

America

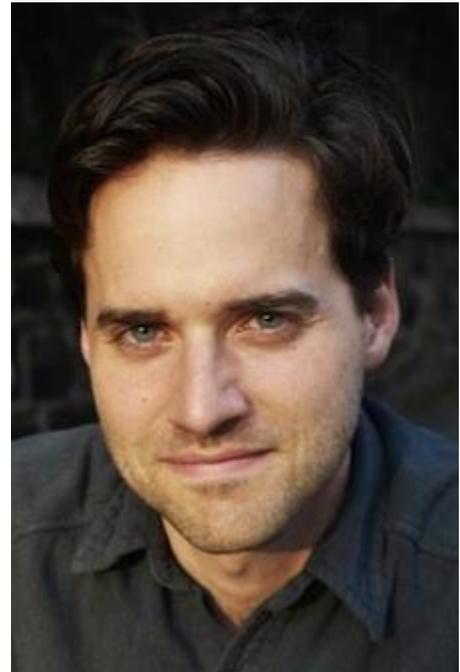
PONTIFEX ECONOMICUS

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The subtitle of Pope Francis' [stunning new encyclical](#), "[Laudato Si', On Care for Our Common Home](#)," [4] belies the preference of some that a pontiff [not venture into economic matters](#) [5]—Jeb Bush, for instance. [Etymologically](#) [6], after all, economics is the discipline of managing a home; the encyclical's heading therefore presents it as an economics for the world we hold in common. But what kind of economics is it?

As the document's most uncomfortable critics have pointed out, the pope has little faith in the capacity of the market mechanisms of global capitalism to smooth out our reckless abuse of creation on their own. He is less than sanguine also about the capacity of national governments to do the job, especially since many are in the thrall of the same multinational corporations that profit from doing the damage. With neither capitalism alone nor the strong arm of states to turn to, it is no surprise that critics—Catholic ones most venomously—have accused him of [economic naïveté](#) [7] and [incoherence](#) [8].

There is, however, a different sort of economics that helps us see the sense in what Francis proposes—the economics of the commons. [This is a tradition](#) [9] that includes the “all things in common” described in the New Testament Book of Acts and the primacy of the common good over private property, upheld from Augustine to modern social teaching. People throughout history have practiced the art of “commoning” to steward goods that states and markets are not equipped to handle. The late [Elinor Ostrom](#) [10] won a Nobel Prize in



economics for her research on how longstanding communities govern resources like fisheries and forests, and today the commons of information is undergoing a revival through practices [like open-source software](#) [11]. Communities manage their commons in many different ways, using many of the same tools we use to manage our households—like relationship, custom, listening, ritual and love. Act like a greedy homo economicus at the dinner table, and don't expect to be offered dessert.

The Italian economist [Stefano Zamagni](#) [12], a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, has participated in the development of Catholic economic teaching before and during the present papacy. “From an economic point of view, the environment is a common good,” he told me. “It is not a private good or a public good, which means that we cannot cope with the problem of the environment using market mechanisms per se, or government intervention.” The ideas of Elinor Ostrom and other scholars of the commons have figured prominently in the academy's proceedings. The Belgian open-source advocate [Michel Bauwens](#) [13] and the founder of Wikipedia, [Jimmy Wales](#) [14], have been invited speakers.

The kinds of remedies Francis proposes for our ecological sins often fit the logic of commoning. He calls for cooperative kinds of business that share wealth rather than accumulating it. He calls for prayer, for repentance and for dialogue—the kinds of things we do when something goes wrong in our household.

Especially controversial are the passages where Francis proposes “[systems of governance](#) [15] for the whole range of so-called ‘global commons.’” [Some have understood this](#) [16] as some kind of overreaching world government. But Zamagni insists that it is no such thing. Like the World Trade Organization, for instance, this might be something like the very agencies that capitalism relies on, though far more accountable than the W.T.O. to the world's poorest, [who are often the first to hear and suffer](#) [17] from the planet's groanings.

Commoning is not a replacement for markets or states. Zamagni stresses that the consumerist capitalism that dismays Francis is not synonymous with markets as such. “The pope is not against the market economy,” he says; the problem is an idolatry that imagines markets can solve our moral crises for us. We can respect the usefulness of markets without needing to affirm their omnipotence.

This is the first [third world encyclical](#) [18]—drafted by an African cardinal, Peter Turkson, and completed by a South American pope. Like Catholic social teaching in general, it declines to bow before the competing altars of Cold War economics. The commoning it calls for is the wisdom of the ancients, still hidden in plain sight among the “[informal economies](#)”

[19] at global capitalism's margins. This is the art, at once, of keeping a loving home and of sharing a precious planet.

Nathan Schneider is the author of *Thank You, Anarchy and God in Proof*. Website: TheRowBoat.com [20]; Twitter: [@nathanairplane](https://twitter.com/nathanairplane) [21].

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