What does it mean to say that business is a vocation?

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INTRODUCTION
In his Mass of Installation, Pope Francis addressed “all those who have positions of responsibility in economic, political and social life, and all men and women of good will.”¹ In the same spirit of openness and dialogue, we gather to discover and to explore business as a vocation; and while we welcome you all warmly, we wish to thank The Catholic University of America’s School of Business and Economics and The Napa Institute for organizing and hosting this important conference.

Accepting on behalf of the Pontifical Council to come before you to present business as a vocation makes manifest the great and growing interest of the Church to provide guidance for the world of business. Rather than an accusing finger, she believes in opening her arms to help professionals grasp the social implications of their faith and act upon them within their business lives. The Church wants to encourage and help entrepreneurs in these difficult and challenging times to meet their great responsibilities to society in a just and fitting manner. Is this spirit of relationship and encounter not, after all, the great legacy of the Second Vatican Council?

In his opening discourse at Vatican II, Pope John XXIII said he wanted the windows of the Church thrown open in order to permit the outside world to see into the Church, and the Church to see the world outside. Papa Giovanni expressed his prayerful wish to see the Church develop a new solidarity and a respectful affection for the human family, its world and for everything that constitutes its life and envelopes life in society.² St. John XXIII wanted the Church, endowed with her Gospel-faith, to enter newly into dialogue with the human family and its world about all its different problems, for “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ as well.”³ Such prayerful wishes eventually became incarnate in new Pontifical Councils such as Interreligious Dialogue, Christian Unity, and Justice and Peace.

Entering into dialogue with the human family, the Church also engages human reason and its savoir-faire in dialogue with the light of faith, wherein all forms of human activity are seen in the light of God’s original creation of the world and of man in his own image and likeness. Thus, engaging human activity in dialogue with faith leads to the understanding of all such activity in the image and likeness of God’s creative action. Human activity then acquires the sense of a vocation. In the light of her faith, the Church understands human activity—in this case, business, research, invention, entrepreneurship, industry—as a response to God calling man to continue the divine creative work. Created in the image and likeness of God and given the mandate to till and keep the earth, human beings continue God’s work of creation with their activities.
So, let us explore how the Church’s social teaching develops the sense of business as a vocation and some of the foundational ideas related with this understanding of business and entrepreneurship ... as the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has done with its Vocation of the Business Leader, and hopes to do in elaborating the vocations in agriculture, politics, and the judiciary.

CALLING AND GIFT

“Vocation” means a calling which comes from God our Creator. Creation and everything created are purposely willed by God. Therefore, everything that exists finds its meaning with reference to God. Accordingly, the sense and value of human activity are not fully discovered and understood without reference to the God of creation. All human activity that affects man, his existence, and his world must be related back to God and must be seen as man continuing and contributing to God’s work of creation.

Pope Francis explained this fundamental truth in his message to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland: Business is—in fact—a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life. Such men and women are able to serve more effectively the common good and to make the goods of this world more accessible to all.

Business belongs to such human activity; and entrepreneurs should see themselves as called by God to exercise their necessary and important skills and activities in order to assist in continuing God’s work of creation. Properly understood, business leadership is indeed a calling, a vocation, a very noble role. The Church takes great joy in supporting and helping business people to respond appropriately to their vocation and to find the place of their activities in God’s design for man and his world.

We know that business leaders are faced with intense competition, and increasing pressure to be efficient and profitable on a daily basis. Without these qualities, businesses will not survive. But we also know that competition, efficiency, and profitability and the “logic of the market” are not enough to foster the development of people in the world of work. What is needed is the “logic of gift” or generosity that can order the logic of the market towards the good of all. For, it is when human activity is inspired by charity that it anticipates on earth the Kingdom of God, the goal of all human history.
which God willed for itself, can fully find himself only through a sincere gift of himself.” Benedict XVI explains that this placement of the logic of gift within business is one of the great challenges before us; and if this logic of gift fails to animate business and its institutions, which is where much of the world works, we will do great damage to the larger society.

An important insight, therefore, of understanding business as a vocation is the conviction that the businessperson is called not just to do business, but to be a particular kind of leader in business. Like any other kind of work, business must embody what Saint John Paul II called the “subjective dimension of work.” Work changes not only the external world, but also the interiority of the one who does the work—the heart, soul and mind, the creativity and sense of self. Our actions at work as well as in life shape our destiny—they move us to a place with eternal implications.

To these eternal implications, business as a vocation points in the words of Jesus: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Lk 12:48). Businesspeople have been given great resources and the Lord asks them to do great things. This is their vocation.

This gifted character of business carries social implications. Business leaders have significant means to undertake something, and with this comes a corresponding responsibility. Accordingly, understanding business as a vocation, the Church sees business not in terms of a legal minimalism—“don’t cheat, lie, or deceive”—but rather as a vocation that makes “an irreplaceable contribution to the material and even the spiritual well-being of humankind.” It is about a meaningful life that opens the businessperson to God’s will, and not simply their own will, in the day-to-day decisions of ordinary life, which gives us the capacity to share goods in common and build community.

