

10

Being Providentially Situated: The Indispensable Vocation of the Corporate Whistleblower

PAUL J. WADELL
paul.wadell@snc.edu

“**A** MAN OF PRINCIPLE,” the lead article in the January 25, 2004 issue of the *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, tells the story of Dr. Ray Pollak, an organ transplant surgeon whose integrity cost him his job. Early in 1996, Pollak noticed that several of his colleagues at the University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago exaggerated the seriousness of their patients’ illnesses in order to move them up the waiting list for available organs. The deceit prevented more seriously ill patients at other institutions from receiving available organs that might save their lives, but was financially lucrative for the hospital. At the time, the University of Illinois hospital received Medicaid and Medicare payments of up to \$250,000 per transplant patient.¹ Described by his supporters as “an unusually honest man” and “a courageous bulldog if he’s crossed,” Pollak reported his findings to five senior administrators at the hospital. Their response? “What’s the downside of doing things the Chicago way?” The administrators assured him “that other medical centers were fudging with no negative consequences and suggested he keep quiet.”²

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

But Pollak persisted. “How could you not say anything? Peoples’ lives were at stake,” he explained.³ When he continued to protest the behavior of his colleagues, Pollak received a disciplinary letter from the dean of the University of Illinois College of Medicine “accusing him of ‘virtual insubordination.’”⁴ When he refused to “do things the Chicago way,” Pollak’s superiors retaliated. In April 1998 he was removed from his position as chief of the transplant division at the hospital. Two years later he accepted a position at the University of Illinois Hospital’s Peoria campus, but at considerable cost; his salary “fell from \$280,000 at the time of his demotion to \$125,000 in 2000.”⁵ When Pollak asked an administrator why he was being demoted, he was told, “Because unlike you, Ray, I follow orders.”⁶ Amidst a culture of silence and deceit, Pollak knew the professional repercussions of his whistleblowing would be high. “The price of leadership is suicide,” he admitted, “but you should be willing to sacrifice yourself for what you believe in.”⁷

A vocation expresses the unique way a person is called to make a contribution to the world. It may seem odd to think of whistleblowing as an aspect of one’s calling as a Christian. But it is fitting, even imperative, if the institutions and structures of society are to be ruled by practices of justice instead of policies that foster inequity, harm and deceit. There is no way corporations and businesses can heed the Catholic social tradition’s call to honor the common good if there are not women and men courageous enough to speak the truth—the always uncomfortable prophetic word—when others demand silence in order that an evil remain unexposed. Whistleblowers should be encouraged, not castigated, because the moral health of society requires persons of rectitude and integrity.

In this paper I want to explore the role and importance of the whistleblower for helping businesses and corporations to be faithful to their callings. Seeing whistleblowing through the lens of vocation not only highlights the crucial importance of this activity for sustaining just and truthful practices in business, but also illustrates why such risky truth telling is an essential responsibility of a life of faith. Anyone baptized into Christ and called to imitate the ways of Christ must be willing to speak uncomfortable truths and expose often profitable evils. Otherwise there is no way the most fundamental institutions of society, such as corporations and businesses, can, as the Catholic social tradition challenges, advance the reign of God. Thus, part one of the essay will develop a theology of vocation for whistleblowers, suggesting that whistleblowing is a difficult but necessary way Christians are sometimes called to share in God’s work of healing, redeeming and sanctifying. Part two will examine why the witness and actions of whistleblowers are absolutely essential for the integrity of businesses and corporations, particularly if they are to fulfill their fundamental vocation

of serving the common good. Finally, precisely because there is often a great price to be paid for speaking the truth, part three will examine some of the virtues needed for the whistleblower to be faithful to his or her calling.

A Theology of Vocation for Whistleblowers

What difference does it make to think of our selves as being *called*, as being entrusted by God with a unique and special purpose in life? Does this change the way we see our selves and our role in the world? Does it deepen our sense of everyday responsibility? Does it impact the choices we make and the reasons we make them? The biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says vocation represents how one's purpose for being in the world is related to the purposes of God and serves the purposes of God.⁸ In a Christian anthropology, to be human is to be called, to be summoned out of our selves in order actively to participate in the creative and redemptive work of God. We are to devote our lives—to use our insight, intelligence, talents and creativity—to transforming the world in the love, justice and goodness of God. As Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw write, “Each of us has something important to do. Each has a particular set of gifts, opportunities and other attributes—including weaknesses and strengths—that is uniquely our own. And each of us is obliged to examine that package to determine its potential for communicating God's truth and love, confronting evil (including the evil in ourselves) and dealing with it. This is to say we should examine what we have received for its redemptive potential....”⁹ Seeing our lives through the lens of vocation, the pivotal question is not “Who am I?” but “To whom do I belong?” A theology of vocation asks not “What do I want to do?” but “How am I called? How am I needed?”

This opens up a different and more challenging way of understanding what it means to act responsibly in our everyday lives, particularly in our jobs and occupations. A theology of vocation reminds us that all spheres of life are related to God, fall under the moral order given by God and are relevant to the plans and purposes of God. A theology of vocation resists the dreadful and always costly privatization of morality by insisting that God's laws and God's justice pertain not only to the arena of personal morality, but to social life as well. A perduring characteristic of Catholic social teaching is its insistence that the political and economic realms of life must serve the interests of God. All arenas of life are to be made holy, and the special responsibility of those in business is to bring the sanctifying and redeeming activity of God into the corporate world. The whistleblower lives out this vocation by exposing corruption, by refusing to contribute to deception and by calling

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

those in power to accountability. In more theological language, if any aspect of corporate life has been warped and distorted by sin, the whistleblower knows that the Christian's responsibility is to work to restore it by confronting it with the healing and purifying justice of God. If the redemption wrought by Christ extends not only to human beings but to all the powers, structures and institutions of the world, then an abiding responsibility of Christian stewardship, exemplified in the whistleblower, is to contribute to God's *shalom* by working to increase goodness in all areas of life.

