6. Plastics, Markets, and the Preferential Option for the Poor: What Can Be Done, and by Whom?

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As a Catholic theological ethicist whose primary area of research is markets and economics, my focus in this chapter is on plastics as an economic question, seen in light of the principle of the preferential option for the poor. How, this chapter asks, does this principle recast the problem of plastics—and what does it suggest should and can be done about it, by whom?

The Preferential Option for the Poor

The preferential option is a principle that sits at the heart of Christian ethics in general, and Catholic social thought (CST) in particular. The name itself can be confusing, not least because "preference" and "option" make it seem elective. However, this principle is meant to be anything but. While in English the word option tends to imply that we are free to make a choice (or not), this theological term comes from conversations about the necessity of making a fundamental choice, as when the person chooses for God and goodness. This principle declares that we must individually and collectively decide to center the needs of the poor—and that we must do so preferentially, giving them priority.

Within Catholic ethics, this principle has been articulated in these precise terms only in the twentieth century. But the concept itself has its roots originally in Scripture, which consistently depicts God as having a special regard for the well-being of the most vulnerable. In the Hebrew scriptures, the covenantal instruction to care for the widow, the orphan, and the sojourner were usually paired with reminders of the ways that God had protected Israel in its own times of need. This underscored that the command to care for the vulnerable was not a minor or secondary obligation but central to what it meant for Israel to become God's people and to imitate and take on God's own righteousness.

We see this norm intensified further in the New Testament, when the Gospel of Matthew records Jesus as identifying *with* the poor, when he declares that the key criteria distinguishing his true followers will be whether they have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and so forth—because their actions toward "the least of these" will ultimately have been directed toward Christ himself.[1] With this in mind, the Catholic ethicist MT Dávila has described the preferential option as an "incarnational principle," because it invites us to participate in Christ's own character by actively prioritizing the welfare of those who are suffering, excluded, and powerless.[2]

Finally, in more recent years, this has been further nuanced with the caveat that this principle cannot merely be an imperative to serve the marginalized by meeting their needs *for* them, but that this must also include empowering *their* agency. This keeps this principle from becoming paternalistic and mere charity: to truly have an enduring commitment to the dignity of the most vulnerable means acting to empower them as agents in their own lives and following their lead when it comes to solving problems that affect them.

On one level, the application of this principle to the problem of plastics is clear: something is wrong with the way humans are currently producing, using, and disposing of plastics, not only because the harms overall are immense and climbing, but because these are disproportionately visited upon the "least of these." I obviously take this latter point to be firmly established, not least by the Minderoo-Monaco report: it seems

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[1] Matthew 25: 31–46, NRSVCE. In this, Jesus tells his followers, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me," and in turn, "just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me."

[2] MT Dávila, "The Role of the Social Sciences in Catholic Social Thought: The Incarnational Nature of the Option for the Poor and Being Able to 'See' in the Rubric 'See, Judge, Act,'" *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 9, no. 2 (2012): 232.

undeniable now that the destructive consequences of our overuse of plastics are many, and that they are distributed unequally, with the heaviest burdens borne by those with least power and privilege.[3] For those who agree with this empirical claim and who share the moral priority of preferentially caring for the poor, our current trajectory of using plastics appears a significant injustice that cries out for redress.

But of course, it is no good to simply denounce the evils of the status quo; ethics must be able to say much more than this. What can we say about what can be done, moving forward? Who has the capacity—and thus the responsibility—to preferentially address the needs of the poor, when it comes to plastics?

One Tempting (but 2-D) Reading of the Crisis: Fatalism about Markets Producing the Problem

For many in the humanities, both the scale and the deeply economic nature of this crisis make it hard to know how to tackle such questions. By pointing to the global economic shifts behind the recent increase in plastics production, the Minderoo-Monaco report underscores the immense profitability of the industry overall and the strong financial incentives that drive plastics production and usage.[4] Contemplating this situation, it can be tempting to draw two conclusions. The first is that markets themselves are a big part of the problem, if not *the* core cause: it is markets doing what they do—i.e., chasing profit—that has gotten us here. And secondly, if markets are the real cause of the crisis, this suggests that any solution will need to come from "outside" them, by forcibly curbing this relentless pursuit of profit. In this view, perhaps the preferential option should have been the responsibility of big business—both plastics producers and

[3] See Philip J. Landrigan, Hervé Raps, Maureen Cropper, Caroline Bald, Manuel Brunner, Elvia Maya Canonizado, et al., "The Minderoo-Monaco Commission on Plastics and Human Health," *Annals of Global Health* 89, no. 1 (2023): 103–114.
[4] See Landrigan, et al., "The Minderoo-Monaco Commission," 2.

producers of the fossil fuels used to make them—but because these parties will not act to change, it will be the responsibility of government to intervene in markets and compel them to do the right thing, at great cost.

