

## Business as a Vocation: A Catholic Contribution toward a Global Ethic?

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The trend toward describing a business career as a “vocation” in Catholic social thought, though recent in origin, is very promising and appropriately made the central focus of this conference. In order to advance the discussion of this theme, my paper will highlight some of the formidable challenges that stand in the way of “business as a vocation” becoming a universally intelligible concept, with a status similar to the use of common good or human rights discourse in recent Catholic social teaching. The question, in short, is whether “business as vocation” can be understood in ways that both preserve its distinctively Catholic and theological interpretation, while also transcending this context in ways that make it useful to our nonCatholic friends and business partners, in a world where “globalization” means, among other things, a recognition of growing religious diversity, and international business must itself participate in working “toward a global ethic.”

In principle, Catholic social teaching is a more promising approach toward a global ethic than is, for example, Donaldson and Dunfee’s “integrated social contract theory,” precisely because its logic does not conform to the rationalistic exigencies of “applied ethics” (e.g., post-analytic philosophical retrievals of Kantian deontology, utilitarianism, and/or the extension of Lockean social contract theory to business corporations). Catholic social teaching is more promising than these options, precisely because it embodies a hermeneutical approach in which premodern religious, spiritual, and moral traditions continue to be studied as possible sources of indispensable moral wisdom on how to live well today. If the global ethic is to be anything more than the latest attempt to impose a Western cultural hegemony in the name of universal rationality, it must embody a hermeneutical approach to religious and cultural diversity.

Though the need for a global ethic and the appropriateness of a hermeneutical approach to it may be relatively simple to establish, it is not so simple to demonstrate that Catholic social

teaching, in fact, does embody such an approach. After all, might not Catholic social teaching be suspect as simply a “minority report” in the history of modern Western rationalism, i.e., an insufficiently rationalized intellectual tradition whose own universal claims are simply less well founded than those represented in the paradigms of “applied ethics”? After all, might not Catholic social teaching be identified with the kind of Catholic “integralism” or exclusivism that rejects religious and cultural diversity, asserting instead the traditional claims of a spiritual hegemony (e.g., Papal infallibility) often confused with Catholicism as such?

In order to address these suspicions, the bulk of the paper will take up the notion of “business as vocation” in order to assess how well it does and does not conform to the expectations involved in a hermeneutical approach toward a global ethic in business.

- Beginning with the documents constitutive of the tradition of Catholic social teaching, the paper will show the uneven, if not inconsistent use of “vocation” discourse in the tradition. Prior to Vatican II, and even at the Council itself, the majority of uses still identify “vocation” with becoming a priest, or a member of a Catholic religious order. The shift away from this inherited pattern is evident, not surprisingly, in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People (“Apostolicam Actuositatem”) where laity are described as also having their own vocation. This usage is given a general theological grounding and promising practical orientation in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (“Gaudium et Spes”), but, somewhat disappointingly, does not appear in either the Declaration on Religious Freedom (“Dignitatis Humanae”) or the Decree on Ecumenism (“Unitatis Redintegratio”) or the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (“Nostra Aetate”). In the Council’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (“Ad Gentes”), “vocation” discourse once again refers primarily to priests and religious, understood as the primary agents in the Church’s ongoing work of evangelization. The mixed legacy from the documents of Vatican II, however, is clarified in later Papal encyclicals, notably, Pope John Paul II’s On Human Work (“Laborem Exercens,” 1981) and On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (“Centesimus Annus,” 1991), which specifically link “vocation” discourse with human work and economic and social development. Nevertheless, the most explicit statement on “business as vocation” remains the pastoral letter of the USA’s National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All (1986).

This brief review of the Church’s official documents will yield two important points:

- First, the theme of “business as vocation” may be understood as fruitful result of Catholic social teaching’s methodological shift away from the Scholastic rationalism of the pre-Vatican II period and toward a hermeneutical circle involving the creative interaction of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and

Experience. Thus, since Vatican II Catholic social teaching is best understood as adopting a hermeneutical approach.