A Christian theology of vocation highlights the absolute importance of human responsibility for carrying forward God's creative and redemptive activity in the world. God calls us because God *needs* us. God calls us because God *depends* on us. This surprises us because we seldom think that the God who created the heavens and the earth might actually need us. But God needs us because the work of creation begun by God is to be nurtured, sustained and continued by us. There is supreme humility to God because, as Yahweh's covenant with Israel and Jesus' call to his disciples indicate, God "doesn't go it alone." God cares for the world and its peoples through us. God has plans and purposes, but God needs our cooperation for those plans and purposes to be fulfilled. This is a tremendous affirmation of every person's dignity and importance. Every person matters because every person has a distinctive and irreplaceable role to play in furthering God's work in the world.

Put differently, our callings represent how God *honors* us by inviting us to contribute in the great work of the world's sanctification and redemption. As Lee Hardy observes, a theology of vocation underscores that "God has chosen to work in this world through the agency of human hands....He chose to create a world where we, as God's representatives, are involved in the ongoing business of creation and the repair of creation—a world where we assume responsibility for the well-being of the earth and all who inhabit it....In responding to our callings, we are actually participating in God's care for humanity and the earth. We are God's co-workers."¹⁰ Pope John Paul II has repeatedly emphasized this idea in his social encyclicals, particularly *Laborem exercens* (1981).¹¹ That we are the co-workers of God does not deny our absolute dependence on God's grace for carrying out the responsibilities of stewardship, but it equally affirms that in every area of life we are answerable to God and that in all of our roles and responsibilities there is a moral call to be heeded.

Seeing ourselves as accountable to God in the corporate world as much as in marriage and family life prevents us from succumbing to the comforting illusion that God's ways do not pertain to the social world of business and economics. As Douglas Schuurman astutely observes, "One is not called to be a Christian 'in general'; one is called to be a Christian in the concrete social locations one presently occupies, as this mother to these children, this citizen of this country, and so on. One

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

is not called merely to be a wife, a husband or a mechanic; one is called to be a wife, a husband or a mechanic as a Christian ‘in the Lord.’”¹² Similarly, a whistleblower recognizes that one who is committed to living “in the Lord” must continually ask what that commitment *practically* means in one’s work life. Perhaps more than anyone, the whistleblower knows that living “in the Lord” sometimes requires a costly truthfulness, particularly when it is the only way to overcome practices that obstruct the creative and redemptive work of God.

In his *Church Dogmatics* Karl Barth distinguishes between two senses of vocation. First, there is the more general sense of vocation that refers to the common Christian vocation of all the baptized to follow Christ and become like Christ. But there is a second sense of vocation that signifies the more particular and distinctive way a person is called to share in the creative and redemptive activity of God in light of the unique circumstances and opportunities of his life, his talents and gifts and the specific needs of others. Barth describes this second meaning of vocation as “places of responsibility.” For Barth, “places of responsibility” focuses on the precise personal implications of one’s call. It is how one is summoned to apply the general gospel command to love God and neighbor in view of the unique factors of one’s life.¹³ Barth’s concept of “places of responsibility” is helpful because it connects the notion of vocation to the practical realities of one’s everyday life. In short, it insures that the idea of vocation not remain so abstract and general that it floats safely above the difficult challenges of life.¹⁴ Both John Paul II’s language of “co-creator” and Barth’s “places of responsibility” suggest that regardless of one’s situation in life, he or she is “providentially situated”¹⁵ to do God’s work of building up, healing, redeeming and making holy. Seeing all of life through the lens of vocation is instructive because it underscores that we are called to contribute to God’s plans and purposes in the fabric of our everyday lives: in this marriage, with this family, with these co-workers, in this business. Thus, a vocation does not take us outside of our ordinary lives, but challenges us to see and respond to them differently. A theology of vocation summons us to see the routines and responsibilities of our lives as providential opportunities for doing God’s work in the world. A vocation challenges us to recognize the graced potential of the ordinary. As finite, limited beings we are summoned to make a lasting contribution to the reign of God not in some never-to-be-realized ideal world, but in the often messy, confounding and troublesome world in which we live. Every whistleblower confirms and fulfills this understanding of vocation when he or she does not look away from what is wrong.

But they also know confronting an evil can cost them dearly and a theology of vocation must acknowledge this. Every vocation guarantees at least some hardship and adversity. Consider

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

many of the call stories in the Bible. The initial response of those summoned by God is normally resistance, not acceptance. Sometimes this is because they feel they lack the talents needed to succeed at the call. Moses, for example, tells God he is hardly the best candidate to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites because he is “slow of speech and tongue” (Exodus 4:10). Moses assures God that his mission of liberation would more likely be fulfilled if someone more eloquent were called. It is a fascinating story that emphasizes how one’s call coincides with God’s needs and God’s sense of possibility rather than one’s own, a fact echoed in Elizabeth Newman’s remark that “Moses does not invent or determine his vocation, he receives it from God.”¹⁶

Still, the primary reason God’s call clashes with the will and inclinations of those called is that often the call, as any whistleblower will attest, places one in painfully difficult situations. In the Bible those singled out by God are rightly apprehensive because they know their mission will entail great suffering. A biblical theology of call reveals that every call is a journey—truly a costly adventure—that involves tribulation, moments of darkness and sometimes shattering defeats.¹⁷ Vocations are fundamentally graces, but they are undeniably *costly* graces because they demand that we expend ourselves for the sake of a good that not only surpasses us, but likewise a good others might find threatening and adamantly oppose. Pursuing a call faithfully and wholeheartedly will reshape and transform us, but it can also deplete us if honoring the call evokes hostility, misunderstanding and resentment from others.

