

Unshackling the Coffee Supply Chain: An “Ethics Project” for Catholic Colleges and Universities

Bernard G. Prusak and Kim Lamberty

Abstract: Against the background of a growing and increasingly sophisticated body of theological literature on economic ethics, this article proposes a project to change for the better, morally, how coffee is supplied on the campuses of Catholic colleges and universities. We argue that this project is squarely in service of a Catholic college or university’s core educational goal of humane development of its students. The article then proceeds in three steps. First, we explain how the coffee supply chain works and how it is entangled in what Pope Francis called “the economy that kills.” Second, we discuss obstacles to our proposed project and a number of strategies for overcoming them. Third and finally, we reflect further on why our project is worth undertaking. Its impetus is resistance to the exploitation of the vulnerable and affirmation of the basic human dignity of the poor. It thereby presents an opportunity to show students Catholic social thought in practice.

“**T**HINK OF SOMETHING GOOD TO DO. DO IT.”¹ THOSE ARE THE instructions for the “ethics project” that Jason Brennan assigns his business ethics students at Georgetown University. In groups of five to seven, with up to \$1,000 at their disposal, the students must decide upon a project that “adds value to the world” and execute it as best they can over a semester. In Brennan’s terms, the good that the students seek to do may be a so-called moral good—directly concerned with, say, alleviating human suffering, affirming human dignity, or enabling human flourishing—or it may be a non-moral good, such as an art installation, a gourmet food truck, book-sharing boxes across campus, and on and on.²

¹ Jason Brennan, “The Ethics Project: Teaching Business Ethics Through Student-Created Entrepreneurial Action,” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 15 (2018): 286.

² Brennan cites Mark Timmons’s *Moral Theory: An Introduction* “for more on this distinction,” which some readers might question; see Brennan, “The Ethics Project,” 288, n. 3. Timmons, however, distinguishes not between moral and non-moral goods—that is not his terminology—but between things that have intrinsic value and

At the end of the semester, the students make a presentation and submit a report answering a number of questions about the experience. The questions include:

- How did you decide about the tradeoff between what's most desirable . . . and what's most feasible?
- What obstacles did you expect to encounter, and how did you pre-emptively plan to overcome them?
- What obstacles did you in fact encounter, and how did you respond?
- Did you add value to the world, taking into account the combined costs of your time, effort, and any money spent?
- What would you have done differently?³

The aim of the assignment is to make students “engage in genuine ethical and strategic decision-making with real costs, trade-offs, and consequences.”⁴ It teaches them that doing good is much harder than they might initially think.

In this article, we propose an ethics project for people who work and learn at Catholic colleges and universities, though it certainly could be undertaken by people at secular institutions, too. This project is, on its face, simple: change for the better, morally, how coffee is supplied on campus, which is to say in dining halls, cafés, and departmental offices, as well as at events. In the terms of our article's title, unshackle the supply chain delivering to you, for example, your latte, which is now entangled in what Pope Francis called “the economy that kills,” extracting value from the world's poor without making nearly an adequate return (and often imposing, instead, significant environmental harms).⁵ We propose this project against the background of a growing and increasingly sophisticated body of theological literature on economic ethics. This literature supports the

things that have extrinsic value. See Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 5–6. We leave it to readers to interrogate these distinctions and how they map onto one another.

³ Brennan, “The Ethics Project,” 287.

⁴ Brennan, “The Ethics Project,” 288.

⁵ Pope Francis, “Message of the Holy Father Francis to the Participants in the Fourth Annual Meeting of ‘The Economy of Francesco,’” October 6–8, 2023, [vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2023/documents/20231006-messaggio-economy-of-francesco.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2023/documents/20231006-messaggio-economy-of-francesco.html). See also his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53.

claim that consumers bear a measure of moral responsibility for distant harms. After all, consumers play a part in the downward pressure of prices that, through a long chain of market relations, results in constricting the wages of coffee producers. The coffee drinkers among us are thus causally related to the injustices that coffee producers suffer, and those producers have grounds to make a moral claim on us to seek to make the market system more just. The project that we propose, mobilizing the power of institutions rather than only individuals, is one possible response.

Moral theologian Daniel Finn's notion of a social structure is crucial to our analysis. Finn defines a social structure as "a system of relations among preexisting social positions into which people enter."⁶ The global market for shirts, for example, consists of a long chain of such relations, "starting," he writes, "with the relation between the consumer and clerk at the store, all the way to the other end of the supply chain to the relation between the factory floor manager and the seamstress."⁷ The key premise of Finn's argument is that "we can fully understand our *moral* responsibility as consumers in the market only if we recognize our *causal* role as consumers in the lives of distant others."⁸ He focuses, accordingly, on "the constrictive power of prices . . . up and down the chain."⁹ The quest for low prices squeezes the most vulnerable people in the supply chain, who in our global economy are often the smallholder farmer or the impoverished seamstress.

Importantly, on Finn's account, consumers need not intend harm in order to be morally responsible for it. Only a very strange and morally perverse consumer would seek out products on the grounds that they had been made by people who were exploited. Instead, the great majority of consumers surely intend no harm to the people who make the goods they enjoy. Yet even the most well-meaning of consumers participate all the time, often unwittingly, in social structures that are nakedly exploitative—if only we could see the system of relations all the way to its bottom, which typically we cannot. According to Finn, our participation in unjust structures helps "to sustain those structures" and thus leaves us "complicit in a

⁶ Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy: How Buying Here Causes Injustice There* (Georgetown University Press, 2019), 4.

⁷ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 4.

⁸ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 62 (*italics* in the text).

⁹ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 104.

multitude of evils.”¹⁰ For him, “The conclusion must be that we lead indicted lives.”¹¹

It is a complex question whether it makes sense to attribute moral responsibility to consumers for harms they not only do not intend, but also do not foresee. Ignorance is not always an excuse, of course, but it can be when it is hard to overcome (or “invincible,” in traditional moral language). Further, what if a consumer needs a product—say, a shirt—and there is no way to get it other than by participating in, and thus helping to sustain, a market built on unjust relations? The question here is whether it makes sense to attribute moral responsibility to consumers for harms they neither intend nor can realistically avoid, short of making everything themselves.¹² Presumably, the scale of the harms in question would have to factor significantly in our assessment. So, too, would whether consumers really need the product, or in other words whether they have “proportionate reason” to purchase it despite knowing, or suspecting, or at least having some reason to believe, that not all was well in the long chain of relations hanging on their decision. It is also important, however, to consider whether there are morally better and worse ways for consumers to get what they need or want. If there are morally better ways, if they are not prohibitively expensive, and if consumers can learn about them, it is hard to see how *not* choosing the morally better ways could be justified. In such circumstances, consumers who just did not care would indeed be leading “indicted lives.” Happily, with respect to coffee, much can be done.

As an initial justification for our proposed ethics project, consider that institutions of higher education, both faith-based and secular, are undeniably in the business of doing good. They exist to offer the core good of education which, like the good of health care, is different from most other goods in that it aims to produce meaningful, non-zero sum change in the person who is on the receiving end.¹³ Educated persons

¹⁰ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 140. Compare Albino Barrera, “*Gaudium et Spes* and Catholic Ethics in Post-Industrial Economics: Indirect Employers and Globalization,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 3, no. 2 (2006): 333.

¹¹ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 140. Finn also likens what he calls the sinfulness of social structures to the notion of original sin. See *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 119.

¹² See, for more on these questions, Dominic Farrell, “Does the Principle of Cooperation in Wrongdoing Work When Assessing Economic Complicity?” *Journal of Markets & Morality* 22, no. 1 (2019): 99–116, which is a critical review of Albino Barrera’s *Market Complicity and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Farrell argues that “consumers are only responsible for the foreseeable and avoidable preintentional harm wrought by our market activities” (113).

