LIBERTY AND SOLIDARITY
Living the Vocation to Business
How do we live the vocation to business, starting today?

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“How well is Catholic Social Doctrine understood?”
When I ran a business strategy consulting firm, the first thing we would do in any project was survey the market. In order to understand how a product or industry is or can be situated in the market, we would run mental model surveys. Mental models can be described as a person’s view of the world—how we “understand” things to work, absorb, and interpret them. This can be more or less out of tune with an objective perception. As the saying goes, perception is reality.

Through our surveys, we would find out which industry terms resonate with the customers, what they mean to them, and how the company or industry should use language in order to get its message better understood by potential clients. There are hardly any consumer product companies that do not undertake such research before communicating with their target market.

It occurred to a group of us that this could also help in helping the Church increase the effectiveness of her communicating Catholic social doctrine.

Our first task was to establish a list of Catholic social doctrine terms and their actual definition. We decided to focus on less rather than more in order to keep our research focused and avoid what one could describe as “borderline terms,” which the Church may have used in the past but that are not very clearly defined or are beyond our scope (e.g., minimum wage; environmental stewardship; trade; etc.).

Below is a list of the core Catholic social doctrine phrases, principles, and thoughts we tested for in our research:

- Human Dignity: Men and women are made in the image of God and destined for eternal life.
- Justice: To each his due.
- Social Justice: Groups and individuals receive what is rightly owed to them.
- Common Good: All the conditions in society that allow individuals and groups to reach their fullest human good, both in this life and the next.
- Solidarity: Unity arising from love of neighbor.
- Subsidiarity: Higher groups in society should not take over tasks that lower groups would like to perform, unless the lower group asks for help. In other words, social functions should occur at the lowest possible level so that individuals and groups have a true sense of purpose.
- Universal Destination of Goods: God gave the good things of the earth to the whole human race.
- Charity: The love of God and neighbor.
- Preferential Option for the Poor: Charity requires us to place the needs of the poor before our own needs.
- The Purpose of Social Life: Social life should be aimed at the common good.
- Private Property: Private property is good: through ownership we imitate God.
- Entrepreneurship and Business: Economic initiative is a fundamental value and human right.
- Hiring and Firing: Owners should make the dignity of employees central in their decision making, though sometimes firing is necessary.
● Relationship between charity and operating a business: Owning and operating a business is itself an act of charity for a Christian.

● The Role of Truth in Society: A free society must affirm some truths as absolute.

● Wages: Wages should be sufficient for families to support themselves and also save something.

We also sought to measure some underlying perceptions of and engagement with Catholic social doctrine:

● Catholic Church’s “tone” about business and market economy.

● Catholic Church’s understanding of your professional work.

● Relevance of Catholic social teaching for individual Catholics in their daily life.

We started by researching the resonance for some key terms of Catholic social doctrine. Based on our research, Human Dignity, Common Good, Social Justice, and Solidarity are all at or above 60%. This is very high for general terms. It makes sense that Subsidiarity is lower as it’s a very particular term that only applies to Catholic social teaching.

What we find is that Catholic social doctrine terms highly resonate in the general public, that is to say that these are regarded to be positive terms that people like and relate to.

Let’s see if they’re right: Almost 50% of Catholics do not recognize the actual Church definition of Solidarity, compared to 31% of non-Catholics. Subsidiarity is lesser known and the fact that 52% of Catholics say that they don’t know what the term means illustrates this—the highest “don’t know” percentage of any term we’ve researched. We reconfirmed that finding in also researching whether people would recognize a violation of the principle of subsidiarity in action... and only 19% of Catholics got that right while 43% misidentified it.

Common Good, the second most resonating term we’ve researched, is also the least well understood term we’ve researched: only about 10% of Catholics and 5% non-Catholics correctly identify the definition of Common Good. Notice that 85% of Catholics are convinced that they know what this term means... yet 75% of them get the answer wrong.

Universal Destination of Goods is the best understood term among Catholics by a factor of two.

But liking a term is not always the same as knowing what it actually means. How well do people actually know what the Church means by each of these terms?
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SOCIAL JUSTICE, PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR, CHARITY, JUSTICE

Interesting here is to compare the results regarding Justice and Social Justice. Double the amount of Catholics say they don’t know what Social Justice means versus what Justice means. And 75% of Catholics do not identify correctly the Church’s definition of “justice.” This is the highest percentage of “wrong” answers of the entire survey, closely followed by the wrong definition of Common Good with 74.4%. The term Social Justice is a distant third in misunderstanding among Catholics with 60%.

Charity is another high-confidence, low understanding, term among Catholics. Only 10% of us “don’t know” but 67% get the definition wrong.

The Preferential Option for the Poor is the best understood term among Catholics—a third of us correctly identify this definition.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RESULTS

One of the insights we gained from this research is that Catholics seem to know that they “should” know what the Church teaches…but that more than half of us don’t actually know.

Granted, for each question, there is a greater percentage of Catholics who choose the correct answer than non-Catholics, but a greater percentage of Catholics also choose an incorrect answer than did non-Catholics.

I can almost hear you say: … this must be the “non-practicing Catholics” who pull down the Catholic average…

We thought of that as well and tested for it—and found that this is actually not the case: Attending Mass weekly or more significantly decreases the likelihood of a Catholic respondent answering “I don’t know” … but is only slightly increases correct responses. Overall, Catholics have only about a 5% greater likelihood of answering our questions correctly vs. non-Catholics.

Being a pro-life Catholic increases the likelihood of answering correctly by 6.4%—but if included with all other pro-life respondents, there is no pro-life correlation to correct answers.

Catholic school attendance gives the Catholic and non-Catholic respondents an uptick in correct answers of 5.12%. Age did not correlate at all, and Catholic women are 6.3% more likely to answer incorrectly.

We also researched what people feel they know about the Church’s stance on several issues related to business and work. Roughly a third of Catholics say they don’t’ know— with the almost half of them saying that they don’t know what the Church teaches on private property.

Here again, the wrong answers are high. Led by our ignorance about the Church’s teaching on hiring/firing, followed by “wages” and “entrepreneurship.”

We further asked about how people feel with regards to the Church’s “attitude” and empathy toward them:
The good news here is that about a third of Catholics feel the Church understands them in terms of their work and needs... and a another third of Catholics uses the Church's teaching—or their understanding of it—in making decisions at work and in their private lives.

THE BOTTOM LINE OF OUR RESEARCH SO FAR IS THIS:
Catholic social doctrine terms resonate strongly with both Catholics and non-Catholics. Catholic school is where the Church gets the best traction so far in terms of teaching social doctrine. Catholics in particular feel like they should know the answers... but the truth is that they do not.

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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

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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.”

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