FOUNDATION PRINCIPLES
This vision of business, which is generated in its encounter with faith, is grounded in and articulated in the Social Doctrine of the Church. At its center is the fundamental dignity of all human beings because we are made in the image and likeness of God (Gn 1:27). This act of creation expresses God’s infinite love for us. Faith denies that a loving God would wish untruth, bondage, injustice and strife for us. Rather, based on divine love and human dignity, our faith would have us embrace four fundamental values: truth, freedom, justice and peace. Clearly these values are not unique to our perspective but common to the three great monotheistic faiths and other religions, too. But because they are grounded in our divinely and lovingly created human nature—as taught by Catholic Social Doctrine—we have an absolutely firm response when such values are challenged or denied or violated.

Catholic social doctrine enunciates many other principles, some of which are especially pertinent to the world of business. Service to the common good comes before serving narrower interests. The goods or resources of the world have a universal destiny; creation is a gift to the whole of humanity, not just a part. We are called to act in solidarity with those who lack access to these goods—with the large portion of humanity who suffer in the midst of plenty.

“Businesses and workers are not commodities!”

This vision of business, not without significant tensions, is far from easy to execute in today’s world. Business leaders experience great pressures, such as cutthroat competition; excessive demands for efficiency, speed, and profitability; and tendencies towards greed. External obstacles can also affect a business leader’s decisions, such as corruption and the absence of the rule of law or regulations. Chief among the internal obstacles is the temptation or tendency to separate one’s faith from one’s professional activities. Such a divided personal life is one of the more serious errors of our age. The split between religious faith and day-to-day business practice can lead to imbalances and misplaced devotion to economic success.

What this challenge of a divided life calls for is that business leaders receive and accept what God has done for them and to have this gifted life inform and order the way they give and enter into communion with others in business. When businesspeople integrate prayer, weekly communal worship, the scriptures, the gifts of the spiritual life, the virtues, and ethical social principles into their life and work, they live an “integrated life” and receive the grace to foster the integral
development of all business stakeholders. It is precisely this life of faith that can strengthen and embolden business leaders to respond to the world’s challenges not with fear or cynicism, but with the virtues of faith, hope, and love.

LIVING THE FAITH IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE
At the end of the day, understanding business as a vocation is really the living out of the Christian faith, as faith that does justice, or in the language of the Letter of James, faith that does works.

“Good business is good for the common good!”

Ours is a faith that has implications in the social order. Unfortunately people do not see the social implications of their faith. Living the faith enjoys the guidance and direction of the Church’s social teaching. Thus in the dialogue of faith with business, the practical reason of business challenges theology to apply the tradition concretely in the economic sphere. Faith in turn employs the rich heritage of the principles of the Church’s social teaching to point out shortcomings and to reveal opportunities for business to contribute more to human development and fulfilment.

Respect for human dignity and pursuit of the common good are the foundations of this rich heritage of the Church’s social teaching. With regard to business and the economy, they can be rephrased into three interconnected groups of objectives and characteristics that define the goods of business.

The first objective is to produce Good Goods. Businesses attend to the needs of the world by producing goods that are truly good and services that truly serve. They are alert for opportunities to serve otherwise deprived and underserved populations and people in significant need. They make solidarity with the poor a facet of their service to the common good.

Second, businesses should provide Good Work. By organizing good and productive work, businesses make a contribution to the community by fostering the special dignity of human work. Businesses are communities, not mere commodities! Further, they contribute to the full human development of employees by applying the principle of subsidiarity; that is, by providing employees with opportunities to exercise appropriate authority and creativity as they contribute to the mission of the organisation. They also allow workers to influence the overall direction of the business and accept their right to participate in intermediary bodies such as unions.

The third objective is Good Wealth. By being good stewards of the resources given to them, businesses create sustainable wealth through efficient and productive processes producing healthy profits. But creating wealth in a business is insufficient without the wider context of stewardship for the natural and cultural environment, and just distribution to all stakeholders who have made the wealth possible: employees, customers, investors, suppliers, and the larger community.

CONCLUSION
So, let us recall:
Businesses and workers are not commodities!

Good business is good for the common good!

May God bless The Catholic University of America’s School of Business and Economics and The Napa Institute.
May God bless us all as we seek to fulfil the very noble vocation of business throughout the world.

FOOTNOTES
1 Pope Francis, Homily, Eucharist of Installation, 19.03.2013.
2 Cf. Gaudium et Spes, § 3.
3 Gaudium et Spes, § 1.
4 In this text, the usage of “man” includes “woman” and denotes humanity, humankind, all human beings, rather than ‘male as opposed to female’.
5 //www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/research/publications/vocationbusinesslead/
7 Caritas in Veritate, § 7.
9 See Caritas in Veritate, § 36.
10 Gaudium et Spes, § 24.
11 Vocation of the Business Leader, § 2.
12 See John XXIII, Pacem in Terris, §§ 35-36 and also the title “on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity, and liberty.”
To read other presentations from the conference, please visit http://business.cua.edu/libertyandsolidarity/.
“With academics, policy makers, ethicists, theologians, and business leaders as presenters, the conference delivered the ideal blend of business theory, social responsibility, theological inspiration, and best practices.”

— 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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