¹³ Education is thus a “practice” in Alasdair MacIntyre’s sense: a “coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity” that seeks to realize goods

are themselves the product, so to speak. So long as the education “takes,” the person comes out different and in various ways better from the experience.

Catholic higher education works with a broad conception of what it is to be a fully educated person,¹⁴ which at least in principle should make Catholic institutions welcoming settings for our project (we consider obstacles and objections later). The Jesuit tradition may serve as an example,¹⁵ though there are also distinctive resources in, for example, the Mercy and Marianist traditions.¹⁶ From the very first Jesuit schools in the 1540s and 1550s, Jesuit educational institutions have been as concerned with character formation as with knowledge acquisition. The historian John O’Malley even claims that the early Jesuits “looked *more* to the formation of mind and character . . . than to the acquisition of . . . information or the advancement of the disciplines.”¹⁷ According to the theologian Michael Buckley, the aim of the early Jesuit schools “was to humanize the student . . . through bringing [him] into contact with the greatest accomplishments of human beings.”¹⁸ In the aftermath of Vatican II, that humanistic program has been deepened to include “not only a celebration of the heights to which cultures can rise but a compassion for the depths of suffering into which they can fall.”¹⁹ From this perspective, fully educated people must be not only skilled in critical thinking, literate,

internal to that activity. See MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187.

¹⁴ See for discussion Bernard G. Prusak, “Catholic Higher Education as Transformation: With What Warrant? Toward What Ends? By What Means?” *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 37, no. 2 (2018): 175–193.

¹⁵ Compare Dean Brackley, “Higher Standards,” *America*, February 6, 2006, america.magazine.org/issue/559/article/higher-standards; Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, “The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education,” *Santa Clara Lectures* 7, no. 1 (October 6, 2000): 1–17, scholarcommons.scu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1022&context=sc_lectures; and Pedro Arrupe, “Hombres para los demás,” January 8, 1973, sjweb.info/documents/education/arr_men_sp.pdf.

¹⁶ See the websites of the Conference for Mercy Higher Education, mercyhighered.org/program-resources/ and the Association of Marianist Universities, marianistuniversities.org/resources-forum/.

¹⁷ John W. O’Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 214, emphasis added.

¹⁸ Michael J. Buckley, *The Catholic University as Promise and Project: Reflections in a Jesuit Idiom* (Georgetown University Press, 1998), 115. Compare John W. O’Malley, *Four Cultures of the West* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 164–165.

¹⁹ David Hollenbach, “The Catholic University Under the Sign of the Cross: Christian Humanism in a Broken World,” in *Finding God in All Things: Essays in Honor of Michael J. Buckley, SJ*, ed. Stephen Pope and Michael Himes (Crossroad, 1996), 295. See further General Congregation 32, Decree 2: “Jesuits Today,” jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1975_decree2gc32/, and General Congregation 34, Decree 17: “Jesuits and University Life,” jesuitportal.bc.edu/research/documents/1995_decree17gc34/.

cultured, and civic-minded, but also sensitive to injustice, offended by it in solidarity, and practiced at giving voice to their values.²⁰

It is obviously much easier to state those praiseworthy aims than to achieve them. The curriculum must play a role, but so must experiential learning activities like immersions or encounters. Solidarity cannot be preached into students, and teaching is not preaching. The guide for mission reflection published by the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities accordingly asks not only how “the Jesuit and Catholic intellectual traditions and Catholic social thought [are] incorporated into the curriculum,” but also how the institution’s “operations, policies and programs advance a deeper and richer understanding of social justice.”²¹ As that last question implicitly recognizes, concrete business and operational decisions form part of an institution’s so-called hidden curriculum,²² communicating to students and all other stakeholders what the institution truly values and what they might appropriately value, too. Moral theologian Gerald Beyer has warned that if Catholic colleges and universities operate by concentrating narrowly on increasing revenues and driving down costs, they risk teaching students that it is in fact permissible to forget about the poor of the world, whatever speakers say at graduation ceremonies and the like.²³

There are thus several possible focus areas for an ethics project at a Catholic college or university. The project might focus on the institution’s “manifest” curriculum (say, by seeking to scale service-learning opportunities); the project might focus on the co-curriculum (for example, by multiplying encounter/immersion opportunities); or the project might focus on the hidden curriculum communicated by what the institution does—with respect to labor policies, investment decisions, and licensing practices, among other operations—as opposed to what its teachers say in the classroom or the lessons conveyed by programs that take students off campus. The project that we propose focuses on an aspect of the hidden curriculum. Institutions’ purchasing practices also teach students lessons;

²⁰ Compare the third paragraph in the University of Notre Dame’s eloquent mission statement, nd.edu/about/mission/. (Note also that Notre Dame is Holy Cross, not Jesuit.)

²¹ Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, “Characteristics of Jesuit Higher Education: A Guide for Mission Reflection,” 14, 18, ajcunet.edu/wp-content/uploads/attachments/A-Guide-for-Mission-Reflection_09-21-4.pdf.

²² See Bernard G. Prusak and Jennifer Reed-Bouley, “A System Adrift? Catholic Social Thought as an Anchor for Catholic Higher Education,” in *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Thought*, ed. Bernard G. Prusak and Jennifer Reed-Bouley (Paulist Press, 2023), 4–5. Compare the rich discussion in Philip W. Jackson, *Life in Classrooms* (Teachers College Press, 1990), 33–37.

²³ Gerald J. Beyer, *Just Universities: Catholic Social Teaching Confronts Corporatized Higher Education* (Fordham University Press, 2021), 13.

purchasing, whether personal or institutional, is a moral act, communicating what we value and our priorities.²⁴ At present, how Catholic colleges and universities typically purchase coffee, which is served all over our campuses, communicates indifference to how it got there, who produced it, and whether the producers were treated fairly or exploited. In contrast, Pope Francis decried the “globalization of indifference,”²⁵ which is to say looking away from the injustices that the well-to-do in the global North have a hand in perpetuating in the global South.²⁶ The project of unshackling the coffee supply chain presents Catholic colleges and universities an opportunity not only to show that they are serious about the faith tradition that they represent, but also to engage the campus community in a real-world learning experience in service both to the poor of our world and to the core educational goal of humane development of our students.

The article proceeds from here in three steps. First, we explain how the coffee supply chain works. Second, we discuss obstacles to our proposed ethics project and strategies for overcoming them. Third and finally, we reflect further on why this project is worth undertaking. To anticipate one point we make then, the project presents an opportunity to show students what Catholic social thought looks like in practice. It thus builds on the theological literature on economic ethics that, we hope, students encounter in the classroom.²⁷

COFFEE AND THE ECONOMY THAT KILLS

Green coffee is the fifth most-traded commodity in the world, and it is one of the top agricultural exports for many countries with developing economies. Smallholder farmers, defined as farming on less than five hectares, produce sixty percent of the world’s coffee, and around twenty-five million smallholder farmers worldwide make their living from coffee.²⁸ Smallholder farmers also make up about

²⁴ Compare Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36: “Even the decision to invest in one place rather than another . . . is always a moral and cultural choice.”

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 52.

²⁶ Compare Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 128, on the artist Giotto’s depiction of the vice of injustice in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy.

