

The Economy of Enough: Rethinking Prosperity in an Age of Limits

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Good morning everyone,

It's a real pleasure to be here with you in Queen's University Belfast. We are here on Earth Day 2026, and also a day after the first anniversary of a dear champion of care for the earth, Pope Francis.

I want to begin with a simple question.

What is enough? Not in theory. Not as an abstract concept. But in *your* life. What is enough—for you to feel secure... fulfilled... at peace? And perhaps an even more uncomfortable question: Who decides that? Is it you? Is it your family? Is it the culture you live in? Or is it—quietly, persistently—the economy itself?

There's a well-known line from Mahatma Gandhi: "The world has enough for everyone's need, but not everyone's greed."

It's one of those lines we know well and we all agree with. But if we take it seriously... it's quite unsettling. Because it suggests that the crisis we face today is not, at its core, a crisis of scarcity. It's a crisis of definition.

We no longer know what "enough" looks like. We no longer accept that there is such a thing as 'enough'.

From Moral Question to Scientific Reality

For most of human history, the idea of "enough" was a moral question. How should we live? What is a good life? What is a just share?

Great philosophers have written on this topic. Epicurus: "Nothing is enough for the man to whom enough is too little." Diogenes: "He has the most who is most content with the least."

But something has shifted. Today, “enough” is no longer just a moral question. It has become a scientific necessity. Since the 1970s, scientists have developed ‘Earth Systems Theory’ to the point we can now speak of planetary boundaries—the limits within which humanity can safely live on this Earth. These boundaries relate to the life support systems we all depend on, including the stable climate, biodiversity, freshwater, the health of our soils and oceans

And here is the stark reality. We have already crossed several of these limits. Not in some distant future. Now. Which means this: We are already living beyond “enough.” Our economy—our way of organising life—is operating outside the safe limits of the Earth itself.

And that raises a very uncomfortable question: The Earth has limits. Do we? Because if our systems depend on endless growth, endless extraction, endless consumption... then we have built an economy that quite literally does not fit on the planet.

The Crisis Beneath the Crisis

This is where the insight of Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* becomes so powerful. It is an insight that is often lost in our technological, siloed society. He speaks of a “common root” behind our crises. Not separate problems—climate here, inequality there, anxiety somewhere else. But a deeper ‘disorder’ impacting society, humanity as a whole. It is reflected in the breakdown in relationships: with the Earth, with each other, with ourselves and with the divine, sacred, God. Our ultimate sense of purpose.

What science describes as planetary limits... Francis describes as a deeper spiritual imbalance. Because we don't just exceed ecological limits. *We exceed limits in our desire.* We live in a culture that constantly tells us that whatever we have is not enough. And so we keep going. More growth. More consumption. More speed. Not because it is making us happier. But because the system depends on it. The system seems to demand it.

Who Decides What Is Enough?

If you think about it, the idea of “enough” is rarely something we consciously choose. It is shaped by powerful forces.

The market tells us *enough is what you can afford (or what you can get credit to buy)*. Culture tells us *enough is what others have*. Technology tells us *enough is*

always just one more click away. And now, potentially, AI combines these three drivers to present a powerful, all-consuming paradigm without limits.

And so, quietly, without ever quite deciding it, we are drawn into a way of living where satisfaction is always just out of reach. And if our desires are being shaped by a system that depends on us always wanting more... then can we ever freely choose enough?

An Economy Laid Bare

And sometimes, you don't need theory to see this. You just need to watch television. There's a programme on the BBC called *Sort Your Life Out*.

Families invite in a team to help them declutter their homes. And what they do is quite extraordinary. They take everything out of the house—every cupboard, every drawer— and lay it all out in a warehouse. Clothes. Toys. Kitchen utensils. Boxes of things long forgotten. All of it. Spread out.

And then the family walks in. And you can see it immediately. Shock. Embarrassment. Sometimes even grief. Because for the first time, they are confronted with the sheer volume of what they own, the footprint of their life. And it is staggering. And watching it, I find myself torn. On one level, it's fascinating. Compelling television. But on another level... it's almost obscene. It is a forensic, detailed analysis of the dysfunction in our world.

Because what you are really seeing is not just clutter. You are seeing an economy of waste, destruction of the environment laid bare. An economy that has quietly, systematically encouraged us to buy things we don't need... with money we may not have... to create lives that don't actually satisfy. And then we spend even more energy— storing those things, organising those things, managing those things— They take up space in our heads... and eventually, trying to get rid of those things.

And let's face it - these families are not extraordinary in any way. They are not the super wealthy. They are often struggling to make ends meet. Normal families who have been caught in this systemic consumerism.

And it raises a simple but uncomfortable question: Who decided this was "enough"? And if we laid out not just our homes—but our entire economy like that... out on the streets. I wonder what we would see.

Ancient Wisdom in a Modern Crisis

And yet, this is not a new question. Long before science told us there are limits... human societies wrestled with how to live well within them. In Latin America, there is the idea of *buen vivir*—living well, not living more. In *Laudato Si'*, we hear of “happy sobriety”. In Ireland we have concepts like ‘Meitheal’. In Africa there is ‘Ubuntu’. All meaning the simple happiness that comes from a state of collective well-being.

Not deprivation. But a kind of abundance. A quiet joy that comes from not being dominated by consumption. Thomas Aquinas said: “Happiness is secured through virtue, not through external goods.” Across all the faiths similar concepts are woven into community spiritual practices. Sabbath, fasting, simplicity, Jubilee.

All pointing toward the same truth: that limits are not the enemy of freedom. They are a key condition for it. The science tells us there are limits. Wisdom teaches us how to live joyfully within them.

