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Living the Vocation to Business

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How does the practice of solidarity in business strengthen human relationships and promote human flourishing?

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Dean Abela asked that I speak to you today regarding the following topic: “How does the practice of solidarity in business strengthen human relationships and promote human flourishing?”

Well, assuming that you believe, as I do, that solidarity is a good thing, it is almost axiomatic that the practice of such solidarity, whether in business, or for that matter anywhere else, would indeed result in the strengthening of human relationships, and the promotion of human flourishing. I think we all accept that conclusion as a foundational premise. So maybe the truly provocative questions for us today are, first, what dynamics within the modern business world might encourage us to practice solidarity, and second, how might those opportunities be exploited most effectively?

By the way, I think conferences like this should be provocative. They should provoke new and challenging thinking about significant issues. Now of course, they should provoke us toward the truth, but if we are not truly opening our minds toward fresh perspectives, we are merely repeating already-accepted articles of faith. That is a good thing, not a bad thing, but it is not the best use of a conference like this.

So let’s start by exploring the dynamics of the modern business world that might present opportunities for practicing solidarity, and let’s start that process by acknowledging some realities of that world.

First, no one really escapes the modern business world. Nor should they want to. The modern business world is nothing more than the market, and an authority no less than Pope Benedict told us that markets are to be valued, for they are places where human beings encounter one another. Markets, the business world, are a place where people voluntarily trade with one another to the betterment of both parties. One may or may not act with virtue, either in the marketplace or in the temple, but assuming one acts with virtue in the market, he leaves the market having increased his
wealth, and having increased the wealth of the person with whom he has traded.

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Now I know this last statement is going to shock you, and maybe take you aback. You may be thinking, “There is no way that everyone who trades becomes wealthier.” But you would be thinking that way because you are trapped in materialism. You would be defining wealth in a narrow materialistic manner, rather than in the way it ought to be defined.

You see, wealth is not merely money. The root of the word “wealth” comes from the old English word “weal,” meaning well-being. So assuming that a market is free, i.e. there is no coercion, and assuming that the participants are acting in a virtuous manner (rather than for example, negotiating for something that is inherently sinful, like prostitution), both participants to the trade leave the market with a greater degree of well-being, a greater amount of wealth, than they had prior to entering the market. So stated again, a free market, when engaged in by people acting in a virtuous manner, is a place where everyone who trades becomes wealthier.

Now future events may come about in which the participants in any particular trade regret their trade. For example, I may buy a share of stock. I only buy that share if I believe it is worth more than the money I pay for it. So right after the trade, I believe my wealth to have marginally increased. If the price of the stock later goes down, my well-being may decrease, but it will not be because of the trade I made in the market. All kinds of good and bad things may happen in the future over which I have no control, any of which may increase or decrease my well-being. If I catch a cold on the plane on the way back home, my well-being, my wealth, will suffer diminution, but not because I bought the plane ticket.

I said earlier that no one really escapes the modern business world. I am sure all of you are aware that after doing a thorough examination of the IOR, commonly known as the “Vatican Bank,” Pope Francis has decided not to close it down, but rather to keep it in operation. Whether he stated the conclusion in this way or not, I believe the Vatican Bank is staying open because of the belief that it enhances the well-being, the wealth, of those with whom it does business.

So why make this point? Well, I think when we ask a question like how the practice of solidarity in business can strengthen human relationships and promote human flourishing, we are close to perpetuating the stereotype that the business world is somehow this necessary evil against which we must guard ourselves. Instead, the business world is something to be embraced: as something whose very raison d'être is to increase the wealth of everyone who enters it. As something that is, in fact, a gift from God.

The thing to be guarded against, in the business world and everywhere else, is sin. Before I ever entered the business world, as a child, I had encountered betrayal, greed, selfishness, materialism, cheating, narcissism, rudeness, stealing, cowardice, and lying. The only really new thing I learned about these sins when I got to the business world is that they weren’t limited to children. And I also knew they weren’t an inherent feature of the market, as I had already encountered all of them on the playground.