This is no secret for whistleblowers. They know following a call often results in threats, reprisals, harassment and isolation. For example, when Chuck Atchison, a safety inspector at the Comanche Peak nuclear power plant in Glen Rose, Texas reported serious safety infractions at the plant, the response of his superiors was not gratitude but dismissal. Atchison was fired from Comanche Peak for being a “troublemaker,” a label that prevented him from getting other jobs. Faced with increasing debts, “he and his wife sold their house and moved into a trailer.” At times Atchison “earned a living collecting beer cans along the highway and selling them as scrap. More disturbing...he began receiving anonymous threats each time he was to testify. Having told the truth, Atchison now feared for his life.”¹⁸

Given the cost of whistleblowing, why do people like Atchison answer the call? Clearly, the smoother and trouble free path is to keep silent, to ignore, to choose not to see. Perhaps the reason whistleblowers respond is because they know despite the costs inherent in any vocation, embracing one’s call is the only way to sustain integrity and authenticity. It is easier to live unauthentically, to deaden one’s conscience, to ignore the call to be responsible; however, the cost of such choices is a

diminished and dishonorable life. Whistleblowers usually pay a price for acting responsibly, but at least they know they have not betrayed the fundamental human call to attend to what is true and good. They may suffer for acting responsibly, but they know one grows in authenticity and safeguards her integrity when she is not afraid to do what she knows is right despite the cost. Conversely, as John Haughey observes, moral diminishment is guaranteed “if we choose other than what we know to be true and, therefore, good for us to be or do.”¹⁹ The whistleblower steadfastly refuses to make that choice because it leads to moral and spiritual disintegration.

Why Whistleblowers Matter: Sustaining Integrity in Business

In its first issue of 2003, TIME magazine named three whistleblowers its “Persons of the Year”: Sherron Watkins, the Enron vice president who warned Kenneth Lay, chair of Enron, about the company’s improper accounting methods; Coleen Rowley, the FBI staff attorney in Minneapolis who told the FBI Director that the agency had ignored warnings from the Minneapolis field office about Zacarias Moussaoui, a co-conspirator in the September 11, 2001 attacks; and Cynthia Cooper of WorldCom who told its board that the company had hidden \$3.8 billion of losses by phony bookkeeping.²⁰ The women were described not as rebels, but as “the truest of believers...ever faithful to the idea that where they worked was a place that served the wider world in some important way.” In fact, at Enron Sherron Watkins was given a note pad with a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. that read, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”²¹

Whistleblowers refuse to be quiet about things that matter. And it is that precious quality of character that makes them indispensable for corporations. Whistleblowers help institutions maintain corporate integrity by challenging them to be magnanimous, by calling them to truthfulness and, to use the language of Thomas Aquinas, by showing them the importance of “fraternal correction.”

Magnanimity is the virtue by which men and women seek moral excellence. The magnanimous man or woman is one who consistently aspires to what is best and most worthy in all areas of their lives. Aquinas says “someone is called magnanimous because he aspires to things which are great simply and absolutely,”²² adding that the magnanimous person particularly seeks excellence in goodness and virtue.²³ He or she refuses to be deterred from pursuing what is right. They resist compromise when to yield their convictions would diminish their integrity, violate their conscience or involve them in actions that would be less than noble. Aquinas notes that for Aristotle

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

the magnanimous person avoids doing anything unjust, is unfailingly truthful, is kind and considerate and generous and refuses to flee “in panic” when doing good is full of risk.²⁴ The magnanimous person habitually “pursues great aims,” but flees anything that would be corrupting.²⁵ Furthermore, magnanimity is a species of courage because it is hard to remain steadfast in doing what is right and just, especially when many oppose it or pressure one to act against his conscience. The magnanimous person remains “unconquered by evil” in the pursuit of the good. He or she “unhesitatingly encounters dangers” because of their unwavering love for what is best.²⁶

But businesses, too, are called to magnanimity, and whistleblowers help them fulfill that calling by refusing to countenance behavior that is morally wrong. Like Aristotle’s “friend of good character,” whistleblowers challenge a company to be its “best self” by continually aspiring to what is right and just. Although their actions are not always welcome, whistleblowers are crucial for helping to cultivate and sustain the proper ethical environment for an institution. Businesses need persons of high moral principles, persons not afraid to confront wrongdoing and persons whose character and behavior elicits moral excellence in their colleagues. Whistleblowers are essential for the moral life of businesses because corporate integrity is as easily compromised as individual integrity. Just like individuals, corporations can lose their soul. They stroll down the path of corruption and moral decline if they tolerate, or worse, subtly encourage, ethically questionable practices. Corporate integrity is imperiled if business leaders “look the other way” when employees adopt strategies that are ethically dubious but perhaps economically advantageous.

