

# The Difference Catholic Social Thought Brings to Corporate Social Responsibility

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Mass readings: Genesis 2, 18-24; Hebrews 2: 9-11; Mark 10:2-16

When Sister Helen e-mailed me asking if I would be interested in preaching at the closing Mass of the conference, a Dominican preaching on home turf (Angelicum), I was, of course, delighted to accept the invitation. After responding to her e-mail, I immediately checked the readings for that Sunday, hoping that the Gospel is on the parable of the vineyard owner who kept going back to the marketplace to bring the unemployed to his fields and then paid a wage based on the preferential option for the poor. What an ending to a conference on corporate social responsibility with such a parable, or something comparable. Instead, the Gospel for the day is the one on marriage and divorce! To begin with, this is a challenging passage to preach on in a pastoral manner, not to mention tying in the theme of the conference: Catholic social thought and corporate social responsibility in dialogue. Well, it turns out that the selection of readings that we have just heard provides firm theological grounding for the difference Christian faith brings to corporate social responsibility.

We have seen, read, and heard many versions of corporate social responsibility in the public square of ideas, and so, as we end this conference, it is appropriate to ask if Catholic social thought adds anything distinctive to it. Given our severe time constraint, I will limit myself to two points based on all three Scripture readings for the day.

## Point #1: Unmerited participation in God=s ongoing act of creation

The first reading is the second account of creation found in Genesis in which the creation of Eve is described. Right off the bat, we can reflect on this for social ethics and say that the human person is social and relational from the very start. But this is not a new insight. Philosophical ethics says as much. No, what is so distinctive about the first reading for our conference is the theological understanding of creation. And for this, I would like to use Thomas Aquinas= account of divine creation.

God must have necessary existence. God cannot be dependent on anything or anyone for existence; otherwise, God would not be God at all! Thus, God simply is. It is in the nature of God to exist. *Ipsum esse subsistens!*

Human beings, on the other hand, are merely contingent in their existence. We can easily verify this empirically because we get sick, grow old and enfeebled, and eventually die. And the world will continue to exist long after we are gone. Indeed, our existence is not necessary; it is merely a participated existence. Creatures like us merely partake of existence from the One

whose existence is necessary.

But there is something even more profound about theological creation. Since we are merely created and contingent in existence, God, the Creator, has to sustain us in continued existence. If God were to walk away from creation, even if only for a moment, we would all revert back into non-existence. This means that creation is not a one-time event but is an ongoing creative act on the part of God who not only brought us into existence but also sustains us in continued existence. Indeed, the theological notion of creation encompasses divine providence: God providing for us for our every need.

This includes the material provisions we require. In this, note that it would have been so easy for God to provide for us directly, as in the biblical account of manna for the Chosen People traveling through the desert. Instead, God provides for us through each other. And herein is a distinctive feature of Christian corporate social responsibility in the public square of ideas. It is understood within its larger overarching framework of theological creation that reminds us both of our need for gratitude and of the promise and possibilities that come with business and economic life.

Business and economics are not mundane activities. Neither are they Aprofane@ sciences. Rather, they are professions that ennoble the human person, vocations through which we can be made holy by God as we participate in the ongoing divine act of creation by which God provides for us through each other. Indeed, Christian corporate social responsibility is distinctive because it is gratefully and humbly accepted as an unmerited gift of being able to participate in God=s providence and governance of the world.

## **Point #2: To let others feel and experience God=s love for them**

Both the second reading (from *Hebrews*) and the Gospel passage from *Mark* remind us of the theology behind sacramental marriage. I propose that the dynamic undergirding the spirituality of marriage is the same impetus animating Christian corporate social responsibility.

In sacramental marriage, the bride and the groom present themselves before God and the faith community as they pledge their undying love for each other. They come to the church, the two of them as bride and groom. But when they leave the church, it is no longer merely the two of them, but the three of them: husband, wife, and Jesus Christ as the third person in their marriage. So what is the role of Jesus Christ in sacramental marriage?

