economists usually view their professional roles from a technocratic perspective largely restricted to positive economics, and allowing only relatively weak statements about what economics as economics indicates ought to be done. Within the dominant paradigm an action ought to be carried out only when it results in at least one person being better off and no one worse off. Better off and worse off are defined in terms of subjective individual satisfactions that cannot be compared across individuals. As a consequence, an economist operating within the paradigm could not recommend on strictly scientific grounds a policy that would leave one person worse off even if it dramatically improved the well being of others. The fundamental nature of individual preferences in this theoretical scheme is largely unquestioned, and the positive versus normative, and scientific-rational versus unscientific-non-rational distinctions are taken as given. This approach of contemporary economics means that many or most of the

important questions about the economic arrangements that are best for man as man lie outside the competence of economists acting as economists.

Now, as a practical matter, economists often have a good deal to say about what is preferable or best, but this is because they recommend certain actions or take certain positions on the basis of their personal preferences, or on the basis of ethical rules that many of them would regard as non-scientifically arrived at, or by means of an application of the economic standard of what is normatively desirable in a non-rigorous way that violates the rigorous canons of their own discipline. The development of contemporary economics and the socialization process economists undergo in their training put these questions of what is best for man as man outside the competence of the economist in his role as human scientist. The good economist is the one who works within and respects the value free paradigm. If he is a professor he trains his student in the same way. In this context what is ethical or just is ultimately a matter of personal preferences derived from what is regarded as some non-rational or non-scientific ethical system. Why has this come to be the case?

Modern economics is rooted in the individualism of Thomas Hobbes and the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. Christian thinking is at odds in important ways with these philosophical positions. Thus, it is important for the economist who tries to live the vocation of a Christian in the modern world to engage in what may be called a philosophical critique of the roots of the discipline. The fundamental philosophical and theological conflict between Christian thought and the thought of Hobbes and Bentham has to do with the meaning of human existence, the meaning of human life. Catholics who have integrated the Christian message into the fiber of their lives have a view of life as meaningful, with faith and reason providing the fundamental answers related to the question of meaning. Catholics believe life has a transcendent meaning and that this meaning is knowable. They have a vision of the true, the good, and the beautiful based on their belief that life transcends the here and now. Economics as a modern social science has developed in independence of this Christian vision. The fundamental vision that motivates work in the modern autonomous social science of economics is radically different.

The ultimate end of man is not included within the framework of economic analysis. The view of man as a satisfaction or utility maximizing individual follows Bentham and Hobbes. Even an individual's communitarian actions may be regarded as taken by him to satisfy his own utility maximizing goals. Many questions remain to be answered, questions such as: What is the good life? What is the best organization of society to lead man to the end of his nature? What is the common good? What is the purpose and meaning of life? The work of the Mystical Body in the world requires that Christians as members of that body must go beyond the conventional framework of modern economics and deal with these questions.

I want to make clear that these comments ought not to be interpreted as indicating that the typical professor of economics never reflects on the underlying assumptions, the methodology, or the value presuppositions of his discipline. Many economists engage in a great deal of reflection about such things, but in our usual teaching role many of us may not engage in much critical reflection upon the dominant paradigm of contemporary economics. We may point out to the student that there are competing paradigms, and we may comment briefly about the methodology of the discipline, but many of us may find that it takes all the classroom time we have available to try to ensure that the students are well grounded in the standard approach. There may be little time left to introduce students to critical reflection on the economics they have learned, and most of us think it would be wrong to devote a great deal of time to a critique of the standard economics that students have not yet learned in courses intended to teach that body of economics to the students. There is an obvious difficulty with shifting to an approach to teaching economics that focuses on critical reflection on the presuppositions of standard work, because such critical reflection requires an accurate grasp of the standard work. In the absence of such an accurate grasp a critic may be simply knocking down a straw man. I sometimes have this reaction when I hear criticism of economics by people who do not understand the subtleties of the thought of most practicing economists. But, it is a problem, however, when critical reflection is not engaged in because learning the standard material may tend to socialize our students in such a way that they may tend to be less critical than they should be. In fact, students may find it more difficult to be critical of what they have painstakingly learned. Perhaps this problem can never be

dealt with to everyone's satisfaction, although I do not think it presents an insuperable difficulty. The danger to be avoided is the danger of encouraging students to evaluate the fundamental presuppositions from a perspective of ignorance of what economics really contains. Perhaps time spent on serious reflection on how the foundational writers who helped set the epistemological foundations of the discipline of economics went about the process of knowing is an important task confronting economists trying to situate their work in economics within the context of their Christian vocations.

