

## A Vatican document to make Socrates proud

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 13, 2012 All Things Catholic

As Pope Paul VI once famously told the United Nations, the Catholic church likes to think of itself as an "expert in humanity." Development of Catholic social teaching over the last 120 years is a good example, as the church has tried to bring its moral tradition to bear on questions of economic justice.

Yet whenever the church tries to say something on economics, it faces a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" dilemma about whether or not to get concrete.

If the church sticks to abstract principles, it's accused of being pie in the sky and irrelevant. If it endorses specific policy proposals, it's accused of exceeding its competence, blurring the lines between church and state, and confusing prudential judgment with dogmatic certainty.

Too much specificity courts other risks too:

- Ideological criticism from the left or the right, depending upon whose ox is being gored. (A variant is ideological cherry-picking; sort of like Kennedy and the Khrushchev letter, both conservatives and liberals tend to focus on what they like in Catholic social teaching and pretend the other stuff doesn't exist.)
- Media focus on the most sensational policy stance, usually distorting the big picture. (Remember reaction to Benedict XVI's call for global governance in his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*? To read paranoid anti-globalist blogs, you might have started scanning the horizon for black helicopters bearing the papal coat of arms.)

Given that this briar patch seems basically unavoidable, what's the church to do? As it happens, a new document from the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, entitled "Vocation of the Business Leader", hints at an intriguing solution.

In a sound-bite, the idea is to be didactic on principle but interrogatory on policy. The church may not have to offer specific answers; perhaps it's enough to frame the right questions. Think of it as Catholic social teaching, Socrates-style.

The 32-page document is designed as a *vade-mecum*, or practical handbook, for business leaders trying to integrate their faith with their work. It was presented on March 30 by Cardinal Peter Turkson, a Ghanian who serves as president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, at an assembly of 2,000 Catholic businesspeople in Lyon, France.

Though the text has the council's backing, it's presented as a "reflection" by scholars and experts rather than a formal note or document. The editorial team was led by Michael Naughton, director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and Dominican Sr. Helen Alford at the Angelicum University in Rome. It also included Italian economist Stefano Zamagni, a principal contributor to *Caritas in Veritate*.

One distinct note is the text's rather lofty conception of the business enterprise: "When businesses and market economies function properly and focus on serving the common good," it says, "they contribute greatly to the material and even the spiritual well-being of society."

As Samuel Gregg observed for *National Review Online*, that's a powerful corrective to "the essentially condescending view of business often adopted by some clergy." In effect, the document acknowledges that business doesn't just fill bellies or line coffers; properly practiced, it also cultivates virtue.

Among other things, the document says that ethically responsible business is a "vehicle of cultural engagement" and a force for "peace and prosperity," that it has "a special role to play in the unfolding of creation," and that through creative work, people don't just "make more" but "become more."

The document also says something out loud which might seem stunningly obvious, especially to Americans raised on the capitalist creed, but which hasn't always appeared so in official Catholic teaching -- that financial profit is a perfectly legitimate aim of business, albeit not the only one.

"If financial wealth is not created," the document says, "it cannot be distributed and organizations cannot be sustained."

In terms of method, the document endorses the "See-Judge-Act" approach to moral discernment pioneered by Belgian Cardinal Joseph Cardijn and his Young Christian Workers movement in the early 20th century. "See-Judge-Act" was embraced by Pope John XXIII in his 1961 social encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, and has been a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching ever since. (Speaking of ideological blowback, Pope John's encyclical famously inspired the witticism "Mater si, magistra no" from the *National Review*, which regarded its social analysis as quasi-Marxist.)

The document offers six practical principles for business, including solidarity with the poor "by being alert for opportunities to serve otherwise deprived and underserved populations," and "stewardship of resources, whether capital, human, or environmental."

One early sign of success is that reaction in the blogosphere seems positive across the usual party lines. Conservatives seem to appreciate the fundamentally positive vision of business that runs through the document, while liberals have applauded its suggestion that corporations need a moral check-up.

Perhaps the most striking element of the text, however, comes in its appendix. There one finds a "Discernment Checklist for the Business Leader," composed of thirty questions which amount to an examination of conscience informed by Catholic social teaching.

Some are fairly broad (yet still packing a punch), such as, "Have I been living a divided life, separating Gospel principles from my work?" and "Am I receiving the sacraments regularly and with attention to how they support and inform my business practices?"

Others are more concrete, and with real bite. For instance:

- Am I creating wealth, or am I engaging in rent-seeking behavior? (That's jargon for trying to get rich by manipulating the political and economic environment, for example by lobbying for tax breaks, rather than by actually creating something.)
- Is my company making every reasonable effort to take responsibility for unintended consequences [such as] environmental damage or other negative effects on suppliers, local communities and even competitors?
- Do I provide working conditions which allow my employees appropriate autonomy at each level?

- Am I making sure that the company provides safe working conditions, living wages, training, and the opportunity for employees to organize themselves?
- Do I follow the same standard of morality in all geographic locations?
- Am I seeking ways to deliver fair returns to providers of capital, fair wages to employees, fair prices to customers and suppliers, and fair taxes to local communities?
- Does my company honor its fiduciary obligations ... with regular and truthful financial reporting?
- When economic conditions demand layoffs, is my company giving adequate notifications, employee transition assistance, and severance pay?

Human nature being what it is, not every business professional is likely to take these questions seriously, or to answer them honestly. Yet if even a handful were to do so, the result could be a new moral depth in what has long been regarded as a basically amoral realm.

?Vocation of the Business Leader? may thus be that rarest of Vatican texts: Something that isn't just dissected by *vaticanisti* and other denizens of the church's chattering classes, but actually used out in the field. One can imagine, for instance, retreats for business leaders organized around the document, culminating in the examination of conscience it invites. One also hopes it becomes a cornerstone of business education, especially in Catholic venues. There are some 1,800 church-affiliated colleges and universities worldwide, roughly 800 of which have business programs, and this text would be a compelling addition to their curricula.

To return to where we began, the real novelty of ?Vocation of the Business Leader? is that it manages to bring Catholic social teaching down to earth without actually floating a single concrete policy proposal. Instead, it asks hard questions and trusts people of intelligence and good will to figure out the right answers.

Socrates would be proud.

?Vocation of the Business Leader? is available on-line at  
<http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/VocationBusinessLead/>

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