This framing of the crisis is not a very hopeful one. To start with, it suggests that real change is not likely, given that mobilizing the transnational political necessary to oppose profitable sectors of the global economy will be no minor thing. By this same token, this approach paints those who want a dramatically different future as idealistic and perhaps even naïve. But perhaps most significantly, this way of thinking does not leave anyone else—that is, anyone who is not a CEO or in a position to promulgate important legislation—with much agency vis-à-vis the crisis. This largely leaves the rest of us sitting around, waiting for those in charge to make the necessary changes and finally exercise an option for the poor.

There is a certain amount of grim truth to this picture. Market incentives being what they are, "top-down" actions to restrict certain forms of business in the plastics industry will be an utterly indispensable part of any real way forward in addressing the escalating harms caused by current patterns of plastics production and disposal.

That said, I would like to suggest that this is not the *whole* picture; instead, it is more of a two-dimensional rendering of our situation—accurate in key respects but also incomplete. Above all, this narration relies on an overly-simplistic picture of how markets work, by presuming that they work only one way. As a result, such a view suggests an unnecessarily limited picture of what can be done about economic injustices and by whom. Against this view, I suggest that CST and economics offer complementary resources that can help us see the plastics crisis in more three-dimensional terms—that is, as one that takes place in markets, to be sure, but is simultaneously social, cultural, political, technological, and even spiritual in nature. This broader perspective on the crisis can accordingly widen our thinking about who is called to address it by implementing the preferential option for the poor.

How CST and Economics Can Help Us See It in 3-D

Let me begin with the normative worldview of CST. The tradition of CST has long refused to conceptually separate something called "the economic" from something else called "the social."[5] No matter how convenient it is to use these terms to describe different dimensions of social life, CST invites us to remember that in reality, these are not actually isolable domains, because we are ultimately integrated beings. Remembering this reality requires rejecting fatalistic thinking about what goes on in "the economy," as if it were an utterly autonomous and a-social realm governed by its own immutable laws and thus exempt from the moral norms that apply in other areas of social life. Instead of buying into that kind of dichotomous thinking, CST urges us to consider how the economic, political, and even spiritual dimensions of the social challenges that we face are all interconnected—and, moreover, how the values of the Gospel speak to each. Because this, finally, is the ethical takeaway of adopting an integrated worldview: the conviction that the Gospel applies to *all* of social life—to the economy as much as to culture and politics, to what happens in markets as much as to what happens in communities and families.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the field of economics also offers resources for critiquing a reading of the plastics crisis as an exclusively (and intractably) economic problem. This may seem a surprising claim. It is certainly true that the discourse of mainstream economics regularly gives the sense that markets operate according to their own natural laws and thus often encourages the very compartmentalized worldview that CST so resoundingly rejects. Such rhetoric is indeed dangerous for our moral imaginations, given that it legitimates both a profits-only mindset within business and a kind of passive fatalism about what can be expected of

[5] See, e.g., Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009), www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html. See also Daniel Finn, ed., *The Moral Dynamics of Economic Life: An Extension and Critique of* Caritas in Veritate (Oxford University Press, 2012).

markets by those "outside" of them.[6] However, underneath and despite this misleading rhetoric, economics also contains practical resources for thinking about how markets are deeply social institutions and how economic processes and outcomes are inevitably shaped by cultural, legal, and social factors. As a result, it offers useful tools for thinking outside the market-state binary that is so unhelpful for addressing complex social problems.[7]

Consider, for example, economic analyses of "social dilemmas" and "collective action problems," a category which includes the plastics crisis.[8] These are situations in which individually-rational decisions lead to collective outcomes that are irrational and even devastating but where conflicting interests in the present discourage the very kind of cooperative action required to make all parties better off in the long term; the so-called "tragedy of the commons," where shared resources are overused until depleted, is one form these can take. The assumption that markets only work one way would lead to the conclusion that this tragedy is inevitable unless the state steps in, because rational market actors simply do not cooperate unless they are forced to.