- Second, while the approach is promising, the results are not yet a contribution toward a global ethic. “Business as vocation,” the paper will argue, may be an admirable retrieval of Biblical wisdom for a Christian program in business ethics, but the challenge of a global ethic, i.e., how to make a Catholic contribution in a world characterized by religious and cultural diversity, has not yet been dealt with satisfactorily.

The final section of the paper, then, will explore the challenge of translating “vocation” discourse into a global ethic that genuinely respects religious and cultural diversity. It will return to Vatican II’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (“*Nostra Aetate*”) in order to discern the possible path of dialogue over “business as vocation” with religious, spiritual, and moral traditions that do not share Catholicism’s theological assumptions. In this section, the argument will focus on the traditions of Chinese civilization: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and their interaction, in order to ask what “vocation” might mean in traditions that do not share the Catholic faith that the Highest Being is personal, indeed, a Trinitarian community of interpersonal relationships that constitute humanity’s origin and end, and the promise of our participation in the Divine Life. Consistent with the assumptions of a hermeneutical approach toward a global ethic, the paper will not attempt to demonstrate the rational validity of the religious claims of either Catholicism or the spiritual traditions of China. Instead, through hermeneutical retrievals in both fields of religious discourse, it will seek to identify promising points of convergence, analogies and functional substitutes by which the “work” done by the concept of “vocation” in Christian ethics can be apprehended in traditions that do not share its theological assumptions. In short, the paper will seek to identify the relationship between Christian discernment of “vocation” and the *Dao* (“Way”) of Chinese “self-cultivation.” The results of this thought-experiment suggest that in a hermeneutic approach, the global ethic may develop through the identification of a series of practical convergences, rather than through the unilateral imposition of “rational” universalism based exclusively on the tacit assumptions of one tradition or another.

The paper will conclude with a brief statement of what all this may mean for international business ethics. The usefulness for international business development of comparing Catholic social teaching with the spiritual traditions of China ought to be obvious, especially with China’s

entry into the WTO and increasingly powerful role in the development of a global economy. Beyond such practicality, however, the payoff for the development of international business ethics must be seen in “long-term” perspective. Conceived as a genuinely global ethic, the international business ethics of the future is not likely to assert and reinforce an intellectual hegemony in favor of any one tradition or civilization. It is not likely to settle for a minimalist “lowest common denominator” approach to ethics, in which the logic of moral justification is allowed to preempt all considerations of personal character, or the recognition of the constitutive nature of roles and relationships in the formation of organizational behavior and ethical norms for social interaction. Discourse on “vocation” will have an important role in the development of international business ethics, not because it is the only conceivable way of thinking about personal and social responsibility in business, but because it will allow others who do not share the faith to be assured of our moral seriousness and spiritual depth. Of course, this assurance can only be realized by the willingness of those who find “vocation” discourse meaningful to listen and learn just as intently from those whose spiritual traditions achieve a similar seriousness and depth, but from entirely different premisses. Cultivating the capacity to participate in conversations intent upon this form of mutual learning ought to be an essential part of any management education informed by Catholic social teaching.

Summary of Statistical Research on “Vocation” in the major documents of Catholic Social Teaching: (To count as a CITATION, the word must be used at least once in a paragraph. While some paragraphs contain multiple instances of the word, they count only as one CITATION, unless the usage refers to two different aspects of “Vocation.”)

LEO XIII: RERUM NOVARUM (1891): NO CITATIONS

US BISHOPS’ PROGRAM OF SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION (1919): 7 CITATIONS: Five of these are clearly references to “vocations” to the priesthood or religious life. Of the remaining two, one is a general acknowledgement of the “vocation” of the laity, framed in terms of 2 Thess. 1:11, where they are commended for the support they have given to the construction of Catholic schools and other Catholic charitable institutions. (Par 15). The other is a reference to the vocation of woman in public affairs, where she is assigned the task of promoting good will and softening the animosities of partisanship, a “service which she by nature is best fitted to render.” (Par. 146)

PIUS XI: QUADRAGESIMO ANNO (1931): NO CITATIONS

JOHN XXIII: MATER ET MAGISTRA (1961): 1 CITATION:

Consistent with John XXIII's personal concern with agriculture, the one passage describes farming specifically as a "vocation, a God-given mission, an answer to God's call to actuate His providential, saving plan in history." (Par. 149) Thus a precedent is set for giving specific recognition to the diversity of lay vocations, otherwise as yet left undefined.

