

INTERVIEW WITH ADEMAR BECHTOLD, PROFESSOR AT NOTRE DAME OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “Yes, my values affected my research in very important ways. I made an implicit commitment to focus my life on teaching, selfishly expecting to make my contribution to humanity through the work of my students, as they make decisions to transform the world into a better place for everyone in the future.”
- “I am passionate about education as a tool to grow economies and improve the standard of living around the world. Millions of good ideas that could solve major problems and challenges facing the world today may be lost forever when children cannot go to school.”

You are a Professor of Economics at Notre Dame of Maryland University. Could you tell us a bit about the university?

The College of Notre Dame of Maryland, established in 1895 on a beautiful campus located just north of Baltimore City, in Maryland, was the first Catholic College in the United States to award a four-year baccalaureate degree for women. On its 116th anniversary, the College of Notre Dame became Notre Dame of Maryland University. Today the University offers undergraduate and graduate programs for both women and men in four schools - the School of Education, School of Nursing, School of Pharmacy, and School of Arts, Science, and Business. Rooted in Catholic Intellectual traditions, the Notre Dame University "challenges women and men to strive for intellectual and professional excellence, build inclusive communities, engage in service to others, and promote social responsibility." The Women's College still focuses first and foremost on providing high-quality education for women, as envisioned by the SSNDs more than a century ago. A small institution with a big heart, Notre Dame has always focused on providing quality education centered on liberal arts and Catholic traditions to students that would not be able to get it otherwise.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Ademar Bechtold, a Professor of Economics at Notre Dame of Maryland University, talks about his teaching and research. This interview is part of a series on Catholic economists in partnership with the Catholic Research Economists Discussion Organization (CREDO).

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What is your main area of research and what do you teach? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

My research interest is on international trade and its effects on the welfare of societies in developing countries. Growing up in a poor farm community in Brazil, I saw firsthand many people working very hard, long hours every day, producing commodities for export without being able to generate enough income to break the cycle of poverty. It was not hard work that elevated people out of poverty, I learned; it was the value society placed on the product of that work. Since that time, I became interested in examining how trade, trade policies, and changing trade patterns affect the market structures and the value-added to commodities produced and exported mainly by developing countries.

As a professor in a relatively small university, I have the opportunity to teach in various economics fields, including international economics, macroeconomics theory and policy, econometrics, and others. There are pros and cons of teaching classes in multiple fields, but the rewards far outpace the costs as they all promote knowledge and allow for the exchange of ideas and personal/professional experiences that help everyone to build a more complex understanding of the world around us.

Are you able to share your values in your teaching? What seems to work and what does not?

Yes, Notre Dame is a place where I can share my values and teach economics with humanity in mind. The choices I make every day, some easy, some difficult, some seemingly inconsequential, others indispensable, are always guided by integrity, respect, service, and excellence. Notre Dame is a community that shares those same core values. One example is the Honor Code: Bound by the Notre Dame Honor Code, students, faculty, and staff work together to create a collaborative learning environment centered on intellectual honesty and academic integrity.

What seems to work? The focus on liberal education has stood the test of time, promoting intellectual ability through humanistic and scientific inquiry. Notre Dame's students strive to interpret information using quantitative and qualitative methods, communicate ideas effectively, appreciate diversity, and better understand human nature and societies.

In a world where everyone can shovel anything to the Internet, well-rounded education and strong critical thinking skills are essential for interpreting complex ideas and expressing informed opinions. Notre Dame strives to provide expanded ways for students to learn how to think (create knowledge), to practice how to do (develop skills),

and to use their education to create a better world (apply values).

The Catholic intellectual tradition adds a value-based dimension for evaluating alternatives to address specific social-economic issues, considering other cultures' experiences, the marginalized and the poor. The small class environment provides opportunities to offer a rigorous curriculum in a collaborative environment where each student brings their unique set of experiences and insights to enrich the learning of all.