As it turns out, however, empirical research in economics indicates that individuals and communities can and do cooperate all the time. This was one of the insights generated by Elinor Ostrom's Nobel prize-winning research on communities that successfully governed communal resources such as fisheries and forests *without* having these managed by a centralized state authority.[9] Some of the insights arising from her work include: 1) that

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[6] For a more developed argument along these lines, see Christina McRorie, "Heterodox Economics, Social Ethics, and Inequality: New Tools for Thinking Critically About Markets and Economic Injustices," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 47, no. 2 (2019): 232–258.

[7] On the shortcomings of a market versus state mentality, see *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 39, and David Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age* (Georgetown University Press, 2015), 5–8.

[8] For one introduction to these from the perspective of economics, see Roger Congleton, *Solving Social Dilemmas: Ethics, Politics, and Prosperity* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

[9] See Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

governance is actually all around us, because our lives are shaped by norms arising from formal and informal institutions alike; 2) that in decentralized settings with many centers of power, collaboration, and negotiation over these norms are frequent; and 3) that norms arising from informal institutions *can* be quite effective at addressing complex problems and averting tragedy, if the right social conditions are in place. In her Nobel Prize address, Ostrom urged policy makers not to think that the only fix for social dilemmas is to have the state itself restrict self-interested behavior in markets but to also focus on "the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans," fostering the kinds of communities that can themselves engage in effective collective action.[10]

I highlight this comment not to cast doubt on the indispensability of state action with regard to large-scale economic injustices, but because this is a perspective that underscores the deeply *social* nature of what happens in markets. Indeed, this research suggests that markets are as much shaped by social institutions and cultural norms as they are by any abstract and unchanging form of "economic rationality." As a result, while government will be part of the solution to economic injustices, other forms of action can make effective contributions as well.

Who Is Called to Live Out the Preferential Option for the Poor, and How?

Taking this broader view of the kinds of social activity shaping market activity, we can now ask again: what can be done about the plastics crisis and by whom? For Christians who believe that the gospel applies to all of social life, this is also a question about how we are called to live out Christ's preferential option for the poor: how can and should we love those who are most vulnerable to the harms of our current and increasing reliance on plastic?

[10] Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," *American Economic Review* 100, no. 3 (2010): 664–665.

The remainder of this chapter considers this question from the perspective of different levels of society, beginning with government, moving to NGOs, businesses, and other organizations, and ending with families and individuals. With the resources of both CST and economics in mind, the goal in what follows will be briefly to ask how each of these are venues in which collective agency is exercised to shape what happens within markets—even if usually indirectly and sometimes with ambiguous effects—and thus, how these are also venues in which we are called to live out the option for the poor.

Government

While it would be a mistake to assume that government alone can effect real change in markets, this by no means undercuts its utter indispensability in protecting the common good. In the Catholic imagination, in fact, government is an important way that "*society as a whole*" acts together; which is to say, CST does not conceive of the state as an external power fundamentally opposed to social life or markets but as itself a medium of collective action.[11]

As a theologian, I will necessarily defer to policy experts on the exact form of the bans, taxes, subsidies, and other measures most appropriate for our current situation; the Minderoo-Monaco report contains a number of promising proposals. I will add that when we think about these proposals, it may be helpful to keep in mind Ostrom's advice to focus on building institutions that bring out "the best in us." How, we want to ask, can regulations make markets more hospitable to just and virtuous action—so that we are not just waiting for the state itself to enact a preferential option for the poor, but we are building an economy in which market actors themselves can live this out, too?

[11] US Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy* (National Conference *of* Catholic Bishops, 1986), "A Pastoral Message: Economic Justice for All," no. 18. Italic in original.

Consider, for example, another finding emerging from empirical research in economics, indicating that markets are more likely to host behavior that is honest, fair, and even generous when they are characterized by transparency and competition.[12] Transparency (about industry practices or about the chemical contents of a product, for example) gives workers, vulnerable populations, and consumers the information required to make good choices, and competition gives them the options necessary to act on that information in ways that incentivize firms to respond accordingly. Where consumers have a moral preference (such as reducing plastics pollution or avoiding forever chemicals) and when they have real options among producers and access to reliable information about the products and practices of those producers, they can act on their values. Where information is not available, or consumers and others do not have real options, however, power is left unaccountably concentrated in the hands of firms.

