

INTERVIEW WITH CAMILA MORALES, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS



Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon

May 2021

EXCERPTS:

- “My research is largely motivated by my own lived experience. I moved to the US with my family when I was a teenager. I spoke little to no English and attended school in one of the poorest counties in the Metro Atlanta area. So, I enjoy working on topics that can help divulge a better understanding of the experiences of immigrant children and young adults.”
- “Being a light in the classroom works. Students notice your joy, they notice your kind disposition towards them, they notice when professors care and when they do not, and they respond to that.”

You are an Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Texas at Dallas. Could you tell us a bit about the University?

The University of Texas at Dallas (UTD) is a public research university, part of the University of Texas System, and primarily located in Richardson, TX (just north of Dallas). The school was first founded in the 1960s by Texas Instruments as the Graduate Research Center of the Southwest with a main focus on engineering, science, and technology. Today, UTD enrolls over 28,000 students from over 150 countries, with nearly 200 National Merit Scholars in the Fall 2020 freshmen cohort. It offers more than 140 academic programs across 8 schools, with STEM majors representing the top degrees conferred to undergraduates.

What has been your main area of research? Why did you choose these fields within economics?

My work lies at the intersection of K-12 education, labor economics, and immigration policy. For example, I have done work on the peer effects of attending school with refugees and examined the efficacy of school-based programs for English Learners.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Camila Morales, Assistant Professor of Economics at the University of Texas at Dallas, talks about her teaching and research. This interview is part of a series on Catholic economists in partnership with the Catholic Research Economists Discussion Organization (CREDO).

Visit us at www.GlobalCatholicEducation.org.

I am currently working on several projects that examine the impact of immigration policies (e.g., DACA and immigration enforcement) on the labor and education outcomes of young adults and children in mixed-status households.

My research is largely motivated by my own lived experience. I moved to the US with my family when I was a teenager. I spoke little to no English and attended school in one of the poorest counties in the Metro Atlanta area. I experienced challenges in school as an English Learner, did not know how to navigate the transition to college, and witnessed firsthand how many of my peers faced limited economic opportunities because of their immigration status. So, I enjoy working on topics that can help divulge a better understanding of the experiences of immigrant children and young adults.

Do your values affect your research? In what way? And what are some challenges you faced or still face today?

As a Catholic, I believe I am called to use my talents and privileges to better the lives of others. So, I choose to work on topics that inform policies affecting the people in my community. My Catholic values affect the types of questions I address in my research and how I think about the broad implications of my work.

I approach my research as a balance of truth and love. As St. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians, even if I have all knowledge and wisdom, but have not love, I am nothing and gain nothing. I apply this in my work by not compromising on the truth, all while remembering that I study topics that affect people's lives and livelihoods.

I strive to remember that the data I use for analysis is the quantification of some aspects of people's lives, not simply numbers on a sheet. I like to meet with people in the communities that contribute to my studies. For example, I have met with many refugee students and learned about their stories. This was a valuable lesson and actually gave me good insight into mechanisms behind my findings.

I am new to the profession and maybe that is why I have not faced many challenges that put my Catholic values and research at odds. Perhaps my most challenging experience so far has been interpersonal relationships in the profession where I do not feel comfortable in sharing or being open about my faith.

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

I share my values with students indirectly by example. I strive to show grace and patience, treat students with dignity, and encourage them when I notice they are struggling. I began by appointment at UTD in the middle of the Covid pandemic, so I was constantly faced with students struggling to keep up with class, and frankly, just stay positive when everything around them seemed to be going wrong. It was challenging, but also an opportunity to grow in grace. Being a light in the classroom works. Students notice your joy, they notice your kind disposition towards them, they notice when professors care and when they do not, and they respond to that.

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

I consider myself a Catholic first and an economist second. So, while I strive for excellence in my research and teaching, I try harder to not let it consume all my time or define my identity. I believe the work-centered culture in economics makes it challenging to have a balance. It is also a very secular discipline in terms of the people who become academics, so at times I find it lonely to be a Catholic economist. That said, being Catholic makes my career easier in that I know I find my worth in God, not any external recognition of my work. So, it takes the pressure off to be perfect for the sake of personal value. Instead, I feel free to pursue excellence in the service of God.

What is your advice for graduates who may be Catholic or have an affinity with Catholic values and are contemplating doing a PhD?

With all the excitement in doing a PhD, there is also a lot of stress and pressure. Personally, it wasn't until I started my PhD that I struggled with imposter syndrome and the never-ending comparison game between peers. What got me through it all was grounding my identity in Christ. Practically, this meant that a setback in my research or a class presentation gone wrong was not devastating or a reason for anxiety. Knowing who I am in Christ and that my worth is fixed on being His child gives me peace. So, if you are contemplating a PhD in Economics, know that it will be challenging, but the Lord will see you through it. Prayer was also key (when isn't it!). I prayed before and during exams. I can't recount the many times I was stuck with a question and asked the Holy Spirit for help. Get a prayer card with St. Thomas Aquinas' prayer for students, it is beautiful and powerful.

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

I just started my career as an academic; I got my PhD from Georgia State University in the summer of 2020 and started at UTD in the fall. My personal journey involves a lot of work by the Lord. I never knew I would end up getting a PhD and becoming a professor. His plans are truly better than I could have ever imagined. He's put people in my life and opened opportunities that led me here. I got my bachelors in Econ from Georgia State and attended the American Economic Association Summer Training Program the summer I graduated. That program literally changed the trajectory of my career. It was there that I met many of the mentors I have today and was empowered to pursue a career in a field where very few people like me "make it". I truly believe I am here by the grace of God who gave me the courage to say yes to this journey.

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

I am passionate about spending time with my family and growing in my faith. I recently started learning and reading more about theology of the body and wow! It's fascinating.