In sacramental marriage, the husband and wife are called to grow deeper in the love of each other through sickness or in health, in good times or in bad, in wealth or in poverty. They are invited to grow deeper in the love of God together as they give and bring the love of Christ to each other. And if it is the will of God that they have children, it is through these parents—in the way they live and in the way they love—that these children will be able to feel and experience

for themselves, for the first time, God=s love for them.

These are formidable requirements—difficult, if not impossible on our own. And that is why Jesus Christ is the third person of every sacramental marriage because it is He who will guarantee that marriage. It is Jesus Christ who will sustain the husband and wife in doing that which is difficult and that which is impossible. It is Jesus Christ who will provide them with His own love when they have long run out of their own love. Thus it is that husbands and wives are able to give the love of Christ to each other tirelessly.

This, in a thumbnail sketch, is the theological underpinning of sacramental marriage. And I propose that it is the same dynamic at work in Christian corporate social responsibility. We have already seen this, whether implicitly or explicitly, in many of the talks and presentations in the past three days. Consider the following.

Christian corporate social responsibility cannot end with justice alone. The latter is only the doorway, the ground floor to a much greater height to which we are invited to soar. In Christian thought, justice has to blossom to its fullness in charity, defined as friendship with God and friendship in God. Thus, observe how this makes a difference in business and economic life.

We do not come to the marketplace as utility-maximizing *homo oeconomicus* or as firms bent on maximizing shareholder value. No, we come as disciples of Christ who poured himself out for us as described in today=s second reading. We look at others not as potential contractual partners in a mutually advantageous market exchange; we embrace them as brothers and sisters, as fellow children of God.

It is not self-interest, enlightened or otherwise, that animates us; it is *koinonia*, the communion of friends who bring Christ to each other. And, of course, there are the problems of evaluation. Balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements are necessary, but they are not good enough for us. Instead, we measure ourselves against the fruits of the Holy Spirit that should be blooming in our lives: the fruits of joy, peace, love, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, chastity, modesty, and self-control (cf. *Galatians* 5:22-23). We measure corporate success in terms of human flourishing and authentic integral human development.

Indeed, Christian corporate social responsibility is distinct in the public square of ideas because Christ is our beginning, our measure, and our end. And as a result, we will be laughed at, right out of the marketplace. People will take advantage of us. These demands of Christian discipleship are as ridiculous and as incredible today as they were for the contemporaries of Jesus to whom he had preached love of their enemies at a time of a hateful and oppressive Roman occupation. But this is Christ in our own day and age—asking again for that which is difficult, that which is impossible. God somehow seems to have a habit of doing this throughout salvation history.

My friends, it is now your turn and my turn to be fools for Christ, just as Peter and Paul were in this very city nearly two thousand year ago. It is now your turn and my turn to be fools for Christ, just like our martyred brothers and sisters who had sanctified the grounds of the Colosseo and Circo Massimo just down the road.

Despite the formidable hurdles we face, we persist in being fools for Christ because just as in the case of the husband and wife in sacramental marriage, it is Jesus Christ who sustains us in doing that which is difficult, that which is impossible. We persevere in being fools for Christ because just as in the case of the husband and wife in sacramental marriage, it is Christ who supplies us with His own love when our own love has long run dry. And, oh, what a love it is. For in the words of St. Paul (1 *Corinthians* 13:7), it is a love that has no limits to its trust, its hope, its power to endure!

And so, as we continue with the celebration of our Eucharist, let us be mindful of our destitute brothers and sisters and of the manifold blessings upon blessings that we often take for granted in our own lives. Let us also be thankful for the unmerited gift of being able to participate in God=s ongoing act of creation, in divine providence and governance. Let us thank God for the gift of Christ setting us afire with love through the Holy Spirit, so that in the way we live and in the way we love, others may be able to feel and experience for themselves, perhaps for the first time, God=s love for them—even in the marketplace, especially in the marketplace.