What role do the virtues play in the business vocation?

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“Virtue is a habit that makes a person good and makes what that person does good as well.”
— ARISTOTLE (+ 322 BC) *Nicomachean Ethics*

“Here in this Book the question is really asked whether God invariably punishes vice with terrestrial punishment and rewards virtue with terrestrial prosperity. If the Jews had answered that question wrongly they might have lost all [of] their [later] influence in history. They might have sunk even down to the level of modern well-educated society. For when once people have begun to believe that prosperity is the reward of virtue their next calamity will be obvious. If prosperity is regarded as the reward of virtue it will be regarded as the symptom of virtue. Men will leave off the task of making good men successful. They will adopt the easier task of making out successful men [to be] good.”
— G.K. CHESTERTON (1916) “Introduction to the Book of Job”

“Virtue is a habit that makes a person good and makes what that person does good as well.”
— PETER ROBINSON *Snapshots from Hell: The Making of an MBA*

My thanks to the organizers of this conference for inviting me to speak to you. I am privileged to make this presentation among so many outstanding scholars and practitioners. And of course, I benefit from His Eminence Cardinal Turkson’s presentation on the nature of vocation and Dr. Hittinger’s comments on the challenges of living out this vocation in the modern world.

In a related mode, I have a challenge to offer you. In recent years, for the very first time, the Church has begun to speak of the occupation, perhaps I may even say the “profession” of business as an authentic Christian vocation. Many of you who are here today have discerned that this is indeed your vocation, or at least one of them. But having discerned that vocation, you need to answer for yourselves two additional sets of questions.

The first set is: What should I do, in the concrete, in the here and now, in active response to this invitation, this calling, to devote my talents and energies to business? And related to this: How must I behave in this arena to remain consistent with my commitments as a disciple of Christ? How will my actions be different from others who are not living out a vocation?
The second set is: What sort of person must I be to do what is required of me? What strengths and abilities must I develop, as a person, to be able to live out my vocation and perhaps even to do so at a level of excellence?

**EXAMPLE OF ATHLETICS**

When we teach ethics to business students—when we try to give an intellectual life to baby wolverines—we tend to focus on the first set of questions, though usually without reference to Christian discipleship. We rarely—if ever at all—address the second set but it is the second set that I want to consider with you today and in doing so I want to offer you a challenge. I challenge you to think about how you have developed your own strengths and abilities and about what you might yet need to develop in order to live your vocation at a level of excellence.

“*A business should serve the genuine human needs of its customers or clients.*”

That word “excellence.” It is attractive to some and frightening to some. Some of us settle for nothing less in superficial aspects of our lives (Mandarin Oriental) and compromise on essentials. Others of us are intimidated by the demands of excellence and make peace with mediocrity by giving it a new name.

The Greek word, “arete,” is often translated as “virtue” but it may also mean “excellence.” For the Greeks, a human virtue was a capacity for thought or action developed to a level of excellence. Aristotle, the Greek philosopher who lived in the fourth century BC, gave us a foundational and systematic analysis of human virtue that has shaped our thinking about this to the present day.

What I will do today is share some of that analysis with you and invite you to think about its application to the vocation of business in general and to your individual vocations in particular.

Our analysis begins by recognizing that our minds operate in two distinct ways. Same mind but two modes of thought. Sometimes we seek to know and to understand, to comprehend the truth about the ways things are in reality. At other times we think in order to act. The first is speculative—not in the sense of contingent or risky but in the sense of seeing what is—and the second is practical (from the Greek word, “praxis,” for action).

This leads us to distinguish two categories of virtues: intellectual virtues, which are developments of our capacity to know and to understand, and moral virtues, which are developments of our capacities to act well. Or we can put things another way and say that intellectual virtues concern what is true and moral virtues concern what is good.

My concern today is with the key moral virtues, which is what Aristotle (and Thomas Aquinas) had in mind when he defined virtues as “habits that make a person good and make what that person does good as well.”

These key virtues we have come to call "cardinal" virtues and there are four of them. Each of them, in one way or another, makes our actions good and reasonable and subordinates our emotions, passions, and appetites to reason.

The most important is practical wisdom (or prudence) which is the development of our capacity to recognize the good in the concrete and to devise sound and effective means of achieving and securing the good.

Justice is the development of our capacity to establish and sustain a right ordering among people in any sort of community or association. The just person is committed to giving others what they deserve to have, to respecting the dignity of persons and to sustaining the common good.

Two other virtues protect the good in special ways. Courage protects the good from challenges external to the person (more about this in a moment), while discipline protects the good from challenges internal to the person.

