

INTERVIEW WITH CLARA PIANO, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT SAMFORD UNIVERSITY

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “The “facts” of economics don’t speak for themselves any more than the data “speaks for itself.” We use our values to identify and adjudicate between costs and benefits. Toward this end, I ask students to write reflection papers each week where they work through their own analysis of the tradeoffs.”
- “More than often, the good that we value can have many different, even unpredictable forms. One of the best things about research has been such surprises, learning about interesting and new ways to manifest the values that many of us hold in common.”

[This interview was conducted when Clara was completing her PhD and teaching at Catholic University of America, i.e. before she joined Samford University].

How do you spend your time in a typical week?

I teach two courses at Catholic University right now, so on the days that I teach, I try to accomplish everything related to that aspect of my job—prepping lectures, meeting with students, or writing exams. As a relatively young and inexperienced professor, I also make extra time to listen to podcasts, read articles, and find books that relate to the courses I’m teaching. It’s really important to me to take my students’ time seriously.

The days during the week that I don’t teach are devoted to research. I wake up, pray for the intercession of St. Thomas Aquinas, and get to writing. Right before lunch I go on a run with my dog to unwind and mull over any problems that arose in my work. The rest of my day is spent on more research activities, usually reading and/or with data. I always try to take Sundays off so I can fully be present at Mass, with family and friends, and in my leisure. It has taken me some time to hit my stride with a weekly schedule, but I’m the kind of person who thrives in patterns, so it was worth the experimentation with my schedule during grad school.

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, Clara Piano, an Assistant Professor of Economics at Samford University, talks about her 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?

During my PhD studies, my primary fields were Institutions and Development. However, I've always been fascinated by the role played by families and religions in society, so my research often engages with the fields of family economics and the economics of religion. For example, while writing a paper on Soviet family policy, I had the chance to engage with family economics, economic history, and Marxist and feminist scholars. I've also written on the role of the *in persona Christi Capitis* doctrine in shaping the institutions of the Catholic Church (primarily seminaries) which provided me the opportunity to dive more deeply into the economics of religion and history again.

What drew me originally to these fields was the same thing that drew me to economics itself— my personal experience of living in developing countries (both as a child and as an adult) and a Catholic Social Thought reading group during college. In particular, I wanted to understand why my grandma Mary was able to successfully find and fulfill her vocation as a nurse, and consequently benefit her family and community, while my abuela Maria in the Dominican Republic did not have the same freedom when it came to finding her unique economic vocation. The more I studied, the more I became convinced that understanding the comparative advantages of the state, the family, and religion is the key to a society that befits human dignity.

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

Yes and no (on purpose). In economics, we often presume that the agents in our models and theories value wealth. This tends to work well, since wealth is itself a means for many diverse human ends (supporting one's family, running a business, caring for the poor), so it explains a lot of behavior. The purpose of an economics class is to learn economics, so I spend the vast majority of class time on economic history, theory, and evidence, to make sure that I'm exposing my students to all the important "facts." But of course, this is not the end of the conversation. The "facts" of economics don't speak for themselves any more than the data "speaks for itself." We use our values to identify and adjudicate between costs and benefits. Toward this end, I ask students to write reflection papers each week where they work through their own analysis of the tradeoffs. We openly discuss the often-difficult tradeoffs that the economic approach identifies. I also see this step in the process as part of the division of labor in society, with other disciplines (e.g., philosophy and theology) and institutions (e.g., family and religion) picking up where I leave off in my economics courses.

Do your values affect your research? If so, in what way? And what are some challenges you face?

Definitely! Knowledge begets love, and it works the other way around too. I am drawn to studying family and religion because I am convinced that they provide great value to society and individual lives, and I wanted to understand that better. My challenge is not so much being impartial about the things that I study (the best any of us can do is honest), but to persevere each day in falling in love with my specific research at the time. I noticed this while studying for my qualifying exams at the beginning of my PhD studies—the more I love what I'm trying to understand, the more I can understand it.

I also want to emphasize that a certain amount of open-mindedness, or trust in truth, is necessary in research. More than often, the good that we value can have many different, even unpredictable forms. One of the best things about research has been such surprises, learning about interesting and new ways to manifest the values that many of us hold in common.

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

Mostly easy! As Catholics, we believe that each person has a unique vocation— a place where your particular talents meet a deep need in the world. When you discover your vocation (as I did during the last year of my undergraduate studies), it often feels like the easiest, most peaceful thing in the world. I still can't believe that I get to spend the rest of my life reading, writing, and teaching. Moreover, as Catholics, we are always on the side of truth. We don't need to be afraid of the truth found in economics, rather, we have a serious duty to seek it.

The only hard part so far is that, when you enter the intellectual world, you must really be certain about what you believe and why. Every aspect of your worldview may be scrutinized (rightfully so), and while this is a great benefit to you in the long run, it can be tedious and scary in the short run. Know who you are, and where you are going.

You are co-chair of the service committee of CREDO - why did you volunteer and what are you trying to achieve?

Yes, and it has been a great experience thus far! I volunteered to help out because I strongly believe in CREDO as an organization. It is a beautiful thing to connect with people who share so much in common with you, but who also have an entirely unique journey and perspective. I am young and inexperienced as an economist, but I do have a lot of enthusiasm to offer, so the service committee was a natural fit. I have also been involved in teaching catechism and confirmation classes

at parishes for many years, and spent a semester of college doing service, so engaging with the broader community has always been something I felt drawn to.

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

Pray about it! Then, when you are given peace and consolation about your decision, don't let anyone dissuade you from it. If I had listened to some prominent authorities in my life, gotten a "real job" and not gone to graduate school, I would not have met my future husband! Of course, other people mean well, but your vocation is between you and God. Letting "The Divine Economist" influence your plans gives you the best chance at finding the happiness you were made for.

Also, I do have one book recommendation. This book continues to bring me peace and encouragement during the difficult times of my academic journey: *The Intellectual Life* (Sertillanges 1987).

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

I did a limited search on the academic job market this past year, and I am grateful to have found a wonderful, tenure-track position at Samford University, which is also quite close to where my fiancé works. I don't think I would have had as much success on the job market if I had not said "yes" to many opportunities that scared me at first — pursuing a research idea while still busy with classes, enjoying a lecturer role alongside my research, and jumping at opportunities that I knew I would initially fail at but improve with experience. I look forward to becoming a member of the Samford community and doing my best to pass on to students the incredible gift that my college professors gave me.

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

I have a beautiful dog (a Pyrador) whose name is Jace! No, I didn't name him, but I took our first name-last name match as a sign that I should adopt him in particular, and it has been the best adventure. Jace and I are both extremely active, so we love running miles and miles along the Mount Vernon Trail each weekend. I'm passionate about nature and have always hiked, camped, and wandered, so it has been fun to have a piece of wild in my home each day.



Photo: Jace!



Photo: Jace & Jace