A Personal Encounter with “Enough”

And I’ve seen something of this in a very real way. A few years ago, I had the privilege of working on the film *The Letter* with Pope Francis. As part of that journey, we went to Assisi. And there we spent time with a group of Franciscan friars. Very simple men. Men who possessed almost nothing. And yet, what struck me most was not what they lacked. It was what they had. There was a peace about them. A lightness. A quiet, grounded joy that shone from their eyes.

And I remember standing there, watching them, and asking myself: How is this possible? How is it possible to possess so little... and yet seem to enjoy everything? And the only answer I could come to was this: That what they had discovered was not about deprivation. It was about freedom. Freedom from the constant pull and dissatisfaction of wanting more. Freedom from the restlessness that tells us we are not yet complete.

And this is something that Pope Francis speaks about very directly in *Laudato Si'*. That consumerism often masks a deeper restlessness in the human heart. And perhaps what those friars had learned— drawing on ancient wisdom— was how to rest.

To rest in who they are. To rest in their place in the world. And from that place... “enough” is no longer something you calculate. It becomes a life choice, a lifestyle.

From Encounter to Economy: The Idea of “Enoughness”

And that experience stayed with me. Because it raised a deeper question. If it is possible for individuals to live like this... is it possible for an economy to be shaped around that same idea? Not an economy of endless growth. But an economy of enough. An economy that may need to ‘de-grow’ so others can flourish.

This is where I found the work of E. F. Schumacher so influential. When I first read his book *Small Is Beautiful* 30 years ago, it was a turning point for me. Because Schumacher dared to ask a very simple—but radical—question: What if economics began, not with growth, but with sufficiency?

He drew deeply on Buddhist thought, which speaks of a middle way. The principles he shared also fit well with a vision of faith rooted in care for our common home. Not excess. Not deprivation. But enough. What he called “enoughness.” And he argued that our economic system had lost sight of this completely. That we had come to believe that: bigger is always better, more is always progress, and that there is no natural point of “enough”. But what if that is simply not true?

What if there *is* a sufficiency point— beyond which more does not add to human wellbeing... and may even begin to undermine it? This is what science is telling us loud and clear now.

What Would an Economy of Enough Look Like?

Now, this can sound abstract. But actually—it’s already happening. All around us. It is here in this room today in the myriad expressions of a vital new, community based economy. It often grows quietly. Often at the margins. But it is growing.

And what if this economy of enough went to scale. What would look different?

It would prioritise:

1. Meeting needs within limits

Clearly, it has a distributional dimension. It is connected to equity. Not maximising consumption—but ensuring that everyone has *enough* to live well, within the boundaries of the planet.

You see this emerging in ideas like:

- circular economy models

- regenerative agriculture
- low-energy, community-based living

2. Valuing care, not just production

In our current system, what matters most is what can be measured, monetised, and scaled.

But an economy of enough would recognise the value of:

- care
- relationships
- community
- time

The things that actually make life meaningful—but are often invisible in GDP.

3. Designing out waste and excess

Not producing more, only to throw it away.

But designing systems where:

- resources are reused
- products are made to last
- consumption is more thoughtful

We are already seeing this in:

- repair movements
- sharing economies
- local initiatives that reduce waste

4. Localisation and human scale

Schumacher spoke about the importance of scale.

That systems should be small enough to be human, relational, accountable.

And we see this in:

- local food networks
- community energy projects

- cooperative businesses

Places where people are not just consumers—but participants, citizens in communities that care.

Signs of Hope—Already Emerging

And what gives me hope is this: This is not a distant vision. It is already happening. In small ways. In communities. In movements. In people quietly choosing a different way of living.

Sometimes here in Northern Ireland it looks like:

- a community growing food together
- a parish installing solar panels
- a family choosing to buy less and live more simply
- young people questioning the idea that success means accumulation

Sometimes it looks like entire new economic models emerging— like the idea that we should meet the needs of all people within the limits of the planet. Not beyond them.

The Deeper Shift

But perhaps the most important shift is not structural. It is cultural - and this is the biggest challenge we face. It is about redefining what we mean by prosperity, flourishing. This is a problem of how we communicate this shift. How do we make visible the opportunities already emerging so this mosaic of action can become a true power for collective change?

Because an economy of enough is not about lowering our expectations. It is about raising our understanding of what a good life is. And recognising that beyond a certain point... more does not bring more life. This can be a hard sell and can seem counter-cultural, even now with science pointing to the urgency of change.

And yet, here we are. Perhaps the first generation to fully understand the limits of the planet. And still struggling to live within them. Because choosing “enough” doesn’t feel easy. It can feel like falling behind, missing out, opting out. It has been engrained in us that more is success, growth is progress, accumulation is security. So “less” feels like loss. But what if that is precisely the illusion we need to face? What do we *gain* by aspiring to enough? What if “enough” is not about having less— but about recovering what actually matters?

Time. Relationships. Community. Meaning.

Choosing Enough—Together

This is not something we solve through individual willpower alone. It is about how we shape our communities. Our economies. Our values. Because living within limits is not just a moral choice.

It is an alignment with reality. And people don't change because they are told to consume less. They change when they experience a different way of living. When they discover that joy is possible without excess. We don't argue our way into precisely what is "enough". We experience our way into it.

So what might an economy of enough look like? How might people experience it? An economy grounded in limits. Oriented toward human flourishing. Aligned with the Earth. Because the real question is not: How much can we produce? But: What is enough for a good life—for all?

Closing

We now know three things. The Earth has limits. Our systems are exceeding them. And deep down—we already know what "enough" feels like. The question is no longer whether we can define enough.

The question is: Will we choose it—before the planet chooses it for us? And perhaps the simplest way to leave this with you is this: From space, as the recent Artemis II voyage showed us, the Earth does not look like an economy. It looks like a home. Our common home.

Thank you.