#### JOHN XXIII: PACEM IN TERRIS (1963): 1 CITATION:

"Vocation" here refers explicitly to a calling to the priesthood or religious life, but it occurs in a sentence asserting the right of all persons "to choose freely the state of life which they prefer, and therefore the right to set up a family, with equal rights and duties for man and woman." (Par. 15)

#### VATICAN II: LUMEN GENTIUM (1964): 9 CITATIONS

Of the nine citations, humanity's "common vocation" is acknowledged twice (Pars. 11, and 32), with special emphasis in this context of the Church's own vocation in the world (Par. 51). Thus the basis for the development of an understanding of the universality of "vocation" is grounded in the Church's own constitution. Within that context, the conventional differentiation of vocations to the priesthood and religious life (Pars. 28, 31, and 46) and marriage (Par. 35) is acknowledged. Finally, the general characteristics of the vocation of the laity are made explicit with reference to the mission of the Church in this world.

Because of its importance for our topic, here is the most important statement from Lumen Gentium on the vocation of the laity:

"But by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. They live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence. There they are called by God that, being led by the spirit to the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially by the witness of their life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they must manifest Christ to others. It pertains to them in a special way so to illuminate and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be effected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer." (Par. 31)

#### VATICAN II: GAUDIUM ET SPES (1965): 14 CITATIONS:

Seven of the fourteen citations are used to expand upon the theological perspective on humanity's "total" or "integral" vocation, previously seen in Lumen Gentium. Vocation is now clearly understood as God's universal invitation to all persons to share in His work on earth. (Pars. 11, 21, 22, 32, 35, 43, 57, and 76) Of the remaining seven citations, one refers to each person's "proper vocation," thus opening the way for a discussion of the diversity of (lay) vocations (Par. 43); three refer to marriage and family life (Pars. 48, 49, 52); and three refer to a "social vocation" in public life (Pars 63, 75, and 76). Typical is this formulation from Par. 75: "All Christians must be aware of THEIR OWN SPECIFIC VOCATION within the political community. It is for them to give an example by their sense of responsibility and their service of the common good." Though the diversity of social vocations is not further specified, Gaudium et Spes provides the most explicit theological statement that might eventually support the idea of "business as a vocation."

APOSTOLICAM ACTUOSITATEM (1965: DECREE ON THE APOSTOLATE OF THE LAITY): 6 CITATIONS

This document seeks to link Vatican II's theology of lay vocation with previously established Church policies on "the lay apostolate," including Catholic Action. The linkage is explicitly affirmed in two citations (Pars. 1 and 2), and given practical direction in Par. 4 where laypersons are urged to "become members of any of the associations or institutions approved by the Church, [and] aim sincerely at making their own the forms of spirituality proper to these bodies."

Though the "integral vocation" of the laity is affirmed in view of Vatican II's recognition of the intrinsic value of the temporal order in God's plan for our salvation (Par. 7), the laity need the guidance of the Church available in such associations or institutions in order more effectively to fulfill their vocations (Par. 4 and 31). Nevertheless, marriage and family are recognized as the proper context in which such vocations are to be discerned and nurtured. (Par. 11)

AD GENTES (1965: DECREE ON MISSIONARY ACTIVITY): 11 CITATIONS

While the majority of citations (Pars. 15, 16, 19, 24, 38, and 40) of this decree suggests that priests and religious are the one's primarily called to the "missionary vocation" (23), at least three citations (Pars. 23, 38, 40) suggest that laypersons may also be called to it. Nevertheless, the traditional assumptions regarding the restricted role of the laity are apparent, in this statement which seems typical of the document overall: "n those lands which are already Christian, laymen cooperate in the work of evangelization by nurturing in themselves and in others a knowledge and love of the missions; by stimulating vocations in their own family...." (Par. 41) The laity, therefore, are enablers whose primary responsibility is still to nurture vocations to the priesthood and religious life among their children.