Governments play an indispensable role in protecting healthy market competition and mandating appropriate forms of transparency and thus in ensuring an even distribution of economic agency. In a sense, measures implementing competition and transparency unlock the potential of market actors to improve markets from within, by acting on their preexisting values. Moreover, transparency itself can work to shift broader sensibilities and norms, as things like required labels can gently "nudge" us toward better decisions and render certain moral issues more socially salient.[13]

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[12] See Christina G. McRorie, *The World of Markets* (Georgetown University Press, 2025).

[13] One dramatic illustration of this in action was the improvement in health standards after restaurants were required to visibly post hygiene grade cards. See Ginger Zhe Jin and Phillip Leslie, "The Effect of Information on Product Quality: Evidence from Restaurant Hygiene Grade Cards," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 118, no. 2 (2003): 409–451. For an accessible introduction to the broader conversation on nudging and its impact on social outcomes, see Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, *Nudge: The Final Edition* (Penguin Books, 2021).

Alongside regulation, we might also think about the state's role in shaping culture and technological progress, through public investments, such as endowments for the arts and humanities, and investments in medical and scientific research. How can these be oriented so that they help us envision a future that is different? And how can they be used to empower the voices and agency of the poor and marginalized, so that this envisioning process is collaborative and inclusive?

Non-Governmental Organizations

Similar questions can be asked of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have been growing in influence on the international business landscape in recent decades, in part as a way to respond to the failures of existing regulatory and enforcement structures to address economic injustices.[14] NGOs shape markets in a variety of ways, sometimes serving as "watchdogs" that increase transparency by reporting violations of existing standards and at other times pushing for changes to existing regulations and accepted corporate conduct. In this latter role, NGOs implement what some scholars have described as "private politics," both through political organizing and public advertising campaigns aimed to shift consumer perceptions of corporate practices or a specific firm's reputation.[15] Many of these efforts have been successful at changing individual firms' behaviors, and in some cases have even changed the practices of entire industries.[16] In a sense, NGOs thus already play an important role in effecting the option for the poor on a global scale.

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[14] Michael Yaziji and Jonathan Doh, *NGOs and Corporations: Conflict and Collaboration* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[15] E.g., David Baron, "Private Politics," *Journal of Economics and Management Strategy* 12, no. 1 (2003): 31–66.

[16] E.g., see Gani Aldashev, Michela Limardi, and Thierry Verdier, "Watchdogs of the Invisible Hand: NGO Monitoring and Industry Equilibrium," *Journal of Development Economics* 116 (2016): 28–42.

In light of this impact, we can also ask: How are different NGOs currently addressing the plastics crisis, and what additional roles could and should they play? How are NGOs positioned to improve corporate practices, influence legislation, shift public discourse, and develop and foster creative local responses to pollution and plastics-related health problems? And how can governments, businesses, and other agencies support this work, either financially or in other ways? As individuals, for example, can we give key organizations a wider platform for their message, whether on social media or in our classrooms, in our churches or at our places of work? Given their support for smaller non-profits around the world, supporting international NGOs would seem to offer one concrete way for those in developed nations to try to empower grassroots efforts in developing contexts and thus include the marginalized in the process of collaborative problem-solving, even if indirectly and from a distance.[17]

Businesses and Other Organizations that Make Economic Decisions

Business firms are in a similar position to influence what goes on in global markets, and accordingly they have their own responsibility to enact the preferential option for the poor. Indeed, CST views business as a specific vocation to serve the common good and invites business leaders to reflect on the distinct opportunities they encounter to serve and be "*in solidarity with the poor*."[18] How, we can ask, could and should the employees and leaders of firms in different industries—from finance to cosmetics to food production—creatively serve the poor by helping us envision an economy

[17] For brevity's sake this assumes an unambiguously supportive relationship between international NGOs and local agency; a fuller analysis of the role that NGOs play in implementing the preferential option would need to also address the recurrence of paternalistic and colonialist dynamics in development and humanitarian aid.

[18] Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection*, 5th edition (2018), no. 45, www.humandevelopment.va/en/risorse/documenti/vocation-of-the-business-leader-a-reflection-5th-edition.html. Italics in original.

less dependent on plastics, and in so doing also work to reshape the accepted norms of their industries?[19]

It should be added that for-profit enterprises are not the only organizations that exercise economic agency and influence the economy. Social enterprises, non-profits, cooperatives, and universities all hire employees and contractors, construct and lease buildings, invest savings, purchase inputs and materials, offer products and services for sale, design advertising that has implicit values, and so forth—as do churches, libraries, hospitals, and even homeowners' associations and academic societies. In the Christian imagination, then, these are each also venues in which we are called to make a fundamental commitment to prioritizing the needs of the marginalized, and to addressing systemic injustices.