Like individuals, businesses prosper when they risk being magnanimous, when, in the words of Aquinas, they too “aspire to excellence.” Most corporations have a foundational story or narrative that articulates the vision of the founder, the purpose of the organization and the principles and ideals by which it is to be guided in order to remain faithful to its calling. But like persons, businesses can stray from this founding narrative, forget it when convenient or replace it with a philosophy that allows one to turn away from what is best for the sake of a competitive edge or increased profits. And just like persons, when the wayward path becomes the well worn path, moral disintegration results. At their best, whistleblowers’ commitment to magnanimity helps businesses avoid moral calamity. But when it does occur they can help renew an organization by calling it back to its founding narrative and original purpose.

The opposite of magnanimity is *pusillanimity*, a vice that can characterize both persons and institutions. Just as magnanimity is part of the virtue of courage, pusillanimity is a dimension of cowardice. Aquinas describes pusillanimity as a “pettiness of mind” by which a person turns away

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

from excellence.²⁷ A pusillanimous person shrinks from doing what is right, sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of greed, sometimes out of indifference. If the magnanimous person “strives for great aims,” the pusillanimous person steadfastly avoids them because of the difficulty involved in doing good. He or she intentionally “lowers their sights” to the mediocre, the corrupt and the diminishing because they lack the courage and resolve necessary for virtue. Aquinas agrees with Aristotle that pusillanimity can be viewed as “the worst of sins” because by this vice a person consistently “withdraws from what is good.”²⁸ He or she shrinks from virtue because being truthful and just habitually is hard, and often not immediately profitable. The “falling short of excellence” characteristic of pusillanimity is not the result of ignorance, but of indolence, a chronic moral slothfulness by which one refuses to exert himself in order to achieve the excellence of which he is capable.²⁹ Obviously, businesses can exhibit pusillanimity as much as individuals. They too can exhibit “moral slothfulness” and “pettiness of mind.” Consider Enron and WorldCom. They were pusillanimous institutions because their leaders fostered an environment where it was acceptable to “shrink from what is right.”

Aquinas opens his discussion of the vice of pusillanimity by noting that “there is, however, in everything a natural tendency to undertake action commensurate with its capability.”³⁰ Applied to the moral life, this means that human beings are called to achieve the excellence for which God has made us capable. There is a “natural tendency” in us to aspire to greatness, a tendency that bespeaks who we have been created to be by God. God fashioned us to be magnanimous, to be fulfilled through goodness and virtue. To be less than we are capable of morally is truly an “unnatural act” because by it we refuse to extend ourselves to achieve the good that is within our powers. This is the essence of pusillanimity and Aquinas names it a sin because by it a person mocks the gifts entrusted to her by God. He compares the pusillanimous to the ungrateful servant of the gospel (Matt. 25:14, Luke. 19, 12) who “buried in the earth the money received from his master and achieved nothing with it because of a pusillanimous fear.”³¹ When businesses shrink from doing what is right and grow complacent with moral mediocrity, they too “bury” what has been entrusted to them.

The whistleblower is indispensable for the vocational authenticity of businesses because, like any person of integrity, he or she refuses to be bewitched by counterfeit goods or corrupt practices. But it is precisely their refusal that can make them so threatening. Whistleblowers refuse to accommodate what is right to what is gratifying or profitable. They refuse to debase a rich and promising understanding of corporate vocation by substituting lesser goods and purposes. And most of all, they refuse to collapse what is best and most noble “into vain and ever-narrowing pursuits of

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

self-interest.”³² Instead, they remain committed to ideals, the pursuit of which sustains businesses on the path to institutional authenticity. If businesses are often more comfortable with pusillanimity than magnanimity, whistleblowers reveal how shortsighted and deceptive that comfort can be. In this way they make an indispensable contribution to the vocational integrity of organizations.

Second, whistleblowers are essential for the moral health of businesses because they refuse to lie. We live in a society where lying and deception are almost expected from those in institutional authority, almost acceptable. The deceit is justified in the name of some allegedly higher purpose (national security, institutional loyalty, maintaining a competitive edge), but in reality it is used to conceal behavior that is arrogantly self-serving. Lying and deception are employed to sustain the unwarranted privileges of a few and to conceal the unjust consequences those privileges bring to others. As the story of Dr. Ray Pollak, as well as the scandals at Enron and WorldCom, poignantly illustrate, people in leadership encouraged those around them to obfuscate, to mislead, to participate in deceptions that brought great gain to some but immeasurable harm to others. Joining in on the lie witnessed that one was a team player, someone willing to put aside niggling qualms of conscience out of loyalty to superiors and institutions.

In such situations, agreeableness is substituted for truthfulness. The good employee is the one who plays along, who says nothing, who participates in the ruse. But as Stanley Hauerwas warns, the price of tolerating such flagrant dishonesty is a dangerous indifference for the truth that leads to a toxic and paralyzing cynicism.³³ People become experts at ambiguity, virtuosos at intentionally misleading abstractions. Instead of being troubled by lying, they find it to be not only acceptable but amusing, a sign of stealthy cleverness and worldly wisdom. To deceive others is not a vice of which to be ashamed, but a well honed habit of the powerful, a skill to celebrate and esteem. The deceiver is not a person who transgresses the truth, but the crafty woman or man who knows anyone unwilling to lie will never succeed.

