

INTERVIEW WITH ERIC SCORSONE, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ECONOMICS AT MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

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EXCERPTS:

- “I think, especially in working for a public university, one must be careful and balanced in presenting or teaching about one's values. I have never felt pressure not to teach my own values, but rather I hold myself accountable to teach a fair and balance view of public policy issues from a plurality of views.”
- “My values impact the type of research I work on and how I teach. I am interested in doing work on issues that impact local communities and in particular marginalized communities. I am very drawn to the teaching of Pope Francis and wish to emulate the kinds of issues he emphasizes... I reach out and work with local public officials in communities where economic and social distress is widespread.”

You are an Associate Professor of Economics at Michigan State University. Could you tell us a bit about the University?

Michigan State University (MSU) is a publicly funded university governed by an elected board of trustees who are elected by the residents of Michigan. It is one of the largest universities in the United States. It was founded in 1855 as land grant university by President Lincoln meaning that it was established to extend education to the general public beyond the elite who typically attended college at that time. This included areas of study including agriculture, practical engineering, and the agricultural extension service to assist farmers and farm households.

Today, it has extended these ideas to many other areas and the extension service works on nutrition and homeowner issues, urban agriculture and gardening, state and local government assistance, natural resource management along with all the traditional topical areas of a modern university.

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, Eric Scorsone, Associate Professor of Economics at Michigan State 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 has been your main area of research and what did you teach? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

My interest has always been in public policy and I chose economics to be the field that I could best understand these issues. Over time, my focus became state and local government or subnational governments which are often less studied than national or federal governments but are almost always dealing with the most important issues of the day. Ultimately, I focused on state and local government finance because I spent time working as an economist in the Colorado Governor's Office as a PhD student working on state revenue forecasting and state tax policy. I founded and continue to run the MSU Extension Local Government Finance and Policy Center and work extensively with local governments in Michigan and globally.

Were you able to share your values in your teaching? What seemed to work and what does not?

I think, especially in working for a public university, one must be careful and balanced in presenting or teaching about one's values. I have never felt pressure not to teach my own values, but rather (from my own feelings) I hold myself accountable to teach a fair and balance view of public policy issues from a plurality of views. If someone asks about my own personal views, I am happy to share those and the foundation for those views.

Do your values affect your research, and if so in what way? And what are some challenges you faced or still face today?

I think my values impact the type of research I work on and how I teach. I am interested in doing work on issues that impact local communities and in particular marginalized communities. I am very drawn to the teaching of Pope Francis and wish to emulate the kinds of issues he emphasizes. I do research on topics that address policy issues relevant to marginalized communities in the local government context and I do much of my extension teaching to local public officials. In particular, I reach out and work with local public officials in communities where economic and social distress is widespread.

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

It can be quite difficult especially at a public university. One cannot explicitly express religious values and so one needs to learn how to operate in this environment. I believe the best approach is to express your values through your actions. You treat people, colleagues, students and guests in line with your values and you act as you would want to be treated.

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 recommend that your Catholic views shape the kind of research and teaching you want to pursue. The important questions of our day have been well highlighted by Pope Francis including racism, climate change, inequality, and the overall need to support marginalized communities. These are all topics an economist can tackle. If you want to be more explicit about your own views, you may want to pursue a degree at a Catholic university if that is a possibility. That said, it should be no problem to seek an education where you need to be and still be successful.

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

I ended up here after studying as an undergraduate student in economics at Loyola University Chicago. The Jesuits taught us that we needed to pursue our gifts to help others and be a beacon of light in the world. I took several classes in theology, economics, and business ethics that helped me understand how ethics, values and economics work together. From there, I spent time both in graduate school and the real world understanding what my role was to be. Although it was a nonlinear journey in many ways, I believe I ended up doing this work to help those in marginalized communities fully participate in the economy and society. A public land grant university has a similar mission to extend the resources of the university to those in need.

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

Since the beginning of the pandemic, I have been working on the frontlines with the Mayor of the city of Flint in Michigan. I chose to do this rather than simply stay at home and work. My responsibility has been to assist the Mayor and other elected officials. Flint is a community that has been hit with economic and social distress, a drinking water crisis in 2015, and now the pandemic. I don't do this work because I believe I am smarter than anyone, but rather to share my talents and gifts and help a struggling community.