

**One Small Step for a Neighbor - One Giant Leap for the Common Good**  
**A Franciscan Approach to Economics**  
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My eight-year-old nephew had been working for months on a school report about the state of Ohio. While he had hoped to be assigned California, he eventually decided to do his best with the Buckeye State. On the day of his presentation he dressed as the astronaut Neil Armstrong, born in Ohio and the first person to walk on the moon. As he offered a few concluding thoughts he donned his space helmet and spontaneously sang, “Ground Control to Major Tom (ten, nine, eight, seven, six) commencing countdown, engines on (five, four, three) check ignition and may God’s love be with you (two, one, liftoff).”<sup>1</sup> This reference to the 1972 David Bowie song entitled *Space Oddity* earned high esteem from his teacher, who is a huge Bowie fan!

Later in the song Major Tom speaks back to Ground Control saying, “...the stars look very different today; for here am I sitting in a tin can far above the world; planet earth is blue and there’s nothing I can do.” Being up so high provides not only a different perspective of the stars and the earth, but also of oneself as being but a small part of a much larger whole. Such experiences of awe and wonder can easily lead to one’s feeling insignificant, or even helpless.

I can’t help but wonder if such thoughts and feelings were inside of Zacchaeus the tax collector, when in Luke’s Gospel he climbed up into a tree to better see Jesus passing through Jericho. Searching for Jesus by scanning the crowd, separated from everyone (not only in height) I imagine that he felt like he was sitting in a “tin can”, wrapped in the money he had acquired by cheating so many people. Then spotting him, Zacchaeus looked down at Jesus seeing not the blue earth, but rather the one “in whom all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, [for] all things have been created through him and for him.”<sup>2</sup> Was Zacchaeus paralyzed up there, gazing in wonder at Jesus? Did he feel like Major Tom, as if there was nothing he could do?

As God’s love accompanied Major Tom’s liftoff into space, so too God’s love called Zacchaeus back to earth, when Jesus coxed him down and invited himself to Zacchaeus’ home. This encounter with Jesus led Zacchaeus to realize that there was something he could do! For after some time together, Zacchaeus the tax collector chose to do something quite profound by offering restitution to everyone he had cheated.

This Lukan story is used as the scriptural foundation of the Catechism’s teaching on the seventh commandment (not stealing) in relation to commutative justice. This is a correcting of an injustice that one has inflicted upon another person, which requires a proportional

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<sup>1</sup> Bowie, David. *Space Oddity*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYYRH4apXDo> (accessed April 12, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 1:16.

restitution on behalf of the transgressor.<sup>3</sup> Luke tells us that Zacchaeus ultimately decided to give half of his wealth to the poor and he also offered a fourfold restitution to those whom he had defrauded.<sup>4</sup>

As Jesus did with Zacchaeus, Saint Francis of Assisi often invited himself into the middle of people's economic life by preaching in the town squares. Like today, the regular economic transactions of his time too often disadvantaged the poor, while benefiting only those who wrapped themselves in tin cans of wealth and prestige. Francis understood that his public preaching needed to be grounded in the Church's calling people to relationship with God, which included a reordering of the economic priorities of the time. This included a movement from an over emphasis on the increase of profit or power to the service of persons and the entire human community.<sup>5</sup>

In his short lifetime Francis made a transformative impact in the turning of people's hearts. This reality can be seen through the fresco in Assisi depicting the body of Francis at San Damiano after his death, when Saint Clare and her sisters were able to pay their respects. Immediately to the left of this encounter there is a small man climbing a tree, to better be able to look down and catch a glimpse of the dead saint. Placing this "Zacchaeus figure" in the fresco serves as a metaphor for how Francis, first with his own life and then in the lives of countless others, brought commutative justice or restitution to a world obsessed with profit and power. Francis and Clare's embracing of poverty gave birth to a way of life that heightens the importance of the Church "making moral judgment(s) about economic and social matters," as their living the Gospel life "strived to inspire right attitudes with respect to earthly goods and in socio-economic relationships".<sup>6</sup>



Francis' impact on the economic life of peoples has echoed down through the centuries. In his book Franciscans and Their Finances, Capuchin Friar David Couturier notes that Franciscans commenting on finances has been a consistent chorus throughout the centuries and is rooted in Francis' turning from a monastic model of religious life to one that is more urban and part of the fabric of everyday life. This shift brought the lesser brothers and sisters up against bad economics that hurt the poor and vulnerable.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we Franciscans find inherent to our Gospel living, the necessity to study finance and related fields, so as to better comment on the shape of economic activity. We Franciscans

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<sup>3</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2412.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 19:8.

<sup>5</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2426.

<sup>6</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2420.

<sup>7</sup> Couturier, OFM Cap., David. *Franciscans and Their Finances: Economics in a Disenchanted World*, page 69.

may not be perfect in our assessments, but we are committed amateurs, thinking, pondering, and sharing for the common good and especially for the poor.<sup>8</sup>

Couturier critiques the architects of our modern economy for their sidelining of religion and their redefining of freedom in the context of the choice to buy and sell at will. His antidote is the promotion of a fraternal economy: “The Franciscan attempt to develop a more ‘relational’ and less ‘competitive’ form of economy...suspicious of models that require privacy, isolation and aggressive as foundational elements.”<sup>9</sup>

A fraternal economy builds communion rather than competition, in order to minimize the collateral damage caused by the “invisible hand” of the Market. This collateral damage is especially seen in the disparity between the rich and the poor in the so called north-south divide. Inequality is embedded into the current economic systems to such a degree that Couturier points out how, “Our own Franciscan structures participate in this injustice. In many places, our own economic activity feed the inequality that our theological sentiments deny and hope to transcend.”<sup>10</sup>

I remember talking about this dynamic to a German Conventual Friar after his first reading of Pope Francis’ *Laudato Sí*. He was thinking of his life in Germany when he came to the conclusion that: *It is not that I am rich, and they are poor; but rather that because I am rich, they are poor!* This insight is a contemporary “Zacchaeus moment” that begs for a kind of response from us that brings about restitution based on distributive justice. Simply put, when we realize that we are using our money to buy products that exploit others, it is incumbent upon us to shift our consumption by paying more for the sake of supporting fair-trade practices. Everyday concrete examples range from clothing to chocolate and coffee.

In the 2018 meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, Pope Francis called for a “wise discernment” that would put the human person and his or her rights at the center of economic decision making for the common good, providing for a fair and equitable sharing of profits. “Now is the time to take courage and bold steps for our beloved planet. This is the right moment to put into action our responsibility to contribute to the development of humanity.”<sup>11</sup>

Pope Francis has added his voice to the call of generations of Franciscans for a more fraternal economy that necessitates both commutative and distributive justice. The directive from our Franciscan Mission Control, the Gospel, is for everyone to take *bold steps* out of our tin cans, like the steps of Neil Armstrong as he looked down on our blue planet from the surface of the moon. So that each of us might take *One Small Step for a Neighbor*, and together *One Giant Leap for the Common Good*.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 71.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 69.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>11</sup> World Economic Forum Annual Meeting 2018, *Pope Francis’ Message to Davos*, January 12, 2018. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/01/the-pope-s-announcement-to-wef18/> (accessed April 12, 2019).

“Ground Control to *You & Me* (ten, nine, eight, seven, six) commencing countdown, engines on (five, four, three) check ignition and may God's love be with you (two, one, liftoff).”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bowie, David. *Space Oddity, with alterations in italics*.