Fine then. Let’s acknowledge, for the moment, that the business world is a good thing, that many of us are smack dab in it, and that none of us really avoid it. How do we practice solidarity within it so as to strengthen human relationships?

Well, one of the cool things about the business world is that it is focused on returns on investment. It measures them with mathematical order. Much as was done by our greatest teacher, who spoke of talents being invested to yield more talents, and who, when speaking of the seed that fell on good soil, referenced a yield of 30, 60 and 100-fold, so too should we imitate our Lord and seek such returns.

And this gets to the part of the effort where we, as evangelizers and as members of the Body of Christ, must herald our discovery. And that discovery is this: nothing creates more wealth, more well-being, than flourishing human
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relationships. Pope Benedict, just a few years before he stepped down from the papacy, spoke to a group of leading businessmen, and told them that human relationships ought to be the constituent element of their lives.

The challenge is that it is hard to measure the quality of our human relationships, which is the source of our greatest well-being. So we rely on a shortcut—we measure our well-being, our wealth, in dollars. Now dollars aren't irrelevant; in fact, they are often quite relevant, but they are a very poor proxy for real wealth.

This is where the challenge arises for the Christian businessman. He or she must not neglect the dollars, but must in the end actually conduct himself as if something else has priority.

You see, this issue of being a Christian in the business world is not a constant Manichean choice between having money or being good. It is rather a matter of priorities. Do we put first things first? The way to practice solidarity in business, such that human relationships are strengthened, and human flourishing abounds, is to make such solidarity the higher priority. It is not in place of profits, but it is more important.

So I want to make a suggestion for strengthening those human relationships, which might strike against so much of what you may think makes you an American. For those of you who are not American, you will not find this as instinctively troubling. What I want to suggest is that if we want to strengthen our human relationships, which is the most important factor in the flourishing of all humanity, then we should decrease our independence, and increase our dependence.

This strikes against so much of what we believe it is to be American. Let's face it, our country got started with a Declaration of Independence. But you know what? That document was arguably misnamed. Most of the colonists did not actually want independence—they just wanted to be free from tyranny and injustice. That is very different from wanting to be independent.

We say we want our children to be independent, but do we really? What do we even mean by that? That we don't want them to need us? My father and mother are approaching the end of their lives—I still need them. My father and I would have a hard time working together daily, but we go to lunch all the time, and share thoughts, ideas, friendship, and love. I am not independent of him, and in fact, am quite dependent.

As Christians, we know we are never to be independent of our Father in Heaven. In fact, we are to cultivate our dependence, even to the point of deepening, and increasing that dependence, on a daily basis. In the best marriages, the spouses actually increase their dependence on one another.

This phenomenon is actually quite reasonable, even though it may at first seem counterintuitive. The reality is that human relationships are strengthened when the humans involved are dependent, rather than independent of one another. The business partnerships that prevail are the ones where both partners need one another.

Now some of the most financially successful companies in the world understand at least one dimension of this phenomenon. They desperately want you, their customer, to be dependent on their product or service. They know, with a fair degree of mathematical precision, that the more dependent you are on them, the more profitable is the relationship for them.

But here are two additional aspects of this phenomenon which might be equally counterintuitive to you.

First, if your dependence on a particular good or service is very profitable for that company, they are pretty dependent on you too. In other words, Google trades at a multiple of 30 times earnings. They trade at that multiple because
many people are dependent on their search engine, and go to it first. But Google is equally dependent on the relationship with its customers. If it fails to deliver good value, it will no longer be the first choice as a search engine, and its multiple will go to around 10 times, and the company be worth $300 billion less. You see, Google’s dependence on us is pretty significant too.

The second additional counterintuitive aspect of the phenomenon is that if you are dependent on someone else, the level of your dependence on them is probably correlated to the amount of additional wealth created by that dependence. Let me give you an example. How many of you have now become dependent on your cellular phone? Why is that? Well because it brings so much value to you. I know they are a pain, and a distraction, but we all carry them because they enhance our well-being, our wealth. Our dependence on them is correlated to the degree to which they enhance our well-being. By the way, if it does not enhance your well-being, you should throw it away, rather than complain about it. Your dependence on this product means that purchasing it has been profitable for you, and for the company that made it.