The whistleblower refuses to honor the lie. The temptation is to think that lying in small matters does not matter. It is all right, we assume, to succumb to the occasional lie, especially when everyone tells us it is a trifle, because we believe we’ll know where “to draw the line” before bigger lies. But to concede that the truth does not matter in the smaller details of everyday life chisels in us the kind of character that will feel little compunction about participating in greater lies.³⁴ And what better creates an environment of dishonesty and deceit than the casual willingness to lie in seemingly small matters rather than be inconvenienced by the truth? The whistleblower knows it is exactly being comfortable about dishonesty in small matters that forms us into people who are not only

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

untroubled by larger lies, but who are also no longer able even to recognize them. We've lost sight of what is true and right because in our penchant for deception we ourselves have become deceived.

A commonplace observation in Christian ethics is that we act according to how we see, suggesting that we cannot *act rightly* unless we first *see rightly*.³⁵ But, as the recent scandals in corporations and businesses (as well as colleges, universities and churches) suggest, seeing truthfully demands a lot more than just opening our eyes. Deceit and distortion are always the harvest of skewed and self-serving moral visions because persons (and institutions) who cultivate habits of misperceiving view everything in terms of their own needs, gratification and purposes. The English philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, wrote, "I can only choose within the world I can see."³⁶ True, but what happens when my vision is deformed by a lust for wealth, power or prestige? What happens if I believe everyone is expendable and everything permissible as long as I succeed? Habits of lying are rooted in a refusal to deal with what is real. A person schooled in lying is essentially manipulative because he or she sees the world not as it is but as they need it to be. Murdoch calls this penchant for the lie *fantasy* and describes fantasy as "the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images."³⁷ Obviously, corporations and businesses can be weave webs of fantasy. How else to explain the corruption exposed by whistleblowers than the work of "blinding self-centered aims and images"?

The incalculable value of the whistleblower is that she challenges organizations to remain committed to a moral vision that refuses to succumb to the enticements of fantasy. She knows how easy it is to slip into habits of deception, but realizes how corrupting and destructive dishonesty is both for persons and institutions. Where lying flourishes, dissolution, whether personal or institutional, is bound to follow because, as Aquinas said, "People could not live with one another were there not a mutual trust that they were being truthful to one another."³⁸ Life together, whether in our homes, churches, communities or businesses is not possible without truthfulness because once we no longer trust one another, the solidarity that makes any kind of corporate life possible dwindles. Lying may appear to be profitable, especially when many further the deception. But ultimately it places the liar (whether person or institution) in exile because the very credibility he or she needs to be in relationship with other persons or organizations has been destroyed. Businesses need to encourage truthfulness, not penalize it. They need to honor the whistleblower, not ostracize them, because ultimately the only way businesses can prosper and, as the Catholic social tradition attests, contribute to the common good, is if they are trustworthy.

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

A third way whistleblowers help businesses maintain vocational integrity is through the practice of “fraternal correction,” namely the willingness to confront persons or organizations about the wrongfulness of their actions. It is what Dr. Ray Pollak did for his superiors at the University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago, what Chuck Atchison did at Comanche Peak, what Cynthia Cooper did for executives at WorldCom, Sherron Watkins for Enron, and Coleen Rowley for the FBI. In each instance they risked speaking the truth to those in charge because they knew what was happening was wrong.

Aquinas saw such correction as a duty of charity, an obligation of love. He argued that if we truly love our neighbor we will not hesitate to speak out when we see him doing something wrong precisely because we care for him and are committed to what is best for him. The purpose of fraternal correction is not to shame a wrongdoer, but to call him back to his true good and to warn him of the dangers of sin. Thus, the motive behind the confrontation is not to assert one’s moral superiority but to honor the requirements of love. Aquinas did not believe such correction would be easy, but he knew that if the command to love the neighbor is more than a platitude, it must sometimes take the form of rebuke. Again, the purpose of the rebuke is not to hurt a person but to care enough about him to help him turn back to the good; indeed, not to do so is a failure of love. As Aquinas explained, “Ridding someone of an evil is really the same as doing him good, and is, therefore, an act of charity, for it is charity that makes us will our friend’s welfare and do our best to bring it about. It follows, then, that fraternal correction is also an act of charity, since it wards off from our brother the evil which is sin.”³⁹

But the practice of fraternal correction is necessary for another reason. The wrong a person does harms not only herself, but others as well. The repercussions of her wrongdoing cannot be limited to herself because they also injure the community. The Catholic moral tradition has always appreciated that human beings are social creatures. Our behavior is never purely private—never simply *our business*—because we live in communities and our lives are so tightly bound to others that what we do effects them as well as ourselves. Thus, fraternal correction is a duty of charity not only out of love for an individual, but also for the larger community. Aquinas puts it well when he says wrongdoing is not only “something that hurts the sinner himself,” but is also always “a blow to the common good.”⁴⁰

It may seem odd to talk about cultivating the practice of fraternal correction in businesses and corporations. Nevertheless, it is a practice we desperately need to embrace if both persons and institutions are not to be undone by the penchant for mischief that occasionally thrives in all of us.

Of course, this means whistleblowers themselves must be open to correction from others. Like anyone, their assessment of a situation may be skewed or self-serving. Like anyone, their motives for speaking out might be tainted by pride or excessive ambition. Whistleblowers serve institutions only when they allow their motives to be examined and their actions challenged by others. Receiving correction is never easy, but institutions can sustain vocational integrity only by cultivating an environment where people are willing to speak the uncomfortable truth, to challenge and to critique, in order to sustain the rectitude necessary for the moral life of a community.