On the surface, this commitment will necessarily mean asking about the physical use of plastics in these communities. That said, it will also be critical to reflect on how these are settings in which we negotiate and collaborate on social norms and visions of the good life, too—or, put differently, on how these venues each host a kind of collective cultural governance. What do libraries, hospitals, and universities put on our radar as important to care about, through their programming and websites and campuses, and what habits do they model and facilitate? How do they each make a bid to shape what their employees, patrons, students, customers, and the wider public notice, and what they care about—and who has influence over how they do this?

For example, can medical schools train pediatricians to teach new parents about the health dangers of certain plastics, or can universities solicit donations for research centers aimed at understanding and addressing the health impacts of plastic? What about business schools? Business schools exercise a tremendous influence on the values, sensibilities, and moral imaginations that their students bring into the

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[19] For more on the capacities and responsibilities of businesses to influence the industries in which they operate, see Martin Schlag, "Are Businesses Responsible for the Moral Ecology in Which They Operate?" in *Business Ethics and Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Daniel K. Finn (Georgetown University Press, 2021), 163–179.

workforce. As a result, those who work and teach at or donate to business schools have a special responsibility to use their positions to promote ethical entrepreneurship. How can business school curricula and programming encourage forms of enterprise that creatively resist a mindlessly plasticized future, include the poor in global markets, and encourage cultures of solidarity?

Families and Individuals

Finally, what are the capacities and thus responsibilities of families and individuals? While it is important not to let a focus on individual agency eclipse larger institutional concerns, a good deal of academic and pastoral scholarship has quite rightly critiqued the wasteful nature of the contemporary American lifestyle, and calls to reduce plastics consumption often feature in exhortations to eco-discipleship.[20] Instead of repeating that (very good) advice, I want to highlight our role in shaping culture more broadly and in indirectly but collectively contributing to the governance of markets. We know we have a responsibility to prudently exercise our political right to vote, and we are generally aware that we are also "voting" for the economy to be a certain way every time we spend money. However, in addition to our roles as citizens and consumers, we also contribute to collective governance in other ways, even if these are inevitably indirect and diffuse.

How we do this will vary from person to person, since we each participate in different communities and exercise different forms of power within those communities. But in these communities, too, many of the above questions will apply: where do we work, live, shop, worship, and recreate, and do we have any influence over the decisions that these communities make and over the values and sensibilities they foster in others? Can we encourage our children's schools to reduce their reliance

[20] On the danger of the "individualization of responsibility," for example, see Michael Maniates, "Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?," *Global Environmental Politics* 1, no. 3 (August 2001): 31–52.

on single-use plastics and to include the plastics crisis in their science curriculum? Do we have any influence over what happens in the breakrooms and cafeterias at our places of work?

In our relationships more generally, how do we speak about our consumption choices and the purpose of business? Do we fall prey to dualistic thinking that fatalistically separates moral concerns from economic ones? For example, are we inadvertently teaching our children that success in life requires a good income and that *after* they secure this, *then* they can do good by making charitable donations? Or—just as unhelpfully—do we cynically refer to careers in finance and industry as intrinsically materialistic and for "sellouts," as if business itself could not contribute to the common good? Or, do we view the economy in an integrated way, and encourage others to do so, too?

Conclusion

Although the disproportionate harms visited upon the most vulnerable call for drastic change to our current trajectory of producing, using, and disposing of ever-more plastics, the very scale of the crisis can make it seem that this change can only come from authorities at "the top." When considering the global economic factors driving this trajectory, it is tempting to conclude that the "rest of us" are effectively powerless until governments step in to stop markets from doing what they do "naturally." This chapter opened by admitting a great deal of truth to this picture, above all with regard to the necessity of coordinated political action to set limits on the production and disposal of plastics. Even so, it has argued that both economics and CST offer resources for viewing the economy—and thus the plastics crisis—in somewhat less two-dimensional terms.

Instead, this chapter has argued for a perspective that takes into account the deeply social nature of all economic activity and thus the way that market processes and outcomes are sustained and shaped by a range of cultural norms and practices. Such a view broadens our sense of who participates in economic governance and of what forms of action can be taken to steer global and local economies away from our mindlessly increasing reliance on plastics. For those who believe that the most vulnerable deserve to be most prioritized in collective decision-making, this opens up important questions about how to use whatever agency we have, in whatever roles we occupy, to work toward a healthier and more just world.

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