As I mentioned earlier, some of the most successful companies realize the value of creating these dependencies. Many cultures have some version of the saying “the customer is king.” The best businesses herald their dependence on their customers, and their gratitude for that dependence! Because here is what they also know—if they are constantly cognizant of their dependence on their customers, they are more likely to create the kind of value for that customer such that the customer becomes dependent on them. And guess what? This is a really good thing.

Think of a deep, long-lasting, abiding friendship. In such a friendship, there is a mutuality of dependence. The friends are, to use the pejorative psychological term, codependents. And they love and value that friendship.

So how might we cultivate more of this dependence in our businesses, and in our lives, so as to strengthen our human relationships, and promote human flourishing? I want to close today by providing the five steps I believe we need to take to accentuate our focus on cultivating dependence among one another.

First, we must continually be refining and/or redefining our notion of wealth. Various countries are now examining alternative ways to measure wealth other than the familiar gross domestic product. You see GDP measures income, but not wealth. We all know that a stream of income that is received for 20 years is worth a lot more than a stream of income that is received for five years. Even discounting the 20-year stream at 5% per year, it is still worth almost three times the 5-year income stream. In other words, long-term profitable relationships are worth much more than short-term relationships.

Cardinal Ratzinger, in his last homily before the conclave in which he became Pope Benedict, said that of all the things in this world—mountains, bridges, rivers, buildings, books, great art—the only thing that lasts into eternity is the human soul. And so if we want the best pay-off for our wealth, our well-being, we must invest in human relationships—in the human soul.

We all know, intuitively, that healthy long-term relationships make life richer. But did you know that someone actually won a Nobel Prize in economics by demonstrating the mathematical proof of this conclusion? Ronald Coase wrote about why people form firms and partnerships in business, noting, mathematically, that the transaction costs of having to negotiate anew for every new endeavor would at times be so great that it would be better for individuals to band together, even if such banding together would lead to some theoretically suboptimal economics, for in the real world, they would find it easier to work together over the
long run, and would end up having their joint productivity yield a greater result.

We don’t need to go into all the math; suffice it to say, when my partner and I sit down to talk through a business problem, the fact that we have been doing this together for 25 years now makes our discussion not only easy, but even pleasant. We have benefited so much from this phenomenon that we now emphasize to potential business partners that we are seeking long-term relationships that can last upwards of 20 years or more.

The second step we must take to cultivate our dependence on one another is to focus on value creation. These days, I am of the age that a lot of my friends want me to meet with their children who have recently graduated. They come to me because they want to talk about their careers, and their prospects. Among other things, one of which is that they should start looking for their spouse, I tell them that they must focus on value creation. No matter what field they might enter, they should constantly be focused on creating value for others. I tell them, “You see, if you bring value to others, they will depend on you, and that will further your career.” What it will also do is make them wealthy.

There are five ways one might obtain money: you can receive it as a gift, you can steal it, you can gamble and win, you can swindle (which is stealing wrapped in a fraudulent market transaction), or you can deliver value and be paid for that value. Only two of these are legitimate, and we should not go through life hoping to receive monetary gifts. So the last way, the delivery of value, is that on which we should focus our business energy.

The cool thing about delivering value is how “other-directed” it is. In order to deliver value to someone else, we simply must put aside our selfish desires and focus on the needs of someone else. I love the first line of Rick Warren’s best-selling book, “The Purpose Driven Life.” The first line of that book reads, “It’s not about you.”

If we want to practice solidarity by strengthening human relationships, we must realize that it is not all about us, and a great method of doing that in business, and for that matter in the rest of life too, is to think about this question of how I might deliver value to someone else.

The third step to strengthening human relationships and promoting human flourishing in our businesses is to practice it in our own homes. What better training! Our businesses should not be regarded as more important than the rest of our lives, nor as all that different.

