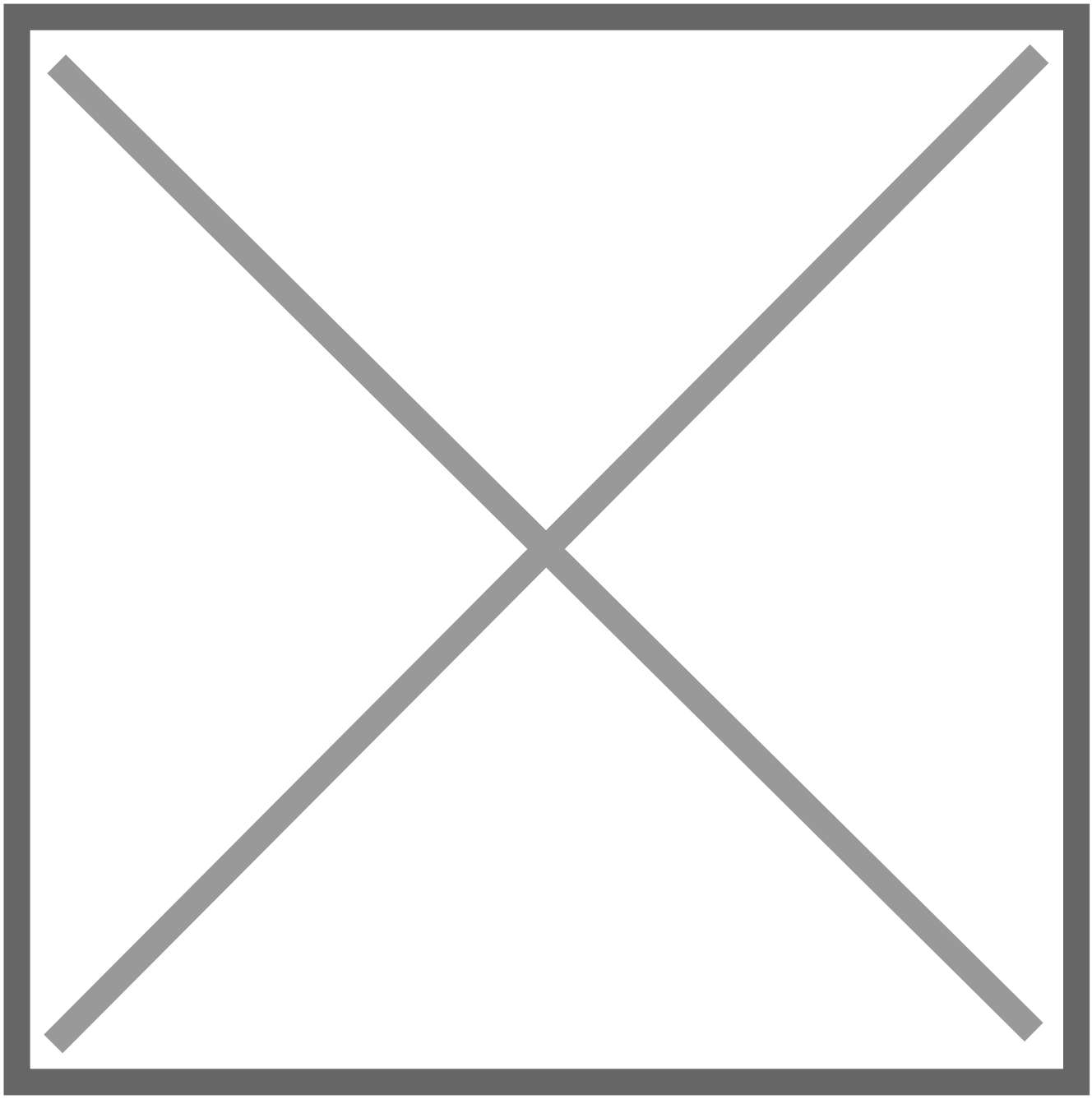


Sergio Barrera pauses for a photo on the University of Minnesota campus in Minneapolis Feb. 28, 2020. Barrera is among 2,000 young economists and entrepreneurs who were invited by Pope Francis to participate in the "Economy of Francesco" virtual meeting Nov. 19-21. (CNS/The Catholic Spirit/Dave Hrbacek)

Cindy Wooden

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Faith and finishing his doctorate in economics are big parts of Sergio Barrera's life, and he was looking for a way to bring them together.

Then, in 2019, Pope Francis invited young economists, entrepreneurs and "change-makers" to gather in Assisi to share dreams, hopes, ideas, projects and best practices for making the global economy more responsive to the needs of the poor and of the planet.