DEI VERBUM (1965 DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON DIVINE REVELATION): NO CITATIONS

DIGNITATIS HUMANAЕ (1965: DECREE ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM): NO CITATIONS

UNITATIS REDINTEGRATIO (1965: DECREE ON ECUMENISM): NO CITATIONS

NOSTRA AETATE (1965: DECREE ON NON CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS): NO CITATIONS

While it may seem odd to include Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, and its Decrees on Religious Freedom, Ecumenism, and NonChristian Religions in a survey of Catholic Social Teaching, the idea of "vocation," it seems to me, is related in various ways to the central themes of these documents.

The relationship with "revelation," for example, is an important theoretical challenge. Though "vocation" only makes sense in the semantic field established by Divine revelation, an important challenge for any theology of vocation may be to distinguish it from the subjective aspects of prophecy or inspiration or other processes by which Divine revelation is thought to have occurred in history. At any rate, the authors of Dei Verbum saw no need to make this connect or to clarify the relationship between the two.

The relationship with the other three is practical, since each describes a central arena in which the vocation of the laity in particular is likely to be exercised. For it is the laity who most directly encounter the practical challenges of living in a world characterized by religious and

cultural diversity, and it the laity who most would welcome guidance on how to respect such diversity while also evangelizing their neighbors in the ways indicated, for example, in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*.

#### PAUL VI: *POPULORUM PROGRESSIO* (1967): 4 CITATIONS

Two of the citations (Par. 15 and 42) echo Vatican II's universalization of the idea of vocation, consciousness of which, the Encyclical asserts, is what "gives human life its true meaning." (Par. 42) The other two citations identify the search for social progress with a "deeper respect for the rights and the vocation of the individual" (Par. 65) and specifically identify the "vocation" of the United Nations with the establishment of a "world authority" based on the recognition of universal human brotherhood (Par. 78).

#### SYNOD OF BISHOPS: *JUSTITIA IN MUNDO* (1971): 1 CITATION

Here "the Church's vocation to be present in the heart of the world" is linked specifically with "listening to the cry of those who suffer violence and are oppressed by unjust systems and structures." (Par. 5)

#### PAUL VI: *OCTAGESIMA ADVENIENS* (1971): 3 CITATIONS

Two citations underscore the role of political activity that knows how to "stand aside from particular interests" in order to project a "plan of society which is consistent in its concrete means and in its inspiration, and which springs from a complete conception of man's vocation and of its differing social expressions." (Pars. 25 and 46) The other citation seeks to honor the "proper vocation" of women "and at the same time recognizing her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life." (Par. 13) Though unstated, one can reasonably assume that woman's proper vocation is still motherhood within the family, since her "independence as a person" must be recognized "at the same time." Apparently no new ground is to be broken here.

#### JOHN PAUL II: *LABOREM EXERCENS* (1983): 2 CITATIONS

Both citations explore John Paul II's distinctive insight into the significance of human work as "one of the fundamental dimensions of his [humanity's] earthly existence and of his vocation." (Par. 51) Echoing Vatican II, human work becomes human precisely insofar as "in accord with the divine plan and will, it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race and allow people as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it." (Par. 122) If Vatican II can be said to have universalized the idea of vocation among all of humanity, *Laborem Exercens* seems to have deepened it by linking it with work, and hence, the very meaning of humanity's "earthly existence." Thus vocation seems to be integral to any authentic "vision of the values of human work, or such a spirituality of work." (Par. 123)