I am involved in a lot of public policy issues, and I often have folks approach me with ideas for how to save the Church, or the world. And I tell them, you know, maybe before saving the world, we should save our country. But before saving our country, we should save our state. But before saving our state, maybe we should save our own city. But before saving our own city, maybe we should save our own workplace, or our own parish.

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“Oh Frank, you don’t understand, my pastor won’t listen to anyone!” So then we realize it is so hard to make our own parish better—maybe it is easier just to opine as to how to save the world. But you know what? Even before saving our own parishes or workplaces, we have to ask, are we saving our own families? In other words, if we are not strengthening the human relationships we have at home, and promoting human flourishing there, everything else we do is a clanging gong, or a clashing cymbal, for we have neglected the most important part.

The fourth step: we must understand that solidarity, and human relationships, require time and presence. So how do we cultivate time and presence? By staying still and silent. We know this spiritually—we know that in order to have time and presence with the Lord, we must be still and silent. But you know what most of us do? We do violence to this notion of being still. About a year ago, Pope Francis spoke of airport bishops, who travel around the world, but do not know the smell of their sheep. But he could also be speaking to many of us laypeople. We do violence to our geographical peace. Now please understand—I am not condemning air travel—I do it every week. But we must be aware of its hazards. We must seek to govern it. Otherwise, it can lead to escapism. I know that for many in business, it is a form of escapism, even though they may not want to admit it.
The same thing can happen with our college-age children. We send them away from their families and their homes for schooling as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I am not seeking to condemn those who make geographic moves, but we must consider the human costs in relationships when we send our best and brightest away from their homes. Does this promote solidarity?

You know the Church does not speak much about this issue of modern mobility. Many priests and bishops have moved far away from their families, and have sympathies for those who move for educational or economic opportunity. And there are many wonderful things that have occurred because of such mobility. But there is also a price. There is a price in terms of solidarity. We will not have solidarity in our society if we do not have it in our neighborhoods and our parishes and our workplaces, and if the turnover in each of those specific geographic locations passes the tipping point, each of them becomes more like a train station or an airport, rather than a home. As we all know, there is not a lot of solidarity and flourishing of human relationships in the airport.

And so can we then be surprised when corporations and employees don’t feel loyalty to one another, when they have not developed solidarity within their own communities?

And so the fifth step, which is related to the previous suggestion: If we are to strengthen our human relationships, and promote human flourishing, we must live with the smell of our sheep. This phrase has become one of the best known lessons of Pope Francis. He directed it at priests and bishops, but it is true for any of us who have any position of leadership. For as leaders, we are to be shepherds. We are to live with the smell of our sheep.

You know there have been some recent studies of baby smell. You know the wonderful smell of a baby. My 14-month-old grandson smells a little like vanilla. One study showed that when given three different hospital gowns, 80% of new mothers could identify which gown belonged to their babies. They know the smell of their sheep.

That is how we must be in our businesses. We must know our customers, we must know our employees, we must know our coworkers, but first, we must know our own families. We must understand ourselves to be shepherds, caring for our sheep. And this goes for all of us, no matter what station in life we might find ourselves. Everyone has a lamb to take care of. I took my grandson to his first football game this past Saturday. When he grins at me, he is taking care of me. And I hold him close, and call him “Angelboy,” and smell his skin and his hair, and take care of him, and we are both wealthier, for we are dependent on one another.

My dear friends, if we want to practice solidarity within our businesses, and strengthen human relationships, and promote human flourishing, we must seek and cultivate dependence, first on God, and then among our family members, our co-workers, and our customers. Thank you very much.
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“It was a great joy for me to share ideas with colleagues already given to our Christian anthropology and to do so in the spirit-centering (and mind-expanding) context of daily prayer and sacrament. I’ve never been party to such fruitful exchanges.”

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“This is a very important topic of integration of business leadership and faith. It’s always a great joy for me to be around people who are excited about incorporating their love of God into a passionate business world.”

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