What needs more work? In my view, one way Catholic Institutions like Notre Dame could do a better job is by offering more opportunities for students from developing countries to study in the U.S. and take back their knowledge to influence their communities' future. Also, by providing more opportunities for our students to experience life in other countries and use their experiences to improve our communities' living standards. In this increasingly interdependent world, the ability to examine issues from the perspectives of different cultures, political, economic, legal, and ethical systems can foster better understanding, peace, and human development.

Do your values affect your research? In what way? And what are some challenges you face?

Yes, my values affected my research in very important ways. On the one hand, it affected my choice of international trade and its intersection with poverty and regional economic development as a focus of research. On the other hand, it affected my choice of working at a small university, focusing on teaching and creating opportunities for different populations, knowing that it would limit my time and resources for research. When I accepted a position at Notre Dame many years ago, I made an implicit commitment to focus my life on teaching, selfishly expecting to make my contribution to humanity through the work of my students, as they make decisions to transform the world into a better place for everyone in the future.

What is your advice for graduates who may be Catholic or have an affinity with Catholic values and are contemplating doing a PhD?

I would advise the students to build a research plan that fits the world they want to live in after their graduation. Catholic intellectual tradition is based on the idea that truth animates faith and that faith is a catalyst for inquiry, which is essential for acquiring wisdom to build "just" societies.

Today we all have access to more information than I could ever dream of during my college years. I would tell my students to use information wisely to make informed choices in the pursuit of truth. I would encourage them to

build knowledgeware that can inspire new generations to challenge some of the values and assumptions made by my generation on "what is" and "what ought to be" to keep the world on a sustainable path.

Also, I would advise my students to think globally. We live in a global world, and no one country will be able to continuously improve itself while bringing other countries down. I would show them how their research and ideas can inspire business leaders and politicians to develop a global mindset and help everyone embrace the world as the beautiful, diverse, and complex place it is. I would encourage my students to travel abroad to learn the ways people in other countries think before judging them for not thinking like them.

Lastly, I would advise them to embrace change. Making the world a better place implies changing it. Albert Einstein once wrote: "The world, as we have created, is a process of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking." We all need to accept the fact that we will need to change our thinking before we can change the world.

Of course, it is important to build realistic expectations focusing on assessable goals, develop a good working relationship with the advisor, follow a healthy work-life balance, building a research network, etc..., but, I would like to think that those are discussions the student will have at the beginning of a Ph.D. program in any school.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position? What was your personal journey?

I was born in a rural community in Brazil and attended a one-room elementary school where students from all grades meet at the same time with the same teacher in the same room. Of course, many extraordinary things happened along the way for a student from that school to earn a Ph.D. from a University in the United States, but none was more important than the values instilled in me by my family.

My life's journey has been a journey of discovery, hard work, and many lessons learned during moments of great joys and moments of great sorrow. While working my way through College, I became a member of a Rotaract Club (youth branch of Rotary) where I learned many important skills, engaged in community service, and developed invaluable friendships that lasted until today. A few years after finishing College, I received a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship for a year of study at the University at Buffalo, New York. After completing a year of study I went back to Brazil, but later accepted an invitation from my advisor to return to the U.S. and work on a Ph.D. program. Since then, my work has focused on economic education with a focus on improving the living standards of less privileged populations.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

I spend as much time as I can with my family. My wife Silvana and I have two children. Leander (25) graduated from the University of Delaware and Raphael (22) is graduating with a Master's degree from Johns Hopkins and on the way to start a Ph.D. program at the University of Washington in the fall.

I like to travel and experience other countries and cultures. Learning from the experiences of others in their communities and observing different ways people deal with issues and opportunities, I refresh my own perspectives on what I want to accomplish in life's journey.

I am passionate about education as a tool to grow economies and improve the standard of living around the world. Millions of good ideas that could solve major problems and challenges facing the world today may be lost forever when children cannot go to school. An informed society, I believe, is better prepared to make wise decisions to improve the allocation of scarce resources and to create a more prosperous and "just" world.



Photo: Taking 15 students for a study tour in Brazil.