#### JOHN PAUL II: *SOLICITUDO REI SOCIALIS* (1987): 8 CITATIONS

Not surprisingly, since *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* was meant to commemorate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*, its references to "vocation" come by way of elaborating on the theological significance of its use in that encyclical. Thus the citations are almost evenly divided between two points, the first, namely, to identify economic and social "development" with humanity's authentic vocation to work (Pars. 28, 29, and 30), and the second, namely, to clarify the nature of

the Church's vocation as a "sacrament" relative to such development (Pars. 31 and 40). This sacramental understanding, grounded as it is in the Trinitarian nature of the Church's communion of God and humanity, specifically justifies the role of Catholic social thought in reflecting on and seeking to orient properly the processes of economic and social development (Par. 41). There is, in short, no authentic human development apart from a proper orientation to the mystery of each person's vocation and that of the Church as a whole.

#### NCCB, "THE CHALLENGE OF PEACE" (1983): 3 CITATIONS

Within these three citations, one finds first an admission of a new difficulty "that could prevent us from hearing and following our authentic vocation," namely, that the cost of discipleship has increased dramatically in a world where "convinced Christians are a minority in nearly every country of the world - including nominally Christian and Catholic nations," specifically the USA. Thus the new theology of vocation may in the end be an invitation to take up the cross, which normally means "even the path of persecution and the possibility of martyrdom. (Par. 276) Yet despite this sobering reminder, the pastoral letter also seeks to recognize and support the specific vocations of military professionals (Par. 310), and reiterates the Church's "respect [for] the vocation of public service." (Par. 325)

#### NCCB, "ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL" (1986): 21 CITATIONS

The number of citations confirms what may have been obvious all along, namely, that the NCCB's pastoral letter on the economy is the single most important statement in Catholic social teaching affirming a theological perspective in which it is possible to regard business as a vocation. Indeed, within the context of its several citations enriching the Church's understanding of "our secular vocations" (Pars. 25 (Introduction), 60, 78, 85 and 100), including an entire chapter devoted to "The Christian Vocation in the World Today" (Pars. 326, 327, 332, 333, 336, 341, 342, and 352), the US bishops go beyond John Paul II's identification of human work with our authentic vocation to speak specifically of business as a vocation:

"Business people, managers, investors, and financiers follow a vital Christian vocation when they act responsibly and seek the common good. We encourage and support a renewed sense of vocation in the business community. We also recognize that the way business people serve society is governed and limited by the incentives which flow from tax policies, and availability of credit, and other public policies." (Par. 117)

This acknowledgement of the specific vocation of people in business, of course, is not exclusive. The pastoral letter echoes *Mater et Magistra* (1961) in specifically acknowledging farming as a vocation. (Par. 3) It also clarifies the relationship between the laity's "secular vocations" and those of the clergy. The ministries of the Church are to assist (Par. 360) the laity in fulfilling their vocations, by proclaiming "the gospel message in a way that not only challenges the faithful but also sustains and encourages their vocation in and to the world." (Par. 361)

This theological development, it seems, is a result of the distinctive cultural setting in which American Catholicism finds itself. For as the pastoral letter insists, the Church has "much to learn from the strong emphasis in Protestant traditions on the vocation of lay people in the world and from ecumenical efforts to develop an economic ethic that addresses newly emergent problems." (Par. 59) Indeed, the affirmation of a specific vocation to business may have been inconceivable apart from the witness of Protestant forms of Christian social ethics.

The pastoral letter's theology of vocation, in my view, is a watershed event in the history of Catholic social teaching. As such it deserves several papers devoted exclusively to its interpretation.

#### JOHN PAUL II: CENTESIMUS ANNUS (1991): 5 CITATIONS

Lest anyone be worried that Papal teaching may have been contaminated by the Americanism of the pastoral letter's perspective on vocation, *Centesimus Annus* discusses this idea in ways that harken back to the Pope's own previous work and that of his predecessors. The link between vocation and work previously established in *Laborem Exercens* is now, on the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, made a tacit presupposition of Leo XIII's doctrine of the fundamental rights of workers. (Par. 6) Thus a theology of vocation, still conceived in relatively abstract terms, grounds Catholic social teaching's concern for solidarity in the struggle for economic and social justice. The theology of vocation thus reminds us that the struggle always and ultimately is spiritual and nature.

