

Vatican to craft Catholic 'Sullivan Principles'

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 1, 2011 NCR Today

ROME -- Few efforts to cajole corporations into a deeper sense of social responsibility have been more celebrated than the 'Sullivan Principles,' elaborated in the late 1970s by African-American minister Leon Sullivan to apply economic pressure on South Africa to revise, and eventually abandon, its system of apartheid.

By consensus, the 'Sullivan Principles' worked because they condensed volumes of lofty theoretical language about global solidarity and human rights into a short set of concrete, practical commitments, which had a visible impact in the real world.

Building on that model, the Vatican may now be preparing to develop a similar template for business ethics in the 21st century -- a sort of Catholic version of the 'Sullivan Principles' -- based on Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*.

That, at least, was one concrete proposal to emerge from a Feb. 24-26 symposium on the encyclical, titled 'The Logic of Gift,' hosted in Rome by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. The event was co-sponsored by the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought of the Center for Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota.

A working group in the Council for Justice and Peace has been formed to prepare a draft, composed of a handful of experts on Catholic social thought and two officials from the council: Italian Bishop Mario Toso, the secretary, and Monsignor Anthony Frontiero, an American who works in the council.

If anything, the aim of these new 'Sullivan Principles' would be even more audacious than the original -- not to bring down a racist system in one nation, but to reshape an amorphous economy that spans the entire globe, often defying control by anyone, pushing it in the direction of enshrining 'gift' as the sole profit as a core economic value.

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The 'Logic of Gift' symposium brought together academics who specialize in Catholic social teaching with a cross-section of business professionals. The aim was to flesh out what notions such as 'gratitude,' which loomed large in the pope's encyclical, mean when applied to running a private equities fund or managing an international retail goods firm.

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Underlying those discussions was a frustration that the noble aspirations of Catholic social teaching often evaporate when it's time to move from theory into practice.

As one participant put things, 'We seem to have a sense of what we yearn for, but behavioral specificity is thin.'

Andreas Widmer, a former Swiss Guard who now runs a private fund in Boston promoting enterprise solutions to poverty, provocatively suggested that captains of industry should give themselves a test: 'If you were arrested for being Christian business leaders, and the police did an audit of your company practices and policies, would

they find evidence of the social tradition informing your business??

Widmer ticked off competitive pay, just procedures for layoffs, and job design (especially evidence of participation and subsidiarity in the workplace) as key indicators.

That's the sort of thing that underlies the proposal for a Catholic version of the "Sullivan Principles," floated during the symposium by three leaders in Catholic social thought: André Habisch, a German professor of social ethics; and Robert Kennedy and Michael Naughton of the University of St. Thomas.

As Naughton put it, the idea would be to produce a short "primer" on Catholic social principles as they apply to concrete business challenges — maybe ten pages, designed to appeal to business people who won't read *Caritas in Veritate* or the recently published "Compendium" of Catholic social teaching, but who are nevertheless eager to bring their moral and spiritual convictions to bear on their business activity.

Though the Sullivan Principles are likely the best-known model for such a project, Naughton said there are other examples to draw upon, including the U.N. Social Compact and the principles of the "Caux Round Table," an international organization of business executives that aims to promote ethical practice.

As Naughton laid out the argument, the Catholic church has unique resources to get the job done. Three in particular stand out:

- Arguably the most extensive tradition of social thought, teaching and practice of any religious body in the world.
- A extensive network of groups and associations of Catholic business professionals, such as the Brussels-based "International Christian Union of Business Executives," founded by Catholics in the early 20th century though now ecumenical;
- More than 1,000 Catholic colleges and universities around the world, most of which have business schools — though many, Naughton said, don't actually draw upon the Catholic social tradition in any systematic way.

Naughton said the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace is the logical aegis under which a Catholic set of "Sullivan Principles" ought to be elaborated. Business is a global reality, and the Vatican is a global institution. Moreover, he said, such a "primer" would be a template for how the church can engage culture, of which business is one key expression.

The "Logic of Gift" symposium was part of a series of events organized by the Council for Justice and Peace to explore application of *Caritas in Veritate*, including a gathering last October in Rome to consider the encyclical's reception in the United States, and a Pan-African Congress on the encyclical staged in Ghana.

In May, the Council for Justice and Peace also plans to host a world congress marking the 50th anniversary of Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, considered a cornerstone in the evolution of contemporary Catholic social doctrine.

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