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THE FRATERNAL ECONOMY: A FRANCISCAN PERSPECTIVE

SUMMARY: The Franciscan vision of the economy, which had a remarkable development during the 13th-15th centuries, keeps being relevant today. This fact has been recently recognized by Pope Francis when he convened a world meeting of young economists in Assisi, entitled “The economy of Francesco”, to promote a more fraternal economic system, more attentive to the poor and the environment. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting ended up being held online on November 19-21, 2020. This article presents the fundamental features of the Franciscan economy that the Pope has once again proposed as an inspirational model for a new economy today.

KEYWORDS: Economy – Francis of Assisi – Pope Francis, Franciscans – Mounts of piety

SUMARIO: La visión franciscana de la economía, que tuvo un notable desarrollo durante los siglos XIII-XV, sigue gozando hoy de una sorprendente actualidad. Así lo ha reconocido recientemente el Papa Francisco al convocar en Asís un encuentro mundial de jóvenes economistas, titulado “The Economy of Francesco”, para promover un sistema económico más fraterno, más atento a los pobres y al medio ambiente. A causa de la pandemia del COVID-19, el encuentro terminó celebrándose online los días 19-21 de noviembre 2020. Este artículo presenta los rasgos fundamentales de la economía franciscana que el Papa ha vuelto a proponer como modelo inspirador para una nueva economía del “nosotros.”

PALABRAS CLAVE: Economía – Papa Francisco – Francisco de Asís – Franciscanos – Montes de Piedad.

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The Franciscan vision of the economy, which had a remarkable development during the 13th-15th centuries, continues to be surprisingly relevant today, as the ecclesiastical Magisterium has explicitly acknowledged recently. Indeed, taking inspiration from Francis of Assisi, Pope Francis has invited everyone to build a fraternal economy that is inclusive, oriented to the common good, and “attentive above all to the poor and excluded”¹. The Pontiff suggests a continuity between his proposal and that of the little poor man of Assisi.

The Pope has wanted to organize in Assisi an international meeting of young economists (under 35 years of age), entitled “Economy of Francesco,” “to promote together, through a common ‘covenant,’ a process of global change” (*Ec-Fco*) towards a new economic system that must be more inclusive and more attentive to the person and the environment. We need to set in motion processes to demand a change in “life-style, models of production and consumption, and established structures of power which today govern societies”². In calling for this meeting, the Pope showed his confidence in young people “to give a soul to the economy of tomorrow” (*Ec-Fco*), since “the present world system is certainly unsustainable”³. Accepting the papal invitation, more than 3,000 young economists from 120 countries signed up.

The meeting had been scheduled to be held on March 26-28, 2020, in Assisi, a city “which has for centuries eloquently symbolized a humanism of fraternity” and keeps being the icon of a culture of peace and “a fitting place to inspire a new economy” (*Ec-Fco*). It was there that St. Francis embraced poverty, thus promoting “a vision of economics that remains most timely” (*Ec-Fco*). The Covid-19 pandemic first forced the meeting to be moved to November 19-21, 2020, and finally to be held online.

The first part of this article presents the intuitions of Francis of Assisi that can inspire a free and fraternal economy. The second part indicates some aspects of Franciscan economics that contradict the individualistic vision of today’s capitalism⁴. In

¹ Francis, “Letter for the event *Economy of Francesco*” (May 1, 2019), [*Ec-Fco*], in *L’Osservatore Romano* [OR], (May 12, 2019) 8.

² Francis, “Video message to participants at the meeting *Economy of Francesco*” (Dec. 21, 2020), in *Internet*: <https://youtu.be/zu5Xkt6TOHE>

³ Francis, “Video message” (Dec. 21, 2020).

⁴ The author has further developed these paragraphs in: Martín Carbaño Núñez, *A free and fraternal economy. The Franciscan perspective*, Phoenix (AZ), 2017; Idem, *Franziskanische Wirtschaft. Ein Vorschlag um aus der Krise Herauszukommen*, Heiligenkreuz 2021. The original text of this article corresponds to a conference that the author gave in Italian at Predazzo, on

fact, the friars propose a market economy that is clearly different from current capitalism, which seeks above all the maximization of individual profit at the expense of damaging nature and increasing social inequalities.

I. THE ECONOMIC CHOICES OF FRANCIS OF ASSISI

Francis of Assisi was the son of a merchant, Pietro Bernardone, and knew well the economic transformation that was taking place at the time. The activation of commerce was bringing about a change in the concept of wealth, which was increasingly based on money.

Embracing poverty and rejecting money, he prophetically challenges the subordination of human beings to capital and consumerism⁵. He invites his friars to be “the lesser ones and be subject to all” (*ER* 7,2) so that they could love without hindrance or prejudice. They must avoid any kind of accumulation or appropriation: “neither house, nor place, nor anything at all”⁶, because everything belongs to the Lord⁷. Through a humble and charitable service, they should give back to the Lord and to their fellow human beings all the gifts they have freely received (material and spiritual), to the point of giving themselves completely out of love. “Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give” (Mt 10:8).

1. Work as the ordinary way for earning a living

Unlike the monastic communities of the time, Francis did not want the friars to possess the means of production. In his Testament, he asks “all brothers to give themselves to honest work” and that “those who do not know how to work learn”⁸. As poor and minors, they will work with their own hands among the poor. They will exercise the “grace of working” “faithfully and devotedly” (*LR* 5,2); that is to say, in an atmosphere of faith and total donation. In this way, the friars express their

August 25, 2021, at an event that the Social Cooperative “Frate Jacopa” organizes annually in collaboration with the city council.

⁵ Francis of Assisi, “The Later Rule” [*LR*], 5,4, in *Francis of Assisi: Early documents*, edited by Regis J. Armstrong – J.A.Wayne Hellmann – William J. Short, 3 vol., [*FAED*], New York 2001 I, 99-106, ; Idem, “The Earlier Rule” [*ER*], 7,6 (*FAED* I, 63-86).

⁶ *LR* 6,1; cf. *ER* 7,14.

⁷ “Whoever holds onto something for himself hides the money of his Lord”. Francis of Assisi, *Admonitions* [*Adm*], 18,2 (*FAED* I, 128-137).

⁸ Francis of Assisi, *The Testament* [*Test*], 20-23 (*FAED* I, 124-127); cf. *ER* 7,3.