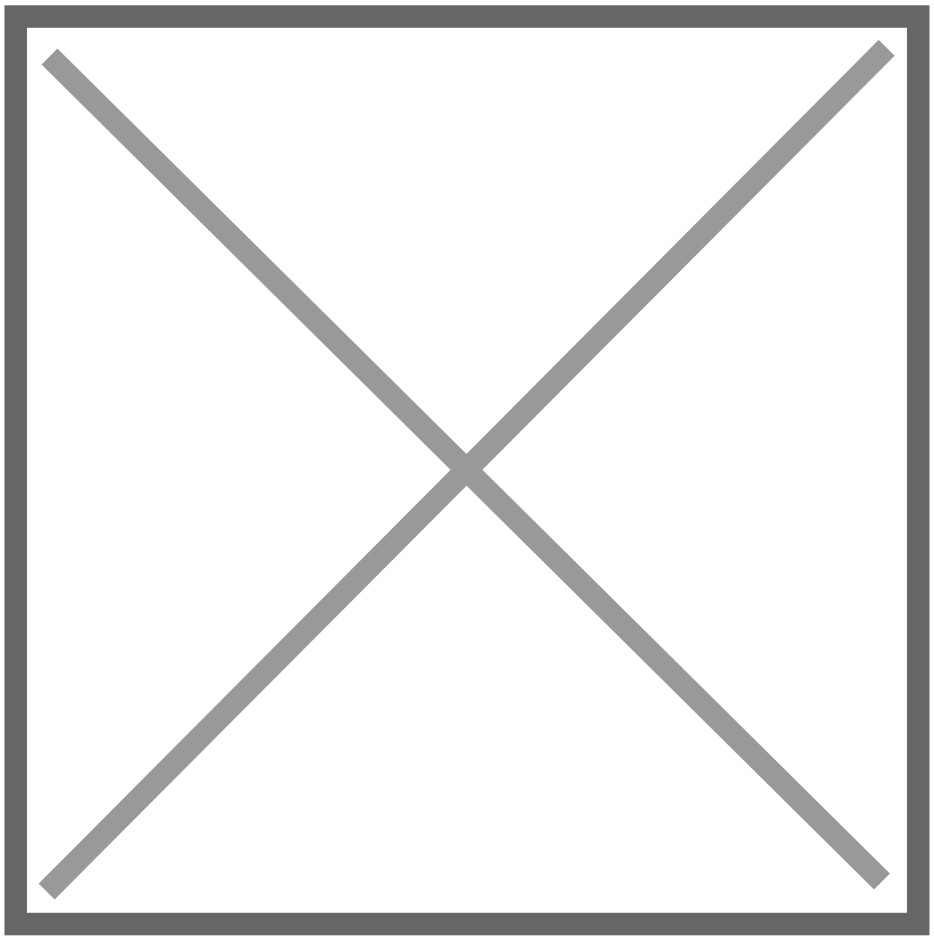
In his invitation, the pope called for "a different kind of economy: one that brings life not death, one that is inclusive and not exclusive, humane and not dehumanizing, one that cares for the environment and does not despoil it."

Barrera, a 30-year-old former Marine and current Ph.D. student at the University of Minnesota, applied to be part of the program, looking forward to meeting his peers in Assisi in March 2020. Instead, the coronavirus pandemic pushed the discussions online, leading up to the global "Economy of Francesco" virtual meeting Nov. 19-21.

Even after the online event, participants are planning to continue their virtual teamwork and are hoping they can meet in person in Assisi next year.

In the meantime, the COVID-19 pandemic with its lockdowns and restrictions and its impact on employment rates, education, health care, poverty and hunger have laid bare many of the problems of the current economic system and grounded the young adults' conversations in a shared global reality.

Just how common the experience is was a surprise to three U.S. participants.



Jeffrey D. Sachs, an economist and professor of Sustainable Development at Columbia University, participates in the "Economy of Francesco" virtual meeting in this screen capture from YouTube Nov. 19, 2020. The meeting is a project of Pope Francis, who has called for a different kind of economy that better respects humanity and nature. The pope is scheduled to address the meeting Nov. 21. (CNS photo)

In the eight months since the event was supposed to take place, Barrera has been part of the project's virtual "village" examining systemic inequality.

Growing up in Arizona as the son of a Mexican immigrant and then serving as a Marine in Afghanistan, Barrera said the central role economic opportunity plays in migration, violence and peace, education and health care is clear.