Fraternal correction must be practiced prudently. But it cannot be shirked because “certain sins...are harmful to the material or spiritual interests of our neighbor...”⁴¹ The practices that Dr. Pollak exposed at his hospital in Chicago were surely detrimental to the interest of the “neighbor” in need of a liver transplant. And the policies Cynthia Cooper and Sherron Watkins disclosed at WorldCom and Enron had undeniably resulted in exorbitant harm for thousands who had invested in those businesses. Every case of whistleblowing shows that the consequences of failing to expose wrongdoing and confront wrongdoers are scarcely negligible. As a kind of fraternal correction, whistleblowing ought to be encouraged in businesses because by it companies are challenged to pursue what is right and just consistently.

Some Virtues Every Whistleblower Needs

Whistleblowers are special because they do not allow the threats and intimidation of others to silence their conscience. They are admirable, even heroic, because they refuse to become accomplices in wrongdoing when doing so would be rewarded. How do they do it? How do they endure the isolation, loneliness and shunning visited upon whistleblowers? How, knowing what their integrity will cost them, do they still insist on speaking the truth? It is because they have nurtured virtues that fortify them in doing what is right and good. Although many virtues are necessary for sustaining their commitment to the good, four seem especially important: prudence, justice, righteous anger and courage.

Prudence is the virtue of “practical wisdom,” the skill that enables a person to judge how, in light of all the unique features of a situation, the good can be best achieved. “What shape must doing the good take in this situation if I am not to fall short of achieving it?” That is the question of prudence, the virtue that helps us figure how we must act if we are not to misfire in our desire to do good.⁴² Aquinas begins his examination of prudence by citing Augustine’s insight that “prudence is

love choosing wisely between the helpful and the harmful.”⁴³ This is exactly what the whistleblower must do. Given the potential consequences of their actions, whistleblowers must be extremely astute in determining what is the best means to take in addressing a wrongdoing. They must, in their attempts to remedy an injustice, “choose wisely between the helpful and the harmful” if their intervention is not to result in more damage than good. Aquinas notes that the prudent person is “one who is able to deliberate well...about what is to be done for the sake of an end.”⁴⁴ The ability to think things out carefully, to be determined but not rash, committed but not careless, marks the person of prudence. He or she proceeds cautiously and thoughtfully because they know that when faced with complex, difficult situations, good intentions do not suffice.

What concretely might it mean for whistleblowers to “choose wisely between the helpful and the harmful”? The prudent whistleblower will assess his probabilities for success *before* he acts. Recognizing a problem that needs to be addressed, he will strategize about how best to resolve it. At the very least, this means when faced with wrongdoing the first response of the whistleblower should be to work within the system by using whatever processes companies might have for employees to voice their concerns. One potential danger for the whistleblower is to immediately assume the “heroic” role by separating himself from others and acting alone. But to make this one’s initial response is reckless and foolish not only because the whistleblower will be more effective if he is supported by others, but also because by standing alone he takes unnecessary risks. Thus, the most prudent way for the whistleblower to achieve his purpose is first to seek the support of others in addressing the problem. Instead of “going it alone,” he has a much greater chance to succeed if he gets others to join in his efforts.⁴⁵

In his analysis of prudence, Aquinas identifies a number of elements of this virtue that are pertinent to the whistleblower. One is *docility*, which Aquinas understands as the capacity to be teachable.⁴⁶ In trying to discern the best course of action, the whistleblower needs to seek the counsel, guidance and advice of others. He must listen carefully to their assessment of the situation and allow his own views to be challenged. Has he identified the problem accurately? Has he considered alternatives? Could he be blinded by self-deception, ambition or a desire for celebrity?

Furthermore, in order to make a wise decision the whistleblower must be skilled in assessing the *possible consequences* of his actions.⁴⁷ How might his actions effect not only his fellow employees, but also his family? What is his responsibility to them? In light of the possible consequences, could the costs be so disproportionate to whatever good might be achieved that it would be imprudent to act? Being able to assess possible consequences of an act is linked to a third component of prudence,

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

circumspection. As Aquinas writes, “it may happen that a means good and suitable in the abstract becomes bad and inopportune owing to a combination of circumstances....Accordingly prudence calls for circumspection in order that what is done for an end may match the circumstances of the situation.”⁴⁸ The whistleblower must have a keen appreciation for the distinct circumstances of the situation and recognize how those circumstances might call for one way of acting instead of another.

Finally, the whistleblower needs to be guided by a healthy sense of caution, a fourth dimension of prudence. “Caution is called for in moral actions,” Aquinas says, “not to guard against performing acts of virtue, but against possible hindrances to them.”⁴⁹ As an element of prudence, caution counsels the whistleblower to proceed slowly by taking time to apprise potential shortcomings of a proposed course of action. If the goal of the act is to achieve good by remedying a wrong, what obstacles might stand in the way? And if there is no way to achieve the good without some accompanying harm, how can that harm be minimized? These are concerns the whistleblower must reckon with if his actions are to be prudent and therefore good.

A second essential virtue of the whistleblower is justice. Justice is the virtue of human togetherness, the virtue that keeps us in “right relationship” with one another. Aquinas, citing Cicero, said “the purpose of justice is to hold men together in companionable living in common.”⁵⁰ But we have to know how to “hold together in companionable living in common” not only within our marriages, families or more intimate relationships, but in the whole of society as well. The whistleblower knows that without justice society falls apart. And it falls apart because the common good is ignored. The aim of justice is to respect and preserve the common good.⁵¹ What was going on at the University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago, Comache Peak, WorldCom and Enron reveals a flagrant and startling disregard for the common good. The heart of injustice is disdain and contempt for the common good.⁵² What distinguishes the whistleblower and makes him or her exemplary is their refusal to sacrifice the needs and welfare of others in order to advance oneself.