²⁷ Other texts worth noting include David Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Ethics in a Consumer Age* (Georgetown University Press, 2015); Daniel K. Finn, ed., *Distant Markets, Distant Harms: Economic Complexity and Christian Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2014); and Laura M. Hartman, *The Christian Consumer: Living Faithfully in a Fragile World* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁸ Dan Rushton, “Map of the Month: Bringing Smallholder Coffee Farmers out of Poverty,” Carto, December 5, 2019, carto.com/blog/enveritas-coffee-poverty-visualization. Note that sources disagree on the number of existing smallholder coffee farmers; estimates vary from 12.5 million to 25 million. Some sources conflate coffee farms with coffee farmers; there are likely 25 million farmers on 12.5 million farms.

seventy-eight percent of the 1.8 billion people in the world who live on less than \$3.65 per day, the amount that the World Bank considers the poverty line.²⁹ One recent study of ten coffee-producing countries found that in eight of them average coffee income is at or below the poverty line.³⁰ According to another study, forty-four percent of smallholder coffee farmers are living in poverty, and twenty-two percent are living in extreme poverty.³¹ In many cases, smallholder farmers are producing multiple crops on small plots, with small coffee yields. In other cases, producers do not tend to their trees properly, either for lack of training or because low earnings make it not worth the very labor-intensive work.

As of 2022, the United States was the largest global importer of coffee.³² The United States consumes 1.62 billion pounds of coffee annually, and seven in ten people in the United States drink coffee at least weekly.³³ In the United States, consumers are often willing to pay \$4 or more for a cup of coffee in a coffee shop, but little of that money normally goes to the farmers.

In 1997, one of this article's authors, Kim Lamberty, traveled to Haiti for the first time and tasted the locally grown, hand-roasted coffee of Baradères, in the country's southwest. Like many communities in Haiti, the smallholder farmers of Baradères are longtime coffee producers. To hear them tell it, coffee ties them to their ancestors, who were brought to Haiti as slaves from Africa and forced to toil in coffee plantations that enriched the French. During the colonial period, half of the world's coffee came from Haiti.³⁴ After the Haitian Revolution concluded with a declaration of independence from the French in 1804, Haitians hoped to keep the profits from one of the world's most important cash crops. As with other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, that never happened, as it also did

²⁹ See World Bank Group, "For Up to 800 Million Rural Poor, a Strong World Bank Group Commitment to Agriculture," November 12, 2014, worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2014/11/12/for-up-to-800-million-rural-poor-a-strong-world-bank-commitment-to-agriculture.

³⁰ Sjoerd Panhuysen and Frederik de Vries, "Coffee Barometer 2023," Conservation International and Solidaridad, coffeebarometer.org/documents_resources/coffee_barometer_2023.pdf, 15–16.

³¹ Rushton, "Map of the Month: Bringing Smallholder Coffee Farmers out of Poverty."

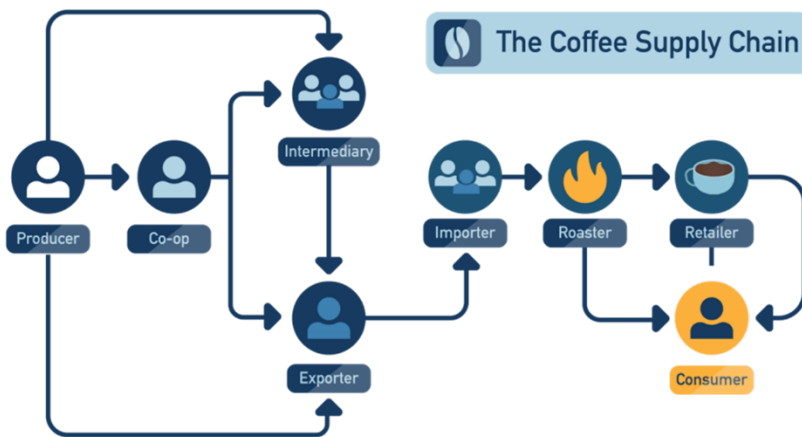
³² Constanza Valdes and Steven Zahniser, "U.S. Demand for Coffee Stimulates Imports from Latin America," USDA Economic Research, September 26, 2024, ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail?chartId=110079.

³³ See the "key findings" of the 2024 Atlas of American Coffee produced by the National Coffee Association of U.S.A., ncausa.org/newsroom/nca-releases-atlas-of-american-coffee, and the World Population Review's "Coffee Consumption by Country 2025," worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/coffee-consumption-by-country.

³⁴ Cory Gilman, "Rooted in Racism: Coffee's Bitter Origins," Heifer International, July 30, 2020, heifer.org/blog/newsworthy/rooted-in-racism-coffees-bitter-origins.html.

not with other globally traded cash crops, such as cacao and mangoes. Chattel slavery made Europeans and North Americans wealthy, and the global trade system, with wealth concentrated in the hands of the global North, has exploited natural resources in the global South, with profits going to investors, not workers. This system of profits going to investors prevented newly independent countries rich in natural resources from broadly enriching their own populations. In the case of Haiti, a history of trade embargo, forced payments to France, and occupation also stymied meaningful economic development.³⁵

Below is a schematic of how the system typically works.³⁶



Producers are the most vulnerable link in the coffee supply chain. In some cases, when there is no local farmer cooperative or other representative negotiating on behalf of producers, individual smallholder farmers will sell directly to an intermediary (termed “speculators” in Haiti) and will take the price they are offered because they have no other choice. If the price is too low, as with Haiti in the 1980s after a global market collapse and political upheaval in the country, producers will cut down their trees to plant food crops, but that is a step they will take only out of desperation.

A better course of action for smallholder farmers is to organize into cooperatives (coops) in order to leverage their strength and bargain for higher prices. Coop leadership, which is usually, but not always, democratically elected, negotiates with the intermediary or sometimes directly with an exporter. Large exporters generally work with

³⁵ See further Paul Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti*, 3rd ed. (Common Courage Press, 2006).

³⁶ The image is from an article on the site Understory, “Top1–Global Impact Blockchain,” March 8, 2022, theunderstory.io/top1-global-impact-blockchain/. The image can be found on multiple sites online.

multiple intermediaries and not directly with producer coops, unless a coop is very large. Smaller exporter companies sometimes work with coops on multi-year contracts. Eliminating the intermediary is good for both parties, because intermediaries take a cut, which comes for the most part out of the price that producers receive.

In addition to negotiating higher prices, coops provide access to finance and machinery and enable expensive certifications, such as Fair Trade or organic. But they are also an intermediary, and they likewise take a cut, usually to pay for their leadership and infrastructure costs. Further, it is all too common that coop leadership receive high salaries while producers barely scrape by. In Haiti, coops have been accused of fraud, mismanagement, and theft. For those reasons, some producers have replaced coops with more loosely organized associations, which negotiate for prices but do not have leaders taking salaries.³⁷ Eliminating the coop intermediary can leave more money in the pockets of producers.

Coffee is traded as a commodity on the global exchange market.³⁸ Prices fluctuate, sometimes wildly, but are predominantly determined by what happens in very large coffee-producing countries, such as Colombia, with very large plantations. Everyone in the supply chain has to make a profit, and there is an upper limit to what each party will pay, including to what consumers will tolerate. Historically, this system has resulted in unbroken, generational poverty for smallholder farmers, while plantation owners, exporters, importers, roasters, and retailers have accumulated the profits. The highest revenue in the coffee sector goes to large-scale roasters and chains, such as Nestlé and Starbucks, and most of the wealth that coffee generates is concentrated in consuming countries, meaning Europe and the United States, and not in producing countries, nearly all of which are located in the global South.³⁹ It is difficult to find an exact breakdown of the distribution of the revenue: one company states that typically farmers receive 8 percent of the cost of a bag of coffee that consumers purchase in a grocery store or café, which amounts to around \$1.⁴⁰ The others in the supply chain make money based on volume; smallholder farmers obviously do not.

³⁷ See Gabriella Oakley, “Breaking Down the Business of Coffee Cooperatives,” *Coffee Intelligence*, February 2, 2023, intelligence.coffee/2023/02/the-business-of-coffee-cooperatives/.

³⁸ For coffee prices, see the International Coffee Organization’s monthly market reports, ico.org.