My second and final theoretical point is to note that the best practical work in labor economics that students of Catholic social teaching focused on in the early part of the latter half of the 20th century was on labor problems, and it dealt with these problems within an interdisciplinary framework. This reflected the theoretical focus of American Institutional Economics, a focus that originated in the work of men such as Richard Ely, a founding father of the American Economic Association, and Ely's student, John Rogers Commons. Ely and other Americans like him had done their graduate training in Germany and had adopted the German inductive, historical, and interdisciplinary approach to studying the problems of an emerging industrial economy. They rejected the deductive non-historical methodology, and the dominant laissez-faire ideology of English neo classical economics, and viewed the state positively rather than as a necessary evil. The American Institutional Economists also rejected Bentham's reductionist view of the human person as solely a calculator of his own subjective satisfactions. The Institutional Economists adopted a view of the human person as the subject of human activity that is more compatible with Catholic philosophical and religious thought. It is why, I think, the work of men such as Commons and Ely struck a responsive chord with thinkers working within the framework of Catholic social thought in the 1930s. Commons once described his life's work as trying to save capitalism by making it good, and the orientation of Catholic social thought on the economy was and remains reformist. The carrying on and carrying out of this work is an important task confronting Catholic social thinkers working in economics in the 21st century.

VI. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

What I have learned from my early education and life experience is significant. The idea brought home to me by Father Casey in introducing me to *Mystici Corporis Christi* survives. I remain convinced that the important work each layperson has to do as a member of Christ's body is in the hurly-burly, the push and pull and tension of daily life in the world, in our families, in our political communities, in our unions, in the work place, as lawyers and bankers and iron workers. This list goes on almost without limit, and if we do not pay attention to our Christian vocations as economists, lawyers, bankers, police officers firefighters, sales people, sheet metal workers, and so on, the Body of Christ in the world of which we are all members will suffer. Our parishes are important and the Diocesan structure of administration and governance and authority is important, and we all have to pay attention to it, but we need to be aware of slipping into a mindset in which we regard our work in the church as work within the institutional structure, and neglect to reflect on and actively realize that our membership in the church is a membership in a reality that is integrated with every aspect of our daily lives. It is my opinion that many pre Vatican II Catholics knew this and went into the shops and unions and factories and offices carrying Christ with them actively conscious of their important work in the church even if they did not carry out specific tasks in their parishes. They knew the life of the church was not just in their parishes, or in the Diocesan hierarchical structure. The church was the Mystical Body in the world. In Vatican II language the People of God in the World, and it is in the give and take of everyday life that Christians must work out their salvation and play out their roles in bringing to fruition the Kingdom of Christ. Vatican II was a great event in the history of the church, but we should not think that the church was benighted and out of touch with the modern world before Vatican II. That was not my personal experience. The lesson I draw for the Church in the 21st century from the experience of my life and work is that we should focus our attention more sharply and consistently than I think it has been on the church's social teaching as it applies to the economic order and on the fact that the Christian life in the

church is lived in the world by all of us in our specific occupations, which are in this sense truly called vocations.

In closing, perhaps Bernard Lonergan with whose work I have had some contact, may bring an important perspective to the Christian vocation in economics. Lonergan has stressed that the search for moral truth must begin by paying close attention to experience and seek to understand what it might mean. Current Catholic teaching about the social order is the fruit of this kind of exercise to that extent that it is a systematic attempt to understand the Word of God for our own era. Understanding means asking questions and entertaining new questions related to our experience. The thinking that follows may point to a concrete solution that may work. We need to learn how to make reasonable judgments and eventually reasonable decisions, responsible to the Word of God directed toward love of God and neighbor. Our work must be carried out in the “concrete situations that condition the lives of individuals, of groups, of the whole of humanity.”⁶ Pondering those ideas of Lonergan in a disciplined way may provide important guidance for the Christian economist and for the church in the 21st century.

⁶ Victor Clore, “Revolution in Roman Catholic Theology,” presented at the 32nd Annual Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, June 19-24, 2005. This final paragraph reflects my understanding of some of the content of Father Clore’s paper.