A third virtue that is essential for whistleblowers is the virtue of *righteous anger*. We might not ordinarily think of anger as indispensable for a virtuous life; in fact, we may conclude that anger leads to more trouble than good. Undoubtedly, anger can be excessive, and if it is not rooted in love and directed towards the good it can do incalculable harm; like any true virtue, righteous anger must be informed by charity.⁵³ But it also true that anger gives us the zeal and energy we need to confront evil and try to overcome it. A virtuous person is not one who represses or denies her emotions, but one who cultivates them in the service of good. Virtuous people are “fired with a zeal for what is genuinely good; likewise, they passionately abhor what is evil and false.”⁵⁴ That is a good description

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

of the whistleblower, someone who is “fired with zeal” for the good and rightly angered by what is dishonest and false. Aristotle noted that the virtuous person is the man or woman who feels the right way about the right things at the right time and in the right manner. For Aristotle, as well as Aquinas, to be angry about injustice and to use the energy of anger to combat it is a sign of virtue, not vice. On the other hand, to see something that is wrong and feel and do nothing—to be apathetic—is to be morally weak. In light of the practices exposed by whistleblowers, what is odd is not that they were angry, but that so many others were not.

For Aquinas, to use anger “for the correction of vice and the maintenance of justice is laudable.”⁵⁵ This is what whistleblowers do. Instead of allowing anger to stymie their devotion to what is right, they use it to stay resolute, particularly when doing so is difficult or when the wrong that needs to be remedied is great. Aquinas, quoting Gregory, argued that anger should “stand up robustly against vice,”⁵⁶ which is an apt description of whistleblowers when they speak out against what is wrong in institutions. They use their anger not to be vindictive or spiteful, but to expose and uproot practices that are terribly wrong but hard to overcome. Without virtuous anger, whistleblowers could let the indifference, antagonism, threats and resentments of others defeat them. Without virtuous anger, whistleblowers could conclude that the wrongdoing around them is too widely supported and deeply entrenched to be undone. Or without virtuous anger they could allow excessive analysis and deliberation of a situation to paralyze them into inactivity.⁵⁷ Virtuous anger enables them not to continually postpone confronting an injustice, but to address it in a timely fashion.⁵⁸

Righteous anger is not an optional virtue for the moral life because without it we lack the commitment and resolve needed for doing good and attacking evil. In being justly angry, whistleblowers exhibit a virtue every person needs. Anger is a vice when it is excessive, misdirected or unreasonable. But a lack of anger is equally a vice because it results in an unwarranted tolerance for what is wrong. It is a tolerance which reveals a lack of will to do what is right and which masks a deep indifference about the harm wrought by injustice. In his analysis of justified anger, Aquinas noted that John Chrysostom held “that a man sins when he has cause to be angry and is not, for unreasonable tolerance sows vices; it nurses negligence, and invites the good as well as the evil to do wrong.”⁵⁹ Almost every instance of whistleblowing underscores the accuracy of Chrysostom’s insight. Terrible harm was done because people who should have been angry were not.

Fourth, whistleblowers need the virtue of courage. Courage helps us remain devoted to doing what is right amidst opposition and adversity. It is the virtue by which we “stand steadfast

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

against whatever wages war” upon our pursuit of the good.⁶⁰ Whistleblowers must be well schooled in this virtue because their efforts to expose wrongdoing and change unjust practices are customarily adamantly opposed. One of the most powerful obstacles to any person’s resolve to do good is fear. It is certainly easier to do what is right when such action is applauded and supported. But what if it is vehemently opposed? What if our desire to do good is met with antagonism and threats? A common failure in the moral life is to give up on what is right because of fear. We choose not to speak the truth because we fear the reaction of others. We decide not to confront a wrongdoer because we fear what he might do in response. Whistleblowers have plenty to fear: threats, isolation, ostracization, financial penalties, the loss of a job. Aquinas notes that “the task of the virtue of courage is to remove the hindrance which holds back the will from following reason. Now retreat from a difficult situation is characteristic of fear, for fear connotes withdrawal before a formidable evil.”⁶¹ Whistleblowers face formidable evils, evils rightly to be feared. But this does not dissuade them from doing what is right. They will not “retreat from a difficult situation” because, on account of their courage, they refuse to be ruled by fear.

Courage means “to take heart.” But in our efforts to do what is right it is easy to lose heart. It is easy to allow discouragement, disillusionment or the steadfast opposition of others to defeat us. Without courage we give up on the good. It would be understandable for whistleblowers to allow adversity to defeat them. With little support or encouragement from others, there must be moments when they feel their efforts to address wrongdoing are futile. What sustains them through setbacks, disappointments and the animosity of others is courage. Courage helps us deal with all that opposes us in life lest it overcome us. Whistleblowers face an abundance of opposition, but they hold tight to what they know is right because they do not allow hardship to deter them or dejection to control them. In a fitting tribute to any person of courage, Aquinas says they “cling most bravely to what is good.”⁶²

But the courage of the whistleblower involves more than sheer endurance. They must not only stand fast in the face of evil but also look for ways to overcome it. This is why Aquinas says there are two parts to courage: endurance and daring. It is through endurance that whistleblowers find the resolve necessary to deal with fear, to deal with the hostility and opposition of others. But endurance is not enough, because the ultimate purpose of courage is not simply to endure amidst evil, but to attack and overcome evil. Without daring, courage can look like resignation. As Aquinas reflected, “But courage ought not merely to endure unflinchingly the pressure of difficult situations by restraining fear; it ought also to make a calculated attack, when it is necessary to eliminate

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

difficulties in order to win safety for the future.”⁶³ Whistleblowers do both. They endure difficult situations, but they also make prudent, calculated attacks against evil. They use their intelligence, their emotions and their imaginations to find ways not only to expose evil but overcome it. The ultimate aim of courage is to preserve the order of justice.⁶⁴ It is flagrant, costly practices of injustice that provoke whistleblowers to action and the purpose of their protest is to restore the order of justice—to restore the common good. But when many are determined to hide wrongdoing and are quite comfortable with ignoring the common good, it is only with courage that whistleblowers can defeat them.