Permit me here a word about vices. Vices are distortions or mal-developments of our natural capacities. Vices are the opposites of virtues and most moral virtues are flanked by vices of excess or defect. We needn’t go into this further except to say that moral vices not only distort our actions, they pervert our thinking. To the extent to which the vices creep into our lives, we are inhibited from seeing and understanding the good. Or to put it another way, a truly vicious person can no longer distinguish right from wrong in the arena in which he or she is vicious.
What role do the virtues play in the business vocation?

Let’s flesh out this idea of moral virtues and business. Our starting point has to be an understanding of the good that business does or serves. What human goods are realized and protected by the operations of a business and the leadership of a manager?

I suggest there are three broad areas to consider (in no particular order):

First, a business should serve the genuine human needs of its customers or clients.

Second, a business should provide good and stable work for its employees.

Third, a business should create wealth for owners and investors.

How do the moral virtues contribute to this?

**PRUDENCE** (Practical Wisdom): The habit of recognizing good ends and choosing effective means to achieve them. In business, this means discerning genuine human needs and devising ways of addressing these needs that are proportioned to the capacities of the enterprise.

**ASSOCIATED VICES**
- False Prudence: good judgment about means, but poor choice of ends (e.g., a good thief); false professional competence
- Imprudence: poor judgment about means; incompetence

**ALLIED VIRTUE**
- Sound deliberation: care in examining possible means and willingness to accept advice from others.

**JUSTICE** (Fairness): A firm commitment to choose the good as identified by prudence; the habit of exercising virtue in support of the Common Good (general) or giving to others what they are due (particular). A manager must be able to determine what is fair in particular cases (employees, customers, etc.) but also able to devise and sustain structures that are well-ordered and fair.

**ALLIED VIRTUES**
- Truthfulness (lying, exaggeration)
- Gratitude (in gratitude, excessive gratitude)
- Vindication—just punishment (revenge, insensitivity)
- Liberality—moderates love of money (greed)
- Affability—promoting agreeable relations (flattery)
- Trustingness—the reasonable inclination to trust others (suspicion, gullibility)
- Friendliness—the reasonable inclination to treat others as potential friends (hostility, false familiarity)

**COURAGE** (Fortitude): Right tenacity; a willingness to endure suffering for the sake of the good; the habit of exercising control over inclinations toward fear and boldness to achieve the goals directed by reason. (Vices—cowardice/rashness) Courage aggressively defends the good against threats external to the person.

**ALLIED VIRTUES**
- Loyalty—the habit of remaining faithful in a relationship in the face of difficulties
- Magnanimity—the habit of doing great deeds worthy of honor (presumption, ambition, smallness, faint-heartedness).
- Magnificence—the habit of doing great deeds regardless of cost or effort (extravagance, stinginess).
- Patience—the habit of moderating sadness (impatience, impassivity).
Perseverance—the habit of persisting in the pursuit of a good end in the face of obstacles; constancy of purpose (stubbornness, softness).

**DISCIPLINE** (Temperance): Right passion; selfless self-preservation; the habit of exercising control over inclinations toward enjoyment and denial to achieve a reasonable, well-ordered life. (Vices—indulgence/insensitivity) Discipline protects the good from threats internal to the person.

**ALLIED VIRTUES**
- **Moderation:** the habit of ordering one's desires for the pleasures of food and drink (gluttony, abstemiousness).
- **Chastity:** the habit of ordering one's desires for the pleasures of sex (lust, disaffection).
- **Industriousness:** the habit of engaging in well-ordered work (“workaholism,” laziness).
- **Discipline:** the habit of doing what needs to be done when it needs to be done (compulsiveness, procrastination).

Finally, a word about two other virtues, the supernatural virtues of hope and charity.

Aquinas teaches us that hope, as a virtue, focuses us on a future good, difficult to attain but nevertheless possible. That future good, for Christians, is a share in God’s eternal life. That is, this is something we see as a real objective to be attained, not easy or assured but possible. We rely on God’s help—grace is a neglected topic in modern theology—and *hope* that our efforts will achieve the goal.

Charity is the development of our capacity to love, supernatural because the object of our love is the hidden God. And charity directs us to love all of those made in God’s image.★
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— ROBERT J. SPITZER, S.J., PH.D, President, Magis Center and Napa Institute

“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.”

— LLOYD SANDELANDS, Professor of Management and Organization, Stephen M. Ross School of Business Administration, University of Michigan

“The conference was profound because of so many fundamental shifts in perspective. Amazing quality of speakers.”

— LOUIS KIM, Vice President, Hewlett-Packard

“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.”

— ANDY LAVALLEE, Founder & CEO, LaVallee’s Bakery

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