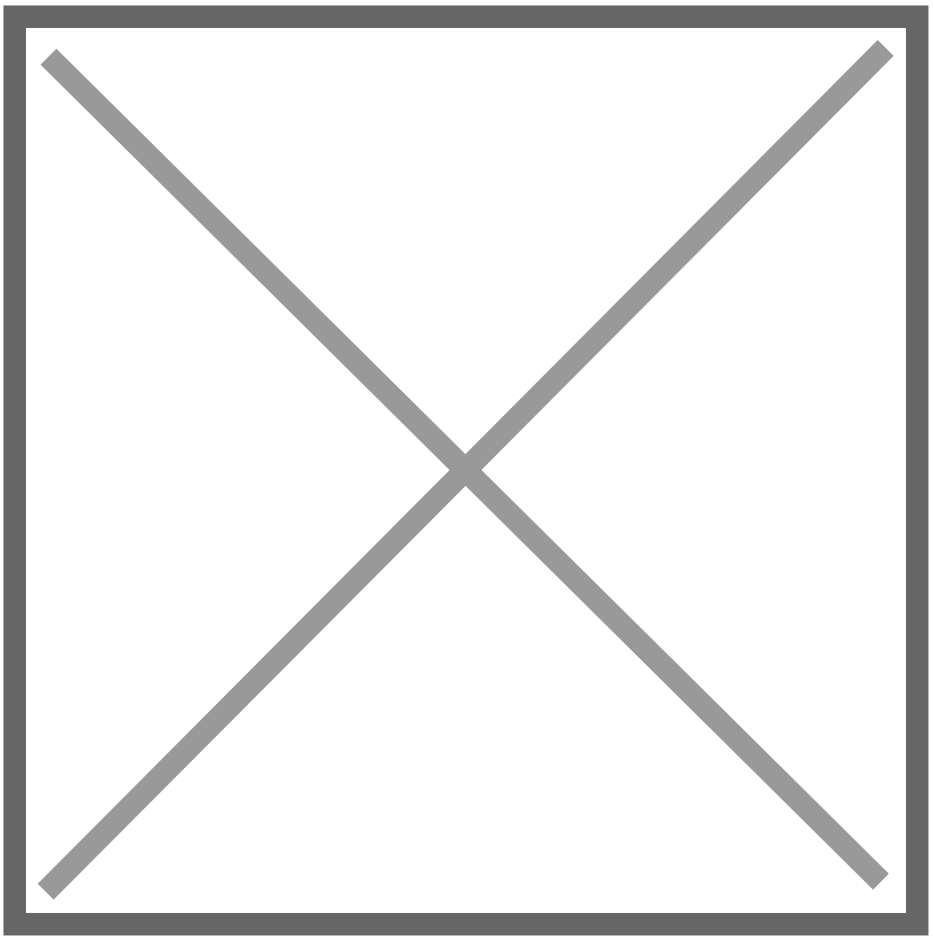
"I had already been kind of looking for a way to integrate economics with my faith, and then the pope issued this call, so I responded and applied," he said.

Barrera knows some people think Francis is either naive about the economy or is pushing socialism. In fact, he said, he recently had a conversation about that with a friend who works for the Republican Party.

"The way I explained it to him was that the pope is not trying to promote socialism," he said. The pope is trying "to inspire us to be our better selves and exhort us to do better."

Living in and being part of a capitalistic economy does not excuse a Christian from caring about his or her neighbor, from treating employees justly and from using resources to help one's family and others, Barrera said. In the Gospels and, especially in the Old Testament, he added, care for one's workers is repeatedly highlighted as mandatory for a believer.

"That's not socialism; that's being a good person," he said. "The pope is more or less trying to inspire us to not be greedy, to not be motivated just by our own self-interest and trying to inspire us to care more about others."



Cardinal Peter Turkson, prefect of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, participates in the "Economy of Francesco" virtual meeting in this screen capture from YouTube Nov. 19, 2020. The meeting is a project of Pope Francis, who has called for a different kind of economy that better respects humanity and nature. The pope is scheduled to address the meeting Nov. 21. (CNS photo)

Melinda Davis, a 23-year-old Notre Dame graduate, is part of the "business and peace" village and its small group on nuclear disarmament and military spending.

"Nuclear disarmament is as much an economic issue as it is political," she said. Massive sums are spent on making and maintaining nuclear arsenals, and top scientists and manufacturers dedicate their lives to developing the weaponry.

Davis and members of her small group, who come from France, Italy, Spain, Brazil and Ecuador, obviously are concerned about the threat nuclear stockpiles pose to the world's future, but they also are shocked at how little or no military spending has

been diverted to fight the coronavirus and its devastating impact on health care, education, employment and food insecurity.

"There's a clear priority toward this kind of false sense of security" that weapons systems bring, Davis said. But given the pandemic, "what are we going to do, shoot the virus?"

Tracey L. Freiberg, a visiting professor of economics at St. John's University in New York, has focused her doctoral work on paid family leave policies and is part of the Economy of Francesco's "work and care" group.

Part of the group's research has focused on how the unpaid work of caring for children, the home and the elderly falls predominantly to women, how inequality in pay means that in a family the lower earner — usually the woman — will quit a job in order to stay home to care for other family members and how "caring" professionals such as nurses, teachers, home-health aides and nannies are paid so little.

Those issues existed previously, but, Frieberg said, "the pandemic is just highlighting the fact that all of these people that we really need are paid very little."

Participants in the project, she said, share a sense that "there's something wrong in the world, and we can have our voices heard and try to make a difference."

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