In this essay I have tried to show why whistleblowers are essential if businesses and corporations are to maintain integrity and be faithful to their vocations. Like all of us, businesses are called to contribute to the creative and redemptive activity of God. They should be agents for justice in the world, institutions that take seriously their contributions to the common good. But just as individuals go astray, so do businesses, and this is what makes whistleblowers indispensable. They are “providentially situated” to do great good because they challenge businesses to strive for moral excellence, to be committed to truthfulness and to be open to correction in order to remain committed to policies and practices that truly serve the good of society. Like so many aspects of Christian discipleship, there is often a painful cost to taking on the role of whistleblower. But if their witness can remind business and corporate leaders that they and their institutions are called to be accountable to God, they have accomplished something of lasting importance.

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

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- ¹ Nara Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, January 25, 2004, 14.
- ² Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” 16.
- ³ Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” 14.
- ⁴ Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” 16.
- ⁵ Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” 28.
- ⁶ Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” 16.
- ⁷ Schoenberg, “A Man of Principle,” 29. Pollak’s actions led to a whistleblower lawsuit not only against the University of Illinois Hospital in Chicago, but against Northwestern Memorial Hospital and the University of Chicago Hospitals as well. Each was accused of improperly diagnosing patients in order to move them up the waiting list for liver transplants. None of the hospitals admitted wrongdoing, but nonetheless settled with the government. Pollak received \$500,000 from the government’s \$2 million settlement with the University of Illinois.
- ⁸ Cited in Wilkie Au, S.J., *By Way of the Heart: Toward a Holistic Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 58.
- ⁹ Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, *Personal Vocation: God Calls Everyone by Name* (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 2003), 99.
- ¹⁰ Lee Hardy, “Investing Ourselves in the Divine Economy,” in *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Baylor: Baylor University Press, 2004), 30, 32.
- ¹¹ John Paul II, *Laborem exercens (On Human Work)*, 1981, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, David J. O’Brien & Thomas A. Shannon, eds. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992). For example, in section 25 John Paul writes, “The word of God’s revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the creator and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation.”
- ¹² Douglas J. Schuurman, *Vocation: Discerning Our Callings in Life*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 29.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* Schuurman writes, “As Barth says, the call does not float abstractly above the stream of life, but rather it meets people in all their concrete, situated existence—as this particular person and no other.”
- ¹⁵ I take this phrase from Schuurman, *Vocation*, 39.
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth Newman, “Called Through Relations,” in *Christian Reflection*, 21-2.
- ¹⁷ A.J. Conyers, “The Meaning of Vocation,” in *Christian Reflection*, 14-7.
- ¹⁸ J. Goldberg and B. Holland, “Truth & Consequences,” *Omni* 13 (1990): 72.
- ¹⁹ John C. Haughey, S.J., “The Three Conversions Embedded in Personal Calling,” in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation: Theological Explorations*, John C. Haughey, ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 3.
- ²⁰ Richard Lacayo and Amanda Ripley, “Persons of the Year,” *TIME* 160 (2003), 30.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 129,1.
- ²³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 129,4.
- ²⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 129,4.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 129,5..
- ²⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 133,2.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 133,1.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Mark A. McIntosh, “Trying to Follow a Call: Vocation and Discernment in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim Progress*,” in *Revisiting the Idea of Vocation*, 129.
- ³³ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 59.
- ³⁴ Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith*, 70.
- ³⁵ Paul J. Wadell, *Becoming Friends: Worship, Justice, and the Practice of Christian Friendship* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002), 121-30.
- ³⁶ Iris Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of the Good Over Other Concepts,” in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 37.
- ³⁷ Murdoch, “The Sovereignty of the Good,” 67.
- ³⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 109,3.
- ³⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 33,1.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 33, 7.
- ⁴² Paul J. Wadell, *The Primacy of Love: An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 130.
- ⁴³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 47,1.
- ⁴⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 47,2.
- ⁴⁵ I am grateful to David Herrera and Gina Wolfe for this insight.
- ⁴⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 49,3.
- ⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 49,6.

PART II: THE CALLING OF BUSINESS

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 49,7.

⁴⁹ *ST*, II-II, 49,8.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 58,6.

⁵² Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 59,1. Of the relation between injustice and the common good, Aquinas writes, “In essence this is a special vice, in that it concerns a special objective interest, namely the common good, which it disdains. Yet it stretches out to a general sin, for contempt for the common good draws out all manner of sins.”

⁵³ I am grateful to Andre Delbecq for drawing this point to my attention.

⁵⁴ Wadell, *The Primacy of Love*, 97.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, 158,1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians Among the Virtues: Theological Conversations with Ancient and Modern Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 92-3.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 158,8.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 123,2.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 123,3.

⁶² Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 123,6.

⁶³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 123,3.

⁶⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 123,12.