#### NCCB "A DECADE AFTER ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL: CONTINUING PRINCIPLES, CHANGING CONTEXT, NEW CHALLENGES" (1995): NO CITATIONS

This finding seems extraordinary, given the prominence of vocation in the pastoral letter commemorated in this document. It is tempting to speculate on the reasons for this deliberate omission.

#### UK BISHOPS "THE COMMON GOOD AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING" (1996): 3 CITATIONS

When the bishops of the UK took up a task roughly analogous to that of the NCCB's pastoral letter on the economy, they produced a magnificent document demonstrating the enduring vitality of common good discourse in and for Catholic social teaching. But a theology of vocation is relatively marginal to their effort. Vocations are specifically affirmed of politics (Par. 58) and the so-called helping professions involved in the provision of social services (Par. 83). The other citation echoes the identification of human work with vocation, "a participation in God's creative activity," previously established in *Laborem Exercens*. While the theology is not further developed, it is well used as a context in which to advocate that work should be organized in ways that enhance the workers' capacity to take satisfaction in it and find it meaningful. (Par. 90)

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This statistical review of the major documents of Catholic social teaching should be sufficient to demonstrate the unevenness of the tradition's use of vocation discourse. It also makes clear that "vocation" was little invoked in Catholic social teaching prior to Vatican II. The reason for the relative absence of vocation discourse seems due to the weight of the traditional Catholic ecclesiology and its tendency to restrict vocation discourse to the calling of candidates to the priesthood and religious life. Marriage, however, even before Vatican II, was also described as a vocation, parallel to that of the clergy and religious. But the possibility of a robustly theological interpretation of the vocation of the laity only emerged at Vatican II, and even then, somewhat hesitantly. A basis for it was established, quite properly, in *Lumen Gentium*, and expanded especially in its practical meaning in *Gaudium et Spes*. But a systematic treatment of the diversity and specificity of lay vocations in the world was not developed there, or even in

Apostolicam Actuositatem. Since the Council there have been two major advances toward a theology of vocation, namely, first, the identification of work, particularly as it relates teleologically to authentic human development, with vocation, as in the encyclicals of Paul VI and John Paul II, and second, the move toward a recognition of the diversity and specificity of lay vocations modeled in the NCCB's affirmation of a vocation to business.

This then is basically what Catholic social teaching has to contribute to a global ethic in which vocation discourse might help orient what the 1993 Parliament of World Religions expressed as a "Commitment to a Culture of Solidarity and a Just Economic Order":

"Numberless men and women of all regions and religions strive to live their lives in solidarity with one another and to work for authentic fulfillment of their vocations. Nevertheless, all over the world we find endless hunger, deficiency, and need." ("Toward a Global Ethic" (1993))

The question to be explored in the remainder of this paper, then, is whether the particular history of vocation discourse in Catholic social teaching can actually make a constructive contribution toward a global ethic. Even if the affirmation of a vocation to business can be acknowledged as a logical development of Catholic social teaching, answering this question will involve a critical assessment of the emphatically Trinitarian and theistic presuppositions of Catholic vocation discourse. The question, in short, is whether any affirmation based on those presuppositions can actually be universalized. In order to answer this question, I will attempt next a brief sketch of a nontheistic tradition, namely Chinese Confucianism, which seems to contain in its understanding of self-cultivation a functional substitute for Christian vocational discourse. While I don't expect to be able to give any definitive answer to the question, the labor involved in working it out may be useful to anyone seeking to understand the specific cultural density of major themes in Catholic social teaching that otherwise may seem universal or universalizable. The resolution of this issue, it seems to me, may be of some practical value, given the context of "Globalization" processes in which Christian business people today must exercise their vocations.

Thank you for your patience!

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