

INTERVIEW WITH JOSEPH KABOSKI, PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

April 2021



EXCERPTS:

- “We need to foster the dissemination of non-ideological and legitimate economic knowledge within Church conversations of the economy. At the same time, we need to help baptize the secular discipline of economics with Catholic values. Most economists, even practicing Catholics, don’t have an appreciation of Catholic social doctrine.”
- “The Catholic faith is both difficult and “a light yolk” at the same time. I think living a faithful life as an economist is probably no more or less difficult than any other profession.”

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

The University of Notre Dame is one of the premier Catholic universities in the United States. It was started in the mid-19th century by the Congregation of the Holy Cross, a French order, and despite its French origins and name, it became well known for educating the children of working class Irish immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is famous in the United States for its football team as well. It is now a wealthy Catholic school that is trying to move from being a liberal arts school to a research university. The economics department is a fairly new department, started around 2002 or so.

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

I am a development economist, whose research mixes microeconomic and macroeconomic methods. The macroeconomic methods are more unique within development. I got interested in economics because I was concerned about poverty, but once I studied I realized that poverty in the U.S. paled in comparison to global poverty, so I concentrated on development.

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, Joseph Kaboski, a Professor of Economics at the University of Notre Dame, 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).

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

For teaching, I teach a graduate course in macroeconomic development, and an undergraduate course in economics and Catholic social thought, that I developed when I came to Notre Dame. I taught international trade in the past as well.

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

When I taught at Ohio State, it was a public, secular university, and I would try to occasionally make comments or pose questions that would get the students to think about well-being in a somewhat broader sense than simply income or efficiency, but it was limited. Here at Notre Dame, my undergraduate course is quite explicit in Catholic values, but the graduate class is closer to what I did at Ohio State.

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

Certainly my values affect the focus of my research, the questions I ask, and how I view my findings. I have research on a Microfinance poverty program sponsored by Catholic Relief Services. I stay away from things like contraception, abortion, etc. Still, I am a very mainstream economist whose research is published in the field's secular journals. You would not read most of my research and find anything explicitly Catholic in them or really too far out of the ordinary. I appreciate the strengths of markets, competition, prices, incentives, and the importance of scarcity and constraints, but I also realize the limitations of markets, an important role for government, etc. I have recent research in the Amazon looking at a way of increasing the income of poor fishing communities by undermining a supply chain cartel, for example.

But, for example, I co-lead a UK-funded research program on the macroeconomic development of low income countries called STEG (Structural Transformation and Economic Growth), and my values are part of that. We have tried to avoid being ideological, get people involved from low income countries through a free virtual class, etc. In the UK, there is interest not only in growth but also sustainability, climate change, distributional concerns, and the status of women, which also helps. But for a research call we were writing, the original wording was to look for potential policies to address government distortions or market failures, which I thought was too narrow in focusing only on efficiency, and I pushed to broaden the language to include policies that would improve people's well-being more broadly.

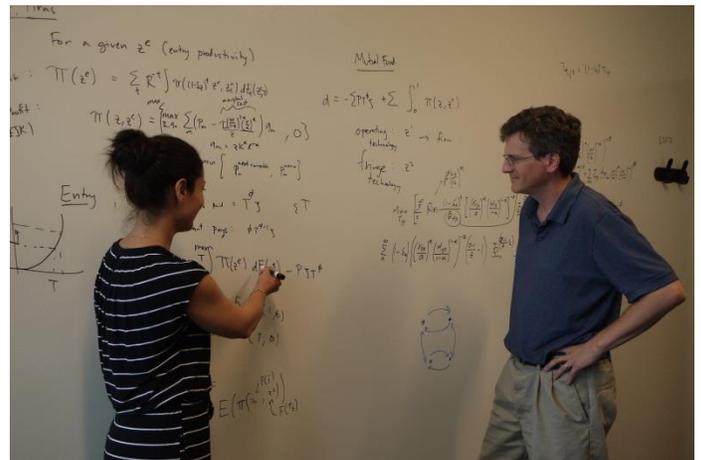


Photo: Teaching at University of Notre Dame.

You launched CREDO and have served as President of the association for many years. What has been achieved, and what needs to be done to strengthen the association and increase its impact?