³⁹ Gabriella Oakley, “Who Are the Top Earners in the Coffee Sector?,” *Coffee Intelligence*, August 10, 2023, intelligence.coffee/2023/08/the-top-earners-coffee-sector/.

⁴⁰ See Wakuli, “Direct Trade Coffee Versus Free Trade Coffee,” wakuli.com/blogs/direct-trade/direct-trade-versus-fair-trade-coffee.

Fair Trade evolved to rectify this inequality. The Mennonite Central Committee and SERRV International were the first, in 1946 and 1949 respectively, to develop fair trade supply chains in developing countries.⁴¹ The fair trade coffee movement began in earnest in the 1980s, following the global collapse of coffee prices, and the first fair trade coffee label was introduced in the Netherlands in 1988. Today, there exist a confusing array of organizations certifying coffee to be “fair trade,”⁴² which is supposed to mean that producers receive a slightly higher price, with a guaranteed minimum.⁴³ Further, Fair Trade Federation members in the United States and Canada commit to a number of social justice and environmental principles, such as ensuring the rights of children, safe working conditions, and responsible stewardship of the environment.⁴⁴ These principles are important, not least because there is plenty of evidence of forced and child labor in the coffee supply chain.⁴⁵

In practice, consumers pay more for fair trade coffee, but the premium does not always make its way to the producers; rather, it goes to a coop and may be spent to cover its administrative costs.⁴⁶ The fair trade minimum requires a slight increase in the price that exporters pay for green coffee, currently twenty cents per pound. This is an improvement, but it has not been enough to uproot the poverty and reverse the historical inequities in the coffee business. Despite the increase in both the sales of fair trade products and fair trade premiums over the past decade,⁴⁷ most smallholder coffee producers are still poor. Retailers and especially roasters do better. They are able to charge consumers above the fair trade premium of twenty cents per pound that goes to farmer coops (because consumers will pay), currently an average of \$1.50 more, with the upshot that the actual fair trade premium goes to retailers, not to coops and producers.⁴⁸

⁴¹ See “History of Fair Trade,” Coop Coffees, coopcoffees.coop/fair-trade/history-of-fair-trade/.

⁴² “History of Fair Trade.”

⁴³ See Fairtrade International, “Fairtrade Minimum Prices and Premiums,” fairtrade.net/en/why-fairtrade/how-we-do-it/fairtrade-standards/fairtrade-minimum-price-and-premium-information.html.

⁴⁴ Fair Trade Federation, “Fairtrade Principles,” fairtradefederation.org/principles/.

⁴⁵ See the Food Empowerment Project, “Bitter Brew: The Stirring Reality of Coffee,” foodispower.org/our-food-choices/coffee/.

⁴⁶ Food Empowerment Project, “Bitter Brew.”

⁴⁷ “History of Fair Trade.”

⁴⁸ Helene Naegele, “Where Does the Fair Trade Money Go? How Much Consumers Pay Extra for Fair Trade Coffee and How This Value Is Split along the Value Chain,” *World Development* 133 (September 2020), doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105006, sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X20301327.

The direct trade movement in coffee came about to address the fact that everyone but the farmers was getting the profits from fair trade. Direct trade is a system whereby roasters buy directly from producer coops or similar associations. In theory, this system benefits both the farmer and the roaster, because each receives a larger piece of the pie. It also eliminates the fees involved with fair trade certification, which are out of reach for some growers. However, the direct trade system is easily exploited. Without a certification process, anyone can claim to be a direct trade company. The direct trade system also eliminates the social justice and environmental principles to which fair trade-certified companies commit, though some direct trade companies adhere to these principles and some companies are both direct and fair trade. A deeper problem is that direct trade is still not enabling many producers to move out of poverty. Coffee roasters have many other expenses besides the cost of green coffee, and most of those expenses are fixed, such as the price of packaging and the cost of the electricity that it takes to run the roaster. To stay in business, roasters work to keep the cost of green beans as low as they can, because there is a limit to how much consumers will pay in a competitive market. In addition, smaller roasters do not have the resources to maintain direct relationships with coffee producers, and so often it is still an intermediary, the bean broker or importer, that maintains the relationship.

Just Haiti, the organization that Kim Lamberty leads, is a fair and direct trade organization.⁴⁹ Inspired by the Gospel, as reflected through both Catholic social teaching and especially the lens of theologians from the global South, Just Haiti's founders aspired to create a business that would turn Catholic social teaching into something more than theory.⁵⁰ In 1967, Pope Paul VI called on Catholics to respond to "the hungry nations of the world" who "cry out to the peoples blessed with abundance."⁵¹ However, while he saw the answer as development aid, liberation theologians saw the answer as liberation from aid.⁵² Following liberation theologians, Just Haiti invests in poverty-stricken communities so that they can develop their own small businesses, reap the profits themselves, and become what Pope Francis termed "dignified agents of their own destiny."⁵³

⁴⁹ See justhaiti.org.

⁵⁰ See Kim Lamberty, "Proclaiming the Reign of God in a Suffering World: The Movement from Development to Liberation," *Missiology: An International Review* 45, no. 1 (2017): 88–102.

⁵¹ Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, no. 3.

⁵² See Lamberty, "Proclaiming the Reign of God," 93.

⁵³ Pope Francis, "Address to U.N. General Assembly," September 25, 2015, vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150925_onu-visita.html.

Here is how it works. A team of nine unpaid volunteers operate the organization in the United States; in Haiti, the producers are organized into associations with democratically elected leadership and an unpaid coordinator who organizes fund transfers and transportation. The unpaid coordinator in Haiti is also a producer and acts as negotiator/broker for the Haitian producer associations. The unpaid volunteers in the United States consider their work a form of reparations for the ongoing depredations of colonialism.⁵⁴ Through 2024, the organization paid producers up front \$4.50 per pound of green coffee; the current fair trade minimum is \$1.75, and the current, wildly fluctuating market price is about \$3.00. (In recent history, it has been between \$2 and \$3.⁵⁵) Prices are determined based on market analysis and comparables. The organization's profits go back to the producers in a formula based on how much coffee they contributed; they usually receive roughly \$1 more per pound than what they were paid up front. Because there are no intermediaries, producers end up receiving about \$6 per bag of coffee purchased in a grocery store or café.⁵⁶

With earnings substantially more than most smallholder coffee producers, Just Haiti producers have progressed past subsistence.⁵⁷ Their children are in school, food insecurity is not an issue, they have access to health care, and they are able to provide some social benefits to their communities, such as assistance during emergencies, or resettling displaced persons. To be clear, they still live in poverty, but it is poverty with dignity, another concept with deep roots in Catholic social teaching.⁵⁸ Their dignity lies in part in the ability to support

⁵⁴ In other words, they are “renounc[ing] some of their rights so as to place their goods more generously at the service of others.” See Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 190, quoting Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens*, no. 23.

⁵⁵ This market price is not the amount that goes directly to producers. It typically goes to coops, which subtract their expenses, or to local bean brokers if there is no coop, or to plantation owners. Note that if international prices remain high, Just Haiti will increase the amount paid to producers in 2025–2026.

⁵⁶ The math is inexact, because one pound of green coffee does not equal one pound of roasted coffee, and the weight of roasted versus green coffee depends on how dark the coffee roast is.

⁵⁷ Unfortunately, it is not possible to measure income changes, because income is not tracked in Haiti. Accordingly, producers have no idea how much their income has changed since associating with Just Haiti. Other metrics must be used, such as the number or proportion of children in school.

⁵⁸ See, on the concept of dignity, Clemens Sedmak, “Enacting Human Dignity,” in *The Practice of Human Development and Dignity*, ed. Paolo G. Carozza and Clemens Sedmak (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 27–45. Sedmak works with the account of dignity in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26: “There must be made available to all men everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate

themselves and their families through their own labor. They are not wealthy, but, until the very recent disintegration of Haiti, they had enjoyed a reliable income.

