

*“Can Catholic social thought speak  
to the secular concerns of  
business?: The role of natural law”*

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# **Business Education at Catholic Universities**

**What difference should being Catholic make to business education?**

**One answer: Catholic business education should include the application of the principles of Catholic Social Thought (CST) to business and management.**

# A Problem

- Catholic Social Thought is “of a theological nature;” it “finds its essential foundation in biblical revelation and the tradition of the Church.” (*Compendium* 73, 74; all references are to the *Compendium* unless otherwise noted.)
- How then can CST provide a common ground for deliberation and action in a global business community where 5 of 6 people are not Catholic?
- **More specifically, how can CST speak to the secular concerns of business, and be heard?**

# Solution

**CST can provide a common ground based on the role that reason and natural law play in CST.**

# In General: Faith and Reason

- “Faith...has no fear of reason, but seeks it out and has trust in it. Just as grace builds on nature and brings it to fulfillment, so faith builds upon and perfects reason.”

*Faith and Reason 43 (1998)*

- What can be known by reason is known by faith, but in a deeper way.
- Faith does not reject reason, but adds to it. This is the pattern in what follows.
- Reason provides a common ground for everyone.

# CST speak to the world using reason and natural law (*Deus Caritas Est*, §28a)

- “The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics.... Catholic social doctrine has ...no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith.”
- “[The Church] cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument...”
- “The Church's social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law.”

# Two Preliminary Questions

- **What is Natural Law?**
- **What is Catholic Social Thought (CST)?**

# What is “Natural Law”?

- The Catholic understanding is that natural law is infused in the intellect by God; it is a participation in the eternal law of God, who is the lawgiver. (140)
- It extends to all people insofar as it is established by reason, and unites peoples enjoining common principles. (140, 141)
- It expresses the dignity of the person and lays the foundations of the person’s fundamental duties. (140)
- For our purposes we can simply consider natural law to represent the set of basic principles of morality discoverable by reason, including the basic principles of CST.

# What is CST?

- The Judeo-Christian tradition from its beginning has reflected on human and societal relations.
- But 'CST' usually is used in a restricted sense that refers to the Catholic teaching on social issues beginning with Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891), on the "Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor," in which the Pope reflected on social conditions brought about by industrialization.
- In 2004, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace brought together in an organized way the most important of these teachings in a text whose English title is *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The Compendium is the reference point for my remarks.

# Basic Principles of CST

1. **The dignity of the human person**  
...which is the foundation of all the other principles and content of the Church's social doctrine
2. **The common good**
3. **Subsidiarity**
4. **Solidarity**

(160)

*The dignity of the human person  
“is perceived and understood first  
by reason”*

- *“In fact, the roots of human rights are to be found in the dignity that belongs to each human being. This dignity, inherent in human life and equal in every person, is perceived and understood first of all by reason.” (153)*
- Philosophically, the human capacities of intellect and will, i.e., the power of self-determination, are the grounds of human dignity.

# *The dignity of the human person in Scripture*

- *“The fundamental message of Sacred Scripture proclaims that the human person is a creature of God (cf. Ps 139:14-18), and sees in his being in the image of God the element that characterizes and distinguishes him.” (108)*
- Therefore, “being in the image of God the human individual possesses the dignity of a person, who is not just something, but someone. He is capable of self-knowledge, of self-possession and of freely giving himself and entering into communion with other persons...”

# Becoming what we should be: Human excellence and flourishing

- Students sometimes mistakenly suggest that the dignity of the human person implies “each person gets to make up his or her own morality.”
- CST maintains the traditional view that humans discern genuine goods using reason and they should use their self-determination to shape their lives and persons to achieve those goods (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc.: Classical Moral Philosophy).
- The traditional view is associated with what is called “virtue ethics” today; it emphasizes patterns of excellence such as the “cardinal virtues:” self-control, courage, justice, and practical wisdom. It proposes a conception of genuine human flourishing based on these virtues.
- Business literature takes an analogous approach in emphasizing the importance of character and leadership.

# *The Common Good*

- *“The principle of the common good stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people. According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, **the common good** indicates ‘the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.’” (164)*
- **The emphasis is on the human person: establishing social conditions that promote the achievement of human excellence and genuine flourishing for each and every person.**

# Subsidiarity

- *“On the basis of this principle, all social entities of a superior order must adopt attitudes of help (‘subsidium’) - therefore of support, promotion, development - with respect to lower-order entities.” (186)*
- “Subsidiarity prevents the functions rightly performed by intermediate social entities from being absorbed by social entities of a higher level.” (186)
- “The characteristic implication of subsidiarity is participation; it cannot be restricted given its importance for human growth.” (189)
- Participation is needed to achieve excellence: if one cannot participate, one cannot engage in activities by which excellence is acquired and nurtured.

# *Solidarity* (§193)

- “Solidarity is seen ... under two complementary aspects: that of a *social principle* and that of a *moral virtue*.”
- “*Solidarity is...an authentic moral virtue*, not a “feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a *firm and persevering determination* to commit oneself to the *common good*. That is to say to the good of all and of each individual.”
- “Solidarity rises to the rank of fundamental *social virtue* since it places itself in the sphere of justice. It is a virtue directed *par excellence* to the *common good*, and is found in ‘a commitment to the good of one's neighbor.’”
- Solidarity honors the inherent dignity of each and every human being.

# Summary

- Although CST is based in theology, the basic principles of CST do not depend on theological premises; the principles are grasped by reason.
- The fundamental principle is the dignity of the human person.
- CST may be seen as a version of “Classical Moral Philosophy,” which aims at the flourishing of the human person, individually and in community.
- These principles provide a common ground for deliberation between Catholics and non-Catholics.