We've grown tremendously, both in people involved and our activities. We have several hundred members, regular conferences, virtual panels, etc. We've had regular Masses and breakfasts at the ASSA (Allied Social Science Associations) annual meetings since our founding, and we're now members of the ASSA, so we will start having academic sessions as well. We have the summer seminar introducing economists to Catholic social teaching, and a monthly virtual seminar as well. And we have engaged bishops and Church leaders in many countries, including the USCCB and the Vatican. That's a lot of success.

But I think we need to improve and expand on all five dimensions of our mission. We need to build the community — we are only reaching a fraction of Catholic research economists, especially outside of the U.S., and we need to help foster the careers of young Catholic economists. We need to foster the dissemination of non-ideological and legitimate economic knowledge within Church conversations of the economy. Economists have a lot of important knowledge that matters for people's material well-being, but there is resistance to economists, especially quantitative economists, in many quarters of the Church. Even Pope Francis, for example, is very interested in the economy but — at the same time — very suspicious of economists. A lot of this is breaking down preconceptions of what economists are and do, and explaining the importance of economics for the things Catholics care about.

At the same time, we need to help baptize the secular discipline of economics with Catholic values, and that starts by helping CREDO members know and appreciate the Catholic insights. Most economists, even practicing Catholics, don't have an appreciation of Catholic social

doctrine. In many cases, we might not know what we should be caring about as Catholics, when it comes to the economy. So there is a lot of work to do, and I hope our movement of adding committees is a way of getting more people involved.

Is being a Catholic economist easy or hard, and why is that?

The Catholic faith is both difficult and “a light yoke” at the same time. I think living a faithful life as an economist is probably no more or less difficult than any other profession. I have successes and failures, but the lightness of the yoke comes from realizing that God is merciful even in my failings and, given Jesus' victory which we celebrate later this week, my own success is not too critical in the grand scheme. I tell my students that there are a lot of different ways to serve God. That's true within economics as well. You don't need to be a development economist or teaching at a Catholic university. Perhaps what makes the vocation of an economist unique is that there is not much of a blueprint made for you of how to integrate your professional life into your faith, so it requires a lot of personal discernment. Again, I think the idea of CREDO can potentially be helpful is just giving young people examples of faithful economists.

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

The Ph.D. is a big investment. Make sure you love economics and go to the best program you can get into. It will undoubtedly be a secular program, so it will take a lot of personal effort outside of class to grow your faith, both in the heart and intellectually. You will have to swim against the stream. Your advisor is unlikely to appreciate your religion, for example. But that is true of being a Christian these days, no matter where you are. It is countercultural to be Catholic, and if you follow the currents, there is a danger of losing your faith. At the same time, it has the advantage of making it almost impossible to be a lukewarm about your faith, however. A lukewarm faith, where God is just a side part of your life, is never a “stable equilibrium,” especially for an intellectual because it's intellectually untenable. And people do still respond to the goodwill that they see in a fervent Christian.

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

I grew up in a big, Catholic family in the Rust Belt of the U.S., and we faced our share of economic struggles when I was a kid. My parents were both hard working and college-educated, but my father had several long unemployment spells when we were kids, and that left an

impression on all of us. At the deepest points, I remember receiving free lunch (briefly) and Christmas toy donations, and I remember being quite ashamed by both. Today, I feel more shame for my pride back then, and I appreciate that having a background like that is quite rare in academia.

I studied engineering as an undergrad, but eventually moved into economics for graduate school because I thought it mattered more for people. I went to the University of Chicago, where I took classes from Becker and Lucas and went to daily Mass, where homilies would sometimes rail against market economics, the “Chicago Boys”, etc., so I needed to reconcile things in my mind and read up on Catholic social teaching. Fr. Bill Jabusch, the chaplain at Chicago, who wound up marrying my wife and me, helped me organize a conference on economics and Catholic Social Thought, and probably a decade later, Cardinal George asked me to do the same through the Lumen Christi Institute, and those conferences eventually grew into CREDO.

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

At Notre Dame, the chapel door inscription says “God, Country, and Notre Dame”, but I'm a big fan of Wisconsin sports teams. The Green Bay Packers' famous coach, Vince Lombardi (who was a daily communicant) had a motto of priorities: God, family, and the Green Bay Packers, in that order. I have a beautiful wife and a brood of kids. I try to keep my passions as God, family, and economics, with Wisconsin sports teams close in fourth place.



Photo: Department of Economics graduates at the University of Notre Dame.