The pivotal person in the supply chain is the consumer, because what the consumer is willing to pay sets a limit on producer income. Here we recall Daniel Finn's emphasis on "the constrictive power of prices . . . up and down the chain."⁵⁹ Consumers in the United States are not accustomed to paying the full value of many of the goods we consume, because pricing often does not include paying a living wage to the most vulnerable persons in the supply chain. If we are serious about lifting the vulnerable out of poverty through a living wage, then consumer education is key. If consumers understand the supply chain, are savvy enough to understand the nuances of fair and direct trade, and are willing to hold roasters accountable, they could make a significant difference in the lives of producers and their communities.

OBSTACLES AND STRATEGIES

It might seem to be an inopportune moment to ask Catholic colleges and universities to devote any energies to goods that appear to be about something other than the core good of education. First, a significant number of Catholic colleges and universities are struggling to stay open, and some are failing. At least twenty-one Catholic colleges and universities have closed since 2016.⁶⁰ All but the most wealthy, prestigious institutions are bracing for a projected decline in the numbers of traditional college-age students, especially in the Northeast and Midwest, where most Catholic colleges and universities are clustered.⁶¹ Since the Great Recession at the end of 2007, birthrates have fallen by twenty percent.⁶² To date, immigration has allowed the US to maintain population growth—immigrants accounted for the

information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious."

⁵⁹ Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 104.

⁶⁰ See, for context, Stephen Beale, "Demographic Trends, Financial Challenges Force Catholic College Closures," *National Catholic Register*, May 6, 2024, ncregister.com/news/demographic-trends-financial-challenges-force-catholic-college-closures.

⁶¹ See Dan Bauman, "Colleges Were Already Bracing for an 'Enrollment Cliff.' Now There Might Be a Second One," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 7, 2024, chronicle.com/article/colleges-were-already-bracing-for-an-enrollment-cliff-now-there-might-be-a-second-one, though interestingly this article notes that increased immigration might offset the predicted declines.

⁶² See Melissa Kearney, Phillip Levine, and Luke Pardue, "The Mystery of the Declining U.S. Birth Rate," *Econofact*, February 15, 2002, econofact.org/the-mystery-of-the-declining-u-s-birth-rate. Compare Lyman Stone, "5.8 Million Fewer Babies: America's Lost Decade in Fertility," *American Enterprise Institute*, February 3, 2021, [aei.org/articles/5-8-million-fewer-babies-americas-lost-decade-in-fertility/](https://www.aei.org/articles/5-8-million-fewer-babies-americas-lost-decade-in-fertility/).

entirety of population growth from 2022 to 2023⁶³—but even so enrollment in elementary and secondary schools is projected to decline by more than five percent from 2021 to 2031,⁶⁴ and the second Trump administration has turned against immigration with a vengeance.

Second, although the Pew Research Center's 2023–2024 Religious Landscape Study found that the share of US adults who identify as Christian has recently leveled off at just above sixty percent,⁶⁵ further declines appear likely in the decades to come. As of 2024, the percentage of US adults identifying as Catholic stands at twenty percent, which is down from twenty-four percent in 2007, but has been more or less steady since 2014.⁶⁶ Younger adults, however, are less likely than older adults to have been raised in a religious household and are correspondingly much less religious: for example, forty-three percent of people ages 18–24 identify as “nones” or religiously non-affiliated, compared to thirteen percent of people ages 74 and older.⁶⁷ And Catholics are older than the US population overall, by fifty-eight percent over age 50 to forty-seven percent overall.⁶⁸ Further, being raised in a religious household is much less “sticky” than being raised in a non-religious household: for every convert to Catholicism, there are 8.4 former Catholics.⁶⁹ The church's sexual abuse scandal has not helped. As theologian Massimo Faggioli recently observed, for young people who have not known a church that has not been plagued by the sexual abuse scandal, it may appear that salvation is available, ironically, only outside the church and through leaving it.⁷⁰ All of this

⁶³ Jeanne Batalova, “Frequently Requested Statistics on Immigrants and Immigration in the United States,” Migration Information Source, March 12, 2025, [migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/frequently-requested-statistics-immigrants-and-immigration-united-states).

⁶⁴ US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2022 Digest of Education Statistics, table 203.20, nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_203.20.asp.

⁶⁵ Gregory A. Smith et al., “Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off: Findings from the 2023–2024 Religious Landscape Study,” Pew Research Center, February 26, 2025, [pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/#trends-in-the-size-of-u-s-religious-groups-and-denominations](https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/decline-of-christianity-in-the-us-has-slowed-may-have-leveled-off/#trends-in-the-size-of-u-s-religious-groups-and-denominations). That share is down from 78 percent in 2007, but more or less steady since 2019.

⁶⁶ Justin Nortey, Patricia Tevington, and Gregory A. Smith, “10 Facts about U.S. Catholics,” Pew Research Center, March 4, 2025, [pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/04/10-facts-about-us-catholics/](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/03/04/10-facts-about-us-catholics/).

⁶⁷ Smith et al., “Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off.”

⁶⁸ Nortey, Tevington, and Smith, “10 Facts about U.S. Catholics.”

⁶⁹ Smith et al., “Decline of Christianity in the U.S. Has Slowed, May Have Leveled Off.”

⁷⁰ Massimo Faggioli, *Theology and Catholic Higher Education: Beyond Our Identity Crisis* (Orbis, 2024), 22.

does not bode well for enrollment at Catholic colleges and universities.⁷¹

Against this background, a project to change how coffee is supplied on campus risks being dismissed as an unrealistic non-starter—an admirable idea, but not practical in current circumstances.⁷² After all, such a project would likely cost the university money, and it may not be in a position to pass on the costs to students. All but the most elite colleges and universities need to attract students through financial aid packages,⁷³ not lose them to less expensive competitors that do not have to answer to the high demands of Catholic social teaching.

Administrators who respond with wariness to such a project are themselves more than likely motivated by a good: namely, the viability of the institution, in the interests of the education it provides students as well as the employment it provides faculty and staff. It is part of administrators' job to keep their institution financially secure. The challenge, then, is to reframe this project as an opportunity rather than a nuisance or a risk. In business-speak, how can it be a "win-win"? How does it align with and advance shared interests and values across the institution? And what might be incremental steps toward achieving the project's goals?⁷⁴

⁷¹ See Rick Seltzer, "Narrowing Enrollment Pipeline Pressures Roman Catholic Colleges," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 4, 2021, insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2021/03/05/narrowing-enrollment-pipeline-pressures-roman-catholic-colleges.

⁷² More radically, it might be denied altogether that colleges and universities are, or ought to be, moral and social agents. From this point of view, they exist merely to give students the knowledge and skills needed for the work world beyond graduation. We do not address this objection in the body of the text because countering it would require writing another article. One observation is that it is simply false, as an empirical matter, that colleges and universities lack such agency. Instead, some have already exhibited, for example, leadership in climate action. See Alexander R. Barron et al., "Carbon Neutrality Should Not Be the End Goal: Lessons for Institutional Climate Action from U.S. Higher Education," *One Earth* 4, no. 9 (2021): 1248–1258, doi.org/10.1016/j.oneear.2021.08.014, and the discussion of divestment from fossil fuels in Beyer, *Just Universities*, 157–160. As for whether Catholic colleges *ought* to exercise moral and social agency, a text to begin with is Jon Sobrino, "The University's Christian Inspiration," *Horizons* 17, no. 2 (1990): 280–296. On climate action in particular, see Erin Lothes Biviano, "Symbol and Sacrament: Fossil Fuel Divestment and Reinvestment as a Real Symbol of Love," *Journal of Moral Theology* 11, no. 1 (2022): 55–84. As an aside, the second Trump administration's campaign to control higher education certainly suggests that it believes colleges and universities are moral and social agents.

⁷³ See Ron Lieber, "Colleges Know How Much You're Willing to Pay. Here's How," *New York Times*, May 1, 2025, [nytimes.com/2025/05/01/business/college-tuition-price-consultants.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/05/01/business/college-tuition-price-consultants.html).

⁷⁴ This paragraph draws from the strategies and terminology in Mary C. Gentile's *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What's Right* (Yale University Press, 2010). See, for example, the list of "enablers for voicing values" in appendix C, 230–231.

Extractivist business practices—practices that strip value from producers, workers, and communities without making nearly an adequate return—thrive by concealing their operations. In our globalized economy, consumers’ relationship is primarily with the commodities we buy, not with the people who produce them.⁷⁵ We are largely oblivious to the conditions under which workers labor, as well as to the wages they make (or not) and how the profit they help generate is captured and distributed. Sadly, a lot of people may not care—Pope Francis spoke in this regard of the aforementioned “globalization of indifference”⁷⁶—but it seems safe to hold that many people would be appalled if they saw for themselves, say, forced and child labor in the coffee supply chain.⁷⁷

One way to combat indifference and ignorance is to establish relationships with people who have historically been exploited. Really getting to know smallholder producers provides crucial insight into the global trading system for commodities: it becomes undeniably clear that the system involves people, not just numbers; it also becomes clear that the system is built on exploiting the most vulnerable people in the supply chain. Establishing such relationships is difficult but not impossible. For example, before the pandemic, and before Haiti descended into the violence that now afflicts it, Gannon University’s Center for Social Concerns regularly traveled with students to Haiti over spring break for an encounter experience. The relationships that students and staff built with coffee producers led to the introduction of a special Just Haiti roast on Gannon’s Erie, Pennsylvania, campus. The new roast was developed by the coffee company Out of the Grey Coffee, which has its corporate office in Erie, and its sale was coordinated with Gannon’s food service provider, Metz.⁷⁸

A second course of action is to partner with local coffee companies already committed to justice and sustainability. Those partnerships

⁷⁵ See for a brief, insightful discussion, Vincent J. Miller, “Slavery and Commodity Chains: Fighting the Globalization of Indifference,” *America*, January 3, 2014, americamagazine.org/issue/slavery-and-commodity-chains-fighting-globalization-indifference.

⁷⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 52.

⁷⁷ See the US Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs 2017–2022 project, “Addressing Child Labor and Forced Labor in the Coffee Supply Chain in Honduras,” datastore.iatistandard.org/activity/US-GOV-17-IL314731775K11.

⁷⁸ See Jessie Badach Hubert, “Forging New Grounds Tomorrow among Haitian Partners,” *Gannon*, online ed., July 2019, magazine.gannon.edu/Article.aspx?date=July2019&title=forging-new-grounds-tomorrow-among-haitian-partners&issue=9&article=191. The roast is Out of the Grey Coffee’s Neg Mawon, outofthegreycoffee.com/collections/oogcoffee-americas/products/single-origin-haitian-neg-mawon-shg-fair-trade-plus-coffee. Haitian farmers made what they have long made from Just Haiti: \$4.50 per pound up front, plus about \$1 after sales.

need to be negotiated in turn with the institution's food service or hot beverage provider. For example, Georgetown University recently announced that its contract with Aramark Refreshments allows offices and departments to purchase coffee and tea from two nearby roasters, in Washington, DC, and Baltimore, that sell ethically responsible and sustainable products.⁷⁹ This course of action might be pitched as a “win-win” for an institution that wants to make the news for bettering the local economy, though the devil is in the details. (For example, what are the criteria for “ethical” roasters? They should start with how much money producers make. And what are the terms of the deal with Aramark?)

Either way, allies are essential. No ethics project will succeed if it is seen as belonging exclusively to a few social justice warriors on campus, unfairly caricatured campus ministry do-gooders, or faculty with nothing more than axes to grind about “corporatized” higher education.⁸⁰ Enlisting students is always well-advised. They are a college or university's primary stakeholders, and so if they care about doing right by the producers of the coffee they drink on campus, the administration is at least going to take note.

A case in point is anti-sweatshop activism on campuses in the 1990s, which led to meaningful change in institutions' licensing practices.⁸¹ The Worker Rights Consortium, which is an independent labor rights monitoring organization, was established in 2001, and it now includes as affiliates nearly 150 colleges and universities in the United States and Canada, among them twenty Catholic institutions.⁸² Further, around 140 colleges and universities belong to the Fair Labor Association's University Caucus, including thirteen Catholic

⁷⁹ Georgetown University, Office of the Chief Financial Officer, “New Hot Beverage Options: Improve Office Sustainability and Manage Costs,” March 13, 2024, ocfo.georgetown.edu/announcements/new-hot-beverage-options-improve-office-sustainability-and-manage-costs/. The roasters include Blue's Coffee & Tea Co., bluescoffeeandtea.co.com, and Southeastern Roastery, southeasternroastery.com. Misha's Coffee, mishascoffee.com, is also part of the agreement, but Misha's does not appear committed to justice and sustainability as part of its brand. Fairfield University recently announced a similar partnership with a local roaster, Silvermine Coffee, silverminecoffee.com, but it too says nothing on its website about doing right by producers and the environment. See Fairfield University, “Fairfield University Launches New ‘Red Sea’ Coffee with Local Partner Silvermine Coffee Roasters,” September 29, 2024, fairfield.edu/news/press-releases/2024/sepember/new-red-sea-coffee-with-silvermine-coffee-roasters.html.

⁸⁰ See on corporatization Beyer, *Just Universities*, 14–15.

⁸¹ See for discussion Joseph A. McCartin, “Confronting the Labor Problem in Catholic Higher Education: Applying Catholic Social Teaching in an Age of Increasing Inequality,” *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 37, no. 1 (2018): 83–84.

⁸² See “WRC Affiliate Colleges and Universities as of October 24, 2024,” workersrights.org/affiliates/affiliate-institutions/.

institutions,⁸³ and Georgetown, Seattle University, and the University of Notre Dame have detailed licensing codes of conduct.⁸⁴

It is true that the energy behind ensuring both safe working conditions and a living wage for apparel workers has dissipated. The celebrated clothing company Alta Gracia closed in 2021,⁸⁵ and in 2017 Notre Dame relaxed its licensing code to allow it to do business with companies in China.⁸⁶ The Ignatian Solidarity Network's Catholic Ethical Purchasing Alliance (CEPA) is still fighting the good fight,⁸⁷ but attention on college and university campuses has largely shifted from labor rights to issues of environmental sustainability and supplier diversity.⁸⁸ Yet it is good news that attention to social justice has

⁸³ See "FLA University Caucus," fairlabor.org/members/colleges-universities/?member_type=college-university.

⁸⁴ See "Code of Conduct for Georgetown University Licensees," publicaffairs.georgetown.edu/business-policy/licensing-oversight-committee/code-of-conduct/; "University of Notre Dame Licensing Code of Conduct," licensing.nd.edu/assets/12740/codeofconduct_document.pdf; and "Seattle University Code of Conduct," seattleu.edu/media/seattle-university/documents/policies/controller/Anti-Sweatshop-Policy.pdf, even quoting General Congregation 32 and the US bishops' 1986 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. The University of Scranton, too, restricts "products produced through 'sweat shop' or other similar unjust labor practices," though this restriction figures in a list including as well "products that could present a high-liability exposure . . . , that endorse political candidates or that express a political point of view, alcohol-related products, tobacco-related products, sexually suggestive products." See "The University of Scranton Identity Procedures and Guidelines," scranton.edu/marketing-communications/images/Identity-standards-manual.pdf, §5.1.

⁸⁵ See Milli Legrain, "Famed Garment Factory Paying a Living Wage Struggles to Stay Afloat," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2021, theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/02/alta-gracia-dominican-garment-factory-living-wage-pandemic, and the WRC's report, "Alta Gracia Workers Have Received Their Severance, on Time and in Full," June 24, 2021, workersrights.org/communications-to-affiliates/alta-gracia-workers-have-received-their-severance-on-time-and-in-full/.

⁸⁶ See Bill Purcell and Margarita Rose, "Engaging Mission: Applying the Catholic Social Tradition to Investing and Licensing" *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 37, no. 1 (2018): 66–67.

⁸⁷ See ignatiansolidarity.net/catholic-ethical-purchasing-alliance/.

⁸⁸ See, for example, the Association of Jesuit Colleges' *Laudato Si'* Commission's "Eco-Social Engagement Report 2024," published June 25, 2024, ajcunet.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/AJCU-Eco-Social-Engagement-6.25.24.pdf, documenting "the range of environmental sustainability and justice activities" at the twenty-seven Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States. Creighton University and Seattle University have noteworthy sustainability purchasing and procurement policies, and Marquette University and Seattle University (again) provide examples of supplier diversity initiatives. See Creighton University's sustainability purchasing practices "Policies and Standards," creighton.edu/sites/default/files/2021-12/2.9-Sustainability.pdf; Seattle University's "Policy on Sustainable Procurement," seattleu.edu/media/seattle-university/documents/policies/controller/policy-on-sustainable-procurement.pdf; Marquette University's "Supplier and Workforce Diversity Inclusion Plan," marquette.edu/suppliers/documents/diversitysupplierworkforcedevelopmentinclusion

persisted, even if it has shifted, and the fact that environmental sustainability matters to undergraduates—to the point that, in one survey, twelve percent reported it influenced their choice of college⁸⁹—suggests that there can be a confluence between concern for the bottom line and concern for people and the planet.⁹⁰ In business terminology, “triple bottom line” thinking really can work in the higher education marketplace.⁹¹ This is a crucial point for administrators and board members whose responsibilities include tending to their institution’s financial well-being.

Students are important allies, but so are administrators: not only the vice president (or analog) of marketing, but also the vice presidents of enrollment management and finance, and the directors of facilities, purchasing, and auxiliary services, among others. Many Catholic institutions’ procurement or purchasing policies can be found online, and most include either a statement of ethics or a more elaborate code, such as Boston College’s stipulating that “integrity and fair dealing shall be at the heart of every business decision made by procurement personnel.”⁹² These policies represent an opportunity to open a discussion with administrators on the basis of already affirmed principles and commitments. For example, John Carroll University’s purchasing policy states that “the University’s best interests are served when a transaction results in the lowest overall cost to the University” (which is common language in these policies), but it also notes that preferred vendors will exhibit “alignment with the University’s Mission (e.g. Fair Trade, sustainability practices, etc.).”⁹³ The right partners could do a lot of good putting that language to work. The University of Dayton’s “Procurement and Payables Policy” is yet

n.pdf; and Seattle University’s “Policy on Supplier Diversity,” seattleu.edu/media/seattle-university/documents/policies/general/Policy-on-Supplier-Diversity.pdf.

⁸⁹ Melissa Ezarik, “Actions and Hopes of the Sustainability-Focused Student,” *Inside Higher Ed*, January 2, 2023, insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2023/01/02/sustainability-actions-students-take-and-want-their-colleges. The same survey found that forty-five percent of students considered environmental sustainability in their choice of college.

⁹⁰ Supporting smallholder farmers is also part of a climate solution. See Kim Lamberty, “Small Scale Farming in Perspective,” Quixote Center, February 9, 2023, quixote.org/posts/small-scale-farming-in-perspective.

⁹¹ See Kelsey Miller, “The Triple Bottom Line: What It Is and Why It’s Important,” Harvard Business School Online Business Insights, December 8, 2020, online.hbs.edu/blog/post/what-is-the-triple-bottom-line.

⁹² Boston College, “Procurement Code of Ethics,” bc.edu/content/dam/bc1/offices/FVP/BCProcurementCodeofEthics-1.pdf. Compare Fordham University’s statement of “Business Ethics/Ethical Conduct,” fordham.edu/resources/policies/office-of-finance-purchasing-manual/business-ethicsethical-conduct/.

⁹³ John Carroll University, “Purchasing Policy,” jcu.edu/sites/default/files/2022-10/Purchasing%20Policy%202022_10.14.2022.pdf.

more promising. According to that policy, “The University views its purchasing decisions as opportunities to choose environmentally and socially preferable products and services, to support vendors with strong commitments to sustainability, to support the local economy, and to pursue the common good.”⁹⁴ An ethics project to change for the better, morally, how coffee is supplied on campus could not ask for stronger footing.

Even so, translating words into practices is never a given. Concretely, as we have discussed, proponents of the project will need to build and educate (and educate and educate) a coalition of allies, ideally including students, staff, faculty, administrators, and even board members. There certainly will need to be champions on the financial and operational sides of the institution, and faculty are important to articulate the project’s theological grounds and to make the case that it is squarely in service of the institution’s core educational goal of humane development of its students. That case also needs to be made in language that will speak to and attract prospective students and their parents or guardians. Proponents should work, then, with colleagues in enrollment management and marketing to find ways to cast the project as a visible, dynamic, and creative expression of the institution’s mission—a telling example of how the institution lives its mission and shapes its community, such that people want to belong to it.

Proponents also will need to gather facts: for a start, (1) about the coffee coops, associations, or roasters they propose to work with and what these businesses do for the lives of producers; (2) about the relative cost of, say, Just Haiti, or Café Justo, or Capeltic coffee, as opposed to whatever is currently served on campus;⁹⁵ and (3) about the terms of the institution’s contract with its food or beverage provider. Further, proponents will need to show that they understand the reasons why administrators might initially be hesitant to implement this project. Even apart from the special challenges facing Catholic colleges and universities at the moment, running a college or university is no small undertaking. As Francis Oakley, a former president of Williams College, remarked, “If it were not quite so

⁹⁴ University of Dayton, “Procurement and Payables Policy,” udayton.edu/policies/finance/procurement-payables-policy.php. Similarly, Dayton’s “Sustainability Policy” casts purchasing decisions as educational opportunities; see udayton.edu/policies/facilities/sustainability-policy.php.

⁹⁵ Capeltic is a coffee coop founded with the support of the Jesuit Province of Mexico, in Chiapas, Mexico. Café Justo, which is likewise in Mexico, is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church. See capeltic.org and justcoffee.org. See also Kelly Swan, “Capeltic Coffee Collaborative Turning Coffee into Hope,” *Jesuits Central and Southern*, July 1, 2019, jesuitscentralandsouthern.org/stories/capeltic-coffee-collaborative-turning-coffee-into-hope/.

familiar and so very much taken for granted, the sheer multiplicity of activities characteristically pursued under their aegis would probably strike the observer as really quite odd.”⁹⁶ Angrily denouncing the institution as hypocritical, or publicly confronting its leaders, is not then the way to go. Instead, proponents should position themselves as agents of continuous improvement,⁹⁷ seeking to help the institution realize its values and goals, and they should assume that administrators want the same.⁹⁸ Proponents will need to show not only that the project is feasible, but also that it really can be expected to bring “added value” to the institution, rather than just more work and costs. That added value might come in the form of new students drawn to the institution for the witness of its mission (recall the importance of environmental sustainability to students), or it might come in the form of a deeper grasp of the mission, lest it be flattened to job preparation, or even worse the mere getting of money.⁹⁹ As Gerald Beyer has noted, a college or university that focuses narrowly on increasing revenues and driving down costs risks misshaping its students and inviting them to think of education, too, as merely a market transaction.¹⁰⁰

The impetus of the ethics project that we propose is resistance to the exploitation of the vulnerable, affirmation of the basic human dignity of the poor, and recognition that, in the theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez’s words, “The poverty of the poor is not a call to generous relief action, but a demand that we go and build a different social order.”¹⁰¹ Our proposed project can be a means, then, into a deeper

⁹⁶ Francis Oakley, *From the Cast-Iron Shore: In Lifelong Pursuit of Liberal Learning* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 395. Oakley goes on: “Those activities range from classroom teaching to the mounting of . . . musical, artistic, and athletic events; from the deployment of security forces . . . to the construction, cyclical renovation, and routine maintenance of the large-scale physical plant as well as the grounds, roads, and drainage and heating systems; and from the housing and feeding of thousands of students . . . to the running of infirmaries, libraries, theatres, studios, laboratories, and museums, and, beyond that, to the collective pursuit of research endeavors (sometimes of great magnitude).”

⁹⁷ Compare Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values*, 184.

⁹⁸ Gentile, *Giving Voice to Values*, 186.

⁹⁹ See, distinguishing between the mere getting of money and the productive making of money, Christine Swanton, “Virtues of Productivity Versus Technicist Rationality,” in *Economics and the Virtues: Building a New Moral Foundation*, ed. Jennifer A. Baker and Mark D. White (Oxford University Press, 2016), 196. For an example of “getting money,” see Lisa Bonos, “These Young People See Meme Coins as Their Best Shot at the American Dream,” *Washington Post*, May 4, 2025, www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2025/05/04/crypto-meme-coins-investing-wealth/.

¹⁰⁰ Beyer, *Just Universities*, 15.

¹⁰¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, as quoted in Paul Farmer, “Health, Healing and Social Justice: Insights from Liberation Theology,” in *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations*

understanding of the mission of Catholic higher education, but only if proponents educate their campus community about, on the one hand, the grim history and reality of the coffee supply chain and, on the other, the responsibility and power they have as consumers to begin to help set systemic wrongs right. Daniel Finn's conclusion that "we lead indicted lives" must not be the final word, as he urges himself. Instead, "This sense of indictment must be enlivening and not deadening."¹⁰² We believe our project answers this call.

THE RISKS OF ACTING AND NOT ACTING AND THE STRATEGY OF SMALL WINS

To recall from this article's introduction, Jason Brennan has his students who do an "ethics project" answer a number of questions about the experience. These questions include:

- What obstacles did you expect to encounter, and how did you pre-emptively plan to overcome them?
- What obstacles did you in fact encounter, and how did you respond?
- Did you add value to the world, taking into account the combined costs of your time, effort, and any money spent?¹⁰³

We have sought to identify likely obstacles to our proposed ethics project, and we have indicated some strategies to overcome those obstacles. No doubt other obstacles would arise in the course of trying to make our project a reality. For example, perhaps there are people on campus who really want a Starbucks; perhaps that energizes students more than the prospect of a café serving Just Haiti, Café Justo, or Capeltic coffee. Or perhaps the purchasing department is willing to cooperate, and the chief financial officer is interested, but she or he feels bound by the board of trustees to concentrate on saving money above all else.¹⁰⁴ Or perhaps the college or university's food or hot

with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez, ed. Michael Griffin and Jennie Weiss Block (Orbis Books, 2013), 35.

¹⁰² Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*, 140.

¹⁰³ Brennan, "The Ethics Project," 287.

¹⁰⁴ See, on the paltry education of boards of trustees in Catholic social thought, Bernard G. Prusak, "Independent Boards of Trustees at Catholic Colleges and Universities, Fifty Years Later: Findings and Reflections from Six Holy Cross Schools," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 37, no. 1 (2018): 3–27. The situation may be changing for the better, however, at Jesuit colleges and universities; see the AJCU Trustee Forum

beverage provider flatly refuses to cooperate. After all, those service providers use higher education as a means to make money; they are not themselves non-profit entities with educational missions.

There is no saying whether this project would succeed on any Catholic campus, and there is a risk that, if it is tried only to fail, all that it would do is generate deeper cynicism about whether the college or university is in fact meaningfully Catholic. That outcome would not “add value to the world.” So failure would have a significant cost. Not trying, however, has its own costs. The Catholic college or university risks reducing Catholic social teaching to mere pious words that even it does not seek to translate into practice. The Catholic college or university risks (further) accommodating itself to and normalizing extractive business practices. And the Catholic college or university risks entrenching a fatalism about the nature of business, namely, that it cannot be conducted in the service of solidarity and the common good.¹⁰⁵ Whatever else Catholic colleges and universities (and Catholic business schools) are for, they should be against teaching their students that.

Any ambitious ethics project comes with a further, ironic risk: namely, teaching the lesson that it is so hard to do good that it is not even worth trying. The ethics project that we have proposed is potentially daunting. It is so much easier to go along with the status quo. And it is not immediately obvious that anyone is the worse for it. The coffee we drink, like the chocolate we eat, bears no marks of exploitation. What’s more, in order to change how coffee is supplied on campus, so many minds and hearts must themselves be changed, and there are so many settled ways of doing business that need to be undone. The problem might seem too big.

In conclusion, we suggest one last strategy: scale down the problem to workable tasks, and go for the small wins.¹⁰⁶ In other words, look for ready to hand opportunities to implement change: for example, the coffee served after public lectures. Small wins do not need to be part of a big, pre-conceived plan laying out the steps, one by one, toward the final goal. Instead, they can be fragmentary and scattered, depending on the opportunities that present themselves. The key points about small wins are that they build confidence, win allies, deter opponents, lower resistance, and often point the way to new

initiative, ajcunet.edu/formation-programs/trustee-forum/, which at least recognizes that there is an issue.

¹⁰⁵ Contrast Andrew Gustafson, “The Economy of Communion: Catholic Social Thought Put to Work,” in *Finding Faith in Business: An Economy of Communion Vision*, ed. Andrew Gustafson and Celeste Harvey (New City Press, 2024), 117–140.

¹⁰⁶ We follow here Karl E. Weick, “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” *American Psychologist* 39, no. 1 (1984): 40–49.

opportunities for further wins¹⁰⁷—say, when a department chair or administrative assistant asks whether they can serve Just Haiti, Café Justo, or Capeltic coffee in the department’s office space, or when a faculty member in the business school asks whether her class can work with a coffee coop to craft a business plan or devise a marketing campaign. A series of small wins may even inspire a benefactor to step forward. Fatalism need not have the last word. Instead, as Pope Francis remarked in *Laudato Si’*, “Truly, much can be done!”¹⁰⁸ 

Bernard Prusak, PhD, holds the Raymond & Eleanor Smiley Chair in business ethics at John Carroll University. His books include *Catholic Moral Philosophy in Practice and Theory* (Paulist, 2016) and the collection *Catholic Higher Education and Catholic Social Thought*, edited with Jennifer Reed-Bouley (Paulist, 2023).

Kim Lamberty, DMin, is executive director of Quixote Center (quixote.org) and president and co-founder of Just Haiti. Both organizations work with smallholder farmers in Haiti to increase household income and eliminate hunger. Dr. Lamberty is the author of numerous academic articles on the practical application of Catholic missiology, Catholic social teaching, and liberation theology.

¹⁰⁷ See Weick, “Small Wins,” 43.

¹⁰⁸ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, no. 180. This exclamation comes just after Francis proposed that “new forms of cooperation and community organization can be encouraged in order to defend the interests of small producers and preserve local ecosystems from destruction.” See for discussion Nathan Schneider, “‘Truly, Much Can Be Done!’ Cooperative Economics from the Book of Acts to Pope Francis,” in *Care for the World: Laudato Si’ and Catholic Social Thought in an Era of Climate Crisis*, ed. Frank Pasquale (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 145–166.